

Changing the Face of Gender Diversity



Today, just over 5 percent of drivers and 14 percent of managers in the transportation industry are female, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. Clearly, there is room for improvement.

Historically, transportation companies have been slow to get on the gender diversity bandwagon, but many are starting to recognize the value of a more diverse workforce and seek fresh ideas to make it happen.

Some companies are ahead of the curve, like Saia Corporation, a provider of LTL, non-asset truckload, and logistics services, and Bennett International Group, a provider of

specialized freight transportation and heavy haul transport. Recently, they shared some of the creative strategies they're using to help strike a better gender balance.

Start at the Top

Michelle Richard, Vice President of Human Resources at Saia, recommends actively engaging the leadership team in diversity initiatives.

"The commitment to any vision must be made at the very top, in the C suite," Richard explains. "Without buy-in and support at that level, a vision is relegated to a mere concept rather than an actionable strategy. Commitment is key. Beyond commitment, you have to believe it, you have to be sincere, and it has to be important to you."

Richard offers Saia's sales team as an example. At one point, it was mostly comprised of men, but today it is split almost evenly—male and female. "Getting to that balance took commitment, focus and a vision to be more representative of our customers and more inclusive," she explains. "As a result, we continue to have one of the best sales organizations in the industry, and a leadership team that is committed to progress, innovation and growth."

Make an Impact through Recognition

Bennett is thriving under the direction of female President and CEO, Marcia Taylor. Today, the company's employee population is approximately 37 percent female, including several women in senior leadership roles. The company's overall driving force consists of about 9 percent female drivers—above the industry average.

While Taylor says the company doesn't spend too much time actively pursuing gender diversity, Bennett has made some strategic moves to foster a balanced work environment. The company's "Women in the Driver's Seat" Program is designed to recognize its female independent drivers and contractors. Launched in 2014, the program now has approximately 200 participants.

As part of the program, Bennett developed an annual "Women in the Driver's Seat Award

A Conversation with Marcia Taylor at Bennett International Group



With Marcia Taylor at the helm, Bennett International Group, has become a \$327.7 million global provider of logistics, transportation and supply chain solutions. Her role as President and CEO has given her a unique perspective on gender diversity. She took time to answer some top-of-mind questions for WIT readers.

How does being a woman-owned company impact awareness of/focus on gender diversity?

Taylor: Being a woman-owned company in a male-dominated industry puts the spotlight on me personally and the women in our organization. People want to know what the difference is in working for and being a customer of a woman-owned company. For us, it is our core values and our desire to care for every driver, employee and agent. We are all family at Bennett.

What strategies have you used to encourage diversity?

Taylor: Over the years, we have pursued certification as a Women's Business Enterprise National Council (WBENC) certified organization, and we have actively participated in woman-focused associations like Women in Defense and Women In Trucking. We have also received rankings as Atlanta's Top Woman-Owned

Company by *Atlanta Business Chronicle*. We also actively support higher education in Logistics through scholarships which have been supporting more women in our industry. The public relations resulting from these activities has attracted some terrific female talent to the organization.

What impact has Bennett's "Women in the Driver's Seat" program had on your workforce?

Taylor: The last two years, we have recognized "Women Drivers of Excellence," and when I call the winners and hear their stories, I get so inspired by all of the wonderful women that we have driving for us. They are balancing work and life demands and truly enjoy being part of the few that are in the industry. The

lifestyle isn't for everyone, but I can see our ladies opening the doors to so many more women considering a career in the industry.

What's the secret to retaining qualified female employees as drivers and/or leaders?

Taylor: We just genuinely care for our drivers and for our employees. We actively give back to the communities we serve, and we make sure that anyone associated with our organization is treated like family and taken care of. Whether it is going to the hospital for a sick family member, starting our Driver Relief Fund for drivers that are in financial hardship, or just taking the time to stop and have a long chat in the Driver's Lounge, retention is all about lifelong relationships for us.

What do you see on the horizon for women in the industry?

Taylor: I see a bright future for women in our industry. I think that the more females are involved in all levels of logistics and trucking—from the C-Suite to the dispatcher, clerk and driver—the more we will see satisfaction increase from everyone involved. We are making great, positive changes, and I think that the industry will become healthier, safer and more caring because of us.

of Excellence" to recognize exemplary drivers, brings in inspiring speakers like Olympic Gold Medal gymnast Shannon Miller to remind them of what champions they are, and features profiles of successful women drivers on the company's website.

Taylor says the recognition goes a long way toward employee satisfaction. "Our female drivers and employees tell me how meaningful our program is in terms of recognizing the role that they have in our success," she explains.

Create a Community

Open channels of communication can give female employees the opportunity to voice

preferences and concerns as well as exchange ideas and support one another.

Saia finds the value in providing an open forum for its female drivers. For the past two years, the company has invited drivers from across the country to a focus group, now dubbed the "Sisters of Saia." During the day-and-a-half event, they listen to industry speakers, connect with one another, and talk openly about what is going well and areas where improvement is needed. Last year's focus group helped the company to identify several action items to improve employee satisfaction.

Bennett also is building a community through its "Women in the Driver's Seat" initiative.

The company ensures that its female drivers have networking opportunities to build relationships with other women drivers at Bennett and throughout the industry. The company encourages them to attend industry events and provides each driver with a complimentary Women In Trucking membership.

Put a Face on Trucking

If women don't see people like themselves at a company, they may be reluctant to apply. That fact prompted Saia to tap its focus group attendees as ambassadors. These drivers are instrumental in Saia's recruiting efforts, joining the company at job fairs and truck shows.

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A Fresh Perspective from Michelle Richard at Saia



Michelle Richard is Vice President of Human Resources for Saia Inc., a \$1 billion corporation offering customers a wide range of less-than-truckload, non-asset truckload, and logistics services. When asked about gender diversity issues, she shared some thought-provoking insights:

Gender Diversity vs. Inclusion

If you ask any female driver, you will hear that they are “just as competent and skilled,” “just as professional,” and “just as capable” as a male driver. There’s no desire to be treated differently. Instead, they want value placed on their merit, performance, skill, experience and contributions—just like any driver, employee, leader, professional—regardless of gender. So, I think we have to change our vocabulary here. Instead of diversity, I think we have to consider those things that bring us together, as in inclusion. Inclusion connotes a togetherness and connectivity that you may not achieve by focusing on what makes us different.

That said, diversity is far from a negative concept. Uniqueness and individuality are very important and necessary. Still, as I seek to build a team and grow talent within my

organization (particularly among a population that is so grossly under-represented in our industry), I prefer to think of women, not in terms of diversity, but in terms of their inclusion. Whether it be them having a seat at the table in our organization, or them being a vital part of the sustainability and future of our industry, they must be included and, beyond that, they must lead. So, the mere changing of our lens to inclusion rather than diversity, paints a much larger landscape of collaboration, connection, familiarity and unity.

Gender Diversity as a Team Effort

The leadership team at Saia is committed to growing female drivers within our work-

force. We are putting in the work, we are acting in concert, and we are making progress. But this can’t just be a leadership initiative; it has to be a team effort. We need every driver, dispatch operator, customer service rep, sales rep, human resource manager, safety manager, regional manager, payroll clerk—ANYBODY with a daughter, granddaughter, sister, cousin, niece, sister-in-law, mother-in-law—to talk to them about Saia. The leadership team may write the play, but we all have an obligation to be on stage.

Holding Up a Mirror

We have to put a face on trucking and make it familiar. Whether it is the woman in line next to you at the store, the mom at soccer practice, the woman at the shampoo bowl next to you, or your mom, aunt, sister, or friend—we’ve got to enable women to see themselves in these roles. Not to be unicorns, but to be part of something bigger—a family, an industry, a profession. If we can change this optic, make it more familiar and viable, we will be able to change the landscape in our industry for generations to come.

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Women are often uncomfortable inquiring about positions as truck drivers at industry events. Showing potential recruits that women like them are in the role can be very valuable. Courtney George, Saia’s Human Resources Project Specialist, explains: “Women who stop by our booth at recruiting events are hesitant at first. They’ll start by asking about jobs for their husbands. Involving our women drivers makes a huge difference. Getting a chance to talk with someone who is already in that role helps to put them at ease.”

Make Personal Connections

“Word of mouth and personal connections are the strongest recruiting mechanism that we have for leadership positions,” Richard says.

The same holds true for drivers. “Ask any driver how they were hired into their current position,” she suggests, “and most will tell you that they knew someone who already worked there, they got a call from a buddy, or saw a driver at a stop or during a pick-up/delivery and asked for a card, or found a card in their window. Drivers are the best recruiters, and we have a team of them ready to bring in more women to Saia.”

Saia also has a “Dock to Driver” program that enables dockworkers with an interest in driving to become drivers through a rigorous training program, enabling the company to achieve its goal of promoting from within whenever possible.

One of Bennett’s recruiting strategies hits even closer to home.

“Perhaps the most nontraditional recruiting method we have is to encourage family members to become a part of the organization,” Taylor says. “We have mothers and daughters that work here. At one time, there were four generations of women from my family working at Bennett. Employees bring friends and relatives to us, and as long as they don’t work for each other in the same department, we welcome that.”

Exploring strategies like these could help to create a better gender balance at your company. There’s no time like the present to give one a try. 