OPTIMIZING DRIVER RECRUITMENT FOR SMALL TRUCKING COMPANIES: THE SLTM SYSTEMATIC APPROACH

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Abstract. The article focuses on optimizing the driver recruitment process in small U.S. trucking companies through the implementation of the SLTM (Strategic Logistics Talent Marketing) system approach. The purpose of the article is to enhance the technology of driver recruitment in small trucking companies by introducing innovative managerial practices aimed at improving recruitment efficiency and workforce stability. The study employs general scientific research methods, including analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, comparative and system-structural approaches, the method of generalization, and elements of strategic modeling. The results show that small trucking businesses play a crucial role in the U.S. heavy logistics sector, providing nearly 95% of all freight transport and ensuring the operational efficiency of regional deliveries. It is concluded that despite their vital importance to the economy, these companies remain vulnerable due to increasing operating costs and a shortage of qualified drivers. The study finds that driver turnover in the for-hire trucking segment reaches 80%, directly affecting contract stability and logistics performance. The recruitment process in small trucking companies is shown to have a multi-level structure based on a personalized approach to candidates, covering all stages from sourcing to retention. Six key stages of the recruitment cycle are identified, including employer branding, motivational and needs-based approaches, HRM development, and the creation of socially stable working conditions. The study proves that reducing staff turnover depends not only on financial motivation but primarily on the quality of communication, trust, and partnership between management and employees. The practical significance of the study lies in the potential application of the SLTM system to enhance workforce stability and HR management efficiency in small trucking companies.

Keywords: recruitment; logistics; SLTM; personnel management; transportation.

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Introduction

The U.S. logistics industry is undergoing an active transformation phase aimed at long-term development over the next decade. Forecasts from the U.S. Department of Transportation indicate that freight volumes will increase by more than one-third by 2035, placing greater demands on infrastructure and the sector's human resources. In this context, the issue of attracting and retaining truck drivers becomes strategically significant. The challenge is particularly acute in the small business sector, which represents the majority of the nation's carriers but faces financial and organizational limitations in competing for skilled labor. The shortage of qualified drivers already poses systemic risks to supply chain operations, directly influencing national economic stability.

Given these challenges, both academia and industry practitioners are actively exploring new human resource management models capable of combining economic efficiency with social sustainability. Modern approaches view recruitment not merely as an HR procedure but as an element of systemic management within national logistics security. The integration of analytical technologies, strategic marketing, and employer branding provides the foundation for developing innovative methods aimed at improving the attractiveness of the driving profession, reducing turnover, and maintaining transportation infrastructure stability. In this context, there emerges a need for systemic approaches that ensure not only effective recruitment but also the strengthening of national logistics security.

Literature Review. The issue of optimizing driver recruitment processes for small trucking companies has been extensively examined in foreign academic literature, particularly in studies addressing both economic and organizational-behavioral dimensions. A significant contribution to the topic was made by S. V. Burks [3], who analyzed the U.S. truck driver labor market structure and demonstrated that its issues have a systemic nature associated with high turnover rates and uneven job distribution. D. K. Cooper [4] dedicated his research to retention strategies in small transport companies, emphasizing the importance of corporate culture, flexible work schedules, and internal motivation systems. Similar issues were raised by E. Duckering [5], who proposed a model of strategic management for driver shortages in specialized sectors, particularly oil and gas. The study by H. Min and A. Emam [10] focused on developing an ideal driver profile for effective recruitment and retention, systematizing key selection criteria-from psychological traits to professional competence. Early works such as those by S. A. LeMay and G. S. Taylor [9] laid the theoretical groundwork for modern hiring methods, highlighting the need for long-term employee loyalty strategies. Meanwhile, A. Wygal and co-authors [11] examined factors contributing to driver dissatisfaction-low pay, lack of work-life balance-which directly impact recruitment efficiency. Valuable empirical data for studying the SLTM (Systematic Logistics Talent Management) system's effectiveness are provided by institutional analytical reports, particularly those from the American Transportation Research Institute [1; 2], which reveal the economic context of the industry and its bottlenecks. Reports from the Federal Highway Administration [6; 7] and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration [8] complement the research by outlining regulatory and institutional dimensions, identifying systemic constraints, and suggesting potential directions for workforce optimization in logistics.

Despite the considerable number of international studies and industry reports, there remains a lack of a systematic approach to developing a universal recruitment model for small transport companies. The methodological foundation of this study lies in a systems approach to analyzing recruitment processes in small trucking companies, combining elements of logistics management, HR marketing, and behavioral economics. Analytical and comparative methods are used to identify labor market trends; the structural-functional approach supports the modeling of the recruitment process; and content analysis facilitates the synthesis of academic and industry findings. Additionally, methods of generalization and

systematization are employed to design a reference model for driver recruitment and to substantiate the innovative Strategic Logistics Talent Marketing (SLTM) methodology.

Purpose of the Article. The purpose of the article is to optimize the technology of driver recruitment in small trucking companies by introducing innovative management approaches aimed at increasing recruitment efficiency and workforce stability. Three main tasks are defined: analyze the current driver labor market situation; determine the technological sequence of the hiring process; and explore innovative approaches to its optimization.

Research Results

The U.S. freight transportation system serves as a key infrastructural foundation ensuring national economic stability and the continuous delivery of critical goods. According to the Federal Highway Administration [7], the national transportation network is structured around the National Highway Freight Network (NHFN), which integrates over 51,000 miles of major freight corridors and includes two priority route groups: urban (CUFC – Critical Urban Freight Corridors) and rural (CRFC – Critical Rural Freight Corridors) logistics axes. These routes define the strategic geography of national logistics security, connecting ports, rail hubs, industrial zones, and distribution centers. The NHFN functions as the "backbone" of the transport system, handling over 75% of the nation's total freight traffic [7].

Within this network, several high-density regions exceed the national average traffic intensity by several times. These include:

- eastern seaboard megacities-New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, and Baltimore-forming a high-load cluster along the I-95 corridor linking major Atlantic ports;
- the Midwest, particularly Chicago, which serves as the U.S. multimodal hub connecting road, rail, and air routes;
- the southern region, concentrating critical energy flows through Houston, Dallas, and New Orleans, where freight traffic supports oil, gas, chemical, and agricultural industries;
- the west coast, including Los Angeles, Long Beach, and Seattle, serving as key maritime gateways for imports from Asia, where even short-term port disruptions or driver shortages can trigger nationwide supply chain breakdowns [6].

Analytical data from the American Transportation Research Institute [1, 2] confirm that most critical freight bottlenecks are located in these regions. According to the 2025 report, the most congested intersections include:

- Fort Lee, New Jersey (I-95 @ SR-4);
- Chicago (I-294 @ I-290/88);
- Atlanta (I-285 @ I-85 North);
- Houston (I-45 @ I-69/US-59);
- Los Angeles (SR-60 @ SR-57).

Transportation challenges in these areas stem from limited highway throughput. Average truck speeds during peak hours do not exceed 30 mph, causing daily delays in the delivery of critical cargo worth tens of thousands of hours. These bottlenecks have both local and macroeconomic effects-they reduce the capacity of the national logistics system, increase carrier costs, and create driver shortages on routes where delays become a systemic risk factor for small companies.

Since small trucking companies constitute the backbone of U.S. road freight transport, they continue to represent the vast majority of registered carriers. According to recent data from the American Trucking Associations (2025), 91.5 % of carriers operate fleets of ten or fewer trucks, while 99.3 % operate fewer than one hundred power units. Despite economic headwinds, the industry thus remains dominated by small businesses. These small carriers

typically perform local and regional deliveries, ensuring operational flexibility and responsiveness. Their role in the national logistics network remains critical, as large operators primarily concentrate on long-haul routes, while last-mile and intra-regional deliveries depend on smaller firms. This structure, however, makes regulatory compliance particularly challenging for operators with limited administrative and financial resources [2, 8].

At the same time, small trucking companies face a high degree of economic vulnerability. According to FMCSA [8], 2024 saw a rise in operating costs alongside declining freight rates, exerting continuous pressure on profit margins. Major expense categories include fuel (over 27% of total costs), driver wages, and insurance.

The workforce issue remains one of the key challenges to the stability of small carriers. FMCSA data indicate that in 2024, driver turnover in the for-hire trucking segment exceeded 80%, which is particularly burdensome for companies with small fleets. The shortage of qualified drivers causes contract delays and increases recruitment expenses, which can reach up to 7-9% of a small carrier's annual budget. High stress levels, long working hours, limited benefits, and a lack of clear career paths contribute to a high exit rate among young drivers during their first year.

Although the overall driver labor market in the U.S. appears balanced, small trucking companies experience chronic instability. The driver shortage in this segment results from structural factors such as:

- concentration of small carriers in long-haul operations;
- high labor intensity;
- low social appeal of the profession;
- limited capacity to increase wages.

Consequently, small freight businesses face a combination of economic and behavioral barriers: high hiring costs; low employee loyalty; challenges in regulatory compliance; and an absence of structured talent pipelines. Table 1 presents the key driver recruitment challenges faced by small trucking companies.

Table 1 – Key challenges in driver recruitment for small trucking companies

№	Problem	Essence of the problem	Consequences for companies
1	Labor market segmentation	The driver shortage is concentrated in long-haul transport (TL segment)	Chronic lack of drivers for long-distance routes
2	High turnover rate	70–80% of drivers change jobs within a year	Increased recruitment costs, disrupted delivery schedules
3	Pay and working condition imbalance	Workweeks exceed 60 hours without overtime compensation	Declining motivation, burnout, staff losses
4	Competition from related industries	Drivers switch to construction, manufacturing, and warehousing	Workforce outflow, staffing gaps during peak seasons
5	Low profession attractiveness	Low social prestige, aging workforce	Reduced inflow of young workers
6	Lack of employer branding	Small companies lack reputational influence in the labor market	Difficulty attracting new drivers
7	Slow response to market changes	Wages fail to adjust to rising demand due to contractual constraints	Temporary staff shortages, loss of competitiveness
8	Insufficient recruitment analytics	No monitoring of workforce mobility or regional risks	Mismatched hiring, inefficient spending

Source: systematized based on [3]

In small trucking companies, the driver recruitment process is structured as a multi-level system that combines traditional hiring elements with practices focused on employee retention. According to the study by Dariell K. Cooper Jr. [4], effective recruitment strategies are built on a combination of the motivational approach (Herzberg, 1959) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). Company owners recognize that attracting qualified drivers depends not only on competitive pay but also on creating an environment that meets fundamental needs – stability, safety, recognition, and professional growth. Thus, the hiring process is centered around building a brand – the company's reputation as an employer offering opportunities for skilled professionals.

The second key direction involves developing human resources (HRM) and leadership practices that directly influence a company's attractiveness as an employer. Small carriers often rely on flexible recruitment approaches such as personal referrals, local networks, and professional communities on social media. This personalized system allows for more accurate candidate evaluation while fostering trust. A vital part of this process is training and development: managers invest in driver education covering safety, digital technologies (electronic logbooks, GPS), and service standards. This not only reduces risks but also enhances the profession's prestige, forming part of the employer branding strategy.

The third direction includes organizational incentives and non-material retention factors introduced already at the recruitment stage. Owners of small companies often emphasize a family-like atmosphere, shorter routes, and the opportunity to spend more time at home – an important factor for drivers with families. Strategies also include establishing a safe working environment, transparent bonus systems, medical benefits, and career growth opportunities. Key recruitment strategies for small trucking companies are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 – Recruitment strategies in small trucking companies

№	Strategy	Content and implementation mechanisms	Expected result
1	Motivational and needs-based approach (Herzberg, Maslow)	Meeting drivers' basic and higher-level needs – stability, safety, recognition, development	Increased employer attractiveness, reduced turnover
2	Leadership and HRM practices	Training managers in communication, ethical leadership, and staff support	Improved internal climate and employee engagement
3	Personalized recruitment	Use of local networks, referrals, and targeted searches within driver communities	Effective selection of candidates aligned with company culture
4	Professional training and safety	Training programs on safe driving, ELD technologies, and customer service	Fewer accidents, higher professional standards
5	Non-material incentives and social support	Flexible schedules, short routes, family-like atmosphere, insurance, and bonuses	Greater job satisfaction and long-term retention
6	Technological integration	Use of modern navigation and communication systems to enhance work efficiency	Optimized operations and reduced driver stress

Source: systematized based on [4]

As noted by LeMay and Taylor [9], recruitment in the transportation industry is effective only when approached comprehensively – from building an employer image to establishing long-term relationships with employees. Unlike large network operators, small companies

must compete not through higher pay but through trust, flexible scheduling, quick access to management, and route stability.

The driver selection process functions as a "funnel" with six main stages – from initial candidate attraction to adaptation during the first three months of employment. Each stage serves a specific control and motivation function. As shown by Burks and Monaco [3] and Wygal et al. [11], the greatest employee losses occur at the final stage, indicating the need for integrated mentoring and onboarding systems. The use of a structured model – particularly within the SLTM methodology – enables small carriers to improve recruitment efficiency, reduce turnover, and ensure the stability of logistics chains (Table 3).

Table 3 – Stages of the driver recruitment process in small trucking companies (reference model)

Stage	Description
1. Advertising reach and lead generation	Conducted through digital platforms (Indeed, Facebook Jobs, CDLlife), social networks, and industry referrals. The goal is to identify potential candidates in critical regions using geotargeting and analytical tools to improve targeting accuracy.
2. Initial candidate screening	Selection based on basic criteria: a valid CDL license, required endorsements (e.g., hazmat), and at least one year of experience. At this stage, uncertified or interstate-ineligible candidates are filtered out.
3. Compliance verification	Official registries are checked—Motor Vehicle Record (MVR), Pre-Employment Screening Program (PSP), DAC Reports, and the FMCSA Drug & Alcohol Clearinghouse. This stage ensures compliance with federal safety requirements and minimizes risks.
4. Route and pay model evaluation	Candidates are presented with route options, "home time" conditions, and pay models (cents-per-mile or guaranteed pay). The main goal is to align expectations and prevent early-stage turnover.
5. Offer and onboarding	Includes contract signing, road testing, document processing, safety policy orientation, and introduction to company standards. This stage shapes the candidate's first professional impression of the company.
6. Employee retention (0–90 days)	A critical adaptation period involving mentoring programs, individual support, rapid feedback, and schedule adjustments. The primary objective is to stabilize new drivers and integrate them into the operational cycle.

Source: summarized from [3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11]

An innovative example of developing a recruitment and retention strategy is presented by the SLTM methodology, created by Yana Narynska. It represents a systematic approach to marketing-based management of driver recruitment in critical U.S. regions, aimed at strengthening the resilience of national logistics chains. Unlike traditional recruitment practices that focus solely on staffing individual companies, SLTM integrates tools of strategic marketing, spatial analytics, and employer branding to attract qualified personnel specifically in areas facing a high risk of driver shortages. This approach transforms the recruitment process into an element of national economic stability, where logistics routes are viewed as strategic infrastructure.

A key feature of SLTM is the use of marketing analytics and digital technologies (Big Data, geotargeting, social platforms) to identify regions with workforce shortages and develop targeted attraction strategies. The methodology is based on the principle of "targeted talent impact," meaning that company resources are directed toward geographic zones where labor

gaps directly affect national security or supply chain stability. Thus, SLTM transforms marketing campaigns into a mechanism for stabilizing the transportation system.

Table 4 – Main components and content of the SLTM (Strategic Logistics Talent Marketing) methodology

Component	Content and practical implementation
1. Analytics of deficit regions and labor categories	Use of Big Data tools, geo-analytics, social platforms, and market intelligence to identify areas with driver shortages; forecasting the impact of labor deficits on national logistics flows.
2. Employer branding as a strategic asset	Building a positive company image through communication campaigns, positioning drivers as key participants in a national mission, and increasing trust in the company within the labor market.
3. Strategic attraction funnel	A systematic sequence of stages: advertising campaign → lead generation → engagement → contract → retention. The goal is to optimize the speed and efficiency of workforce attraction in target regions.
4. Strategic impact assessment	Measuring performance through strategic KPIs: route coverage rate, response time to labor shortages, stability of critical goods transportation, and retention effectiveness.

A key component of the methodology is the creation of employer branding as a strategic asset. In this model, the driver is not merely viewed as a performer of labor functions but as a participant in a critical national mission. This perception fosters stronger motivation, reduces employee turnover, and enhances recruitment efficiency. The final phase of the methodology involves assessing strategic impact through KPIs that measure route coverage, response time to workforce crises, and stability of transport chains. Thus, SLTM serves as a universal model integrating HR marketing, analytics, and risk management within the field of transport logistics.

Conclusions

The small trucking business in the United States forms the backbone of heavy logistics, accounting for nearly 95% of the freight transportation market. These companies provide flexibility and speed in regional deliveries, connecting large logistics hubs with end consumers. At the same time, their operations are marked by high economic vulnerability driven by rising operational costs and a severe labor shortage. According to FMCSA (2024), driver turnover in the for-hire trucking segment reached 80%, directly affecting contract stability and operational efficiency.

The driver recruitment process in small trucking companies has a multi-level structure adapted to the specifics of small business, which largely relies on referrals, personalization, and an individual approach to candidates. The study identifies six key stages of driver selection and adaptation covering the entire cycle – from recruitment to retention. The main strategies include employer branding, the motivational and needs-based approach, HRM development, and the creation of socially stable working conditions that meet drivers' basic needs for stability, safety, recognition, and professional growth. The effectiveness of these strategies depends not only on pay levels but primarily on the quality of interaction between management and staff, the presence of trust, and partnership relations.

Among the innovative directions in workforce management within the freight transportation sector is the Strategic Logistics Talent Marketing (SLTM) system. This methodology integrates marketing analytics, Big Data, geotargeting, and brand management to attract drivers specifically in regions facing the highest labor shortages. Such an approach redefines recruitment not merely as a staffing function but as a component of national

logistics risk management. Through the implementation of digital technologies, KPI-driven monitoring, and the strategic positioning of the driving profession, the SLTM system establishes a new concept of workforce management aimed at reducing turnover, improving efficiency, and strengthening the resilience of the national logistics system.

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