

Mother Nature, human nature and the nature of technology

MISSISSAUGA, Ont. — Although they may feel like opposing forces, evolving technology and changing weather are working to alter both the trucking industry and the people in it.

Silvy Wright, president and CEO of insurance provider Northbridge Financial Corp., told the audience in the main hall at the 2014 Surface Transportation Summit that trucking companies need to be willing to respond to both the new realities imposed by man-made and naturally generated forces.

In discussion with Transportation Media editorial director Lou Smyrlis, Wright began by speaking the effects of technology on the workforce.

“Technology is reshaping our world but we all know quality people are at the core of our success,” said Wright.

“We think about using technology to becoming more efficient and effective, but I see technology changing the service model. A service model which will become more competitive and successful than the traditional service model,” she said citing the example of the cab-hailing app Uber. Not only has the service disrupted the traditional model of calling for a taxi, it has changed the way the drivers think about their jobs. She spoke of one driver who told her that he loves the way Uber acknowledges him and his efforts behind the wheel.

“When I asked him about Uber, he said, “I love it. I’ve been working for Uber for three months. They give me feedback on how well I service the customer. I earn points. I’ve been working with X cab company for 10 years and they never told me how well I did my job.’ Here

the technology not only changed the customer experience and the service model, but it changed the driver experience.”

She said that the instant feedback the driver received about how well he is doing his job is a facet of employee management businesses will have to consider in the future.

“One of the things I think is changing in this world is people want instant service, instant feedback. With regards to our employees, how do we give them the appropriate recognition in the way they want to receive it? Give them a once-a-year a claims-free award? I don’t think that will be enough for the younger generation entering the industry.”

And that’s if they enter the industry to begin with.

“Tucking and insurance have recruiting problems: Part of it is awareness and part of it is image. We probably haven’t done the best job we could do in both industries with regards to the professional experience it provides to young people,” said Wright.

Along with approaching students who are still in high school and telling them about the opportunities offered by both trucking and insurance, Wright said each industry needs to turn more heavily to social media as a recruiting tool.

In response to a question about climate change from Smrylis, Wright emphasized that weather is becoming a costly problem.

“The big change now is severe weather is more common than not,” she said referencing a chart that showed the amount of damage claims caused by bad weather each year over the past 30 years. Looking at the chart, she pointed out 1998—the year of the Quebec icestorm—as a milestone.

“Now what’s happening is we are having severe weather. Climate change is creating severe weather and creating damage and creating havoc on property, transportation and automobiles. For the last five years, starting in 2008, we’ve had a catastrophe north of \$1 billion every year. I don’t have a crystal ball, and, knock-on-wood, 2014 is a little bit lighter than the last five years, but one of the things that chart shows me is the frequency of severe weather. We need to be prepared.”

For Wright, being prepared means having well-formed and ready-to-go back-up plans.

“We need Plan B. Your drivers, your dispatchers, they need to have that Plan B,” she told the crowd. “How well are you prepared to change routes? How well are you prepared to deal with certain equipment that gets affected by lower-than-average temperatures? Be prepared. I know that sounds really common, but I highlight the fact it is common. Have those plans, those routes in place, so you don’t miss business, you don’t lose customers.

“It’s not just having Plan B, in case the day [when it’s needed] will come. It’s having Plan B as a normal course of doing your business.”