Intermodal truckers deserve more appreciation

Several weeks ago, there was a strange mix of news stories about truckers. At almost the same time as Trucker Appreciation Week, harbor truckers on both the East and West coasts were conducting job actions to protest working conditions. This unique juxtaposition of events reflects the schizophrenic role of the intermodal trucker today.

It is axiomatic that all intermodal movements involve at least one truck segment (accompanying movements via other modes). Intermodal truck moves almost always include transit through terminals and transfer between modes. The usual cause of driver unrest has been the time consumed in making these moves. To consider fairly the plight of the intermodal trucker, we should compare them to over-the-road drivers. Door-to-door movement by motor carrier has come to represent a very sophisticated scheduling effort. Appointments must be made for both the pickup and delivery. In today's just-in-time supply chain world these appointments must meet ever-shrinking windows of acceptability. Over time, appointments have been made by date, by morning or afternoon, by hour, and now even by five-to-15 minute time slots.

This type of scheduling provides a very valuable commodity to a driver, reliability. Like all service sector workers, drivers earn money by working. Scheduling appointments allows them to predict how much work they will have, when it will be performed and when they need to solicit their next job. For all these reasons, the long-haul motor carrier has become the most sought-after employment position for truck drivers. Still, there is a constant shortage of qualified drivers.

Intermodal truckers sit lower on the food chain than these long-haul truckers. Often intermodal truckers have been forced to accept the job under undesirable conditions. For many, fueled by the American entrepreneurial spirit, there is a hope for a life complete with the freedom of running one's own business. These drivers are mostly owner-operators — and therein lies their problem.

In America, owner-operators are not employees. As the virtual corporation becomes a way of life, this issue is wreaking havoc across the workplace. The attempt by Microsoft contract programmers to receive the same benefits (and stock options) enjoyed by Microsoft employees doing the same job, brought this matter to public attention for many companies. Rulings by the Internal Revenue Service and National Labor Relations Board are now on the minds of all human resource managers, who are ready to ensure that the firewall between employee and contractor is not breached.

The recent unrest by truckers started in Vancouver, British Columbia, and spread to the United States. The Vancouver truckers ultimately prevailed in their primary demand to be paid by the hour. For reasons we've just reviewed, such a demand will be much more difficult to satisfy in this country.

Past efforts to organize intermodal truckers have failed for this reason. Ironically, the Teamsters, who abandoned representing the owner-operators almost 30 years ago, now stand behind some of the organizing efforts.

Truckers want to change the status by which they are paid — considering the frequent and extreme delays transiting terminals, the current per-trip method is not compensatory. But this treats the symptom only.

If intermodal service is to improve, terminals' productivity must, too. This applies both to rail and marine terminals. To date, efforts have been focused on treating spot problems. For example, gate processing is too slow. But rather than modifying the gate process, terminals simply widen staging areas to accommodate queueing delays.

On-dock rail is the response to an inability to handle peak traffic surges to and from vessels — sweeping the problem from one area of the terminal to another.

Unlike intermodal terminals, marine terminals are open only part of the day. An open marine terminal gate necessitates yard labor. This duality is often required by labor practices that have not yet been addressed by collective bargaining.

Additionally, clerical gate functions are rife with labor problems, too. People remember the labor featherbedding prevalent in the railroad industry prior to deregulation. Although diesel replaced coal, firemen were still on the engine. Similar practices exist today at marine terminals. In some cases, the computer will enter all information automatically — the clerk simply has to hit "enter." In such an environment there is no incentive to invest in labor-saving techniques that do not save any labor. Gate queues remain interminably long.

The federal government has recognized the critical nature of intermodal connectors in the transportation system. Projects such as the Alameda Corridor are designed to improve intermodal throughput.

But infrastructure investment alone is not a solution. Without changing the underlying business processes to improve efficiency, the problems will resurface again.

The problems of intermodal truckers can be avoided and ignored for only so long, but they will not disappear. Ultimately, the intermodal system will break down if terminal management processes are not improved.

Today, the problem is reflected in intermodal trucker unrest. In the future, intermodal growth will be constrained by less than optimal utilization of scarce terminal resources. We should cure the terminal productivity disease and watch the disruption symptoms disappear.