

Research Initiatives at the University of Michigan: Driver Interviews and Discussions

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TRB Session: Managing the Safety of Older
Commercial Drivers

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Background

- Project represents starting point for developing program to keep older truck drivers on the road for as long as they can safely drive
- Project aims:
 - Conduct analysis of truck crash data to identify risk factors that contribute to older truck driver crashes
 - Conduct literature review to identify existing preventive strategies in the trucking industry
 - Conduct a series of group and individual structured interviews with older truck drivers and trucking company management
 - Develop the conceptual framework to improve the safety management of older drivers in the trucking industry

Methods for Interviews with Safety Managers and older Truck Drivers

- Separate interviews held with fleet/safety managers and older truck drivers during 2016
- Separate structured interview guides addressed 6 topics (based on Newnam & Goode, 2015)
 - Unique positives older drivers bring to job
 - Concerns about older drivers
 - Current strategies to help older drivers
 - Challenges with current strategies
 - Strategies that participants want to try but have not yet
 - Desired additional help from others

Methods (Con't)

- Managers recruited with assistance of Michigan Trucking Association
- Potential drivers identified by managers
- Two in-person group interviews held with managers, each lasting about 2 hours
- Individual telephone interviews held with drivers age 60+, each lasting about 30 minutes
- All interviews facilitated by trained moderator
- Incentives of \$50 provided to each interviewee

Participants

- Group sessions held with managers of Eastern and Western Michigan Safety Councils (one at each site)
- Participants represented small and large carriers, carriers with union/nonunion members, and independent operators
- Percent of older drivers employed by carriers ranged from 1-15%
- A total of 19 participated in interviews – 15 managers and 4 drivers

Results: Unique Positives Older Drivers Bring to the Job

- Consistency across managers in describing assets older drivers bring to job – work ethic, reliability, maturity, knowledge, experience
- Older drivers more likely to:
 - Arrive for the start of a shift/trip on time
 - Be more detail-oriented
 - Know how to operate vehicle properly and drive safely
 - Make better decisions
 - Have a better sense of when something is wrong (e.g., when to push and when to hold back in bad weather)
 - Detect when a vehicle is not operating properly
 - Conduct pre- and post-trip checks more thoroughly

Results: Unique Positives Older Drivers Bring to the Job

- Other positives attributed to older drivers
 - Serve as valuable mentors to younger drivers
 - Respect and care for their equipment, pride in maintenance
 - Superior trip planning skills (e.g., selecting most efficient and safest routes, monitoring road and weather conditions, adjusting routes and departure times accordingly)
 - Engagement with other truckers at stops to monitor road conditions ahead (younger drivers more likely to engage with personal electronic devices during truck stop visits)
 - Pride in doing job well and in safety record
 - Greater loyalty to employers

Results: Concerns about Older Drivers

- Most frequently reported concern by both – physical demand of loading and unloading cargo
 - More likely to fall; stress on bodies could lead to injuries
 - May not be strong enough to secure loads
 - Longer loading and unloading times
- General mental/physical health of older drivers after decades on road mentioned by managers
 - Difficulty maintaining healthy eating and exercise habits
 - Social isolation can lead to mental health issues
- Drivers not concerned about own health but frustrated by requirements for physical exams

Results: Concerns about Older Drivers

- Conflicts between older and younger drivers
 - Managers cited differences in communication styles
 - Older drivers cited generational differences
- Increasing integration of technology into job, especially electronic log books
 - Resistance to acceptance and adoption
 - Need for more hands-on training to learn to use
- Heterogeneity of older drivers seen as challenge for anticipating, recognizing, and responding to needs
- Despite concerns, older drivers considered valuable and even essential part of industry



“My main concern is that I need more of them!”

Results: Current Strategies to Help Older Drivers

- For managers, building rapport/respect/trust was essential for recognizing when older drivers needed help and determining how best to help them
- Strategies they reported using included:
 - Providing assistance for loading/unloading (e.g., portable stairs, straps, help from another employee)
 - Allowing more time to complete jobs without pressure
 - Assigning older drivers easier trips, more familiar routes
 - Tailoring technology training to older driver needs
 - Providing a range of wellness programs
 - Providing gym equipment or paying some of membership costs for drivers to join a gym



“The littlest things make a difference”

Results: Current Strategies to Help Older Drivers

- Drivers were aware of many of these strategies but did not consistently recognize their purpose
- They were appreciative of loading/unloading help
- All older drivers had noticed some declines in their performance and practiced compensation
 - Carefully planning routes; monitoring weather forecasts
 - Increasing sleep the night before a trip
 - Slowing down during bad weather
 - Leaving more space between other vehicles
- Some tried to eat healthier on the road (e.g., choosing restaurants with healthier options, bring snacks)

Results: Challenges with Current Strategies Cited by Managers

- Must be careful to avoid discriminating by age even when intention is to help – strategies must be applicable to all drivers
- Compliance with federal and other regulations
- Responsibilities of keeping drivers, equipment and cargo safe may conflict with others' responsibilities
- Time pressures from customers
- Resistance to wellness programs seen as greater among older than younger drivers

Results: Challenges with Current Strategies Cited by Drivers

- Most common – strategies used for safer loading and unloading lead to slower delivery times
- Pressure from dispatch/business office to be faster
- Difficulty sustaining healthy eating on road
- Concern that revealing information about physical, mental or functional declines might lead to job loss

Revealing such information could “fast track me right out of here.”

Results: Strategies Managers Want to Try but Have Not Yet

- Help drivers struggling with memory issues – no guidelines for dementia or memory problems
- Not worry about the bottom-line so much
- Increase the “buy in” for healthy living
- Talk older drivers out of retiring

“You want them to stay longer....how do you make their time the easiest it can be?”

Results: Desired Additional Help from Others Cited by Managers

- Resources to help address memory problems
- More frequent medical assessment without penalty to encourage preventive care
- More comprehensive exams – including cognitive assessment
- Access to mobile simulators for assessments and/or training
- Change focus from incident-based approach to prevention
- Better PR for truck driving careers – higher value

Results: Desired Additional Help from Others Cited by Drivers

- Drivers addressed this issue from a different perspective
- Expressed a desire for others in the system (e.g., managers, doctors, regulators) to value what they bring to the job
- Be left alone to do their jobs

Implications for Improving Safety

- Compensation for declines in functional abilities that can accompany aging, particularly when drivers face challenging conditions, is important for enhancing safety – often practiced by older drivers
- Older drivers are perceived to prepare better for adverse weather conditions by monitoring road and weather conditions and adjusting routes and times
- Older drivers perceived to excel in maintenance of equipment – such maintenance can play important role in maintaining safety

Implications for Improving Safety

- New and emerging technologies may lead to improvements in safety although barriers exist – improving methods for teaching older drivers how to use, accept, and adopt technologies would be useful
- Many concerns raised by managers not directly raised by drivers themselves – due in part to sometimes conflicting goals in workplace but also suggesting opportunities for education/training and dialog
- Balancing job pressures w/ health-related best interests of older drivers needs to be addressed at multiple levels (i.e., organizations, truck companies, drivers)

Thank You



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