

State of Trucking 2026:

A Driver's Guide

2026 MARKS THE 7TH ANNUAL STATE OF TRUCKING SURVEY.

Through these reports, we've followed the trucking industry through years of disruption, recovery and change. From the pandemic and supply chain crisis to inflation, freight uncertainty, driver shortages and new technology, trucking has continued to prove one thing: drivers keep America moving.

This year, the story is not about one single challenge. It is about signals. Drivers know how to read the road ahead. You watch traffic, weather, road conditions, delivery schedules and the behavior of everyone around you. You know that small signs can tell you a lot about what is coming next.

The same is true for the trucking industry in 2026. **The road ahead is full of signals: changing freight patterns, cautious hiring, evolving driver expectations, safety pressure, technology changes and continued regulatory concerns.**

Employers are not reporting uncertainty everywhere, but many are still dealing with hiring delays, retention concerns and peak-season challenges. Drivers are not all rushing to change jobs, but they are being clear about what matters most: better pay, predictable schedules, better equipment, strong communication and respect.

The 2026 State of Trucking survey shows an industry that is steady in some areas and shifting in others. For drivers, that means opportunity, but also a need to stay informed.



SIGNAL ONE:

The job market is steady, but opportunities are still out there

The trucking job market looks different this year, and it's not all boom or bust. Some employers say hiring feels normal, while others are still having trouble finding qualified drivers.

In this year's survey, 63% of employers say filling driver roles is about normal and 11% say it is easier than last year.

But 27% still report moderate or severe

trouble filling truck driver positions. That means qualified drivers remain important. Employers may not be in panic mode, but they still need dependable, professional drivers who can get the job done safely and reliably.

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For drivers, the signal is clear: there are still opportunities, especially for those with strong experience, clean records, flexibility and professionalism. Employers are also keeping flexible staffing in their plans. Most companies say they will keep their use of contingent drivers the same in 2026, while one-third plan to increase their use. That matters for drivers who want options, flexible assignments, local work or the ability to choose opportunities that fit their lives.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR DRIVERS

Qualified drivers are extremely valuable

Employers are still using contingent drivers

Flexible work can create more options

Strong communication, reliability and professionalism can help you stand out

Companies may be moving carefully, but they still need drivers they can trust

The road may not be wide open everywhere, but it is still moving.



SIGNAL TWO:

Drivers are staying, but they know what they want

One of the clearest signals in this year's survey is that most drivers are not planning to leave their jobs right now. In fact, 80% say they are not considering changing jobs in the next 12 months. Additionally, 69% say they have not switched driving partners or companies in the past year.

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85% say pay increase would make them stay longer in their current role

That stability is a good sign for the industry. But it does not mean drivers are satisfied with everything. When asked what company changes would make them stay longer, drivers gave a clear answer: pay. Nearly 85% ranked a pay increase as the top change that would make them stay longer in their current role. More predictable schedules, better equipment, and improved communication also ranked highly.

This shows that drivers are not asking for anything unrealistic. They want to be paid fairly, know what their schedule looks like, drive safe and reliable equipment and work with companies that communicate clearly.

WHAT DRIVERS SAY WOULD MAKE THEM STAY LONGER

Better pay	Improved communication
More predictable schedules	More training
Better equipment	Safety improvements

Cash still matters, but it is not the whole story. Stability and respect matter too. A good driving job should not only offer a paycheck. It should also offer clear expectations, reliable scheduling, safe equipment and a company that values your time.



SIGNAL THREE:

Local work and predictable schedules are leading the way

Drivers are also making it clear what type of work they prefer. In this year’s survey, 72% of drivers say local driving is their ideal type of driving job. That is a major signal for the industry. While every type of driving has a role to play, many drivers want work that allows them to be home more often and maintain a better routine. This does not mean drivers are no longer proud of their career on the road. In fact, 74% say they are very or somewhat likely to recommend driving as a career to someone else. The issue is not whether drivers value the profession. They do. The issue is whether the job fits the life they want.

72% of drivers say local driving is their ideal type of driving job

Pay is still the top factor when choosing a driving job, with more than 63% of drivers ranking competitive pay as number one. But schedule predictability was the strongest second-ranked factor. That shows drivers want both earning power and control over their time.

WHAT DRIVERS WANT IN A JOB

Competitive pay	Health benefits
Predictable schedules	Work-life balance
The right job type	Retirement savings

There is also an important opportunity for drivers who are open to short-term travel. While local work is the top preference, 54% of drivers say they would travel to another city for short-term driving if demand for their services or if higher pay were offered.

That can open the door to special assignments, peak-season work or temporary opportunities that offer extra income while still allowing drivers to return to their regular lives. The best jobs in 2026 are the ones that fit both your career goals and your life outside of work.



SIGNAL FOUR:

The hiring process for driving jobs still needs work

Finding and applying for driving jobs is not always difficult, but the hiring process can still be frustrating. In the driver survey, 42% say the hiring and screening process usually takes one to two weeks from application to first shift. Another 27% of drivers say it takes less than a week, while 12% say it takes three to four weeks.

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For some drivers, that timeline may be manageable. For others, especially those who need work quickly, delays can create stress. Drivers also reported frustrations with the process, including repeating paperwork, slow background checks, poor recruiter communication, inflexible start dates and medical exam delays.

A strong employer or staffing partner should make the process clear, communicate consistently and help you move through required steps as efficiently as possible.

For drivers, the takeaway is simple: ask questions early. Know what paperwork you need, confirm screening requirements and stay in touch with your recruiter or hiring contact. A smoother hiring process can help you get on the road faster.





SIGNAL FIVE:

Safety and wellness are part of the job

Safety has always been central to trucking, but this year's survey shows that safety and wellness are becoming even more connected to the overall driver experience. Drivers are dealing with real concerns on the road and in their daily work. In the survey, 21% report work-related ailments connected to driving. Common concerns include lower back pain, wrist or hand pain, knee pain, shoulder pain and muscle stiffness. Long hours, sitting for extended periods, loading and unloading, changing schedules and road stress can all affect how drivers feel.

DRIVER WELLNESS SIGNALS

21% report work-related ailments tied to driving	29% sleep eight to ten hours per night
63% sleep five to seven hours per night	Common concerns include lower back pain, knee pain, shoulder pain, wrist or hand pain and muscle stiffness

Employers are paying attention too. More than half say they will increase safety training in 2026. Many are using safety incentive programs, formal training, in-cab coaching, wellness programs and fatigue management policies. Safety is not just about avoiding accidents, but about making sure drivers have the training, equipment, support and working conditions they need to do the job well.

WHAT DRIVERS SHOULD LOOK FOR

Safe and reliable equipment	Training that feels useful, not just required
Clear safety policies	
Strong communication from dispatch or management	A company that listens when drivers raise concerns

A good job should help you stay safe on the road and healthy over the long term.



SIGNAL SIX:

Technology is changing trucking, but drivers still matter

Technology continues to be one of the biggest topics in trucking. AI, automation, autonomous vehicles, cameras, telematics and route optimization are all part of the

conversation. But drivers are clearly cautious. In this year’s survey, 46% of drivers say they would be uncomfortable sharing the road with autonomous or self-driving trucks. Additionally, 65% say they are very or somewhat concerned that automation or AI will reduce driving jobs. Drivers also view autonomous driving more negatively than positively, with nearly 52% calling it an overall negative trend. Drivers know the road is unpredictable. Weather, traffic, construction, work sites, tight turns, unsafe drivers and unexpected situations all require judgment and experience.

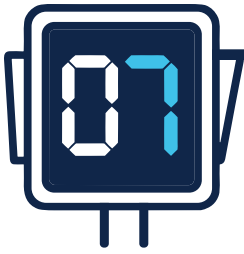
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DRIVER CONCERNS ABOUT AUTOMATION

Safety on the road	Hacking or system errors
Job loss	Less control over the work
Technology failures	Lack of human judgment in unpredictable conditions

At the same time, not all technology is viewed the same way. Tools like ELDs, collision warnings, lane keep assist, in-cab cameras, telematics and route optimization can all play a role in trucking today. The real issue is trust. Drivers are more likely to accept technology when it helps them do their jobs better, safer and more efficiently. They are less likely to support it when it feels like surveillance, replacement or risk.

For drivers, the best approach is to stay informed. Technology will continue to change the industry, but professional drivers bring something technology cannot easily replace such as judgment, experience, adaptability and accountability.



SIGNAL SEVEN:

Freight, regulation and the economy are still worth watching

Drivers are paying attention to the bigger picture too. In the survey, 45% of drivers say they are worried about the economic outlook for freight, including recession, tariffs and nearshoring. Another 42% say they have noticed changes in freight patterns over the past 12 months. Those changes could include different lanes, fewer or shorter hauls, changing customer demand or shifts in where freight is moving.

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WHAT DRIVERS ARE WATCHING

Freight demand	Changes in lanes
Recession concerns	Fewer or shorter hauls
Tariffs	Regulatory changes
Nearshoring	

Regulation also continues to shape trucking. Employers say FMCSA Clearinghouse impacts, drug and alcohol rules, Hours of Service (HOS) and ELD policy changes are among their top concerns for 2026.

For drivers, that means staying current matters. Keeping records clean, understanding compliance requirements and staying aware of changing rules can help protect your opportunities. Economic and regulatory changes may be outside your control, but preparation is not. The more informed you are, the easier it is to make smart decisions about where, when and how you work.



SIGNAL EIGHT:

Experienced drivers can help shape the future

One of the strongest signals in this year’s report is the value of experienced drivers. In the survey, 51% of drivers have been driving for 15 or more years. That is a lot of knowledge on the road. It is also a major advantage for the future of the industry. Many drivers are willing to share that knowledge. More than half say they would be willing to mentor new drivers, and another 27% say maybe. New drivers need more than a license, they need real-world guidance. They need to understand customer sites, cargo securement, defensive driving, ELD use, Hours of Service, wellness on the road and how to handle the daily realities of the job.

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TRAINING TOPICS DRIVERS SAY NEW DRIVERS NEED

Defensive driving	ELD use
Cargo securement	Customer site procedures
Wellness on the road	Fuel efficiency
Hours of Service	

Experienced drivers can help bridge the gap between learning the job and living the job. Mentorship also gives veteran drivers a stronger voice in the industry. It recognizes their skill, professionalism and experience. For newer drivers, it can create confidence and support. For companies, it can improve safety, onboarding and retention. The future of trucking will not be built only by recruiting new drivers. It will be built by listening to the drivers already on the road.

What drivers should do next

The road ahead is full of signals. For drivers, the best move is to use those signals to make smarter career decisions.



Top Takeaways from State of Trucking 2026

Know your worth

Pay remains one of the strongest factors in driver retention. Understand what competitive pay looks like in your market and do not be afraid to ask clear questions about compensation, bonuses and benefits.

Look for predictability

A strong job should offer more than work. It should offer a schedule, route type and communication style that fit your life.

Ask about equipment and safety

Better equipment and safety support are major parts of a good driving experience. Ask how companies handle maintenance, training, fatigue management and driver concerns.

Pay attention to communication

Poor communication is one of the biggest frustrations in hiring and employment. Look for companies and recruiters who are responsive, transparent and organized.

Stay flexible when it makes sense

Short-term travel, temporary assignments or contingent work may open new opportunities, especially when demand or bonuses are available.

Keep your records and credentials current

Compliance matters. Staying up to date on screenings, medical requirements, ELD expectations and safety standards can help you stay ready for new opportunities.

Stay informed about technology

AI and automation are changing the conversation, but drivers still bring judgment and experience to the road. Learn how new tools work and ask how they are meant to support your job.

Share what you know

If you are an experienced driver, mentorship can help strengthen the next generation of drivers and give you a larger role in shaping the profession.



A look in the rearview

Every year, drivers remind us that trucking is more than freight, schedules and miles. It is also about the places you go, the people you meet and the pride that comes with doing essential work.

In this year's survey, drivers shared memories that reflected the variety and meaning of life behind the wheel. Some mentioned unforgettable routes through Colorado, Utah, Virginia, Washington and California. Others talked about military bases, airports, customers, mountain views, beaches and the simple satisfaction of being treated well by people who value their work.

One driver said their most memorable moments came from seeing customers and interacting with them. Another mentioned being treated well by customers who valued their energy. Those stories matter because they show what keeps many drivers connected to the profession.

Trucking is not always easy. But for many, it still offers independence, purpose, travel and the chance to keep America moving.

Reading the road ahead

The 2026 State of Trucking survey shows a changing industry, but it also shows the continued value of professional drivers.

Employers are watching hiring, retention, safety, technology and regulation. Drivers are watching pay, schedules, equipment, communication, freight patterns and the future of the profession.

Both sides are seeing the same thing. Trucking is moving forward, but the road ahead requires attention. For drivers, this year's message is clear. Your experience matters. Your expectations matter. Your safety matters. And your role in the industry remains essential.

The road ahead is full of signals. The drivers who read them will be better prepared to find the right opportunities and keep moving forward.

Centerline Drivers wants to help you find the right placement

Centerline is your access point to driving opportunities that fit your life. Our job is to connect you with safe, rewarding work at top companies while maintaining your flexibility and work-life balance.

We want to help you find local routes with steady, reliable hours and competitive pay. Driving with Centerline means you still get to live your life. Centerline has a team of dedicated, responsive recruiters who will work with you. With support every step of the way, Centerline makes it easier to find your next position fast.

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METHOD

This research was the result of a survey of more than 40 companies hiring truck drivers and over 200 truck drivers nationwide.