



IN-DEPTH RESEARCH REPORT

# TRANSPORTATION PAIN POINTS 2026:

OVERCOMING TOP FLEET-MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES



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**COMPLIANCE  
NETWORK**

# INTRODUCTION

Despite promising signs early in the year, trucking endured a prolonged freight downcycle in 2025, with soft demand, excess capacity, and persistently high operating costs creating a perfect storm that forced many carriers to exit the industry.

At the same time, uncertainty around tariffs, shifting trade dynamics, and a renewed push for deregulation added another layer of volatility to an already fragile marketplace. In this environment, safety and compliance became more critical than ever. When margins are tight and resources are stretched, the cost of a preventable crash, compliance violation, or equipment failure can be devastating.

Fleet managers were forced to balance immediate financial pressures with long-term risk management, placing greater emphasis on prevention, visibility, and early intervention rather than reactive fixes. These competing demands have reshaped how fleets think about driver behavior, regulatory compliance, maintenance, and the role of technology in daily operations.

These realities are reflected in the latest findings from the J. J. Keller Center for Market Insights' seventh annual State of Fleet Management survey. Conducted in early 2026, the survey captures how fleet professionals are responding to today's challenges, including long-standing pain points like driver retention and recordkeeping.

The survey results show that respondents continue to see a need for well-trained, high-quality drivers engaged in continuous learning, a robust safety and compliance program with strong backing from leadership, new vehicle technology that works, and a solid preventive maintenance program. Our research also shows, however, that fleet managers face some common hurdles in reaching these goals.





## FINDINGS

WE SURVEYED HUNDREDS OF PRIVATE AND FOR-HIRE FLEET PROFESSIONALS AND UNCOVERED THREE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES OR “PAIN POINTS” THEY COMMONLY FACE RELATED TO FLEET MANAGEMENT:

**1. KEEPING UP WITH REGULATORY COMPLIANCE**

**2. HIRING AND RETAINING QUALITY DRIVERS WHO MAKE SAFE CHOICES**

**3. ENSURING RECORDS ARE ORGANIZED AND COMPLETE**

### WHO DID WE ASK?

The survey was conducted from **January 7** through **January 22, 2026**.

**550** **PEOPLE** completed the survey from both for-hire and private fleets

**64%**

have fewer than 25 commercial motor vehicles (CMVs)

**14%** have 100+ CMVs

**58%** are private fleets,

**34%** are for-hire

Most people have multiple responsibilities, with a majority of respondents being responsible for managing safety, driver training, and DOT compliance

## PAIN POINT 1:

### KEEPING UP WITH COMPLIANCE



Compliance with local, state, and federal regulations is crucial for businesses involved in transportation, not only to prevent fines and penalties but also to reduce risk and protect public safety. Simple compliance mistakes can lead to major problems on the road and in the courtroom. Though full compliance can be a daunting task, there are many steps you can take to ease the burden, as discussed below.

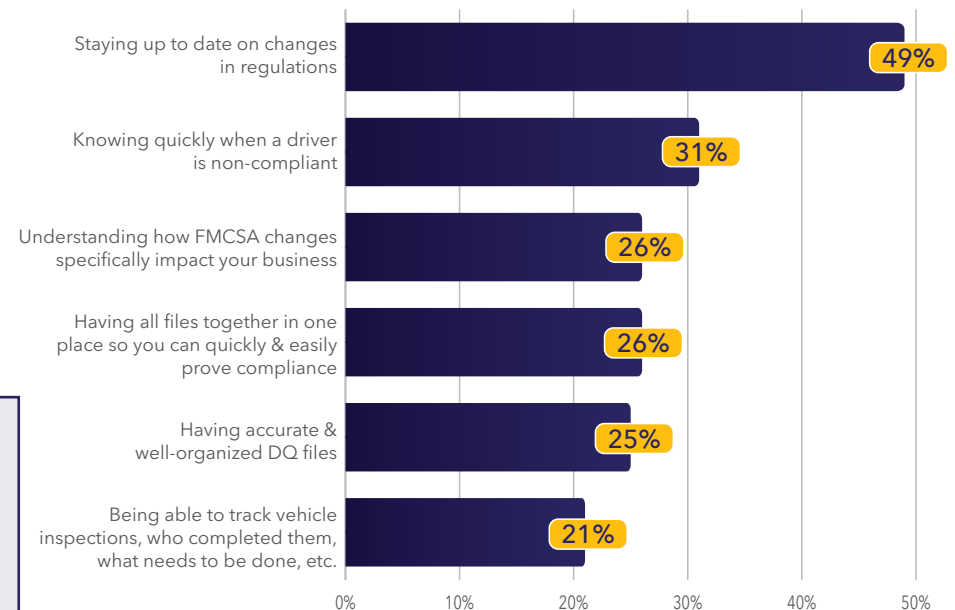
When it comes to compliance with [rules](#) from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), most of our survey respondents (49%) indicated that staying up to date on changes in regulations is one of the most important things they can do to ensure overall compliance. A third of respondents (31%) also rated knowing when a driver is non-compliant as an important factor, as well as understanding how FMCSA changes specifically impact their business (26%), having all files together in one place so you can quickly & easily prove compliance (26%), having accurate & well-organized DQ files (25%), and being able to track vehicle inspections, who completed them, what needs to be done, etc. (21%).

#### Significant Changes from 2025

- ▶ Staying up to date on changes in regulations... increased from 41%
- ▶ Knowing quickly when a driver is non-compliant... increased from 16%
- ▶ Having accurate & well-organized drug & alcohol records... decreased from 26% to 11% (not shown in the chart)



### WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR RELATED TO FMCSA COMPLIANCE?



## EXPERT TIP

### PAIN POINT 1: KEEPING UP WITH COMPLIANCE



Staying compliant with FMCSA regulations requires knowing what those regulations are and how they apply to you, training those who are impacted by the rules, and implementing a solid safety and compliance program that keeps you on the right track.

#### IGNORANCE IS NO EXCUSE

You've probably heard the saying that "ignorance of the law is no excuse." There's just no way around it: Compliance starts with knowing the rules. In fact, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations ([FMCSRs](#)) themselves require all motor carriers to "be knowledgeable of and comply with" those regulations. They also require drivers and other affected employees to be instructed in the regulations.

**§390.3(e)** — (1) Every employer shall be knowledgeable of and comply with all regulations contained in this subchapter which are applicable to that motor carrier's operations.

(2) Every driver and employee shall be instructed regarding, and shall comply with, all applicable regulations contained in this subchapter.



*The most challenging aspect of my job is... "Making sure drivers keep themselves compliant."*

Survey Participant

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If necessary, engage experts who can review your operations and help you decipher the many rules that apply.

Once you know what applies, you'll need to stay informed about changes in the rule. If you don't have the time, resources, and/or expertise to digest the *Federal Register*, the *Congressional Record*, or other daily accounts of government activity, you'll need to rely on someone else to do it for you. Take advantage of services like [Compliance Network](#), newsletters, seminars, workshops, email lists, industry associations, or similar resources to stay informed of recent and upcoming rule changes.

### IMPLEMENT A ROBUST SAFETY PROGRAM

You can't expect to have a safe and compliant operation by simply handing out copies of regulations. Laws and regulations set minimum standards that you must follow, but those alone don't make you safe. You'll need to tell employees exactly what they need to do, which means establishing a comprehensive safety program that outlines all the policies, procedures, and guidelines your organization intends to follow, above and beyond "mere compliance." At a minimum, the program should address key areas like:

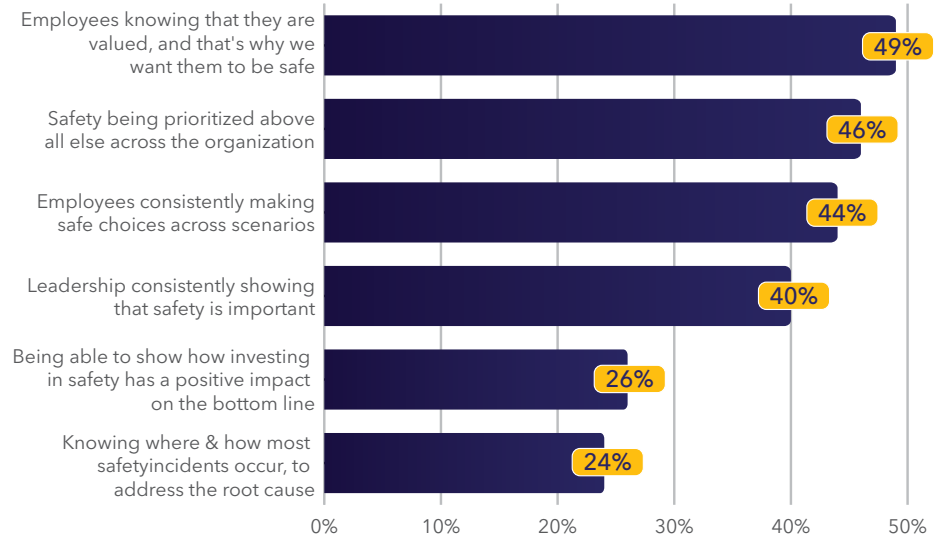
- ▶ Driver hiring and [qualification](#),
- ▶ [Hours of service](#),
- ▶ Vehicle [inspection](#) and [maintenance](#),
- ▶ [Drug and alcohol testing](#),
- ▶ Accident [response](#), and
- ▶ [Recordkeeping](#).

*The most challenging aspect of my job is...  
"Employee relationship with safety."*

Survey Participant

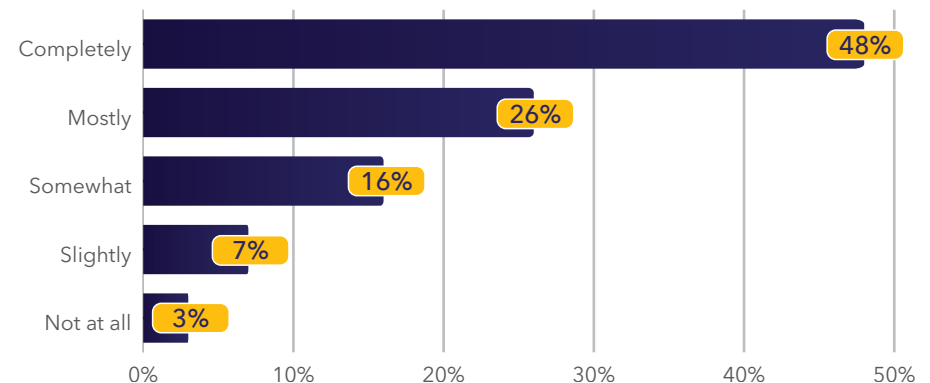


### WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT OVERALL SAFETY AT YOUR COMPANY, WHICH OF THESE, IF ANY, DO YOU CONSIDER MOST IMPORTANT?



### "SAFETY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING AT MY COMPANY: WHEN CUSTOMER SERVICE OR PROFITABILITY COME INTO CONFLICT WITH SAFETY, WE ALWAYS CHOOSE SAFETY."

% Agreement



A big part of your safety and compliance program needs to involve training. Federal rules don't require much training, but your company policies should. Provide regular training and education for your drivers and staff to ensure they understand and adhere to the latest DOT safety regulations and best practices. Cover topics such as:

- ▶ [Defensive](#) driving,
- ▶ [Cargo securement](#),
- ▶ Fatigue and health management,
- ▶ Emergency procedures, and
- ▶ Regulatory updates.

Significant Changes from 2025

- ▶ How to safely & correctly operate their specific vehicle types... decreased from 58%
- ▶ How to avoid injury while working & driving... increased from 20%
- ▶ How to avoid fatigued driving... increased from 5% to 9% (not shown)

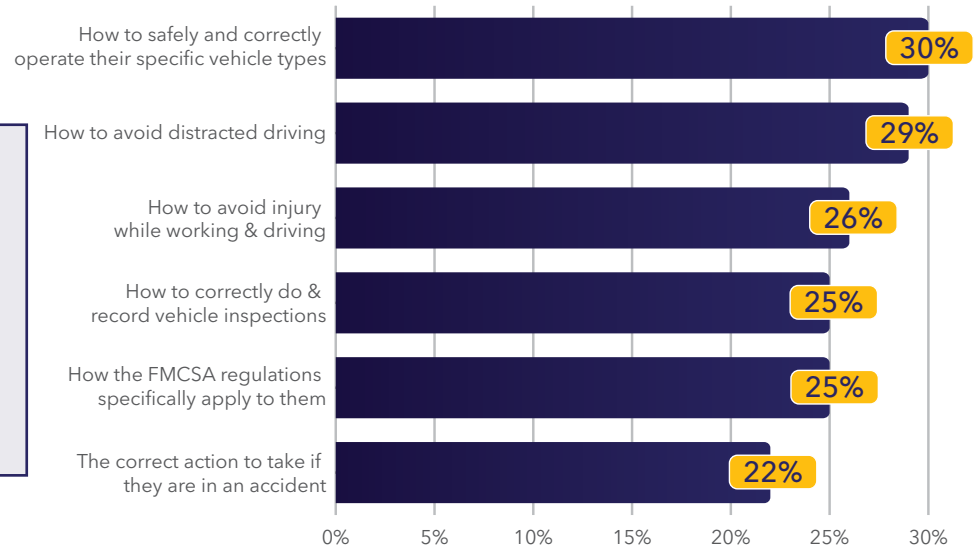
### IDENTIFY GAPS

Audit your compliance program on a regular basis to identify any gaps or opportunities for improvement. This proactive approach will help you address issues before they become violations. You should consider:

- ▶ Using checklists to guide the audit and record the results, and
- ▶ Enlisting the help of a third party to conduct the audit with "fresh eyes."

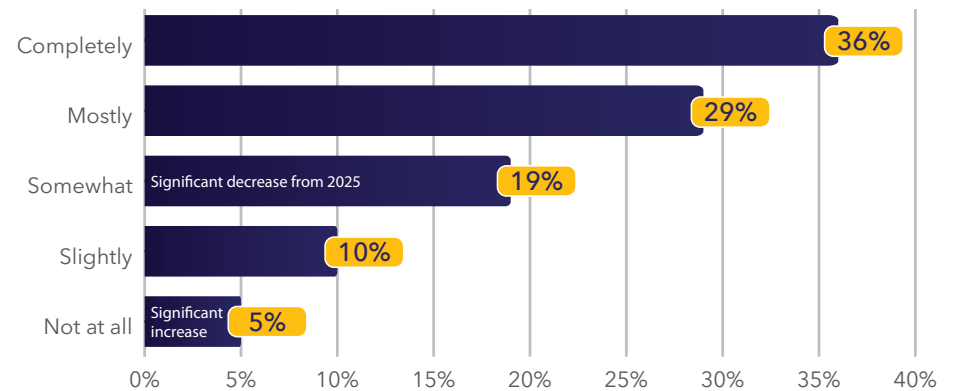
Compliance with transportation safety regulations is an ongoing process that requires continuous effort and attention. By prioritizing safety, staying informed, and implementing these best practices, you can maintain compliance and promote a culture of safety within your organization.

## WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR RELATED TO DRIVER KNOWLEDGE & SKILL?



## "MY COMPANY EMPHASIZES CONTINUOUS LEARNING."

% Agreement



## PAIN POINT 2:

# HIRING AND RETAINING QUALITY DRIVERS.

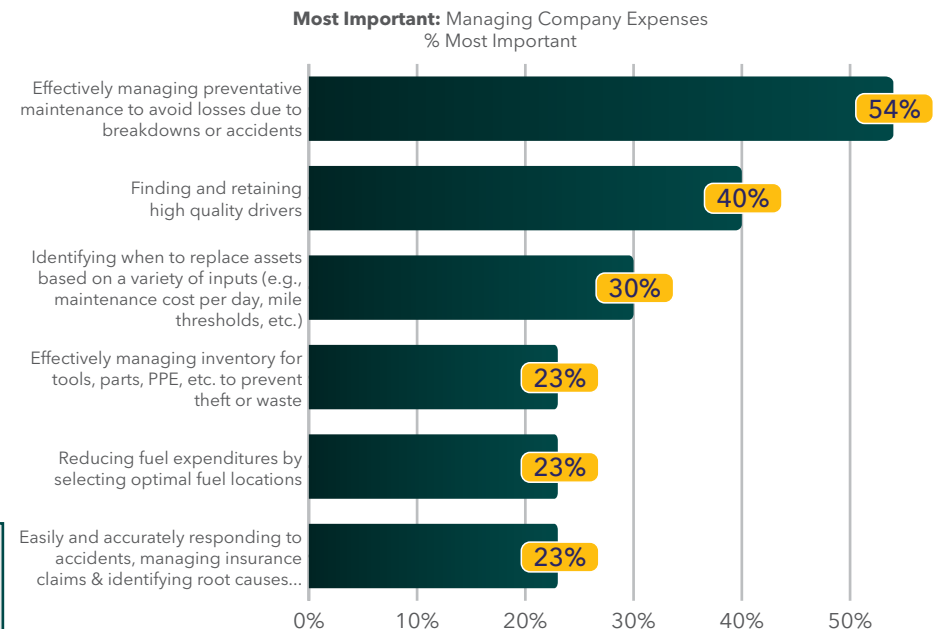


With an estimated shortage of more than 100,000 drivers, it's no wonder the truck and bus transportation industries continue to face challenges with [driver hiring](#) and retention. Driver shortages and churn can have ripple effects throughout an organization, from safety and compliance to vehicle maintenance and finance.

In fact, when it comes to managing company expenses, 4 in 10 survey respondents (40%) said finding and retaining high-quality drivers is the *most important* factor.



## WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR RELATED TO MANAGING EXPENSES?



### Significant Changes from 2025

- ▶ Easily & accurately tracking & managing fuel receipts... decreased from 31% to 18% (not shown in chart)

## EXPERT TIP

### PAIN POINT 2: HIRING AND RETAINING QUALITY DRIVERS



Let's face it, there's no easy solution to the driver shortage, whether it's a *true* shortage or simply a lack of adequate pay, respect, and decent working conditions. No matter the cause, the pain is real, but there are steps you can take to help alleviate the situation and hopefully attract — and retain — quality drivers.

#### EXAMINE PAY AND BENEFITS

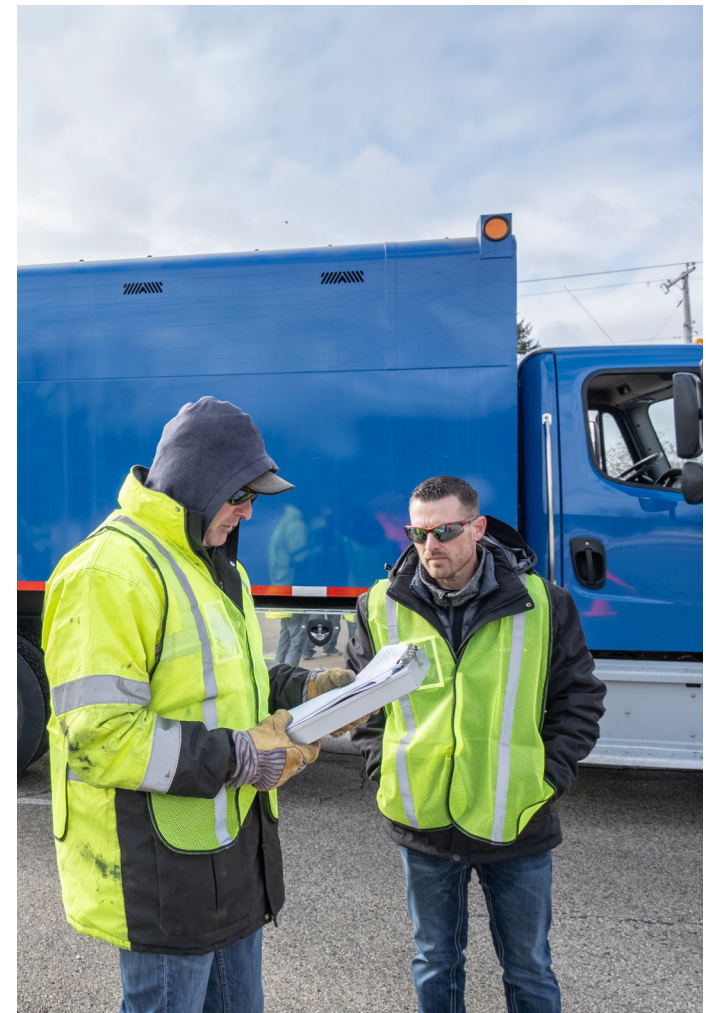
Pay and benefits must be competitive to attract new drivers and keep current ones. Evaluate your [driver pay](#) and benefits on a regular basis, considering the following:

- ▶ The pay package should be structured to pay for activities that other carriers do not.
- ▶ The starting wage should be higher — and the benefits package better — than those offered by competitors.
- ▶ Having more industry experience should result in a higher starting wage.
- ▶ Pay by rolling or practical miles rather than “shortest” miles, and/or consider activity-based pay.

If pay and benefits don't make you stand out from the crowd, at least make sure they're competitive.

#### EXAMINE THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Drivers generally don't leave over pay alone; they often leave because of the way they're treated. The work environment and “culture” of a company have more impact on retention than almost any other factor, including pay. Your company's reputation among drivers, internal and external, may be the best or worst recruiting tool.



*The most challenging aspect of my job is... “Having the right team for the job.”*

Survey Participant



Regularly evaluate the work environment and ask these questions:

- ▶ Is the equipment clean, well-maintained, and in good condition?
- ▶ How do dispatchers and supervisors treat your drivers?
- ▶ Does the company have an “open-door policy” for questions, concerns, and complaints?
- ▶ Is there a support structure to help drivers who run into problems?
- ▶ Do you have [policies and procedures](#) to ensure drivers get adequate time at home, on a scheduled basis? How long are drivers forced to be away from home?
- ▶ Do you have a unique and progressive policy for earned time off, personal leave, and/or vacation time?
- ▶ Do drivers have any say in their dispatch, or is it “forced” on them?
- ▶ Does the company dedicate drivers to specific customers or areas to try to give them a more scheduled lifestyle?

Make your company uniquely attractive, so you can answer this question with confidence: “Why should I come to work for you?”

### HIRE FROM WITHIN

Your best hires may come from within. Consider recruiting new drivers from existing staff.

- ▶ Let employees know about open driver positions and all they have to offer.
- ▶ Start a ride-along program to let interested employees experience the role of a driver.
- ▶ Plan for future capacity needs well in advance, and budget accordingly. It could take several weeks or months to get an employee up to speed as a driver, and you may want to pay for their training and licensing.



*The most challenging aspect of my job is... “Hiring qualified drivers and retaining them.”*

Survey Participant



## ENCOURAGE REFERRALS

The best advertising can be word-of-mouth. Encourage your drivers and other employees to refer other drivers for open positions. Referred drivers tend to have a lower turnover rate, especially if the referring employee participates in the onboarding process.

For a referral program to be as successful as possible, it should:

- ▶ Have enthusiastic support from management;
- ▶ Be actively promoted throughout the company;
- ▶ Offer a variety of awards, including cash incentives; and
- ▶ Specify who is and isn't eligible to participate.

## SEEK REHIRES

Your filing cabinet of *former* drivers may be an untapped resource for filling open seats. Just because a driver has left doesn't mean the relationship needs to end forever. Keep in touch with former drivers who:

- ▶ Left under good terms,
- ▶ Left to pursue a career outside of trucking, or
- ▶ Left to pursue another driving opportunity.

Target as many former drivers as possible, and be persistent.



*The most challenging aspect of my job is... "Hiring competent drivers."*

Survey Participant

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## EXPAND YOUR REACH

When doing external recruiting, take advantage of all opportunities to find new drivers, including:

- ▶ Job fairs;
- ▶ Internet-based recruiting, including social media;
- ▶ Advertisements in magazines, newsletters, and on radio and television;
- ▶ Apprenticeships for inexperienced drivers, in partnership with a local driving school; and
- ▶ Non-traditional drivers, such as women, younger drivers, minorities, and military veterans.

## INVEST AND TRAIN

Investing in and [training](#) new drivers is crucial for their retention and overall success within your organization. By providing comprehensive training, you can ensure that new drivers are well-prepared for the challenges they'll face on the road. This not only enhances their skills and confidence but also fosters a sense of loyalty and commitment to your company.

Moreover, offering ongoing training and development opportunities can help new drivers feel valued and supported. This can include regular safety training, updates on industry regulations, and advanced driving techniques. By investing in your drivers' professional growth, you demonstrate a commitment to their long-term success, which can significantly reduce turnover rates and improve overall job satisfaction.

The driver shortage is among the industry's biggest concerns and it's only expected to get worse. The steps outlined above can help improve your chances of [landing and keeping quality drivers](#), but stakeholders across the country will need to work together in coming years to develop solutions that benefit the entire industry.



## PAIN POINT 3:

# RECORDKEEPING



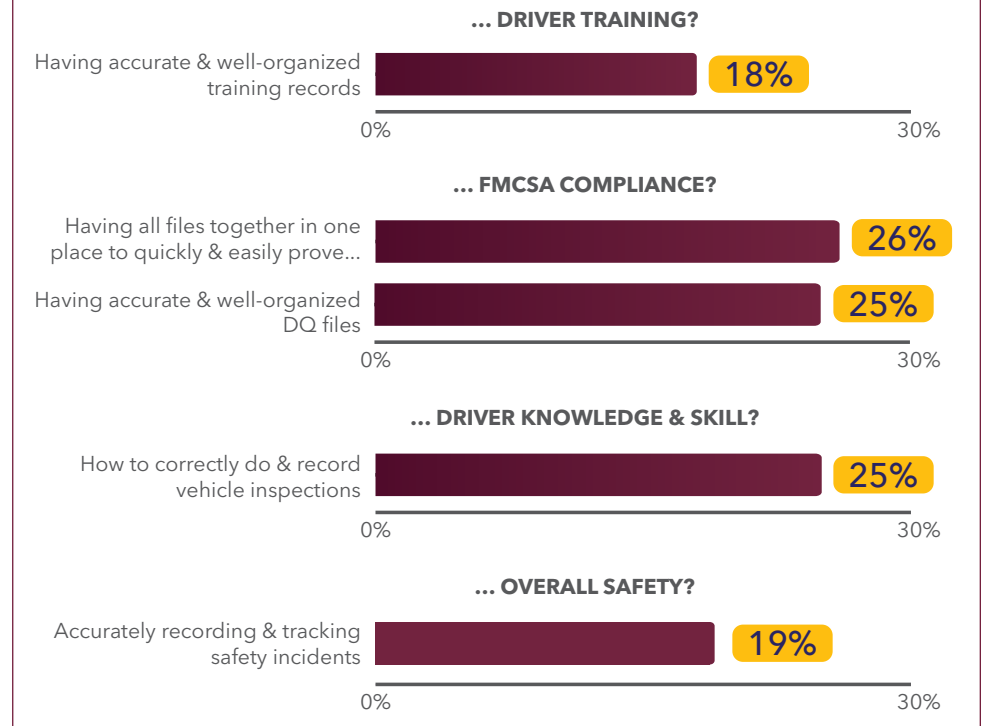
Good [records](#) form the cornerstone of compliance and say a lot about your safety program. For that reason, they're also a valuable business asset that will prove vital during an audit or litigation. The key is:

- ▶ [Knowing which records you need](#),
- ▶ Keeping them all up to date and compliant, and
- ▶ Keeping them organized and accessible.

Our survey respondents identified recordkeeping as one of the top three most challenging aspects of their job.



## WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR RELATED TO ...



## EXPERT TIP

### PAIN POINT 3: RECORDKEEPING



Depending on the state of your records, they may be among your company's greatest assets or its Achilles' heel. They're the foundation on which your compliance and risk management programs are built, which means they can either help sustain your entire operation or cause it to come crumbling down.

How can you ensure that your records will uphold your business and protect you during an [audit](#), investigation, or litigation?

#### **PRIORITIZE ORGANIZATION AND ACCESSIBILITY**

Organized records are the bedrock of effective compliance. Invest in a robust document management system that categorizes and stores records in a way that is both secure and easily retrievable.

Digital systems with cloud storage offer the best of both worlds by providing backup for physical documents and ensuring that crucial records are accessible from anywhere, by the right people at the right time. This level of organization is invaluable during audits or litigation when time is of the essence.

#### **STAY CURRENT ON WHAT'S REQUIRED**

Recordkeeping rules are not set in stone. Things can change when you least expect it, making it critical to stay up to date on recordkeeping laws and regulations (as discussed earlier in this report).

Actively monitor for changes to the government's recordkeeping requirements. When you're alerted to a change, determine the impact and make sure your drivers, administrative staff, and/or other affected individuals implement the change as soon as required.



*The most challenging aspect of my job is... "Managing vehicle service/maintenance schedules and records."*

Survey Participant



## DO REGULAR AUDITS

Self-auditing of your records is a critical component of maintaining compliance and managing risk. Schedule regular internal audits to weigh your records against [an up-to-date checklist](#) to identify potential issues before they come to light during a government audit or the discovery process of a lawsuit.

Be sure your audits cover all aspects of compliance, including:

- ▶ Driver [qualifications](#);
- ▶ Vehicle inspection and maintenance;
- ▶ Hours of service;
- ▶ Registration;
- ▶ Injuries, illnesses, and accidents;
- ▶ Labor laws;
- ▶ Hazardous materials and wastes;
- ▶ Taxes; and
- ▶ Other key compliance areas.

By catching and correcting discrepancies early, you can avoid the negative consequences of non-compliance, including fines, penalties, and claims of negligence.

## DON'T IGNORE PAPERWORK PROBLEMS

If your audits uncover errors or missing documents, take action. The FMCSA encourages motor carriers to make a “good-faith effort” to get back into compliance when a violation is discovered. This should never include falsification of documents to make it look like there wasn’t a violation, however, because that carries a [hefty fine](#) and legal jeopardy (not to mention ethical implications).



*The most challenging aspect of my job is... “Work[ing] to meet so many individual interstate truck compliance [requirements] (FMCSA, 1190, UCR, IFTA, IRP, drug testing, insurance) and all the associated reporting/record keeping.”*

Survey Participant

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What can you do? A good-faith effort might include a mix of the following:

- ▶ Have drivers, mechanics, or others correct their paperwork mistakes. Make clear why correction is necessary, and make sure the person initials and dates the correction. If possible, keep a copy of the original and label the corrected copy as “corrected.”
- ▶ Create a dated and signed note to put in the file or to attach to the flawed document(s) to indicate to an auditor that you’re aware of the violation(s) (this can help show that your self-audits are working). Include details about any steps you took to get into compliance.
- ▶ If it makes sense to do so (depending on how much time has passed), recreate missing documents. Use today’s date and add a note that the document was created after the mistake was uncovered.
- ▶ Review and update your policies and procedures as needed to help put an end to paperwork errors.
- ▶ Train those involved in making or overlooking the mistake, to make sure it doesn’t happen again.

## LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY

[Technology](#) plays a pivotal role in modern recordkeeping strategies. Not only can technology keep your records secure, organized, and accessible (see above), but it can also do real-time auditing as well as data gathering of key metrics. Telematics solutions like [electronic logs](#) and [dashcams](#) can streamline compliance and provide data-driven insights to improve operations and safety. In addition, the ability to generate reports at the push of a button can be invaluable.

Records are not just a regulatory requirement, they’re a reflection of your company’s operational excellence and commitment to safety. By organizing your records, staying informed about regulatory changes, conducting regular audits, and leveraging technology, you can ensure that your records stand as a testament to your company’s integrity and reliability, building a foundation for sustainable, long-term success.



*The most challenging aspect of my job is... “Dealing with government and customer paperwork.”*

Survey Participant

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# BOTTOM LINE

**The transportation industry continues to face a challenging landscape, but obstacles can be overcome.**

With labor and [parking shortages](#), economic uncertainty, supply-chain disruptions, and increased legal scrutiny, motor carriers must adapt, innovate, and invest in the necessary resources and technologies to survive.

Regulatory compliance, driver hiring and retention, and recordkeeping are key challenges that must be tackled head-on, by:

- ▶ Staying informed about regulation changes, achieving compliance through a comprehensive safety program, and continuously auditing to ensure you're on the right track;
- ▶ Recruiting and hiring good drivers by evaluating and refining your pay and benefits, the work environment, and your recruitment strategies; and
- ▶ Digitizing, organizing, and auditing your records to ensure compliance and risk management.

As illuminated by the J.J. Keller Center for Market Insights' survey, the path to overcoming these obstacles lies in committing to continuous improvement, embracing technology, and fostering a culture of safety and compliance.

By focusing on strategic solutions to key pain points — regulatory compliance, driver engagement and retention, and meticulous recordkeeping — [fleet managers](#) can navigate their way towards operational excellence and sustainable success.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daren Hansen, CTP, CTRE, is a Senior Compliance Expert and one of J. J. Keller's transportation specialists. Since starting in 1996, he's had his finger on the pulse of industry trends. His deep understanding of the FMCSRs makes him the go-to guy for all things trucking safety.

He loves sharing what he knows with our customers and has helped thousands of motor carriers with their toughest compliance questions. His knowledge is often showcased in the articles, handbooks, training materials, and newsletters he's created. Daren's work has also been featured in various trade publications.

Daren stays involved in the trucking industry as a member of the National Private Truck Council's (NPTC) Legislative and Regulatory Advisory Committee. Daren proudly earned NPTC's Certified Transportation Professional (CTP) credential in 2022 and J. J. Keller's Certified Transportation Regulatory Expert (CTRE) credential in 2025.



## ABOUT J. J. KELLER CENTER FOR MARKET INSIGHTS

The J. J. Keller Center for Market Insights is the collaborative research arm of J. J. Keller & Associates, Inc. The center originated in 2019 with a focus on sharing, with the public, trends and insights from an abundance of safety and compliance data gathered by J. J. Keller over decades serving more than 700,000 customers across the United States. Through historical data, new proprietary studies and partnerships with reputable, research-focused third-party organizations, the center publishes ongoing reports to spur discussion and advancements in safe, respectful workplaces, job sites and highways. To contact the J. J. Keller Center for Market Insights, contact [sbaranczyk@jjkeller.com](mailto:sbaranczyk@jjkeller.com).





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