

SAFETY SPOTLIGHT

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Our newest feature to The Green Light II will shine the spotlight on Safety Directors throughout our programs to gain insight into not only their background, but also their thoughts and ideas on safety in our industry.

Please meet Heather Darnell, Safety Director for Watkins Trucking, a Birmingham, Alabama-based flatbed company. Heather joined Watkins in March 2008 and has been putting her passion for safety in our industry to work. In 2015, Heather was named Safety Professional of the Year by the Alabama Trucking Association. She is also the co-chair for the ATA Comp Fund Risk Management Advisory Committee (RMAC), a panel of representatives from all over the industry that meet to discuss trends and changes in safety.



How did you get started in Safety?

I started out 15 years ago as a logbook clerk and safety assistant. CSA 2010 was in discussion. It was a great time to be learning as the industry was just beginning the discussions on CSA 2010 and how it was changing the focus of how drivers and companies were being evaluated.

What do you view as the main duties of a Safety Director?

Making sure to communicate with ALL departments and that everyone adapts and understands their roles and responsibilities when it comes to safety. Communication with drivers along with operations and shop employees is also very important. Accountability is key in safety and the Safety Director should be sure to hold the entire team accountable.

Why is safety important to you?

My main goal each day is to see our drivers deliver their loads without accidents or injuries and that they return to their families at the end of the day safely.

What has been the most challenging task in your role/career as a Safety Director?

Hands down, the implementation of electronic logs (e-logs). Training the older drivers new procedures that involve ever-changing technology is a constant challenge.

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How do you promote your company's safety culture? How do you get employees to "buy in" or get involved?

In order to promote safety culture company-wide, each department should be included in the safety management cycle. We view "Safety" as a responsibility to "teach old dogs some new tricks." I make sure we communicate to everyone the changes that are occurring in the industry. We have also established multiple internal safety awards and safety bonuses, including gamifying the top spot for "Safest Driver".

What advice do you wish you had received early in your Safety career?

Always be mentally prepared to have the worst day of your life. If you're prepared, it won't hit you as hard.

What advice would you give someone who is starting out in their Safety role?

I would tell a newbie to find mentors and utilize them. Do not be afraid to ask questions. Even the questions that you may think are embarrassing or sound dumb (there's no such thing). Someone in the room probably has the same questions and is scared to ask. This can lead to some great group discussions.

Listen to your drivers and other departments for feedback. Always keep your door open and have a listening ear. Complete every training/webinar that is available. Actively participate in your state trucking association. There is a wealth of industry knowledge in every room where they gather.

What is one piece of advice you would give to a truck driver?

Be willing to listen, adapt to the constantly-changing environment around you. Strive to have that reputation as the "Safest Driver" and be willing to lend a helping hand to others. Never become too comfortable in the job that you are performing.

What would be your safety quote or message?

When I first started in trucking, a driver brought me this quote that I love. "Asking me to overlook a simple safety violation is like asking me to overlook your value in life." It is such a simple and accurate statement that has stuck with me over the years.