

Summary:

Norwegian long-haul drivers – An interview survey

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With road freight demand on the increase, there are reports suggesting that the recruitment of competent drivers is becoming increasingly difficult, while at the same time tougher competence requirements are being enforced on both fresh and already practicing truck drivers. A quest for enhanced professionalism in the trucking industry is currently channeled through the requirements of the Directive on the initial qualification and periodic training of drivers, while transport decisions by and large are being negotiated on the customers' terms, detached from drivers' influence. At the same time, professional truck drivers are held individually responsible for their compliance to traffic rules and regulations, just like other road users, while the terms on which they execute their profession are defined by decision-makers elsewhere in the value system. In this project, we convey long-haul drivers' own views of their work and their anticipations regarding the future shape of truck driving. Their claims contrast with the public ambition to professionalize the industry and to raise the social status of the drivers.

Background

Road freight transport has grown significantly through several decades, while several information sources convey increasing concern about future recruitment of competent drivers. The aim of this project has been to gain knowledge about long-haul drivers' own perceptions of their work. We are especially interested in whether they experience road authorities as facilitators for performing such work, or, conversely, in whether they feel that public authorities enforce limitations on their working life that negatively affect their job satisfaction.

Objective

The following research questions have been asked:

1. How do long-haul truck drivers presently experience their jobs, and which elements are perceived as central in shaping their working lives
2. How do the drivers perceive future development of their work, and which elements are thought to determine their future working lives

Method

The knowledge base in this project has mainly been generated through semi-structured interviews with 20 long-haul truck drivers, understood as drivers undertaking transports between various parts of Norway as well as international transports. A major share of the interviews have been performed while we travelled with the drivers on particular assignments. Our knowledge base improved greatly due to this approach, firstly as this enabled the drivers to couple their arguments to practical examples, secondly because it enabled us to compare and supplement what we heard to what we saw.

The themes to be discussed during the interviews were initially discussed with representatives of the Public Roads Administration and the trucking industry's organizations, and what we perceived as central outcomes of the interviews were then brought forward in subsequent discussions with these actors, as well as with other informants from the freight market or the public transport sector.

Main conclusions

We have in this project aimed at presenting thick descriptions of Norwegian long-haul drivers' working lives, while searching for the central forces and mechanisms that structure their work. Our findings may be summed up as follows:

- ✓ Our informants clearly express that they experience road dimensions and maintenance standards as inadequate in relation to the demands from employers and customers. A few respondents rank driving on winter roads as the most negative aspect of the job, while the majority claim seldom to experience fear in relation to this. Still, most of our respondents hold that driving on Norwegian roads imposes a degree of tension they do not experience when driving abroad.
- ✓ The drivers invariably confirm that the mismatch between driving and resting time regulations and adequate roadside facilities constitutes a negative aspect of the job. Long-haul truck drivers perform physical work related to loading and unloading, vehicle maintenance, snow chain mounting and dismounting etc., and since the truck's cabin is used both for working and for dwelling, it is experienced as degrading not to have access to facilities as showers and restaurants. Although not verified in the project, we have an impression that commercially operated roadside facilities (truck stops) on routes with low traffic volumes are in decline due to insufficient demand, while parking facilities in the cities are being reduced due to land use pressures. The lack of roadside facilities and parking space is a well-documented problem, but it may be underscored that although sixteen years have passed since Norway adopted the current legislation on driving and resting times, little has been done in order to develop the roadside facilities necessary to ensure that the drivers can comply to these rules.
- ✓ We believe that the relatively low level of involvement we experienced when discussing road quality and maintenance issues with the drivers is due to their state of disillusion over the fact that transport-political aims

towards infrastructure improvements and “strengthening industries’ competitiveness” never seem to actually make a difference in practice. Rather, economic estimations show that the road maintenance lag is increasing. Additionally, the drivers felt that claims concerning modal split alterations and the strengthening of sea and rail transport rather had led to political strategies that hampered their own work.

- ✓ Nearly all the drivers we interviewed claimed to experience some sort of *freedom* in their work, and held this to be the most valued aspect of the job. Our own observations do not reveal that the drivers have considerable freedom neither in time nor space, but, as they perform their work relieved of the management’s immediate and visual control, they are assigned a degree of freedom to choose their own solutions to *ad hoc* problems that always turn up. This kind of freedom has long-standing traditions in the trucking industry, but may appear incompatible to current demands towards rapid, precise and predictable freight movements. Although the transport company’s traffic management commonly functions as a buffer between demanding customers and the legally enforced limitations on drivers’ working hours, possibilities still abound for customers and transporters to downgrade transport planning and hand the responsibilities over to the driver. This assignment of responsibilities is also maintained in roadside controls and the consequent issuing of fines.
- ✓ We argue that a higher degree of central planning of transport activities may lead to increased productivity and predictability in long-haul trucking, but this will imply assigning responsibilities over from driver to management, which may negatively affect the freedom that the drivers value highly in their jobs.
- ✓ Through the implementation of the directive on the initial qualification and periodic training of drivers, the principle that enhanced quality of freight services will be attained through driver training is sustained, although they have very limited influence on the transport decisions. Related to the very low competence requirements imposed on the company owners in the trucking industry, the directive also sustains an inappropriate division of responsibilities between employer and employee.
- ✓ Almost all our respondents claim that high degree of absence from home is the single most negative aspect of the job, both because of being cut off from family and other social relations, and because they feel their job situation imposes an unjust share of domestic responsibility on other family members.
- ✓ Our respondents consider their profession to have low social status, something which they mainly assign to the following factors:
 - High degree of absence from home and restricted opportunities to participate in social relations with family and
 - A wage level that does not compensate for this loss

If we accept the argument that social status is determined by the technical division of labour, we easily recognize the truck drivers way out and way down in industries’ organizational hierarchies. Job-related knowledge may

result in enhanced social status only if it is a kind of knowledge that is in demand. We do not know to what extent the transport market has been consulted during the development of the directive on drivers' qualifications and training, but we cannot see that prior initiatives to enhance drivers' competence have countered an on-going loss of social status.

- ✓ We experience that our informants, as well as those of us who have been working on the project, find it hard to foresee future development of truck drivers' working lives. The drivers' own perceptions concentrate on sustaining current trends: Declining social status, weak wage developments compared to other jobs, more stress due to increasing logistical demands, continuing high degree of absence from home, and consequently increasing recruitment difficulties.
- ✓ In our opinion, there is a strong need to generate knowledge of the functioning of the logistical systems in complex value systems, taking competitive pressures, asymmetrical bargaining relations, public regulations and their unintended consequences, and environmental concerns into account. Focus should be directed towards the following themes:
 - The importance of learning and of various forms of knowledge in the transport sector: What kinds of knowledge are of importance to various occupational groups in the sector, and how can learning processes, knowledge enhancement and a higher level of competence be facilitated?
 - The relationship between disintegrated production, logistics, and transport operations and their associated knowledge bases: It has been shown that closer functional integration between the different actors in the value systems may reduce transport costs for the commodity owners. May the increased information exchange that such integration presupposes also be utilized for competence building purposes in a more dynamic perspective?
 - Sixteen years of regulatory design strongly influenced by European legislation has probably resulted in cheaper freight rates, which is in line with transport political ambitions. Simultaneously, analyses indicate that the economic base as well as the knowledge base of the trucking industry is deteriorating. Increasing pressures from customers towards fast and predictable transports do not appear to have resulted in improved coordination of transport performance, a weakness that is supported by the authorities' sustained assignment of responsibilities to the drivers. This contributes to the negative development of working conditions in the trucking industry relative to other occupations, countering the general ambition of making the industry more professional. We therefore recommend that attention should be directed towards the possibilities for closer integration between customer and transporter, and to consider reassigning the responsibilities for socially acceptable transport performance to the relation between these parties, rather than keeping the driver responsible.

To conclude, we argue that there is a need also for authorities to apply a network or value system perspective to transport activities, where the industry's structure, resource requirements and activities are analysed, considered, and regulated on the basis of an understanding that transport execution is determined – or should be determined – in the relationship between the transport companies and their customers. Enhanced professionalism in the trucking industry should therefore aim at enhancing trucking companies' competence in negotiations with their customers. In addition to this, it is important to understand the way in which freight companies, as well as their customers, engage in various value systems. This clearly affects the possibilities for information exchange as well as for efficient round trip solutions. Traditionally, Scandinavian logistics research has focused explicitly on the needs of the transport buyers, which leads to a simplified view of the challenges facing the freight industry. We recommend an expansion of this analytical framework.