

JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

Drawn by the Salary, Women Flock to Trucking

Truck drivers typically are paid by the mile, regardless of gender. But safety issues remain.

By Cristina Roca and Dieter Holger

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Last year, Rebekah Koon left her job as an assistant manager of a gas station in Fort Bragg, N.C., to train as a truck driver, inspired by watching her uncle hit the road as a long-haul trucker when she was growing up.

“I thought it was really cool, like an extended camping trip,” she says.

Ms. Koon, 28, is part of a new wave of women breaking into trucking. The number of female truckers increased by 68% since 2010 to 234,234 in 2018, though women still account for just 6.6% of the trucking workforce, according to the American Trucking Associations, a trade group.

One big reason: equal pay.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you know a woman who has recently taken a blue-collar job in a male-dominated profession? Why did she make the move? Join the conversation below.

“There are many different types of driver pay in the industry, including by the mile, per load, hourly, and even salary in some cases,” says ATA economist Bob Costello. “In all cases, there is no distinction between male or female. If you go to a fleet and ask how much drivers are paid, it is by experience level, routes, etc., not gender-specific.”

The median annual wage for heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers is \$43,680, according to the

U.S. Labor Dept. Light truck and delivery-service drivers make a median of \$32,810.

Ms. Koon’s new gig hauling for Cargo Transporters has tripled her salary, she says. “It’s a great lifestyle.”

The growth in women in the industry comes as demand for transportation workers is high, boosted by the expansion of e-commerce, says Frank Steemers, an economist at the Conference

Board, a nonprofit research firm. Amid a tight labor market, employers are turning to new demographic groups to fill these positions, he says.



Before she became a trucker, Ms. La Bree was a cosmetologist. Her rig outside her home in Missouri. PHOTO: RANA YOUNG FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“The steering wheel knows no gender,” says Deb La Bree, 53, a former cosmetologist who lives in Missouri and has been driving a truck since 2007.

Some drivers and women’s advocates say the industry has begun to change to make it more accommodating to women. “New technology and equipment make truck driving a job that’s more geared toward women,” says Lindsey Othmer, 26, who drives for XPO Logistics out of Fife, Wash.

For example, XPO trucks now have a more modern transmission system that makes them less strenuous to drive, says Meghan Henson, chief human-resources officer at XPO, one of the largest transportation and logistics companies in the U.S. And at many companies, drivers, regardless of sex, don’t physically load and unload goods anymore.

“The industry has changed,” says Ellen Voie, president and chief executive of Women in Trucking, a nonprofit that encourages women to join the profession.

But the share of women drivers remains small. “Some trucking companies have put an emphasis on female drivers, but the highest percentage of female drivers we have seen is around 20% for those fleets,” economist Bob Costello says in an ATA report.

And some advocates and industry officials say women face obstacles when it comes to joining—and feeling comfortable in—the industry.

Learning to truck requires many hours on the road with a trainer, and most of them are men. Some companies try to match women with female trainers, but there aren’t always enough, says

Ms. Voie.

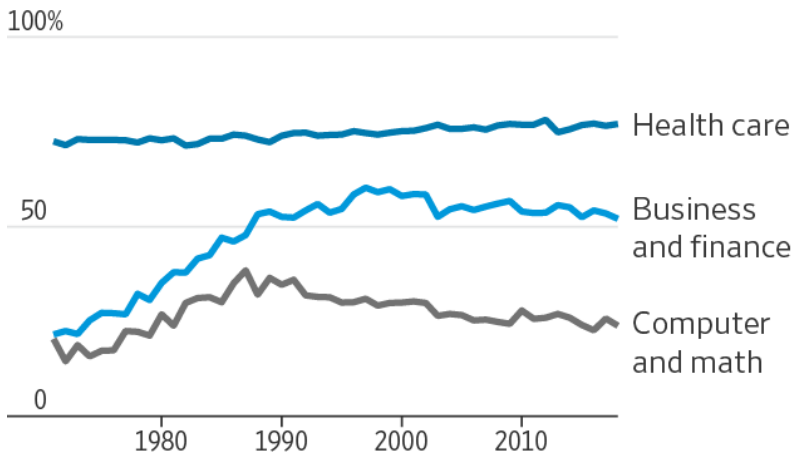
Then there are on-the-job concerns. A 2017 survey by Women in Trucking asked female drivers how safe they felt at work; the average response was 4.4 out of 10.

One of their main concerns is finding a safe, well-lit place to park overnight when there aren't enough spots. If truckers arrive at a truck stop at the end of their working day and find it full, they may have to keep driving past their limit or park illegally on the side of the road.

WHAT 'WOMEN'S WORK' LOOKS LIKE NOW

Women make up about half of the U.S. workforce today, but many jobs remain largely segregated along gender lines. Explore the fields in which women have made the most inroads, and the least.

Share of women in each occupation field



Source: Labor Department

Driver Cecilia Hylton, 24, says her father, who is also a trucker, taught her to loop her seat belt through the door handle and buckle it so the door can't be opened from the outside while she's sleeping.

Ms. Voie is optimistic that the industry will find ways to tackle issues such as training because of the shift in attitude she's witnessed. "Twelve years ago, everyone said, 'We just want good drivers.' Now, the carriers are saying, 'We want more women. Help us do that.' "

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WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

This article is part of a Wall Street Journal special report on women, men and work based on a study by LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Co.

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