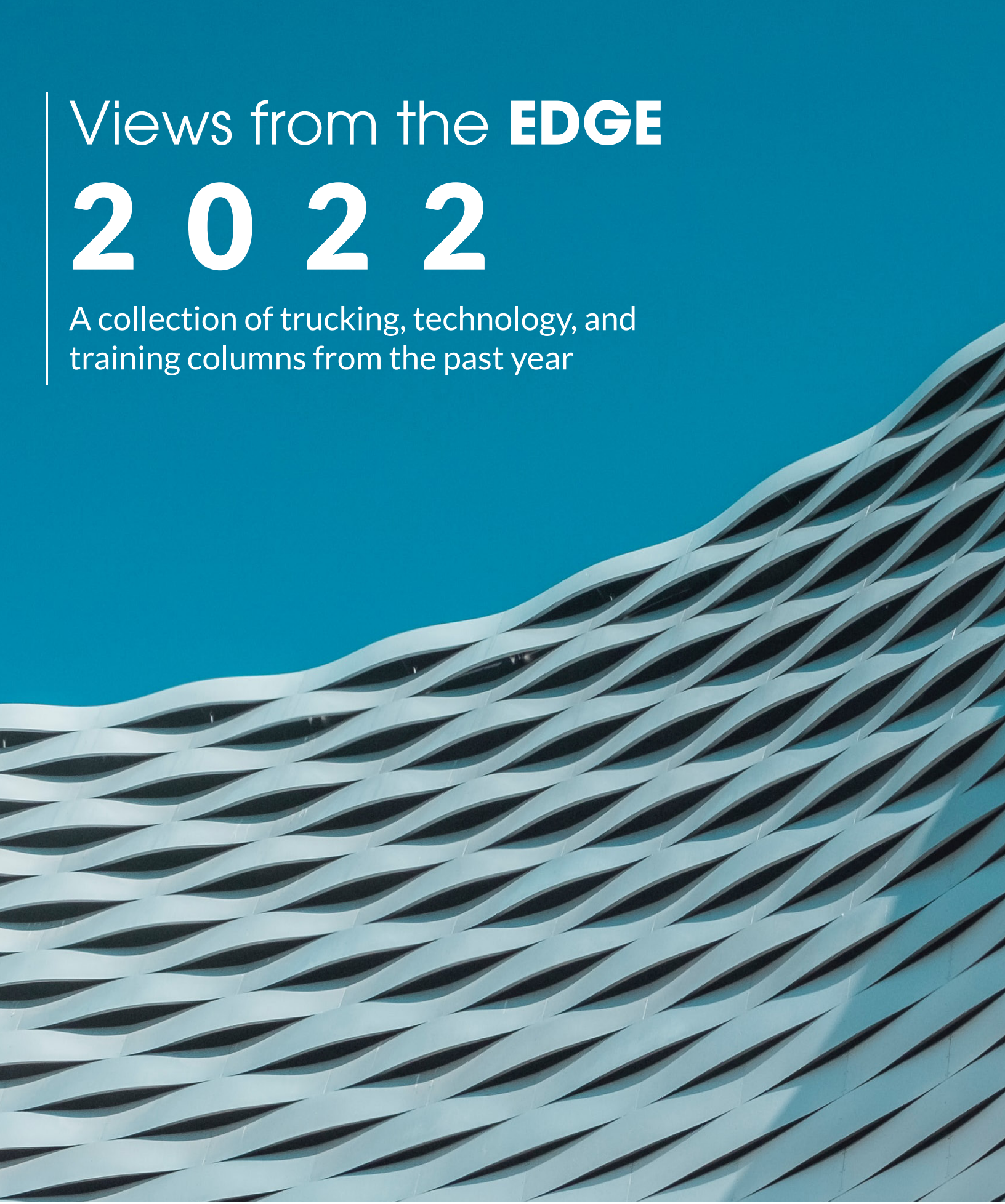
Views from the **EDGE**

2022

A collection of trucking, technology, and training columns from the past year



carriers EDGE®

CONTENTS

TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

TECHNOLOGY & TRUCKING

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT


TRAINING &
DEVELOPMENT

The Long Tail and Training Scarcity

By Mark Murrell
Published on November 3, 2021

In 2006 Chris Anderson published *The Long Tail*, a book discussing how the Internet was fundamentally changing the economics of distribution and retail and all the assumptions that went with it. The book is a fantastic eye-opener, and pretty much required reading for anyone starting or building an Internet business, but the lessons apply to other areas as well.

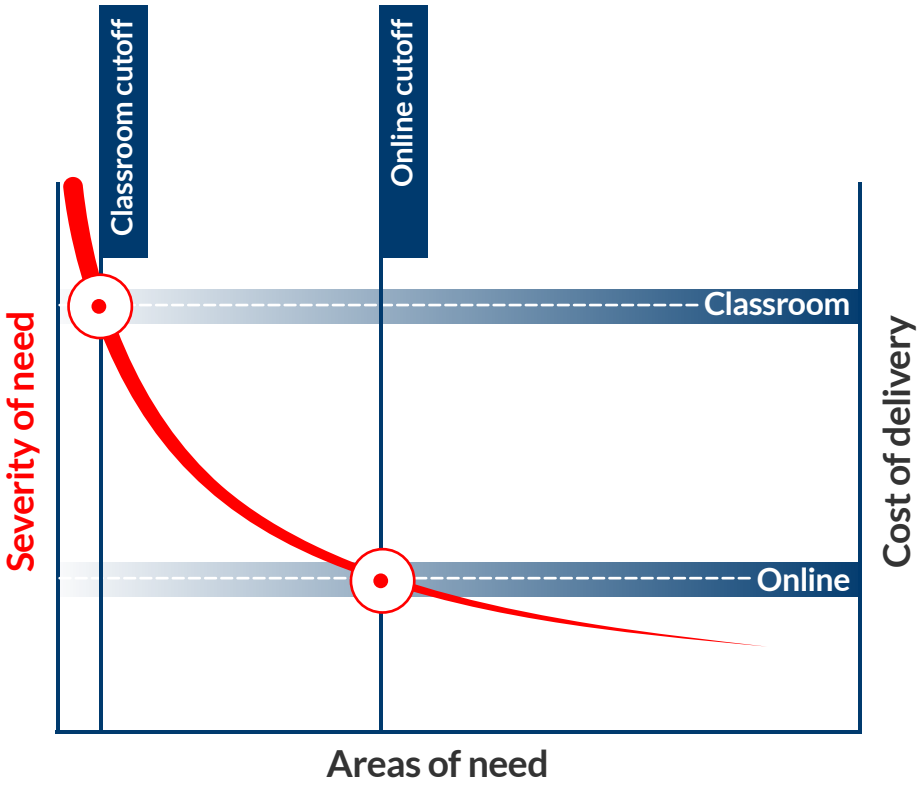
In *The Long Tail*, Anderson talks about "the tyranny of shelf space" and how it forces retailers to only stock the products that sell in the largest volume. As a result, vendors get a distorted view of what the market really wants. However, when those physical barriers are removed, as is the case with Amazon, iTunes, and other Internet retailers, it turns out that there's a huge appetite for variety and thousands of products in every category that will sell in small quantities. Those small quantities, multiplied by the large selection, equal massive sales numbers. No physical retailer could ever stock that many items, but in the virtual world there's no direct cost to having them available (since they only represent a few bytes in a database and a bit of drive space to store a file), so they reap the benefits.

In the general retail world, long tail economics have been at work for a decade or more, and people have come to expect massive variety. However, in many other places people are just starting to realize that the scarcity is no longer an issue.

The Long Tail in Transportation

Within the transportation industry, driver training is one of those places.

In the old days, where "training drivers" meant pulling them off the road and into class, it was hugely expensive. The business only makes money when drivers are delivering goods, so if they're sitting in class then the business is taking a big hit. Much like the huge cost of shelf space forcing retailers to be picky about what they stocked, the huge cost of delivering classroom training forced fleets to be very picky about what training they delivered. Orientation made the cut, because you had to get people started the right way. Post-incident remedial work also made the cut because insurance and enforcement people demanded it. Required courses (hazmat, fire safety) could be justified as well. Beyond that, though, it was pretty tough to justify much else.



However, just like in the retail world, the old days for fleet training are gone and scarcity is no longer an issue. The Internet, in this case online training, means that training is available anywhere, anytime, with no associated business disruption. Most people I talk to understand that the Internet makes training delivery more convenient and helps to catch the people who couldn't attend a live session, but that's just scratching the surface. Amazon gives me the ability to buy a TV online for the same price as Best Buy and have it shipped to my house, but that's not the real value of Amazon. The real value is the thousands of other products I can get from Amazon that I CAN'T get at Best Buy. Similarly, the real value of online training is not that it makes classroom content available for people who missed the live session, but that it opens up an entirely new world of options that couldn't even be considered in a classroom environment.

More is Better

If training can be delivered without disrupting the business or infringing on the driver's home time, why not do it more often? With the impediments removed, you can do way more training than ever before, without having to limit yourself to just the highest priority items.

While you may still have a prioritized list of possible training subjects, the cut-off for what can reasonably be delivered is much farther down the list than it was before. As a result, more different subjects can be covered, and they can be refreshed more regularly, improving the overall absorption rate.

Smarter fleets are recognizing that and changing their entire delivery model. Instead of killing themselves to schedule only the most critical sessions, they're doing new training every quarter (or every month) online and shifting their in-person activities to more specialized work. The results are invariably positive in terms of fleet safety and overall driver quality but it takes a big shift in mindset to consider it.

As a starting point, it's worth asking yourself a few questions:

- If there were no impediments, how much training would you like your fleet to have, and what things would you like to see covered?

- If you actually delivered all that training, how much safer, more compliant, more effective, and more cohesive would your driving team be?

In the retail world, more products, multiplied by even tiny sales volume in each, leads to huge profits. In the training world, the equation looks similar: more training, multiplied by even low priority subject areas, leads to huge quality and efficiency improvements (and increased profitability as a result).

The Mechanics of an eLearning System ...or... Why you shouldn't build it yourself

By Mark Murrell
Published on April 13, 2022

When large fleets start looking at the prospect of providing online training for their drivers, it usually doesn't take long before someone suggests that they build it themselves. The thinking normally comes out of looking at quotes from vendors, thinking about how many staff they could get for the same money, and figuring that it's better to just build their own rather than paying someone else. Added to that, fleets have "IT" people in house already, and they likely have several "trainers" too, so they figure they already have the necessary skillsets, and it would be cheaper to build rather than buy.

I understand that math (as a business owner I do similar calculations all the time), and I don't blame people for thinking about it, but in the case of eLearning for trucking companies, I don't think it's smart to try and build it yourself.

Here's why.

First, let's address the issue of existing staff. You may have IT people and trainers on staff now, but I'm going to bet they're run off their feet as it is. I've yet to see a trucking company that has IT people and trainers sitting around bored, so dumping another big project on them is probably not going to go over well. On top of that, the existing people are highly unlikely to have the right skillsets.

IT people are focused on keeping desktop PCs functioning and virus-free, managing printers and general network issues, and maybe helping build a website. They're not software developers.

Trainers are invariably ex-drivers who have ability or interest in delivering stand-up training, with reasonable proficiency in building the PowerPoint they use in those stand-up sessions. That may be perfectly fine for delivering orientation and doing performance coaching with drivers, but that doesn't make them expert educators.

Since the existing staff don't have the right skillsets, and are too busy as it is, new people will need to be hired. If you assume that the annual fees for a vendor's eLearning system are comparable to a few salaries, then you could certainly hire some people for the same money.

So, what job roles or skillsets are required?

An eLearning system has two main components – the Learning Management System (LMS) that tracks assignments, activity, and progress, and the content that gets served out through that LMS. Let's look at what's involved in building each of those.

Learning Management System

Any fleet large enough to consider building its own eLearning platform is going to need a properly designed, flexible LMS with good usability. That means you'll need a database developer to build the foundation, a middle-tier developer to build the business logic, and an interface developer to design and build the part that users actually interact with. For a system this size, you can probably get one person to do the database and middle-tier, but it's extremely rare (read: expensive) to find someone who can do all three.

What about Open Source? Aren't there free components available for use?

Yes, there are definitely Open Source LMS available, the most prevalent being Moodle. The problem with these systems is that they're built for K-12 or post-secondary users, not corporate. Systems like Moodle are designed to help teachers provide text-based content to their students and track marks. There have been many attempts to try and make these work in a corporate environment, but the fundamental approach is so different they rarely succeed. If you're going to use Open Source as a foundation, you'll end up spending nearly as much adapting and customizing as you'd spend building from scratch.

Well, what about these cheap, web-based LMS that are available?

There are companies now providing basic LMS services for cheap monthly rates. In most cases, you upload your content, assign it to users, and track the performance. As

with the Open Source options, though, there are lots of trade-offs here as well. Most of these are designed for audiences that are very tech-literate (i.e., not trucking) so the usability often isn't great. They also generally have limited functions for managing users or reporting on activity. They're designed for small implementations, so the functions tend to be limited. A big fleet using something like this will end up spending more in administrative costs to manage it than they'll save through the discounted fees.

So, you end up either building a proper LMS yourself, which takes time and money, or you cut corners on a cheapo solution and end up spending the same time and money on customizations or admin staff. But even after you solve that problem and get an LMS, you still need content.

eLearning Content

I think this is the main place where most people figure they can do it themselves, since they have trainers building PowerPoint now, and they think they can just post those on the web and their problems will be solved. There are a couple of reasons why that doesn't work, but the most important one is this: self-paced learning over the web is WAY different from classroom training.

Building effective eLearning means creating content that people get value from without an instructor present. That means that you have to cover all learning styles, account for different learning preferences, deal with technical issues like color-blindness and dyslexia, and present an enjoyable experience that keeps learners engaged throughout. That takes skill and experience to execute effectively.

Building eLearning content generally encompasses three different job roles – an instructional designer to organize and write the content, a visual designer, or graphics person to provide the images and animations supporting that content, and a subject matter expert to ensure the content is accurate. (Good eLearning also has professional voiceover as well, but that's always outsourced anyway so we'll exclude that here.) Trucking companies generally have subject matter experts (the existing trainers) but not the other skills. After 10 years in this industry, I can count on one hand the number of people I've come across that have education degrees or formal background in adult learning.

It's possible that there's a graphics person in marketing who can be tapped to help with the visuals for the eLearning, but you're probably still going to be hiring an instructional designer - and buying them the software they need to build courses, which can be $2500 - $5000 per license.

Putting it all together

So, let's say you hire an instructional designer to build content, and a couple of developers (on contract) to build the LMS. Great, you're ready to get started.

Three months from now, if all goes well, you'll have one course and a basic LMS to store it in. Of course, that's assuming everything goes smoothly, but since you're doing this for the first time there will likely be bumps along the road. Even if it does all go smoothly, you can realistically expect to have 4-6 courses built in the first year. Not a bad start. Except that the vendor had 50 (or more) when they quoted you the price, and they're continuing to crank out more all the time.

The reality is that you'll never catch up to the vendor since this is their core business and a side project for you.

I'm certainly not against building things, but I think it's important to focus on building things that make sense. For example, we don't host our own servers. I have managed servers in the past, but running a modern, secure server environment takes A LOT of work, so you need to be fully committed in order to keep up with changing standards and have any chance at success. We're not interested in committing that level of resources to server management, and there are plenty of people who focus on just that, all day every day. We're much better off paying them to manage the servers so we can focus on building eLearning, even if it seems like a lot of money is going out the door every month.

For trucking companies and eLearning, I think the equation works out the same – focus on delivering freight in the safest, most efficient, and most profitable way possible, and don't get distracted by side projects that aren't core competencies. Rather than trying to reinvent the wheel by building an eLearning product from the ground up, a better approach is to find a good vendor and work with them on any enhancements or customizations you need. They'll be able to turn it around more quickly since they have more efficiencies, so you'll get a better product, more quickly, and over time it ends up much cheaper.

That math always makes sense.

A postscript: I know there are fleets that started building their own eLearning years ago when there weren't packaged products available on the market. In those cases it certainly made sense, since there were no other viable options. However, in today's market, where there are plenty of vendors with complete products, it's a different story.

An eLearning Primer - Part I

By Mark Murrell
Published on May 5, 2022

The summer issue of Inc. magazine had an article focused on employee training, and different ways to make it more interesting. (I couldn't find the article on their website so I couldn't link to it directly here, but it's in the print edition of the magazine.) The article is fairly short but it talks about different approaches to employee training, across different industries, and does a solid job of introducing different ideas. Plus, with a subheading like "Ditch those cheesy videos and embrace a new crop of high-tech training tools" I pretty much had to read it!

The article covers some basic things that are currently in fashion in the eLearning world – microlearning, gamification, self-directed learning paths, and social collaboration – but it's really more of a teaser than anything else.

However, it got me thinking about all the different tools and solutions that collectively make up the "eLearning" category, and I realized that I've spent almost no time here talking about them. I've been doing these periodic columns for a few years now, and have something like 30 of them published, but it turns out that I barely ever talk about eLearning directly.

Of course, now that I've realized that, I have to do something about it!

As a first step, I'll start by reviewing the major types of eLearning, then dig into the approach we use and why we chose it.

In the past few columns I've referenced a variety of different types of learning interventions – everything from individual job aids to focused, formalized coaching programs that all serve to help improve performance when training isn't the right answer. For the purposes of this column, I'll skip all the different online tools that are available to help with those other interventions, and focus specifically on situations where training is the right answer. Even at that level, there are still lots of different options to choose from.

eLearning approaches can be categorized along two main

vectors – synchronous vs. asynchronous, and instructor-led vs. self-paced. The first vector indicates whether everyone learns at the same time (synchronous) or at different times (asynchronous). The second vector indicates whether that learning is directed by an instructor or by the individual learner. Put them together and you have four main approaches:

Synchronous Instructor-led

This is classroom training delivered over the Internet. Today it's most commonly associated with WebEx or GoToMeeting, but the original tools were more focused on reproducing the classroom experience by including things like breakout groups, whiteboarding, polling, and even virtual flip charts. Fun fact – my partner, Jane Jazrawy, was a pioneer in this area, spearheading the launch of the first synchronous eLearning product line in Canada, at PriceWaterhouseCoopers back in 1999.

Asynchronous Instructor-led

This is the model most commonly used in the post-secondary world. The instructor creates a curriculum that runs the length of a term or semester, then students login and complete weekly assignments. The content is primarily text, possibly with some images or video here and there, and usually group projects throughout the term as well. Participants go through the content on their own (but within the established schedule), submit assignments and group projects, then the instructor marks them manually, just like a regular class.

Synchronous Self-paced

In this model, everyone goes through the content at the same time, but the content is designed such that people work independently and control their own pace, without an instructor overseeing it. This used to be more common than it is currently, but vocational schools still use this model pretty commonly.

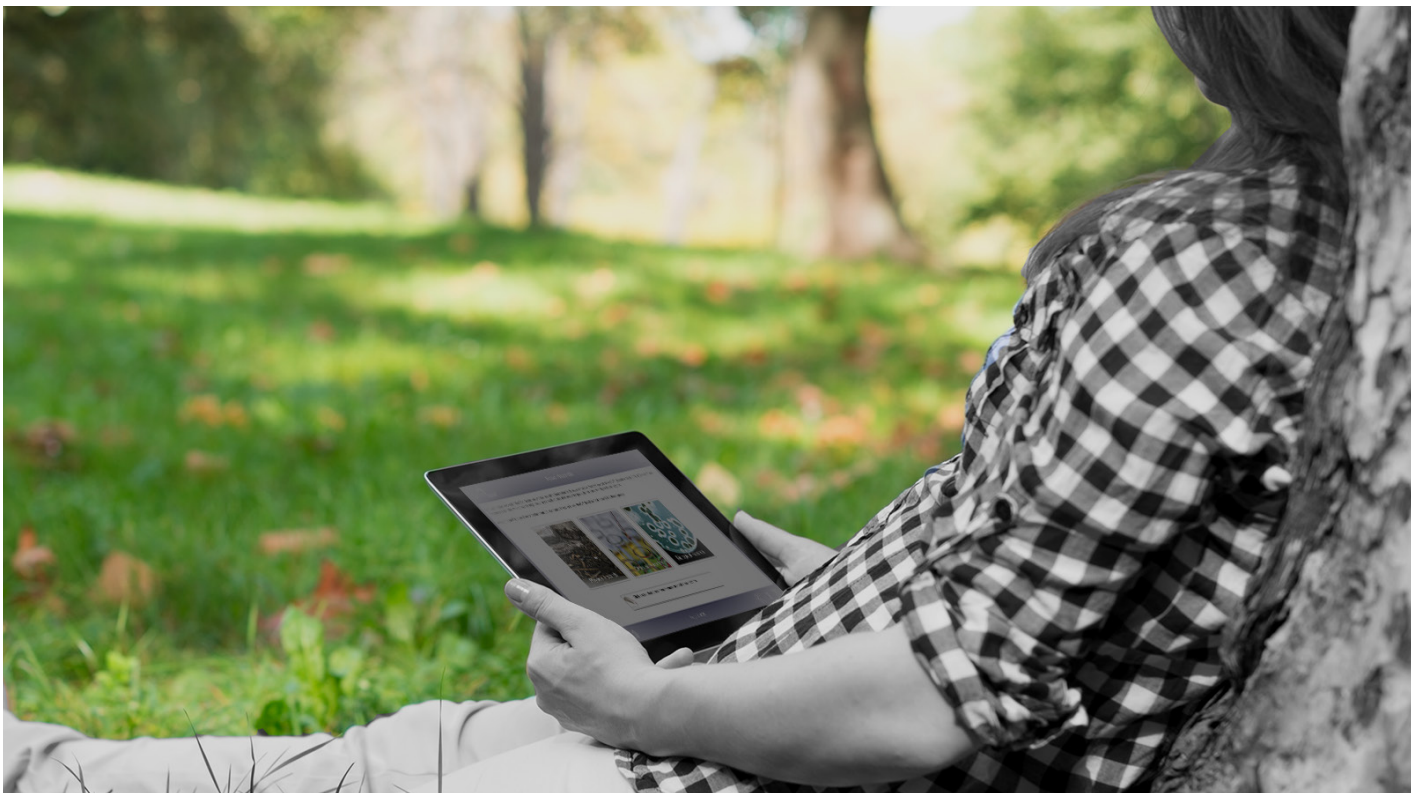
Asynchronous Self-paced

This model has each student participate whenever they like, and proceed through the content independently. This is the most common model in corporate eLearning now.

CarriersEdge eLearning uses the asynchronous, self-paced model, but even that only scratches the surface. Within that model there are a range of different approaches, from the very basic to the highly complex. The most common ones are:

Basic Slides

One step above PowerPoint, courses in this style are just text and images. Content is broken up into different pages or slides, and may be in lesson blocks as well, but there's generally very little interaction. These courses are often built in PowerPoint (then converted to web format) or



directly in a visual web editor like Adobe Dreamweaver.

CBT-Style

Before the Internet, Computer-Based Training was the big thing, with courses run from CD-ROM or corporate file servers. These courses were more interactive than their slide-based predecessors, adding audio, movies, and interactions (e.g. click activities, quizzes) to create a more engaging learning experience. Typically built using tools like Asymetrix ToolBook or Macromedia Director, these were self-contained entities that could do a lot from an educational standpoint. However, having to distribute content by CD-ROM meant a ton of ongoing maintenance headaches. (The first paying job our company did, in December 2000 just after incorporation, was burning CBT CDs for a large bank. It was boring, unglamorous work, and I don't miss it at all!)

CBT-Style courses today are delivered over the Internet, but still have the same approach - slides with text, images, animation, movies, audio narration, interactive quizzes, etc. It's a better experience for the end-user, since they get the benefit of the instructional approach, and no one has to deal with CDs!

Flash-based / American-style

A very different educational approach, emerging in the early 2000s, coincided with the maturing of Macromedia Flash as an authoring tool and the prevalence of the Flash player for running content in browsers. These courses get away from the text-on-the-page model and focus more heavily on the audio narration. Instead of presenting content in pages (or slides) they have a scene containing a block of audio narration and some supporting images or video b-roll underneath it. Interaction is primarily in the form of exercises or learning reinforcement tools, so it's a little like watching a news report with interaction breaks at different points.

This approach is known informally as American-style because the US eLearning industry embraced this model earlier and more quickly than other parts of the world. By the mid-2000s most US eLearning vendors were producing content this way, and it remains the predominant model for commercial producers and consultants.

Immersive

Taking the "scene" idea from Flash-based eLearning in a whole new direction, immersive courses create a completely animated environment and have the student progress through different sections that match the parts of the content. This is scenario-based training taken to the extreme – instead of just having content that talks about a subject, the learner gets dropped into a virtual recreation of that world and explores from there. These courses often include animated avatars that act as guides, effectively providing a virtual instructor. Immersive eLearning is commonly used for things like sales training where role playing is useful, but I've seen it used for project management, medical and dental courses, and physical product training as well.

Game-based

From immersive eLearning, it's only a small step to game-based learning, the current craze in the commercial industry. These courses are essentially quest-style video games with an educational component underlying them. Different actions provide points, lead to badges, and allow you to advance into different areas. Most of the time now they're also collaborative, so performance is tracked and shared, participants can see how their performance compares to others, and like other social video games they can often chat with other students and collaborate on activities as well.

As you can see, there are a lot of different options when it comes to online training, and widely different approaches. In part II we'll look more specifically at the approach we use for CarriersEdge, and why we felt that was the best fit for the transportation industry.

An eLearning Primer - Part II: What Works in Trucking

By Mark Murrell
Published on May 25, 2022

In the first part of this article I reviewed different approaches to eLearning and talked about the ones most commmonly used in the corporate world today.

There were five main styles, ranging from very simple to very elaborate. To recap:

- **Basic Slides** – Primarily text and images, broken up into pages or slides, possibly with a few quiz questions added in.
- **CBT-Style** – Text, images, video, animation, narration and more variety in quizzes and exercises.
- **Flash-based / American Style** – audio and video, with limited text in the content sections. Interactive quizzes and exercises throughout.
- **Immersive** – virtual environments that present content in the context of a simulation of real-world activities.
- **Game-Based** – quest-style video games with an educational slant so participants learn while collecting points and sharing scores socially.

Each successive model is more elaborate than those that came before, so it probably comes as no surprise that they also take progressively longer to build and have increasing costs as well. While a simple slide-based course can be built in a couple of weeks for a few thousand dollars per finished hour of content (the budgeting metric for all custom eLearning), immersive and game-based courses can take upwards of a year and cost $50-75k per finished hour. Big difference!

It's important to note that one style isn't inherently better than another. They each have strengths and weaknesses, and situations where they're the perfect fit.

In trucking, however, most of them don't work very well. To understand why, we need to look at some of things that constrain an eLearning solution for trucking:

- **Regulatory change** – one thing I've learned in 12 years of serving this industry is that trucking LOVES to change regulations. Pretty much as soon as a reg comes out there's a concerted effort in some segment to change it. As a result, any eLearning solution needs to be built with the assumption that the content will change, it may change quickly, and the change may be reverted later on.

- **Technology usage** – the audience in trucking is rarely sitting at a new, fast PC on a fast Internet connection in an office. More often, they're using technology that's a few levels down from the current leading edge, on connections that are either slow, shared, or dedicated to other activities, and they may be using cellular data plans as well.

- **Audience characteristics** – trucking includes a pretty even mix of different learning styles, along with wide ranges in age, education, literacy, and comfort with technology.

- **Price sensitivity –** trucking is a low margin industry with little room for new expenses.

Those constraints pretty much immediately rule out some of the different eLearning types noted at the top.

Immersive and game-based courses take too long to develop to keep up with regulatory changes. They also generally rely on newer technology and better connections to deliver the maximum experience, which rules out a lot of the intended audience. Finally, they're expensive to develop in the first place, and ongoing updates would make them even more expensive, resulting in a final product that wouldn't be viable in the market. As a result, it's no surprise that you don't see courses like this in trucking right now.

Flash-based courses are faster and less expensive to develop, but they do generally require better quality equipment and connections, limiting their effectiveness here. As well, the lack of text is a problem for a good chunk of the audience who prefer to learn by reading, or English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) people who tend to do better when they can see and hear the words at the same time.

At the other end of the spectrum, basic slides are cheap and fast to develop, but the bare bones learning experience doesn't work for a good segment of the audience who need more interaction to learn properly. Regulatory training content can be pretty dry, so a simple text-and-images approach will just magnfiy that and make it even harder for people to stay engaged and learn. Plus, if you're just going to use text and images then a PDF that can be printed or shared is a better choice, or maybe an infographic that's more enjoyable and tends to be stickier for learners.

That brings us to CBT style, which actually works really well for trucking. It provides a great combination of learning elements, and fits very nicely inside the constraints noted above:

- The combination of text, images, video, narration, interactions, and quizzes covers the range of learning styles, and supports the needs of ESL participants as well.

- It's relatively quick to develop so it can be updated more easily when the regs change, keeping the resulting product in a reasonable price range.

- It's light on bandwidth and technology, so it works well on older machines and slower connections, and doesn't burn through cellular data plans either.

- It's flexible enough that it can be built to include some of the elements of more elaborate approaches, without committing to them completely, and can still be very user-friendly and welcoming.

It's for those reasons that we use this model for our courses, and that last point is particularly important since we like to incorporate different elements from a variety of styles. For example, one of the benefits of immersive eLearning is that it gives people a chance to simulate real world scenarios, helping them to see how the new content fits into daily routines. We don't create fully immersive experiences, but we do use characters and scenarios to show how the content applies to real world situations. That provides a comparable benefit, but in a much more contained, sustainable package.

So, while I started this two-part piece talking about all the different kinds of eLearning that are common across the corporate education world now, those options narrow once you start considering the requirements for any specific audience. In the case of the trucking industry, and its distinct needs, CBT-style ends up as the best option. Of course, even within that box there's plenty of room for variety, but at that level it's above my pay grade so I'll leave it to Jane to cover in her articles and webinars!

An eLearning Primer – Part III: Learning Management

By Mark Murrell
Published on June 15, 2022

In the first two parts of this article I discussed the different types of eLearning commonly used in the corporate world today, and what works for the trucking industry's unique requirements.

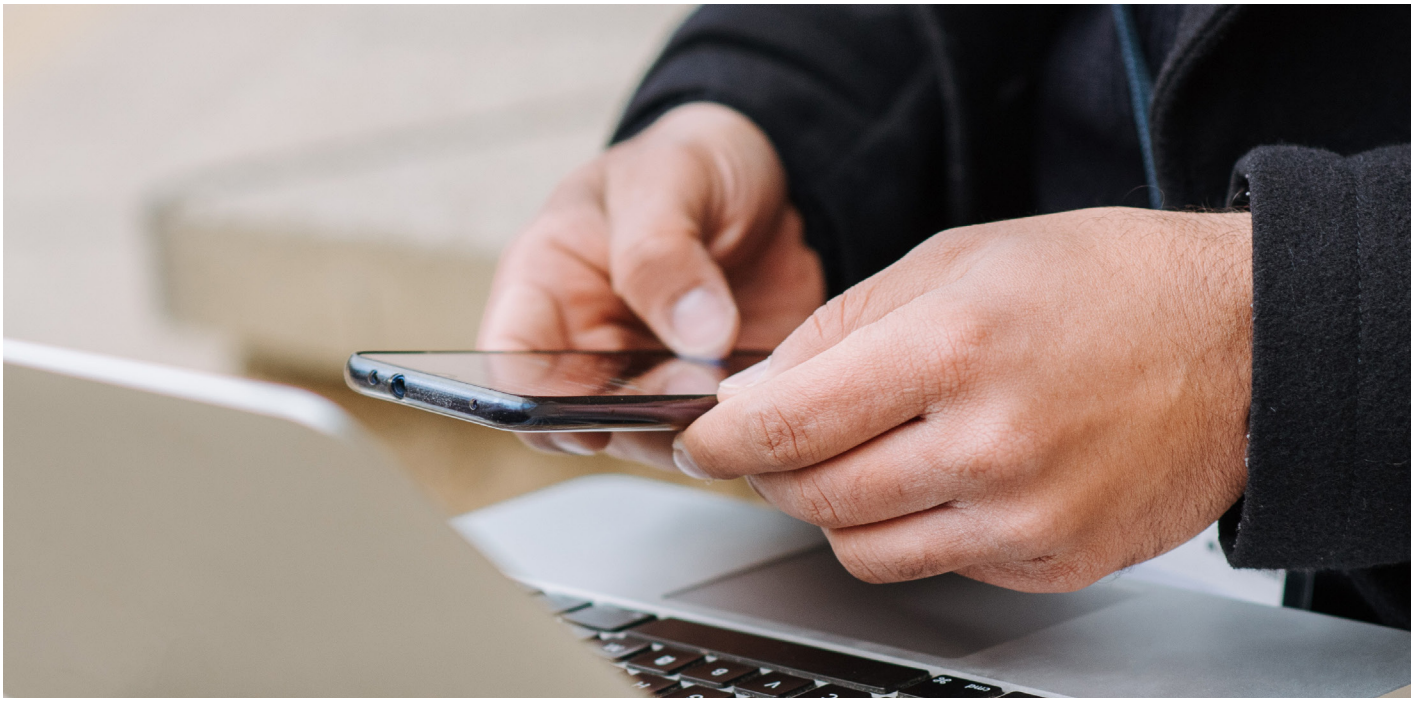
Those articles covered a lot of ground, but I realized afterwards that they were still only talking about one part of the eLearning ecosystem. The content is certainly a critical part of any successful implementation, but just as important is the other piece: the Learning Management System. So, in this article I'll spend some time talking about the ins and outs of an LMS.

A Learning Management System (LMS) is the backend that houses the learning content, manages user accounts and assignments, and tracks activity. It's a hugely important part of the total package, but I'll acknowledge that it's not very sexy. In many ways it's like plumbing or electrical in your house – important, but often hidden away and rarely very exciting. When they're working well you don't notice them. In fact, if you are noticing them, it's probably because something is going wrong.

Similarly, when an LMS is designed and built properly, and when it's operating the way it should, it stays out of your way. You can login, do what you need to do quickly and with minimal headaches, then move on to the rest of your day. Let's take a look inside and see how that happens.

LMS History

Systems that could be used to track learning have been around for a long time, but dedicated corporate LMSs really only emerged as a distinct product category in the late 90s with the launch of Saba and Docent (both launched in 1997). Shortly after that, the major enterprise software companies – at the time, SAP, Oracle, and PeopleSoft – added learning management modules to their systems, and a host of smaller vendors launched similar offerings in quick succession. Initially, all of these were on-premises systems, meaning that you had to get dedicated server hardware and manage



everything on your own. Fortunately, the cloud has taken over and nearly every commercial LMS is now sold as a hosted service.

That's not all that changed in the LMS world over the past 20 years. While they were originally meant primarily to give companies a central place to store content and track basic user activity, they've now developed many more features for creating and organizing content, managing assignments and complex curriculum models, and tracking of all user activities. Today's large enterprises LMSs have expanded to the point where they encompass many things that were traditionally the focus of HR systems, creating a new, broader category of Talent Management Systems.

The Fundamentals Don't Change

However, even though the core functionality and underlying technology has grown substantially in that time, the basics haven't. The primary things that make a great LMS are pretty much the same as what they were in the beginning – flexibility and ease of use.

I mentioned above that an LMS is doing its job when you don't notice it. For that to happen, though, it needs to have the functions you need and they need to behave in a way that makes sense for your organization. You also need to be able to access those functions quickly and easily, without jumping through a lot of hoops to get something done. Since every organization has different needs, and wants to do things its own way, the system needs to be extremely flexible in how it's structured, with a multitude of configuration and customization options so you can get it working in sync with your business.

It also needs to be easy to use, understand, and remember. The reality of the learning management world is that most administrators don't spend their days in the system. In most companies they may login to the LMS a couple of times a week, and smaller companies (particularly in trucking where small fleets may not have dedicated safety or training people) may login even less often. To be successful, an LMS needs to be intuitive enough that you can immediately remember how everything works as soon as you login, and it needs to have a pattern of functions that's consistent so you can figure them out by following the conventions established within the system.

Deceptive Simplicity

Simple enough in concept, but really difficult to build. A company with 10 employees has vastly different needs and usage patterns from a company with 100 or 1000 employees. Designing a system that's flexible enough to handle that range of requirements takes a lot of planning. Making something intuitive and immediately discoverable is also really difficult.

People sometimes login to our LMS and think that it looks simplistic. It's got a very blunt layout, with big, colorful icons and buttons everywhere. It's not designed that way because we want it to look cartoonish, but because we want the

functionality to immediately be obvious, and the system conventions to be clear and consistent. It took many years of watching how people use the system to get to the point where the workflow could be optimized as much as it has been, and it's very specifically designed to reflect the needs of the trucking industry.

What's different about an LMS design for trucking? More than I would have imagined.

While the underlying data structure isn't that different than what we'd use in other industries, the business logic and interface reflect the very specific realities of the industry:

- **Text is a problem** – Many commercial LMSs are very text-heavy in their interfaces, which is fine for corporate HR and training people who are used to reading instructions and following a lot of steps, but that doesn't work in the trucking industry. Administrators want to get in and out without a lot of reading.

- **Clicks are precious** – Most of the interface design world is focusing on getting tasks completed with minimal clicks, but it's critical here. If someone only logs in to the system once a week, they don't want to click into a bunch of different forms to add a user or assign a course. Every required click increases the likelihood of incorrect or erroneous clicks, so they need to be kept to a minimum.

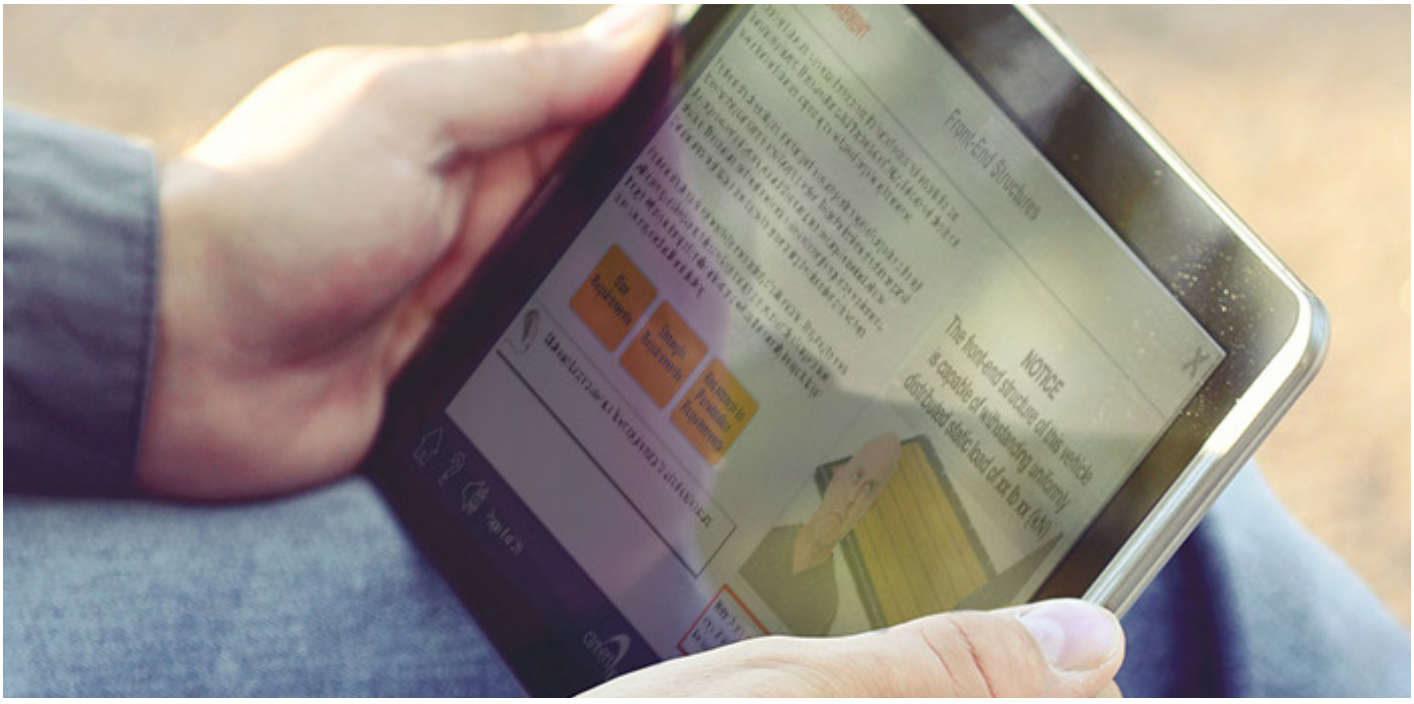
- **Clicks are risky** – Related to the point above, we've found that many people in the industry are reluctant to click on things they're unsure of, so they won't explore the system. As a result, if a function isn't immediately clear and obvious, they may miss it.

- **Connections are unreliable** – I discussed this in the articles talking about courses, but trucking customers often don't have great Internet connections. They may not be unreliable in the sense that they drop (although that happens occasionally as well) but they may have unpredictable speed, so you have to build for slower networks to ensure a consistent experience.

- **Attention is fleeting** – Administrators are often doing multiple things at once, and may get called away mid-task by a crisis or other unforeseen circumstance. They need to be able to resume whatever they were doing without losing their work and having to start over.

All of those are things that we didn't really see when serving other industries, but they're commonplace here. If the LMS is truly going to provide useful functionality while staying out of the way, all of those things need to be built into the design so they're a natural part of it. It's a tricky balancing act, but when it all comes together, it's hugely satisfying as a developer.

It may not be as sexy as the courses, but like plumbing and electrical in a house, it's an important part of keeping everything humming along smoothly.




TECHNOLOGY &
TRUCKING

Autonomous Vehicles and the Trucking Industry

By Mark Murrell
Published on December 15, 2021

"It's the End of the World As We Know It, and I Feel Fine"
~ R.E.M.

Everywhere I turn these days there's another story about autonomous vehicles and their potential impact on the trucking industry. Magazines are writing about it, regulatory agencies are exploring it, and at pretty much every conference there's a session where people talk about it. The vast majority of these stories and info sessions end up adopting a similar tone – after talking about what's happening, there are reassuring notes about how none of this is coming soon, how robots will never be able to do the job as well as a human, and a subtle suggestion that all this talk of driverless vehicles is something approaching a silly fantasy.

I can appreciate that that tone is probably comforting for people who are worried about potentially significant changes in the industry, but I don't think it's helping anything. It may make people feel better, but it's incorrect information, and it misses the point.

I'm a veteran of the tech industry, so I've seen plenty of pronouncements about what things "will never happen". I still clearly remember the mobile phone industry (and media) laughing at Apple's initial goal of selling 10 million total iPhones (they now sell more than 40 million per quarter), so I'm inherently skeptical of people invested in the status quo who proclaim that a robot will never replace a driver, or how we'll never see self-driving trucks taking over the industry. History suggests otherwise.

The reality is that autonomous vehicles (AVs) are coming, and they're going to do the driving part of the job far better than humans ever could. As a result, they're going to be a huge benefit for the industry. Also, the real threat is something completely different that few people even mention.

The Innovator's Dilemma

In his hugely influential book about how disruptive technologies work, Clayton Christensen makes a key distinction between sustaining technologies and disruptive technologies. It's important to understand that when considering AVs in trucking.

Sustaining technologies are innovations that work within the current model and value chain in any segment. They allow the incumbent players to improve their offerings but don't fundamentally change how the segment operates. Sustaining technologies follow a standard S curve of growth, and as they're reaching the end of their rapid growth period, a new sustaining technology picks up the baton and runs from there. As a result, established, mainstream markets have a continuous innovation process without a fundamental change in how the businesses operate.

Disruptive technnologies, on the other hand, don't work within the current models or value chains at all. They force a completely new approach and grow up around a completely different value chain. At the beginning, they're grossly inadequate for the mainstream market, so they start by serving new markets or segments that are unprofitable for the mainstream solutions. Over time they certainly improve, and will eventually reach a point where they're sufficient for a mainstream market, but a hallmark of disruptive technology is that it employs a completely new network of suppliers, vendors, skillsets, and business models, and it doesn't work for customers in the mainstream markets.

That's a gross oversimplification of an outstanding book, but it illustrates the key points.

Sustaining Trucking

Based on the definitions above, it's clear that AVs are sustaining rather than disruptive technologies in the trucking industry. While they're still in their infancy, it's already easy to see that they're designed to work for the mainstream trucking market – they're being developed by established vendors (there are some startups in the segment, but it's safe to assume that those startups will be acquired by a large OEM at some point), they're sold to existing trucking companies, they follow existing standard regulations, and they're filled with regular trucking freight. They may start off running specific lanes or avoiding certain areas, but all trucks have ideal working conditions so these are minor details.

However, while the AV may do the driving part on its own, there are lots of other parts of the job that it won't be taking over. It won't be inspecting the vehicle, securing the cargo, placarding hazmat loads, or any of the other non-driving tasks that are required to safely and legally deliver a shipment. An operator will still be required to complete those parts.

On top of that, since many loads are valuable and/or sensitive, a human will need to be along for the ride just for security and peace of mind. Even with AVs that can operate safely on all types of roads, with all types of traffic, customers and the general public will feel much more comfortable if those loads have a human on board – the same way people feel better when there's a live security guard on site rather than just remote monitoring.

If you put all that together, AVs really aren't going to change the trucking industry all that much in terms of the business and basic operations. It will still be a truck going down the road with a trailer full of freight. The network of industry service providers will stay largely the same*, and the customer base won't change.

Changing the Job

What will change, though, is the skillset required to operate the vehicle. If it's no longer about steering, shifting, and braking, then the job becomes more like a site manager or security position and less of an active operator job. That means that the aptitude of the ideal worker will be different, the educational and training requirements will change (and probably be a lot less), and the compensation model will need to be wholly revamped. Hourly pay makes a lot more sense in those situations.

With a simpler job description, simpler (and cheaper) training requirements, and a pay model that can be understood without an accounting degree, the industry faces better odds in its competition for young workers, which is certainly a positive.

So, thinking about all those things, AVs can be a real benefit for the industry. They'll be a bigger investment upfront, but improved safety and operational efficiency should balance that pretty quickly. An easier time finding drivers, and a lower cost of entry for workers improves the economic picture as well.

Life will be good. For a little while.

In part II, we'll look at the real threat to the industry.

* This isn't to say that no part of the industry will get disrupted by AVs. Repair shops, towing companies, spill cleanup (basically anyone who profits from the problems that are solved by AVs) is going to have a very tough time. However, every sustaining technology displaces people that were reliant on the old tools so this is nothing new – floppy disk makers got killed by CD-ROM makers, who then got killed when everything moved online. Sustaining technologies may not be disruptive, but they can still be ruthless.

Autonomous Vehicles and Trucking - Part II: The Real Disruption

By Mark Murrell
Published on January 19, 2022

In the first part of this piece, I talked about self-driving trucks and why I think they're going to be a big help for the industry. I talked about the concept of sustaining vs. disrupting technologies, as outlined in The Innovator's Dilemma, and how self-driving trucks are a classic example of a sustaining technology that propels mainstream industries foreword.

I also suggested that the real threat to the industry is something very different, and something that few people are talking about. I'm going to focus this piece on that disruptive technology and what I see happening with it.

To begin with, the emerging, disruptive technology that hardly anyone talks about is drones.

There have been a few pieces here and there talking about how Amazon is testing some drone deliveries, but not much attention is being paid to them. That's a mistake, though, because they have the potential to wreak havoc on the trucking industry of today. I know that seems like a ridiculous proposition, so let's break it down and see why that is.

Disruptive Technologies and Mainstream Markets

In The Innovator's Dilemma, Clayton Christensen notes that disruptive technologies start off being wholly unsuited for the mainstream market. They have lower cost structures and different value propositions, but they don't work at all within the existing model of a market. As a result, they have to find new markets - typically areas that were previously underserved because they were unprofitable for mainstream solutions. The disruptor, however, can apply its lower cost structure and serve those markets profitably.

Over time, both the mainstream solutions and the disruptors continue to improve their offerings, delivering ever more robust solutions to the market.

For the mainstream, that means that eventually they're over-delivering – providing a standard set of products or services

that are much more than what the market requires. Once growth starts to level out in the existing market, they move upmarket in search of more profit and growth opportunities.

For disruptors, the continued improvement means that eventually they reach a point where they're offering a core set of features that meet the mainstream market needs. At that point, their lower cost structure gives them a massive advantage and they ultimately displace the mainstream incumbents.

Phones and the Death of PCs

This scenario has played out many times in the history of technology, but two obvious, recent ones are PCs and cell phones.

Today's basic PC is massively overpowered for the tasks it's typically used for – word processing, email, web activities, etc. The PC has more power than an enterprise server had 10 years ago, and most of the power just sits there unused. As a result, PC manufacturers have moved increasingly upmarket into the enterprise or workstation space, focusing their efforts in areas where that power is required and profitable. They've also been disrupted by another emerging technology – cell phones.

When the first iPhone was launched in 2007, it looked like this:

If you had suggested back then that eventually this would be the primary computing device for a large segment of the population, you woul d have been laughed at. There was no way that a phone with a 3½" screen, where the battery died halfway through the day, was going to disrupt desktop and laptop computers.

Except that that's exactly what happened.

Smartphones got more powerful over time, and an entirely new ecosystem developed around them. Instead of moving desktop computing onto the phone, wholly new ways of completing tasks were developed. Instead of trying to type on tiny screens, phones have added intelligent autocomplete that speeds up text entry or voice control so you don't have to type at all. Instead of squeezing traditional websites onto a small screen, completely new, purpose-built apps stay focused on completing very specific tasks. AirBnB, Yelp, Uber, Instagram, Square – entirely new models for conducting business that work beautifully on these devices and society has adopted en masse. The previously mainstream market of PCs has been gutted by the move to mobile, and the traditional PC makers are dying off as a result. The only one that's thriving is Apple, but the vast majority of their business is smartphones, and computers are almost an afterthought now.

Drones and Trucks

Having witnessed several of these massive disruptions in the tech industry, it's not hard for me to look at drones and see another massive disruption on the horizon. I know many of you will think that's ridiculous – how can a drone carry an 80,000 lb. load?

And you're right - a drone may never carry an 80,000 lb. load. But it also won't need to do that to disrupt the trucking space. Here's why.

If you have drones that can reliably deliver 10 lb. loads, that's going to start putting pressure on all the light package and delivery people (e.g. pizza and flowers). Following the normal trajectory, those people will start moving upmarket into heavier cargo that's now handled by cube vans and straight trucks, putting pressure on that group. That will push the existing cube van and straight truck people upmarket as well, ensuring that everyone gets squeezed in some way. That doesn't mean that a bunch of panel van people will suddenly become full truckload carriers, but if they push into LTL work, and that pushes LTL people into TL, then the market starts to get disrupted and things start to get tense.

At the same time, drone technology will continue advancing. Look at how far smartphones have come in 10 years – exponentially faster, dramatically better displays, and far different functionality than what was available before. Drones will be the same. If they can carry 10 lb. loads, how long before they can carry 100 lbs.? At that point, a pretty good amount of freight can be moved around, pretty efficiently, and with no traffic congestion or HOS limits.

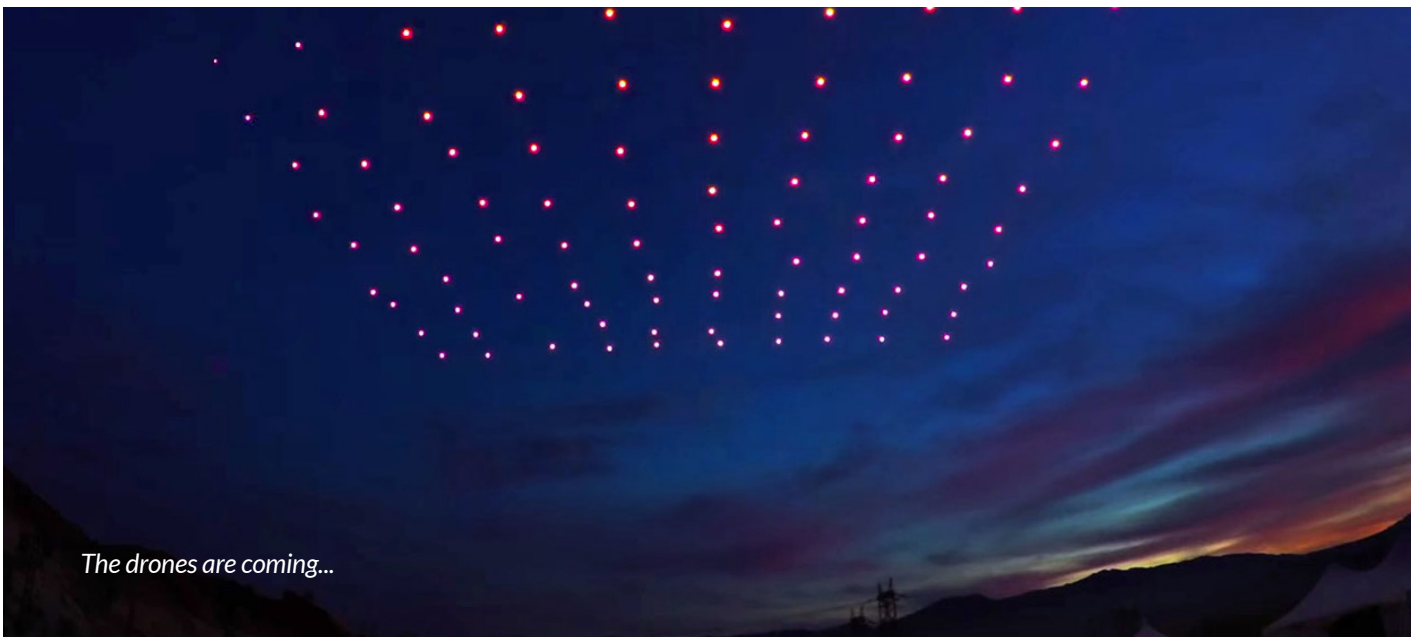
Today's model of combining freight into larger shipments to maximize the efficiency of the truck might be entirely unnecessary with a drone. That changes the entire dynamic of picking and packing, and logistics as a whole.

And what happens when drones can carry 1000 lbs.? At that point, it seems like they'd steamroll right over the existing industry.

The End of the Road?

When considering these scenarios, it's important to note that there will still be trucks on the road - smartphones may have disrupted PCs, but PCs are still being sold. It's just that there are a whole lot less of them being sold now, there are next to no growth opportunities, and even less profit in the industry. Similarly, drones won't completely eradicate trucks, nor will they need to. If drones took even 20% of the freight that's currently being hauled by truck, the effect on the industry would be pretty significant. There would still be trucks on the road, just a whole lot less of them, fighting over an ever-shrinking market, and with few good prospects for profitability.

I try to always have something positive to say in these articles, and I realize that forecasting the death of an industry doesn't really fit that! So, here's what I think will be positive about the scenario above: if it happens, it won't happen for a while; traffic congestion (and all the related safety, environmental, and business impacts) will be greatly improved; consumer goods will be cheaper; and the public advocacy groups will have a whole new industry to hate on! It's not all bad ;-)



The drones are coming...


BUSINESS
MANAGEMENT

Solving the Wrong Problem: Why Process Matters More Than Rules

By Mark Murrell
Published on October 7, 2021

Should you fire a driver for using a handheld device while driving?

The conventional wisdom is that any self-respecting fleet should have a policy prohibiting that activity, and anyone caught violating the policy should be terminated. The same conventional wisdom also says that anything less than termination for the above situation demonstrates negligence, a huge potential problem when court cases come up.

The conventional wisdom, however, is wrong. It misses the point and aggravates the very situation it's attempting to remedy.

Here's why.

In Search of the Perfect Policy

A couple of weeks ago I attended TCA's Safety & Security conference in Phoenix. One of the cool things they do at this conference is have "safety in the round" breakout sessions where attendees get together and talk about whatever safety issues are top of mind for them. It's not a traditional lecture-style breakout, but an open discussion, and it's a great way for fleets large and small to share their thoughts and best practices.

This year, a major point of discussion in these group sessions, and in the formal presentations as well, was centered around distracted driving. Much of that discussion, and many of the questions for panelists, focused on policies and discipline - which offenses constituted a "strike" in a 3-strike policy, which were grounds for immediate dismissal, etc. These were experienced professionals sincerely motivated to make the roads safer for everyone. However, their efforts in this area will never produce satisfactory results because they're trying to solve the wrong problem.

There's no magic combination of policies and discipline that will "fix" safety in a fleet, so while it may be interesting to

compare policies with other fleets, it's not going to improve anything. In fact, it often does the opposite.

Fleets with a multitude of black and white policies about what drivers MUST and MUST NOT do can end up in worse shape than their counterparts for the simple reason that the world isn't black and white. It's a million different shades of grey. If the rules stipulate that anything that isn't black must be white, then there are going to be a ton of situations where the fleet either follows the rule and makes a decision that's bad for the business, or they do what's right for the business and break the rule. The first one hurts the business in the short term, the second one potentially hurts much more in the future when it gets used to demonstrate negligence in court.

Solving the Right Problem

What struck me most about the comparison of policies at this conference was that the fleets that actually had the best safety records were the most lax in this area.

That's right. The safest fleets aren't the most strict with their rules and discipline.

How is that possible?

The answer is that they're focusing on the process rather than the rules. In place of a blanket rule that says "anyone caught using a handheld device will be terminated", they have a process for evaluating the situation, creating a plan of action, then executing that plan. The resulting steps will be different for each driver, and that's the point - more personalized and more effective as a result.

A great example of this comes from Bison Transport, perennial award winner as safest fleet in North America – they don't have a 3 strike policy, and have much looser rules than most other fleets their size. Instead, they have consultants, coaches, and trainers that work with each driver to identify areas for improvement and put together plans to address issues. Sometimes the result is still that the driver has to go, but much of the time drivers get rehabilitated and the company can build on that relationship. While other fleets worry about how to defend themselves in court, Bison avoids court altogether by working with drivers to prevent problems in the first place. The process is structured, rigorous, and repeatable, and the results certainly speak for themselves.

Another session at this conference provided a pretty compelling defense of this approach. It was a panel discussion featuring an insurer, a transportation lawyer, and two fleets. Someone had asked the lawyer about the kinds of things he was seeing in court cases and how fleets could protect themselves. The lawyer pointed out that while people focus much of their attention on the driver, court cases always end up being about the company's processes. Juries tend to be interested in what training the company has done, how they coach their drivers, and how all of that gets documented. He noted that companies that can demonstrate they've taken an active interest in developing and rehabilitating drivers tend not to get questioned as much because they're seen as good employers.

Process Over Rules

It's easy to focus on concrete things like policies and disciplinary steps, and tempting to feel that once a policy is in place then the problem is solved - either people follow the policy or they get cut. That's false security, though, since policy violations are often only the symptoms of a problem. Improving a safety record requires understanding the root causes of the problem and addressing them directly.

Going back to my example at the top, there may be any number of things that led to that driver getting caught using a handheld device. Maybe that driver is a bad apple who doesn't pay attention and needs to be terminated. Or maybe they just don't fully understand why it's important to stay focused. Maybe this was an isolated case and by terminating that driver the problem is solved. Or maybe there are lots of drivers doing it and that one happened to get caught. Maybe there were extenuating circumstances that warrant further discussion. Maybe that driver is normally a stellar employee but has personal or professional stress that's causing a lack of focus.

A simple policy dictating dismissal for violators isn't going to identify what's really going on, but a consulting and coaching process will. The fleets that have a process to explore what happened and why, then consider a broader, fleet-wide solution, will always do better than the fleets that apply black and white rules. Remember, there's no guarantee that the replacement driver is going to be any better than the one who just got terminated.

> But if you focus on having a great driver development process, rather than a great set of rules, you'll have better drivers in the end. That's the right problem to solve.

Hotels, Blind Spots, and the Dangers of Overcompensating

By Mark Murrell
Published on March 2, 2022

I was in Dallas recently and stayed at an historic downtown hotel that recently underwent a huge renovation. The rooms have all been completely rebuilt, and they obviously spent a lot of money creating an experience in the rooms that matches the grandeur of the building's history. However, it's abundantly clear that in undertaking this massive overhaul, the designers did not get any input from women. As a result, the final product fails a large segment of their customers.

How do I know they didn't consult any women on this design? Simple. Pretty much everything in the bathroom doesn't work for the average woman.

The counter is about 6 inches higher than a normal counter, and it's very small (even though the bathroom is spacious). The giant shower has no step or bench, and only the tiniest corner shelf for toiletries (just large enough to hold the tiny bottles the hotel provides, which no woman will ever use).

The closet, for whatever reason, is inside the bathroom, meaning that everything in the closet gets to experience full humidity. Any woman who attempts to use any of these features immediately recognizes the problems. An average sized man, using a hotel room the way men typically do, is completely blind to them.

It's an excellent example of a design and execution blind spot resulting from homogeneous decision making. It's the kind of thing that can easily pop up in all kinds of workplace decisions if you're not careful, and it can be very costly. I imagine that this hotel would be pretty unhappy to hear that after spending tens of millions renovating their fancy hotel that they've failed on such a basic level!

The Science of Failures

Over the summer I read a great book called Meltdown: Why Our Systems Fail and What We Can Do About It. The book, as its title suggests, does a deep dive into a long list of

system failures both large and small – everything from the Fukushima disaster in Japan to Volkswagen's Dieselgate to the Oscars' Best Picture mixup a few years ago. As they explore the root causes of these disasters, a surprising number of common elements are identified. From there, they itemize the things people can do to make the systems more fault tolerant and minimize the risk overall.

It turns out that one of the main contributors to system failure is a lack of diversity in the decision making process. When systems are designed and managed by homogeneous teams, they tend to have gaps that create failure points. This makes a lot of sense – if everyone on the team has a similar background and perspective, they're going to see things in similar ways. That similarity in thinking can make for smooth and easy teamwork, but it also makes for a very narrow perspective on possible failure points.

One of the simplest ways to prevent those narrow perspectives is to have a more diverse team involved in the process. A diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints creates a team that approaches problems from different angles and comes up with more robust solutions. A litle bit of that diversity sure would have helped the Dallas hotel's renovation!

Blind Spots and Overcompensation

We see similar effects in the trucking industry regularly, and as we embark on another season interviewing Best Fleets to Drive For nominees, I'm sure I'm going to see it again.

Among the many questions we ask during the evaluation process are a few about the number of women drivers, what the fleet does to attract underrepresented minorities, and (new this year) how they reflect those efforts in their management team. We know that these questions poke a soft spot for most fleets – women are grossly underrepresented in the industry, and while there is reasonable ethnic diversity among drivers, the leadership is basically a sea of white men.

I know from experience that when we get to these questions during the interview process, there will be participants who are uneasy about their lack of efforts in the area and will respond by overcompensating. They'll tell us how they'd love to have women drivers, if only they could get some more, and how women drivers are so much better than men, and on and on.

Those grand gestures and pronouncements don't fool us, and they also don't help the fleet. The company is telling itself a great story about how wonderful the situation would be, if only some external thing was different, but they're just creating a fantasy to avoid the hard truths. It may make them feel better during the interview, but outside of that their business will continue to have gaps and potential failure points. Maybe they'll get lucky and those weak spots won't blow up on them, but it's generally not good business management to rely on luck!

A much better approach would be to bring those underrepresented voices to the table and get their input. They'll do a much better job uncovering the various process gaps, system weaknesses, and unaddressed issues that represent opportunities for the company to become safer, more efficient, and way more profitable.

In the software development world, a key component of testing new products involves testing with a variety of different machine configurations and expertise levels. You always want to have both power users on new, fast equipment and novice users on clunky old boxes. Those different groups approach a product in vastly different ways and their feedback is critical to stabilizing any new release.

In the world of business processes, team diversity is just as important. Homogeneous teams end up creating expensive solutions that fail easily. Diverse teams produce robust solutions that are much more reliable and durable.

So, next time you're thinking about changing some business processes or systems, think about how many different perspectives are included in the decision making process and see what you can do to expand those. Include both men and women, with different experience levels and backgrounds, and you'll be much better positioned to avoid ending up with a fail like the Dallas hotel.

What Your Purchasing Process Tells Us About Your Company Culture

By Mark Murrell
Published on February 9, 2022

It may seem like an odd combination, but there's a bigger connection between these two areas than most people realize.

We've just completed scoring for the 2019 Best Fleets to Drive For and this year one of the new questions asked fleets how they evaluate and select technology. Since we didn't want them to answer the question just in the context of trucks and related hardware, we put it at the bottom of the section that talks about how the company uses technology to improve efficiency.

Even so, most people answered thinking only about trucks and hardware attached to them (in a future column I'm going to talk about the mental blindspots fleets have). However, once we got past the hardware and started talking about software-based technology systems, the question itself made people think.

I can appreciate that it may seem strange to look at the process for purchasing technology when evaluating the quality of the workplace, but they do fit together.

At the most basic, companies that truly have a strong culture, and effective management, will have a particular approach to evaluating and implementing technology. Companies that don't have that approach will never have a great culture, despite their other efforts.

Sounds crazy, right?

Let's look at how they fit together.

To start with, every company that we talk to during any year's Best Fleets evaluation tells us that drivers are important, that they have some kind of open door policy (maybe a "real" open door policy, a "true" open door policy, or in at least one case, a "no doors" policy) and they'll also tell us that they value driver input on the issues that affect them.

These companies, when asked about operational process and how they work to improve management quality, will also talk about their various internal checks and balances, ongoing efforts to build the effectiveness of the leadership team, and probably the management training courses they're putting people through.

All of those things are fine, and if they're executed consistently, then the company is probably on its way to success. That's where the purchasing question comes in.

If the company really does have a forward-thinking management team, with functional checks and balances, it will come through in the answer to this question. If they really do value input from drivers, that will come through as well.

When it comes to buying trucks, fleets generally do pretty well. Trucks are expensive, so the evaluation process is rigorous and often involves significant input from maintenance, operations, safety, and drivers. In general, fleets have figured out how to buy trucks that work for them.

However, the question isn't about their process for buying trucks, it's about their process for buying other business-related technology. In fact, we specifically avoided discussion of any hardware attached to the truck or trailer, and instead focused on the systems for managing other business functions – things like driver scorecards, HR systems, mobile apps, and other tech that drivers interact with while doing their job. If the fleet is well-managed, and the company culture is collaborative and methodical in its decision-making, then there will be an equally rigorous process for evaluating these systems, with just as much research, discussion, testing, and evaluation before making decisions. If not, then it will come through in the answer to this question.

Friends Over Process

As an example, I'll share a story about a fleet I spoke to several years ago that was using a particular system for managing a particular HR function (I'm being intentionally vague since I don't want to give away who it was). I wasn't familiar with the product they mentioned so I asked about it, and what prompted them to select it. This particular HR function is handled through several well known products, so I was curious why they went with this other option instead of one of the more common alternatives. The answer was that the decision maker was friends with the sales rep, so they didn't really look at anything else.

Hmm, interesting answer. Now, if the fleet was a startup, or very small, that might make sense. When you're small you often do a hundred jobs at once, so if you have simple needs in a particular area you buy from someone you trust. That's perfectly reasonable.

Except, this wasn't a small company just getting started. It was a fairly large fleet (several hundred trucks), who had been around for decades. They had established, fully staffed departments and well-defined processes in most areas. For a company at that stage, there's absolutely no way that they picked the product that was the best fit for the company – they didn't even bother figuring out exactly what they needed. One guy just listened to a sales pitch from a friend and said yes.

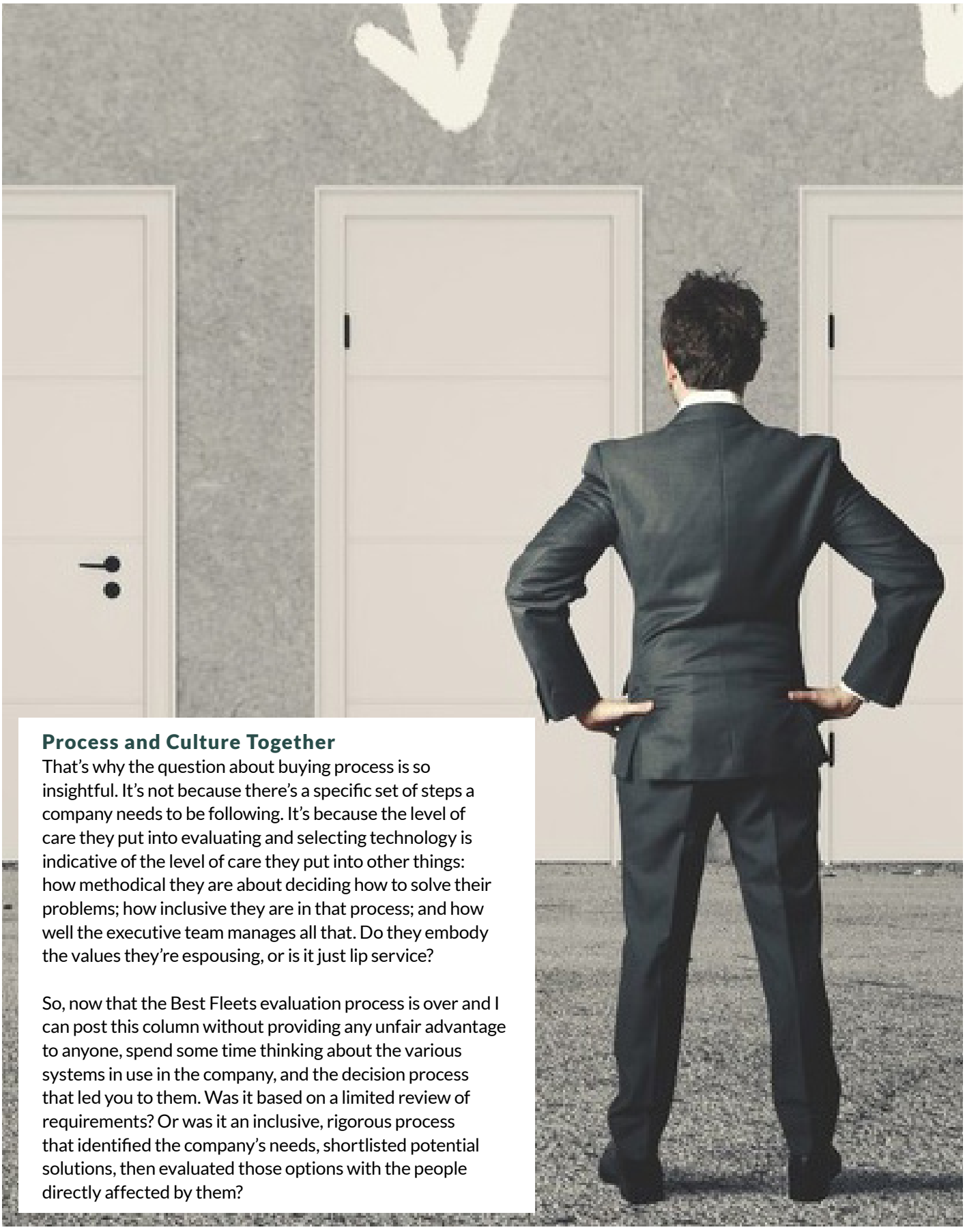
Okay, so what if they have a crappy buying process? What does that have to do with their culture?

It reflects on their culture in a couple of ways. First, the decision maker in this case was a departmental leader, but not an executive at the company. That means that the execs either didn't know about this capricous decisionmaking, or they knew about it and supported it (or at least condoned it). Neither suggests a well run organization.

Second, there's no reason to think that that poor judgement and lack of diligence was limited to this one manager. The fact that this lack of process didn't stand out suggests that others were making equally uninformed decisions in their own departments.

So, we've got a company where the execs either didn't know what's going on or didn't bother fixing it, managers making poor decisions routinely (there's no reason to believe this was the only time this manager made decisions in this way), and a workforce stuck with the results. If they're using systems or equipment that weren't really a good fit for the company's needs, that's going to make people's jobs more frustrating and inefficient. If they don't have a professional approach to decisionmaking, then forget about continuous improvement and sober evaluation of company inefficiencies. All of those things combine to create a work environment where problems don't get solved adequately, and workers end up unhappy.

If you're a driver working in that environment, how likely is it that you're going to feel supported? Even if the company says it wants input, are you likely to provide it? And if you do, how confident are you going to be that the input will receive any thoughtful consideration?



Process and Culture Together

That's why the question about buying process is so insightful. It's not because there's a specific set of steps a company needs to be following. It's because the level of care they put into evaluating and selecting technology is indicative of the level of care they put into other things: how methodical they are about deciding how to solve their problems; how inclusive they are in that process; and how well the executive team manages all that. Do they embody the values they're espousing, or is it just lip service?

So, now that the Best Fleets evaluation process is over and I can post this column without providing any unfair advantage to anyone, spend some time thinking about the various systems in use in the company, and the decision process that led you to them. Was it based on a limited review of requirements? Or was it an inclusive, rigorous process that identified the company's needs, shortlisted potential solutions, then evaluated those options with the people directly affected by them?

CarriersEdge is a leading provider of online driver training for the trucking industry. With a comprehensive library of safety and compliance courses, supported by advanced management and reporting functions, CarriersEdge helps over 2000 fleets train their drivers without sacrificing miles or requiring people to come in on weekends.

CarriersEdge is also the creator of the Best Fleets to Drive For program, an annual evaluation of the best workplaces in the North American trucking industry, produced in partnership with Truckload Carriers Association.