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ECTA: Drive, they said

// BY PETER MACKAY ON 18 OCT 2022

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Industry needs to take positive action if the problem of finding enough drivers to move its product is to be resolved. ECTA has reiterated its ambitions

Of all the challenges facing road transport companies in the current uncertain and volatile economic climate, none is more intractable than the difficulties being experienced in recruiting and attracting drivers. Europe as a whole is facing a shortfall of at least 200,000 drivers and is finding great problems in persuading young people to join the profession to replace the increasingly elderly cohort of existing drivers.

Some of the issues are well rehearsed. Driving, especially over the long distances needed for the transport of chemicals, can keep drivers away from home for days on end, which seems particularly unattractive to the young. There is also growing competition for drivers from parcel delivery firms, following the boom in e-commerce over the pandemic period, where wage rates are good and work is local, meaning drivers can get home every evening.

In response, haulage firms in the chemical sector are doing what they can: offering better salaries, help with training, more comfortable vehicles, apprenticeship schemes and improved conditions all round. But they also need support – there are constant calls for governments to provide secure and comfortable rest areas and more could be done to reduce congestion on the roads, which causes delay and frustration.

Some believe that the chemical industry also has to look at itself if it is to help its logistics partners provide the manpower needed to keep their goods moving. The European Chemical Transport Association (ECTA) published a position paper on the driver shortage in June this year, highlighting the wasted hours drivers spend waiting to load or unload and calling for more flexibility from chemical shippers and receivers, as well as better conditions for drivers at their sites.

With little sign of any improvement in the supply of drivers, ECTA has now published a follow-up position paper, setting out in greater clarity what it feels the chemical industry as a whole needs to do to ensure the job of the driver is more attractive and productive.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM

As ECTA says, the driver shortage problem is not one that transport companies can solve on their own, because the working conditions of a chemical truck driver are mainly defined by the many loading and unloading touch points across Europe. These touch points are out of the control of transport companies and much tighter collaboration with all stakeholders along the logistics chain is required to resolve this driver shortage problem structurally.

ECTA also enumerates some of the reasons why drivers are leaving the profession and it is hard to find new recruits:

- Some 30 per cent of chemical truck shipments have a residence time of more than 3 hours at loading and unloading places
- The work/life balance of a chemical truck driver job is below average compared to other sectors
- Truck drivers are not only confronted with very strict loading/unloading procedures at sites, these are often inconsistent and contradictory, leading to discussions with site operators
- Truck drivers are forced to wait due to inflexible time slots or short opening hours
- The overall truck driver's infrastructure could be much improved and should be made gender-friendly
- There is an increasing gap in understanding between the people operating the loading/unloading site and the people making contractual commitments
- Not all chemical truck drivers are considered a valuable and scarce resource that should be treated with respect. We need to prepare all stakeholders to be open to female drivers.

TAKING A LEAD

To overcome these obvious issues, ECTA is recommending that loading and unloading sites revise and extend their opening hours, take responsibility for the outsourcing of site operations, create flexibility in booking time slots, adapt site inventory level requirements, handle drivers with more respect and support initiatives for digital gate registration.

The focus of ECTA's collaborative action plan is built around the loading and unloading sites. This plan has four elements:

- An ECTA tool will be created in the coming months to provide chemical drivers with the possibility to register data about loading and unloading sites in Europe. These data will be used to identify the best and worst in class. Specific attention is given to the problem of unacceptable delays at loading and unloading sites.
- The daily job of a chemical truck driver is not well understood by all stakeholders. ECTA will define a communication plan and strategy to communicate more about the positive aspects of being a chemical truck driver while promoting industry best practices.
- ECTA will communicate the factual findings described in the first element to individual chemical stakeholders. Summaries of the findings will also be shared with all ECTA members and – through social media – with the professional public.
- ECTA will actively support chemical producers in their efforts to come to structural

improvements and to bring down the waiting times outside the gate and on the premises of

loading and unloading sites. ECTA further expects that individual chemical companies take

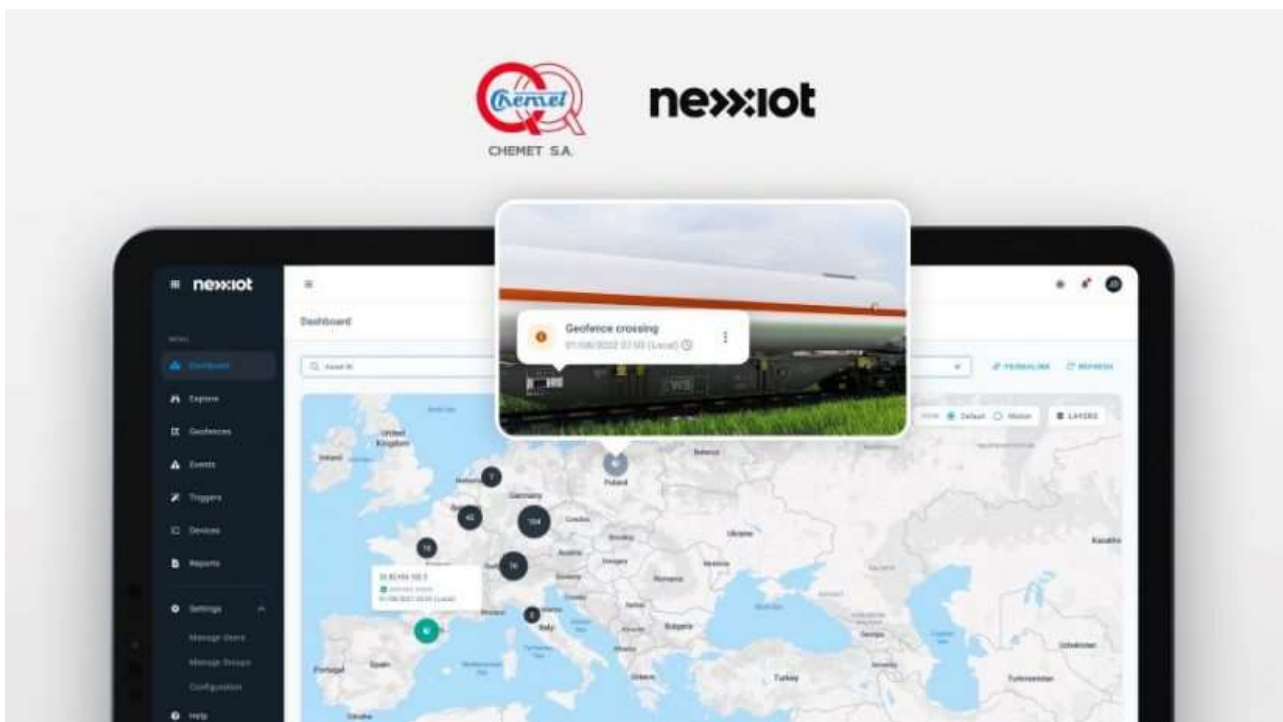
responsibility for communication and improvement towards the companies to which loading

and/or unloading activities are contracted out.

ECTA is appealing for participation from all stakeholders in this effort, which aims to improve the image of the driving job and boost productivity. The Association says: "The driver shortage problem is a big industry opportunity where each of the chemical stakeholders needs to take responsibility and consider truck drivers as a very valuable and scarce resource."

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