

COVID-19 and the effect on haulage drivers

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Haulage drivers are key workers during the pandemic, but there has been little discussion about how the crisis is affecting them, say Sheena Johnson and Lynn Holdsworth, who lead the Age, Health and

Professional Drivers' (AHPD) network. Sheena Johnson is a Senior Lecturer in Organisational Psychology at the University and Lynn Holdsworth is the Network Research Lead and Co-ordinator for AHPD.

Before the COVID-19 crisis, the transport and logistics sector was already facing a struggle to maintain staffing numbers given its high proportion of older workers approaching retirement and the limited numbers of younger drivers entering the industry.

At the same time, the AHPD Network has in recent years been highlighting the importance of protecting the health and wellbeing of this ageing driver workforce which is exposed to a variety of health risks linked to the nature of their work.

Given this, it is little surprise that the COVID-19 crisis has created something of a perfect storm in the industry. In light of this, we asked AHPD members to tell us what the situation is like for them as the industry responds to the pandemic.

Industry impact

Haulage companies have been affected in different ways by the crisis. Those involved in food distribution have been particularly busy, as have those delivering online orders. However, others have seen their work dry up almost completely, for example, if they were delivering to pubs, shops or restaurants.

While some companies have been able to provide full pay to individuals not able to work or have taken advantage of the government furlough scheme, others have offered no more than statutory sick pay, which may have encouraged people to work whilst unwell for financial reasons.

Meanwhile, in response to COVID-19, there have been some significant

changes to the transport and logistics sector intended to help with the flow of goods. These include a relaxation of driver hours to allow them to work longer hours and a relaxation of driver training requirements. Whilst these are welcome changes in terms of keeping goods moving, they are, however, likely to have had implications for the health and safety of drivers, with risks such as drivers working whilst tired and having insufficient rest periods.

Companies have therefore had to manage a balancing act of keeping goods moving and protecting their drivers, whilst working within the new guidelines. However, some drivers have also been concerned that some companies have been taking advantage of the relaxation of driver hours to allow for the delivery of non-essential goods.

Driver impact

The current risk and uncertainty to drivers are brought into even sharper focus by the fact that the average age of an HGV driver is 57, while 13% are over 60. Indeed professional drivers are recognised as comprising of an older, and potentially less healthy, workforce due to some of the risks to health that are associated with the nature of the job.

These include obesity, an unhealthy diet, a lack of exercise, exposure to stress, and sleep deprivation or disturbance. Given the associated risks of COVID-19 to older individuals and those who have underlying [health conditions](#), there has been obvious concern around the health of professional drivers during the crisis.

There have also been reports of drivers being prevented from using toilets and handwashing facilities at premises they visit due to COVID-19 concerns. Yet it is essential that drivers are able to access these facilities in order to reduce the risk of catching and transmitting the virus.

Mental health

At the same time, professional drivers are also facing numerous challenges that could negatively impact on their mental health and wellbeing. These range from concerns about contracting COVID-19 through to the extension of working hours, increased work demands, increased isolation on the road, and reduced contact with people due to social distancing measures. Looking ahead, many are anxious about their jobs, incomes, and possible redundancy.

Before the crisis, health and wellbeing guidelines were produced by the AHPD network and these are arguably more important than ever as the sector responds to the pandemic. In particular, we recommend that employers:

- Continue to adhere to existing guidelines in relation to physical health such as ensuring drivers do not work whilst tired and have adequate rest periods.
- Implement, promote and adhere to guidelines linked to COVID-19 such as ensuring drivers observe social distancing rules, and provide hand sanitiser to drivers.
- Place increased importance on having good communication with drivers and listen to their concerns. Drivers can easily feel isolated and cut off from other employees.
- Place increased emphasis on mental wellbeing support. This can include any support already provided by a company and also specific COVID-19 mental health support. For instance, the [mental health](#) charity Mind has published COVID-19 related advice.
- Recognise that with high numbers of older [professional drivers](#) this is likely to increase the impact of COVID-19 on the workforce.
- Consider providing bereavement support.

- Keep in good contact with furloughed employees. They will still need the support of their employer in these uncertain times even though they are not in the workplace.

It is important during these uncertain and unsettling times that employers do what they can to protect their workers' health. The haulage industry is being relied upon to continue to deliver much-needed goods and is doing a fantastic job. However, due to the significant demands and risks to [drivers](#), support from employers should be given wherever possible.

Provided by University of Manchester

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