



# Driver training an essential part of business at Challenger

**W**hy is driver training so important to Challenger and its 1,800 drivers across Canada?

“Our holistic approach keeps our trucks and drivers safe from a physical, regulatory and customer perspective,” says Allan Babin, training and development supervisor at Challenger, based in Cambridge, Ontario, which has 12 full time driving instructors and 1,300 vehicles. “Our society accepts that virtually every worker requires further training to stay current and improve their on-the-job skills. Why not do it for drivers?”

Challenger, one of Canada’s largest privately held fleets, has been committed to driver training and the evolution of its programs since its launch back in 1975. The company’s tracking and analysis of hard data combined with a deep understanding of its drivers resulted in additional staff and training vehicles as well as significant program changes from November 2010 to the present. As a result, in 2011, the number of incidents dropped 15 percent, a significant reduction given total mileage increased by about 20 percent. Total incident costs declined 33 percent.

The company has been tracking preventable and non-preventable incidents, collisions, complaints, violations, fines, overage and shortages (freight), freight damage claims and more since 1986. The data tells Challenger which drivers need what type of training and helps Babin assess the effectiveness of the course content, delivery methods and scheduling or timing.

“Our data proves that our safest drivers are invariably the most efficient and our most efficient are the safest,” says Babin, who has been in the training business since 1986, has driven tractor-trailers more than 1,000,000 miles incident-free and has been a certified long-combination vehicle instructor since 2008. “We hold our drivers to the appropriate professional standards but use

education and remedial training to change behaviours because it’s far more effective than penalizing or intimidating them.”

Telematics, in place on each of the 1,300 vehicles since 1986, helps identify behaviours such as excessive speed, hard braking and poor fuel economy and allows Babin to drill down for more detailed analytics.

“Telematics give us irrefutable proof sooner—but we’d eventually find out anyway, because such behaviour typically leads to incidents,” says Babin. “Professional drivers don’t have issues with telematics and drivers who don’t accept telematics don’t usually apply at Challenger.”

About a year ago, Challenger launched a driver-appreciation system that monetarily rewards drivers \$0.02/mile each quarter for achieving targets. Bonuses have ranged from \$150 to \$850 per driver, quarterly. The five parameters include: fuel economy, idling, hours of service incentive/logbooks, out of service inspections, and preventable motor-vehicle-accidents. Drivers’ initial reactions ran from “That’s not fair!” to “There’s no way I can do that!” Yet, 20 percent more drivers earned incentives from Q1 to Q4. The savings generated by the program cover its cost, but it’s also the right thing to do for safety’s sake and the environment.

Whether the new bonus system or the drivers’ renewed confidence in Challenger’s instructors and programs is the primary motivator, drivers are more inclined to ask for help with specific issues such as fuel economy and hard braking, which typically means they’re following too closely.

Since Babin joined Challenger about two years ago, the company has made significant changes. Including Babin, Challenger now has 12 trainers (nine in Cambridge, one in Aldergrove, BC, one in Dorval, Quebec),

up from the original three. The focus remains firmly on road safety, but regulatory compliance, for example record-keeping and loading specifications, is also addressed. Because drivers are the most public face of Challenger, they're also given the skills and guidelines needed to communicate with customers and the public.

"Our trucks and drivers are readily identifiable as part of Challenger so we give drivers the tools they need to maintain our professional image, whether they're interacting on the road, at a rest stop or in a restaurant," says Babin.

Distinct programs have been fine-tuned for new hires and existing drivers. As a result of the driver shortage that began in 2008, the bulk of the Challenger's new hires are inexperienced. Every Challenger new hire now gets six weeks of training. About 15 percent of the course is in-class and watching the trainer perform the skills, with 85 percent taking place behind the wheel. Graduates are then partnered with an experienced driver for six months. The shorter course doesn't save Challenger a dime, but it does produce better drivers more quickly because it targets the most relevant topics and strategically builds on the skills taught week to week.

"We blew up the existing curriculum and started over," says Babin. "We wanted a national program that would teach every new driver the correct, Challenger procedure to be used every time."

Challenger increased the focus on in-vehicle training and took it in-house. The company replaced the sleeper cabs in seven trucks with bucket seats so each cab can accommodate an instructor and three drivers. There is now one trainer-truck in Dorval, one in Aldergrove, and five in Cambridge. One of the Cambridge trucks is dedicated to evaluations and is available as a spare.

The first week, trainees are confined to the yard, working on backing skills and pre-trip inspections, while the second week is devoted to city driving with a focus on

proper cornering, braking, acceleration and high-density traffic. In local driving, weeks three and four, the emphasis is on logbooks, schedules, appointments, customer service and, of course, driving. Weeks five and six tackle over-the-road training, which addresses living on the road, from border crossings to trip planning around fuel, meal and rest stops.

Both new hires and current employees take the eight-hour, 11-module, in-class Professional Driver Training Course, but at the four-month and three-year anniversaries respectively. Once known as the defensive driving course, the course was renamed because anyone can sign up for a defensive driving course at the local college or driver's education organization.

"Our content is targeted to professional drivers, so the new name is a more accurate descriptor than defensive driving which suggests something designed to protect the average consumer," says Babin.

Until about a year ago, new hires took the eight-hour Professional Driver Training Course in their first week. But analysis showed new hires' typically had their first incident after they'd been with Challenger for 5.5 months. The company edited and reorganized the 11 modules to address: being a professional transport driver, space management, scanning techniques, braking time and distance travelled, making safe and proper turns, safe backing, fatigue management, pre-trip, en-route and post-trip inspections, adverse driving conditions, preventable versus non-preventable incidents, fuel efficiency. After assessments showed that 75 percent of Challenger's drivers had more than half of their mirrors positioned incorrectly, a module on mirror use and adjustment was added because these skills hadn't been taught elsewhere.

Babin now hears: "I knew that, but I'd stopped doing that," and, "I didn't know that and it makes sense." Previously, driver comments tended to be along the lines of "I'm here for my two-years without an incident course!"

In the case of unprofessional behaviours or incidents, drivers are required to re-take the course immediately and won't be paid for the eight hours they're in class rather than on the road. About 30 percent of the time, a two-hour in-vehicle evaluation will also follow, as will remedial sessions if required.

Once a year, all drivers spend 20 minutes in the simulator in Cambridge, with drivers whose home base is outside Ontario spending 20 minutes in a truck with an instructor. Trainers assess everything from their following distance to braking, cornering and visual scanning skills in a 10- to 15-minute information-sharing session once they're out of the truck. Once again, it's a preventative strategy that can protect people and equipment and save lives.

"As professional drivers, we need to look out for the non-professionals which generally includes our families and friends," says Babin.

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*Drivers spend time working on skills in the truck simulator every year.*

