

INDUSTRY WHITEPAPER

The Definitive Guide to Commercial Trucking

Practical strategy for hiring, verifying, and retaining CDL drivers and fleet staff — for fleet operators competing for a licensed, insurable, credential-scarce workforce.

I've watched too many fleets lose a load over an empty seat, not a bad driver.

I'm Michael Carter, President of My Trade Talent. Fleet operators tell me some version of the same story: a truck sits at the dock because there's no licensed, insurable driver to run it — not because there's no freight, and not because nobody applied.

That's the part outsiders miss about this labor market. It isn't short on applicants. It's short on people who are actually licensed for the right class, clean on their driving record, current on their DOT physical, and cleared through the federal drug and alcohol Clearinghouse — all four, at once. Miss one and the rest of the resume doesn't matter.

This guide is what we tell fleet operators who ask us how to fix that: what the labor market actually looks like right now, the ten roles that keep a fleet running beyond just the driver's seat, and a hiring process built around verification instead of hope. I hope it's useful whether or not you ever work with us.

The five things to take away if you read nothing else.

- **This is a licensing-bottlenecked market, not a hiring-intent one.** Search data shows people overwhelmingly researching how to get a CDL and what it pays — not employers searching for hiring help.
- **A CDL alone doesn't make someone hireable.** Fleets need an active license in the correct class, a clean or acceptable Motor Vehicle Record, a current DOT physical, and clearance through the FMCSA Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse — all four, or most commercial insurance policies won't cover the driver.
- **CDL-A and CDL-B are not interchangeable.** A Class A license covers tractor-trailer combinations over 26,001 lbs GCWR; a Class B license covers a single heavy vehicle without a large towed unit. Class A drivers can generally run most Class B equipment — the reverse isn't true.
- **A fleet's staffing need runs well past the driver's seat.** Dispatchers, fleet and terminal managers, DOT safety and compliance staff, and diesel technicians all sit on the critical path to keeping trucks moving.
- **A flat-rate, standing pipeline outperforms reactive hiring** in a market where the constraint is a scarce, already-licensed pool — not a lack of postings.

INTRODUCTION

Commercial trucking hiring has a licensing problem, not an applicant problem.

Every fleet operator we talk to describes a version of the same frustration: postings draw plenty of clicks, but the pool of people who are actually licensed, insurable, and available is much smaller than it looks. That gap — between "has a CDL" and "insurable to run this specific truck today" — is where reactive hiring falls behind.

This guide lays out what the labor market actually looks like for CDL drivers and fleet support staff right now, the ten roles commercial fleets recruit for most, and a practical framework for hiring that verifies before it trusts a resume.

WHAT THE SEARCH DATA ACTUALLY SHOWS

People research the license. They don't research hiring help.

The CDL itself is the whole story in this trade's search data. "Commercial driver's license CDL" alone draws roughly 14,800 searches a month, with "CDL commercial driver's license" adding another 5,400 — the broader licensing cluster (the license itself, CDL-B licensing, the test, the cost) runs to roughly 23,900 combined monthly searches (SEMrush Keyword Magic Tool).

Pay-related terms are the second-biggest cluster: "CDL driver salary" draws about 2,900 searches a month, with pay-rate and wage variants adding several hundred more — call it roughly 6,800 combined across the salary cluster. Job-seeker terms like "CDL driver jobs" (6,600/mo) and "paid CDL driver training" (480/mo) round out the volume, call that cluster roughly 8,500 combined.

There is no meaningful search volume in this dataset for anything resembling "hire a truck driver" or "driver staffing agency." This is a licensing- and pay-driven search market, not a hiring-intent one.

Why that matters for how you hire

If candidates and researchers are focused on the license, not the job search, that tells you where the real bottleneck sits: fleets aren't competing for visibility on a job board, they're competing for a comparatively small, already-licensed pool. A CDL is a federal/state credential administered under FMCSA standards, and getting one takes real time and cost before a candidate is even eligible to apply anywhere. Waiting for that pool to show up in an applicant tracker, one seat at a time, is exactly the approach that loses to fleets running a standing pipeline.

A CDL-A and a CDL-B are not the same license.

A **CDL-A (Class A)** qualifies a driver to operate combination vehicles — a tractor pulling a trailer — with a gross combination weight rating over 26,001 lbs, provided the towed unit itself exceeds 10,000 lbs. That's the license behind most long-haul and regional tractor-trailer freight.

A **CDL-B (Class B)** qualifies a driver for a single heavy vehicle over 26,001 lbs GVWR without a large towed unit — straight trucks, box trucks, dump trucks, and some buses. Class A drivers can generally drive most Class B vehicles; the reverse is not true.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics tracks these as separate occupations. There is no dedicated BLS code for CDL-B specifically — the nearest match is Light Truck Drivers, and we say so explicitly rather than treat the two roles as identical.

THE 10 ROLES

The positions commercial fleets recruit for most.

Several of these roles are grouped under broader BLS occupational codes since the trade doesn't have a dedicated code for every specialty — we note that explicitly rather than force a number that doesn't exist. A full wage breakdown, with every proxy classification labeled, is in the companion Salary Guide.

ROLE	WHAT THEY DO
CDL-A Truck Driver	Combination vehicles over 26,001 lbs GCWR — long-haul and regional tractor-trailer freight
CDL-B Truck Driver	Single heavy vehicles without a large towed unit — straight trucks, box trucks, dump trucks
Dispatcher / Fleet Coordinator	Routes drivers, tracks loads, manages the moving pieces in real time
Fleet Manager	Oversees vehicle assignment, maintenance scheduling, and fleet performance
Safety & Compliance Manager (DOT)	Owns Clearinghouse, MVR, and DOT audit readiness
Diesel Mechanic / Fleet Technician	Keeps trucks running and roadworthy
Logistics Coordinator	Coordinates freight movement and scheduling across the fleet
Driver Recruiter	Sources and screens licensed, insurable drivers
Terminal Manager	Runs day-to-day operations at a specific terminal
Route / Delivery Supervisor	Supervises drivers and delivery operations on assigned routes

Verify four things before you extend an offer — not after.

At minimum, every driver candidate needs: an active CDL in the correct class for the equipment being run, a clean or acceptable Motor Vehicle Record, current DOT physical/medical certification, and clearance through the FMCSA Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse. Any gap in those four disqualifies a driver from most commercial insurance policies regardless of how strong the rest of the resume looks.

- **Confirm the license class matches the equipment.** A CDL-B holder is not qualified to run CDL-A equipment, full stop.
- **Pull the MVR before the interview, not after the offer.** A driving-record surprise after an offer costs you the seat and the time.
- **Check DOT physical currency and Clearinghouse status directly.** Don't take a candidate's word for either — both are checkable.
- **Build a pipeline before the seat opens.** A licensing-bottlenecked market rewards fleets that already have a warm, pre-screened bench.

A full interview framework — including specific questions by role — is in the companion Interview Guide.

WHY FLAT-RATE

Contingency fees are a tax on urgency. A retainer is a tax on nothing.

Most staffing agencies work on contingency — a percentage fee, paid only when a hire lands. Generalist agencies in particular often don't screen for CDL class, MVR status, or Clearinghouse standing before submitting a candidate, which pushes the verification work back onto the fleet. That model incentivizes speed over fit, and gives the agency no reason to build a durable pipeline for you.

My Trade Talent works on a flat monthly retainer instead:

- We're incentivized to build a standing, credential-verified pipeline of drivers and fleet-support staff — not just fill one seat and move on.
- Your cost doesn't spike with three open seats and doesn't disappear with zero — it's predictable.
- We stay accountable for fit over time, not just for a signed offer letter.

An empty seat doesn't just sit empty — it moves the load onto everyone else.

A vacant driver seat rarely shows up as a clean, isolated loss. It shows up as a route another driver has to cover on overtime, a dispatcher scrambling to re-route a load, or a bid you don't take because you can't staff it with confidence. None of that is captured by "one open req" on a whiteboard.

In a market where the constraint is a scarce, already-licensed pool rather than a lack of applicants, this isn't a one-time gap to fill and forget — it's a standing condition. Fleets that treat every vacancy as an emergency, one at a time, are working against a labor market that produces vacancies continuously.

Use our free **Cost of Vacancy Calculator** at mytradetalent.com/cost-of-vacancy to model what a specific open seat is costing your fleet in overtime, re-routed loads, and lost capacity — by role and days vacant.

Licensed drivers have options. What are they actually screening for?

In a scarce-license market, the hiring conversation runs both directions. Fleets that win the best candidates on their shortlist tend to be specific and honest about a handful of things drivers consistently ask about:

- **Home time and route type.** Local, regional, and over-the-road runs come with very different lifestyles — drivers want a specific, honest answer about which one this seat actually is.
- **Equipment condition.** Drivers want to know what they'll actually be running and whether it's maintained, not just what it looks like in the listing photo.
- **Hours-of-service reality, not policy language.** A specific answer about how the fleet handles a tight delivery window against an HOS limit lands better than a generic safety-first slogan.
- **A real path from driver toward dispatch, safety, or fleet management.** Fleets that can describe that path specifically — not vaguely — retain longer.

None of this replaces competitive pay. But at parity, the fleet that answers these questions specifically wins the candidate the vaguer competitor loses.

RETENTION

Predictability keeps drivers longer than a marginal pay bump does.

Because licensed, insurable drivers have real options in this market, retention tends to track schedule predictability and honest communication more than a small hourly premium. A driver who knows their routes and home-time pattern two weeks out has a real reason to stay rather than shop their CDL every time a competing fleet posts a slightly higher rate.

The same logic applies to fleet-support staff. Dispatchers and safety/compliance managers who understand exactly how a DOT audit or an out-of-service violation gets handled — with a real, documented process rather than improvisation — report more confidence in the job and less turnover.

BUILDING THE PIPELINE

What "credential-verified pipeline" actually means, operationally.

A standing pipeline isn't a bigger applicant pool — it's a smaller, pre-vetted one, maintained continuously instead of assembled under deadline. In practice, that means:

- License class, MVR, DOT physical, and Clearinghouse status are confirmed before a candidate ever reaches your desk — not after an offer is extended.
- Candidates are tagged by actual route experience (local, regional, OTR) and freight type, not self-reported skill level.
- The pipeline stays warm between openings, so a seat filling today doesn't leave you starting from zero when the next one opens — which, in this trade, it will.

Four questions worth asking any recruiter before you sign with them.

- **"How do you verify a CDL, MVR, and Clearinghouse status?"** If the answer doesn't describe a real verification step, the candidates you're seeing haven't been vetted — just represented.
- **"What happens to the pipeline if I don't have an open seat this month?"** Contingency recruiters have no incentive to maintain one. Ask what stays warm between placements.
- **"What's your fee structure if a placement doesn't work out in the first 90 days?"** Get this in writing before you need it, not after.
- **"Do you specialize in commercial trucking, or is it one of a dozen categories you cover?"** Specificity in the answer usually tracks with specificity in the candidates.

FINAL WORD

The license bottleneck isn't going away. The process around it can improve.

A licensing-bottlenecked labor market isn't a temporary crunch to wait out — the search data backs that up plainly. Fleets that adapt their hiring process now, around verification and a maintained pipeline rather than reactive posting, will simply spend less time and money on this problem than the ones who don't.

A flat-rate recruiting partner built for commercial trades.

My Trade Talent recruits for commercial fleet operators nationally on a flat monthly retainer — no per-hire contingency fee, no incentive to rush a placement that doesn't fit. We maintain live, credential-verified candidate pipelines across commercial trucking and nine other commercial trades verticals, in 100+ US markets.

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The pipeline runs through CDL training programs and career fleets, not job boards.

CDL holders overwhelmingly enter the trade through dedicated commercial driver training schools, employer-sponsored training programs, and lateral moves from other fleets — not through a general job-board search, which the search data above backs up directly. Fleet-support roles like dispatch and safety/compliance tend to come from adjacent logistics, transportation, and compliance backgrounds rather than a single dedicated training pipeline.

That matters for sourcing: a posting alone reaches people who are already actively looking, which the search data shows is a much smaller group than the group researching how to get licensed in the first place. Relationships with training providers and a standing, always-on outreach effort consistently surface stronger candidates than a generic posting that only catches people mid-search.

Staffing a fleet is bigger than staffing a driver's seat.

It's easy to treat "trucking hiring" as synonymous with "driver hiring." In practice, a fleet that's fully staffed on drivers but short a dispatcher, a safety and compliance manager, or a diesel technician still can't run at capacity — a truck without a driver is idle, but so is a truck that's out of service because there was no technician available to turn it around, or a load that never gets dispatched correctly. The ten-role list earlier in this guide reflects that: it's a fleet-operations pipeline, not just a driver pipeline.



Every hire from zero is a *tax* on your team.

My Trade Talent maintains a live, credential-verified pipeline of trades talent on a flat monthly retainer — so open seats fill with qualified people, not guesses.

Schedule a Discovery Call

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