

The trucking industry has stated that Provincial and Territorial governments' commercial driver licensing programs do not meet their current needs, which is also somewhat frustrated by the limited advances made to these programs over recent years.

This paper summarizes the present situation, particularly relating to the differences between licensing programs in the various jurisdictions, and also identifies some options for their future improvement.

Introduction

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. The next section looks at the background and current status of commercial vehicle driver licensing. This is followed by a discussion on future direction, a summary of future benefits and risks, and the identification of key questions that need to be addressed.

Background and Current Status

Provincial and Territorial Governments in Canada have responsibility for the issuing and maintenance of commercial driver licenses. (Within this document the provinces and territories are jointly referred to as "the jurisdictions"). The programs and operations related to commercial driver licensing are generally similar across the country. However, in several areas there are inconsistencies between the jurisdictions. These were documented in CTHRC's 'Canadian Commercial Driver Licensing Requirements Report' issued in 2003.

In all jurisdictions there are two main classes of commercial driver licenses and another one for bus drivers. Under the commercial vehicles there is one class for semi-trailer combination vehicles, while the other deals with larger displacement commercial trucks, generally referred to as straight trucks. This latter class can be based on the vehicle's number of axles or its weight. (In this document semi-trailer licenses are referred to as Class 1/AZ licenses and those for the larger displacement trucks as Class 3/C licenses).

The majority of jurisdictions have historically set the minimum age for obtaining a commercial driver license at 18 years, although graduated license programs introduced in recent years have redefined the criteria for entry. One province has a minimum age of 20 and three others use 19 years as the minimum age for issuing a Class 1/AZ license. Three provinces also use 19 as the minimum age for obtaining a Class 3/C license.

Commercial Vehicle Licensing in Canada

Across Canada there are no specific training programs required to be completed, prior to obtaining a commercial driver license. However most, if not all, jurisdictions recommend attending a commercial driver training school prior to taking a driving test.

One province recently completed an analysis of drivers who take their road test. It found the forty percent of applicants who failed the test on their first try were more likely to be involved in accidents, than those who were successful at passing the test on their initial attempt. However, there is no data available indicating the level of training received by those failing the test at their first attempt.

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Several jurisdictions require prospective commercial license holders to possess experience of driving smaller vehicles before they can apply for a Class 1/AZ or 3/C license. Increasingly, the entry requirements are being linked to the successful completion of the jurisdiction's graduated licensing program before a commercial license can be obtained.

All jurisdictions require candidates to pass a written knowledge test and a practical road test before being awarded their commercial driving license. There is a wide variance in the written test content, with the number of questions ranging from twenty to seventy in different jurisdictions. The road test, including the air brake endorsement, is more consistent across Canada, although some jurisdictions differentiate between tests taken in manual or automatic transmission vehicles.

In most jurisdictions, driver test examiners are required to hold Class 1/AZ or Class 3/C licenses to be able to conduct tests in these respective classes. The majority of jurisdictions carry out most of the commercial driver testing using their staff, with a minority of the tests being conducted by private sector examiners. One province uses only private examiners.

With the exception of one province, commercial drivers immigrating to take up residence in Canada do not have their current foreign commercial license accepted, even when there are reciprocal agreements in place between the country of origin and the jurisdiction where they are taking up residence. The immigrant has to comply with the jurisdiction's licensing requirements and take both written and road tests before obtaining the Class 1/AZ or Class 3/C license.

The cost of commercial driver license testing varies between the jurisdictions. In 2003, it ranged from a low of \$14 to above \$140. Many jurisdictions indicate the test fees do not cover all operating costs. The provinces expressed concerns about recovering any additional expenses incurred by more stringent or extensive testing.

In 1999, a few years before CTHRC's report was issued, the Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators (CCMTA) undertook a detailed review of commercial vehicle driver licensing. It noted both the similarities and differences between the jurisdictions, such as those outlined in the preceding paragraphs. The review also outlined changes proposed under two new national program models.

The first model program was entitled 'The National Commercial Driver License Administration Program'. It envisaged the creation of a comprehensive commercial driver profile incorporating the standard driver record/abstract with data from sources such as Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance (CVSA) and NSC infractions. Several jurisdictions have moved to implement the detailed profile, although others, including the provinces with the larger number of commercial drivers, have not yet been able to update their computer systems.

The second model described the creation of 'The National Commercial Driver License Program', which contained several components. These included establishing prescreening criteria; implementing a minimum experience period, developing minimum training program standards; upgrading the driver testing to include more typical operating scenarios; considering the adoption of endorsements for different vehicle combinations; and the creation of a master commercial driver license for experienced 'professional' operators.

The CCMTA review looked at the feasibility of implementing a graduated commercial driver license. While it noted that new commercial drivers were over represented in crashes, especially single vehicle accidents, the review concluded that the introduction of a graduated program would not be feasible. The option to gain experience with straight trucks before progressing to semi-trailer combinations could be difficult to implement, particularly in smaller jurisdictions. Since the 1999 CCMTA review, the concept of graduated licensing for commercial drivers has been dormant. However, portions of the trucking industry have accelerated the use of apprenticeship and mentoring programs.

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The report from the review was accepted by CCMTA. Unfortunately, the tragic events of September 11, 2001 in the United States changed the Council's business priorities to concentrate on driver license security and associated identification issues. This resulted in the commercial driver license initiatives being relegated to a lower priority.

By 2004, CCMTA had completed much of the research and analysis of the security and identification requirements and developed the draft of a new Canadian Driver License Agreement (CDLA). As a result, commercial driver licensing issues regained their priority status and a work group was created to continue the investigation into national commercial driver licensing programs. The initial set of recommendations is currently targeted to be submitted to CCMTA's Board of Directors in May 2006.

While national program development has been relatively non-existent over the past few years, several jurisdictions have implemented changes to their commercial driver licensing operations. Some of these, particularly in the area of prior satisfactory driving experience, are linked to the introduction of graduated licensing programs for new drivers.

In the United States, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) have also been investigating the strengthening of commercial driver licensing programs. The issue of developing a professional commercial driver license has been discussed in the US, although it does not seem to be a current priority for the Administration.

As can be seen from the preceding paragraphs, while there have been changes made by individual jurisdictions to improve commercial driver licensing programs over the past several years, there has been no significant development at the national level. With the review by CCMTA currently underway, the opportunity to develop national commercial driver license models is back on the table. The following section considers many of the issues relating to the possible creation of Canadian commercial driver licensing model programs.

Considerations for Future Direction

This section looks at the future direction of commercial driver licensing in Canada. It is based on the analysis of a variety of document and reports, augmented by a series of interviews with driver licensing authorities, driver training schools, trucking associations and related groups, and trucking fleet operators. As anticipated, the interviews provided a wide range of responses and opinions. However, there was general consensus that a move to a national commercial driver licensing administration model would be beneficial to the industry. The topic of creating a 'professional' or 'master' class of commercial license provided a wide range of differing views, although it is obviously a subject of great interest within the licensing and trucking communities. (The term 'professional' is used in the remainder of this document).

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CCMTA Review: Proposed National Administration Model

The move to a national administration model is widely seen among driver licensing authorities as providing minimum standards for all jurisdictions to implement. However, jurisdictions will still maintain the ability to add to the minimum standard as they see fit.

The minimum standards are expected to cover areas such as license criteria and classifications, driver training schools and their programs, and driver testing. It needs to be emphasized that, while the term 'minimum' is used, the intent is to develop a comprehensive model to strengthen existing licensing programs across the country.

While the trucking industry appears to support the aim of greater consistency across the country, there are concerns that the new model could make the obtaining of a commercial driver license more difficult. Should this happen, it could negatively impact the flow of new drivers into the industry. One example mentioned related to the possibility of new standards increasing the entry age in some jurisdictions. It was felt that this could result in younger drivers considering other careers providing immediate opportunities to the detriment of the trucking industry.

However, others in the trucking industry feel that better and more comprehensive training would improve the retention of drivers. In the long term this could be of significant benefit to the industry.

A Professional Designation

With regard to the possible introduction of a professional commercial driver license, there are a variety of issues that need to be determined. One basic question revolves around the overall responsibility for the professional license, whether it should be government or industry. Our interviews showed support for either alternative.

There seems to be agreement on the general concept of a professional license, being beyond simply having the ability to drive a commercial vehicle. As such, it would cover the knowledge required to operate the vehicle, including factors like CVSA and NSC requirements, border requirements, rules and regulations and other subject matter.

If the professional license is to be issued by the government licensing authority, there is the option to make it an endorsement to the existing commercial driver license, rather than creating a separate license class.

Whether the solution is a separate license class or an endorsement, the professional designation could apply to either Class 1/AZ or Class 3/C licenses. There has also been comment that the professional category should only be available for Class 1/AZ operators, while another view would restrict it solely to carrier fleet drivers.

Another alternative is to separate the designation into sub-categories, such as general carriers, petroleum carriers and food carriers. This would allow specific best practices for the type of commodity carried to be developed. However, it would make the professional program more complex to manage. Should this option be selected, government is probably less likely to participate directly in its operation.

There appears to be general agreement that the professional designation would be an optional, rather than a mandatory, requirement. A significant percentage of commercial driver license holders, such as mechanics and workers where driving is an adjunct to their main work, would probably not find a professional designation appropriate to their needs.

There is also agreement the training programs of many schools will need to be updated and expanded to cover the additional requirements of the professional designation. There is an expectation there would be a cost to the driver (or their employer) to complete the training program.

Similarly, it is assumed some form of test will be required that the commercial driver will need to pass before the professional designation is granted. There would also likely be a fee incurred for taking the test.

Once the designation has been awarded to a commercial driver, there is the issue of maintaining the professional status. There seems to be consensus the issue of a one-time, lifetime qualification will not be appropriate and that some form of maintenance program, such as additional training or retesting, will need to be developed.

There are also the issues of suspension and reinstatement of the designation. If it is a government program, the use of the comprehensive driver profile (including NSC and CVSA infractions) could form the basis for determining ongoing participation in the program. It is assumed the removal of the designation from a commercial driver would not affect their ability to legally drive a commercial vehicle.

Benefits and Risks

The implementation of nationwide, more stringent commercial licensing programs and the introduction of a professional designation are believed to have several benefits, although to date they have not been quantified. Some concerns have also been raised. This section outlines these benefits and concerns.

Benefits

It is felt that improved national standards and more rigorous driver testing could produce improvement in traffic safety. It is also mentioned as a by-product of implementing a professional designation, although it is not clear how this will be realized.

Those attending driver training schools would be directed to schools having the curriculum needed to meet the professional driver requirements. There should also be better opportunities available for students graduating from these schools.

The professional designation is expected to prove advantageous in attracting new entrants into the trucking industry. It is also believed to aid retention of experienced drivers, who will know their professional status provides them with longer-term career opportunities.

The additional training required to obtain and maintain the professional designation is anticipated to improve productivity among experienced drivers

Carrier fleets are also hoping that by employing experienced, well-trained and professionally qualified drivers, they will gain by having lower insurance costs.

Risks

The implementation of more stringent driver testing is likely to increase training requirements and costs, and may make it more difficult to pass the tests. Some carriers are concerned this may make it more difficult to attract new drivers into the industry. However, others see it as a way of separating 'the wheat from the chaff' and deterring those candidates who they would not wish to hire.

There are also concerns over the unknown development, implementation and maintenance costs of a professional designation program and who will pay for them.

There is a thought that by achieving a professional designation a driver will have an expectation to receive a higher salary than those colleagues who have not obtained the designation.

Questions for Discussion

- Is the implementation of a national commercial vehicle driver licensing administration model and a professional designation advantageous and a priority for licensing authorities and the trucking industry?
- Are the operations and maintenance of a professional designation program better handled through a government program or a trucking industry initiative?
- What are the likely additional costs to be incurred by government and industry in developing, operating and maintaining the new programs? Who will pay for them?
- If the new programs were undertaken as a partnership between government and the trucking industry (sector councils), how should this partnership be structured in Provinces / Territories where no Sector Councils exist?