

Lessons From 18-Wheelers

CLOs can use data to secure that seat at the table • BY MICHAEL E. ECHOLS



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The 18-wheelers on our interstate highways have a lot to teach our learning community. Before we get too far into the specifics, allow me to share a few observations that we all see every day.

As you travel on the interstate, take a look at the semitrailer trucks thundering down the highway all around you. What do you see? I will lay you even money that 9 out of 10 of those trucks have some combination of a sloping windbreak on the top of the cab or the tractor pulling the trailer. That windbreak sweeps the air up and over the blunt end of the trailer.

An increasing number of trailers have skirts on the underside extending the length of the bed. These are designed to sweep the air outward before the currents can create drag underneath.

About now, as learning leaders you are asking: "Why should I care about this stuff on 18-wheeler tractor-trailer trucks?" You should care a lot, though the point is not about how modern trucks are configured. The lesson is in how they got that way in the first place.

Before we get to the bottom line, I want to share one more observation about interstate trucking in the U.S. In 1980 the U.S. Congress passed the Motor Carrier Regulatory Reform and Modernization Act. This federal law deregulated the trucking industry. The net effect was to create conditions for new competitors to enter the market. The number of new firms increased dramatically. By 1990 the number of licensed carriers exceeded 40,000, more than double the number in 1980.

This brings us back to what you see on the trucks driving on the interstate — the overwhelming number of independent truckers operating with cost-reducing air-deflection devices on their rigs. Tens of thousands of truckers have made individual investment decisions in their own self-interest, and for many of these independent owner/operators, these rig enhancements require significant funds.

From the learning leader's perspective, what we are seeing in these decisions is value creation as a result of investment. And now for the kicker, there is something in what these truckers are doing that applies directly to our charter as learning leaders.

The real lesson is not so much what these independent trucks did but how they came to the decision that investments in air current deflecting, no matter how

costly, are in their economic interest. They came to this conclusion because they had the data that showed how much fuel the deflecting configuration saves them. Once they had the fuel-saving data, they no longer needed some central authority to tell them they should put the deflecting equipment on their trucks. They could calculate the fuel savings for themselves.

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If learning leaders ever expect to have a seat at the table, to be a ready participant in our organizations' investment decision-making processes, we will have to do something similar to what has taken place in the trucking industry.

We are going to have to show our senior leaders what the truckers learned on their own. We are going to have to show the financial return from the strategic learning investments we advocate for our organization's investment capital.

It sounds simple, and in many ways it is. The trucking industry certainly has figured it out. But in learning we have yet to fully align around the need to create and use our own industry-specific version of the air flow/fuel savings measurements at work in the trucking industry.

At the risk of being cheesy, today we are on the highway of learning. Maybe someday we will get there with our investment and return analytical methods. When we do, I am sure the 18-wheeler drivers will climb down from their cabs and greet us with something like: "Glad you finally made it. What's taken you so long?" **CLO**