

It Takes All Kinds

Older, wiser, and willing to embrace change – a lot of today's new drivers take to the wheel via some unexpected career paths.

By Duff McCutcheon

About 20 years ago, some U.S. government agency conducted a census of the trucking industry, finding that only three percent of the driver population held PhDs. Like that really matters? But today, that number would probably be higher thanks to the influx of middle-aged, second or third career types climbing into our drivers' seats.

These folks bring the benefits of a few extra years of life experience to their new jobs, as well as the skills from their previous careers. While the young bloods are steering clear of trucking in droves, carriers are welcoming these mature entry-level drivers with open arms.

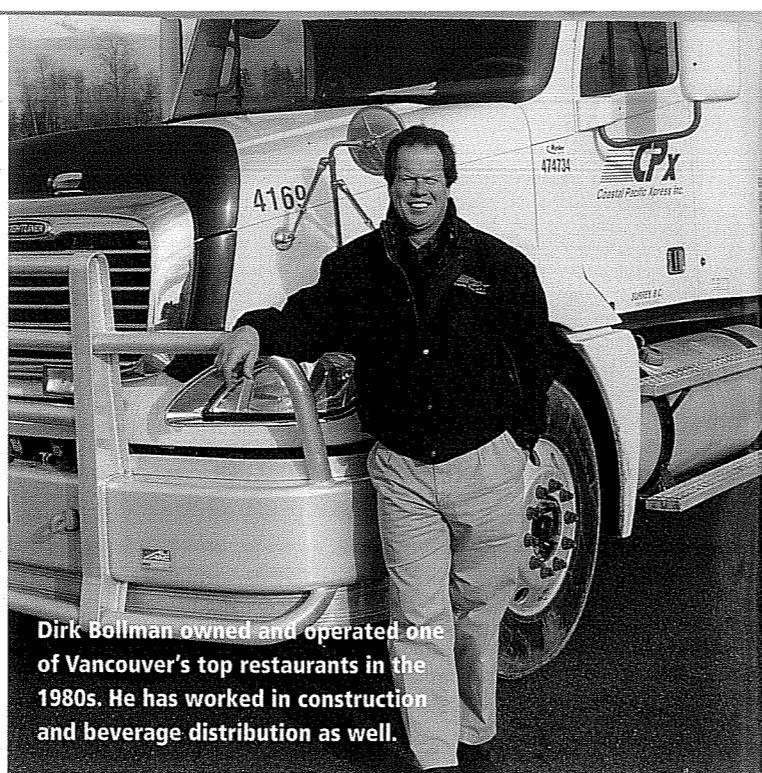
One such recent convert to trucking is Robert Wolff, who in his 40 years, has morphed from computer programmer, to tool-and-die maker, to his most recent vocation: an owner-operator with TST Truckload Express. If variety is the spice of life, then this fellow has a well-stocked spice rack in terms of work experience.

From 1989 to 1995, Wolff worked as a computer programmer with ATI, a Markham, Ont.-based computer graphics-card company. Not a bad gig, but not perfect, either.

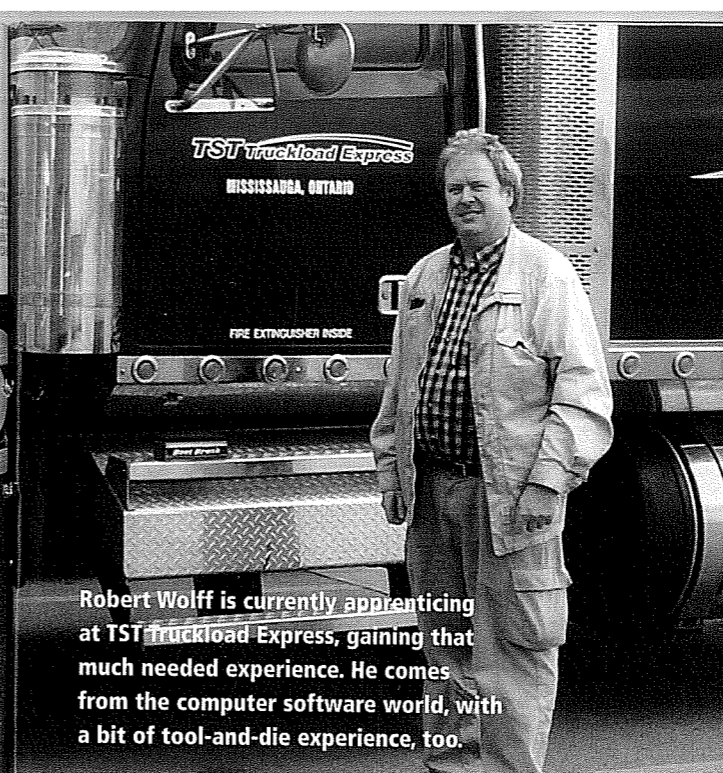
"With programming, keeping up with every new computer language that came out was practically a second full-time job," Wolff says. "Plus, a lot of companies had unrealistic expectations. A trucking parallel would be a service center looking for a mechanic with two years of experience dealing with diesel particulate filters – that person just doesn't exist."

He tried tool-and-die for a spell because he likes working with his hands. But at the automotive parts plant where he worked, life was either "rush, rush, rush," or cutting back on hours. "The trend was a lot of work being outsourced to China," says Wolff. "Each year the slow period got slower and longer."

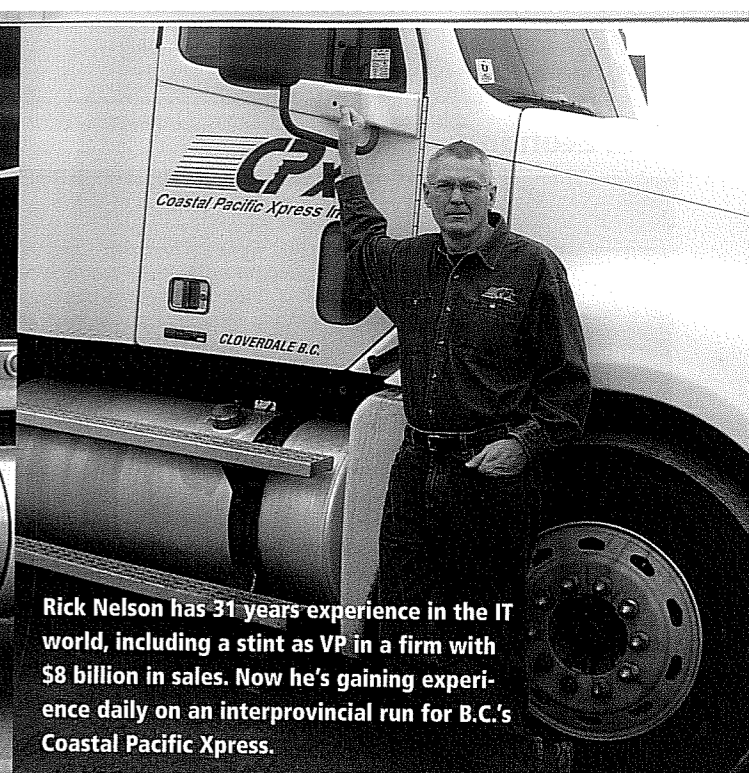
Trucking, he reasoned, couldn't be outsourced. Coming off an on-the-job injury at the parts plant, he heard about the Power to Drive Program, a collaborative effort between Arrow Truck Sales,



Dirk Bollman owned and operated one of Vancouver's top restaurants in the 1980s. He has worked in construction and beverage distribution as well.



Robert Wolff is currently apprenticing at TST Truckload Express, gaining that much needed experience. He comes from the computer software world, with a bit of tool-and-die experience, too.



Rick Nelson has 31 years experience in the IT world, including a stint as VP in a firm with \$8 billion in sales. Now he's gaining experience daily on an interprovincial run for B.C.'s Coastal Pacific Xpress.

KRTS Transportation Specialists, and TST Truckload Express in Ontario aimed at encouraging people to become owner-operators by supplying training, financing, and a contract – all in one deal.

And as he gains experience, he's already developing some very strong opinions about the business, most notably regarding wheel-offs and 100% driver liability.

"You could get a situation where a steel mill produces a bad batch of steel, or the mechanic under-torques the lugs. Yet in the event of an incident, 100% of the blame goes to the owner-op. It shouldn't be a 100% liability offense for the trucker."

Rick Nelson is not one to do things by halves, so when the newly retired former IT executive found he needed a special licence endorsement to haul around his fifth-wheel RV, he opted to go all out and get his Class A.

He enrolled in truck training school and eight weeks later was out on the road. He decided to put off retirement for a few years, landing a job with Coastal Pacific Xpress in Cloverdale, B.C. running between B.C. and Alberta or Saskatchewan. It was quite a career transition. Nelson once controlled an annual budget of \$100 million and a staff of over 500 with the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC).

Nelson had spent 31 years in the IT world, in both the user community and the vendor side, working his way up the ranks to executive positions in both worlds. "I was a vice-president with Computer Associates, the fourth largest software company in the world, \$8 billion in revenues – all that stuff. I was closing deals in the multi-million dollar range," he says.

Later he moved to ICBC, taking over the corporate services portfolio with the public insurer. "I was primarily responsible for IT and real estate, but also security, warehousing, distribution, and mail services. You take away HR, law, insurance, and claims, and I dealt with the rest – it was pretty big."

His last gig was a directorship of consulting services for a pre-IPO, venture-funded California software company. Once that was sold off, he decided to call it a day, having been seduced by all those "Freedom 55" commercials.

"When I went into trucking, I wasn't looking at it as a career, just something to do that I thought I would enjoy," he says.

Plus, he reasons, the industry is always going to need people, so the employability is always there. "And it's sustained – right now trucking is on a very wide cycle and I don't think this shortage is going to be solved anytime soon."

He also brings some different thinking to the trucking business – especially his views on customer care. "Customer service is something you very much believe in the corporate world if you're successful," says Nelson. "And that's already paid off for me as a driver. I go back two or three times to the same customer and they remember me as the guy that said 'hi' and asked how they are, instead of just saying 'I'm here to deliver a load.'"

Dirk Bollman, another CPX driver, came to trucking via the restaurant business, with a few years of fitness training, and construction thrown into the mix.

Ever been to the Quarry House Restaurant in Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Park? (It's now known as Seasons in the Park.) It was one of the city's top restaurants back in the 1980s, under the ownership and management of Bollman and his father. With a staff of 70 and a "West Coast-Continental" menu, it was a popular place.

When Bollman received an offer to sell, he initially said no, but three months into a restructuring, "it looked good," he said. He sold out and went into semi-retirement, keeping himself busy with jobs at the B.C. Liquor Distribution Branch, as well as a very successful stint in construction.

"I was semi-retired, but decided that I really liked working – though I didn't want to sit behind a desk," he says. One day he

came upon a *National Post* article about innovative companies – mentioning CPX and its training program. Bollman was intrigued: "I thought, trucking's not a bad idea – I can work independently, make my own decisions," he says.

"I went to North Shore Driving School for three months, got my "Earning Your Wheels" certificate, and a letter of intent from CPX to hire me. I started out with their apprenticeship program, drove for a few months with another driver, and I've now been on my own for the past seven months, largely doing shorter trips to Edmonton and Calgary."

Apart from being impressed with CPX as a company, Bollman says he was attracted to trucking because he'd heard the industry "was cleaning up its act," he says. "My original perception of trucking had been sort of 'Wild Bunch', but over time I was hearing about positive changes – more stringent regulations, that sort of thing. That's what made me consider it."

While he's still learning how to be a truck driver, he's transferred a lot of skills from his days as a restaurateur – especially people skills. "You come to a company, walk in with your paperwork and if you're relaxed and treat them pleasantly, you get a different response. They're so used to people coming in, in a big rush. If you engage them a bit, it really smoothes things over.

"I find there's still a rough edge in the industry. There's a lot of waiting and downtime in trucking that can really aggravate people. But I don't let it bother me – I sit and read a book." But like all truck drivers, his patience wears thin when it comes to four-wheelers.

"The biggest challenge for me is you're driving a huge vehicle and the cars around you don't have any understanding of how they operate – they cut in front of you, hit the brakes – you're constantly trying to second guess what people are going to do."

If our new friend, Dirk Bollman ever gets bored with driving and gets a hankering to get back to the food service business, we know of a few truckstops that could profit from an epicurean make-over ★