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Local trucking firms look abroad for drivers

Murray Lyons

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Three Saskatchewan trucking companies are creating a mini population surge for Saskatoon and area, carrying out a recruitment drive that will bring 120 drivers and their families here from the United Kingdom.

The campaign to get professional transport drivers here has succeeded beyond company expectations, say officials from the three companies who worked with the provincial and federal immigration departments to bring the drivers here.

Some of the families have already bought houses, put their kids in school, and settled into the community, said John Harrington, terminal manager for Westcan Bulk Transport of Saskatoon.

The firm's first driver arrived just before Christmas. Westcan has the most British imports so far of the three Saskatoon-based transportation companies bringing drivers here, with nine of the U.K. recruits already here and on the road.

Harrington said his company's business of hauling bulk commodities such as grain, fertilizer, and fuel between the three Prairie provinces fits well with the work habits of many British drivers who are used to being home most nights.

The drivers being recruited to the other two companies -- Yanke Group of Companies and Siemens Transportation Group (Kindersley Transport) -- are being recruited to accept long-haul routes where they could be away from their families between a week and 10 days.

This did not appear to be a deterrent in hiring, company officials say. Many British "lorry" drivers are used to doing long-haul work throughout Europe.

There's good reason why the Saskatchewan Trucking Association chose to recruit drivers from the U.K. Companies such as Yanke and Kindersley do a lot of cross-border hauling into the U.S., so a driver's country of origin matters a lot in the post-9/11 world.

"If you were looking for a country in the world that is aligned with the United States, given the political situation, the U.K. is as closely aligned as any country," said Yanke president Scott



Kindersley Transport is looking to hire drivers

CREDIT: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix

Johnston.

Doug Siemens, vice-president of Siemens Transportation Group, which owns long-haul carrier Kindersley Transport Ltd., said the recruiting trip made him an optimist about trucking again.

"One guy was so excited he started to weep," Siemens said. "It was the most positive experience I've had in the trucking industry in 15 years.

"(In Canada,) you put an ad in the paper and you maybe get one guy applying because there is no truck drivers that want to do that type of truck driving.

"You put an ad out there (in the U.K.) and you get close to 100."

One of the British drivers offered a job by Kindersley Transport flew here with his wife, using up vacation time.

The couple was already well enough versed on the Saskatoon market that they wanted to compare house prices and availability between Saskatoon and Warman. In the end, the couple bought in Warman.

The Saskatoon companies are not providing signing bonuses to get the British drivers here. Siemens said that would be a bad precedent internally while Johnston said that Saskatoon's cost of living seemed to be incentive enough.

The immigrant program requires the trucking companies to cover an airline ticket for the employee coming here and they must pay for a return trip back to the U.K. if the job doesn't work out, but they aren't required to cover the airline costs to bring families over.

"There is no support beyond that," Johnston said. "Their earnings will be approximately \$60,000 per annum."

"With the 40 we are bringing over, we expect we will be bringing in \$2.4 million in income into the city."

Johnston said the drivers being recruited made anywhere from 20,000 to 30,000 pounds sterling in the U.K., which he says is on par with Saskatchewan long-haul earnings. The difference is in what that wage can buy.

"They'd pay about 100,000 pounds (\$250,000) for a two-bedroom duplex whereas in Canada . . . for \$250,000, they'll buy a house in (upscale) Arbor Creek," the Yanke official said.

Johnston, who went on the company recruiting trip that included stops in Esher and Leeds, England, and Glasgow, Scotland, said he couldn't believe how informed the families and drivers were about Saskatoon, including one family who said they wanted to visit the Berry Barn when they got here.

"Many of them are elated with the school system, the demographics, and size of Saskatchewan," Johnston said.

Both Yanke and Kindersley officials say getting British drivers is the only way the companies can fulfil the haulage contracts they have and expand their business base.

Siemens said long-distance trucking can see turnover as high as 28 per cent annually among his company's 600 drivers.

