

Rough roads ahead

Many operational challenges facing the industry

THE Road Freight Association (RFA) estimates that there are approximately 1,5m trucks (including trailers) on our roads at any given time. Given the average truck could carry anything between 2t and 36t in payload, that's a lot of cargo moving around. With the RFA predicting as many as 200 000 owner-managed transport businesses, it's a billion rand industry with relatively low barriers to entry.

"The trucking industry is in constant flux," says Paul Kable, automotive business unit head at Cummins Inc. "Not only does technology have an influence on the growth and development in the industry, but labour law and human capital or the lack of it can play havoc in the industry. It's an industry where you can't always plan ahead. Financing vehicles is high and breakdowns are unpredictable, making managing cash flow in a transport business a tricky one at best."

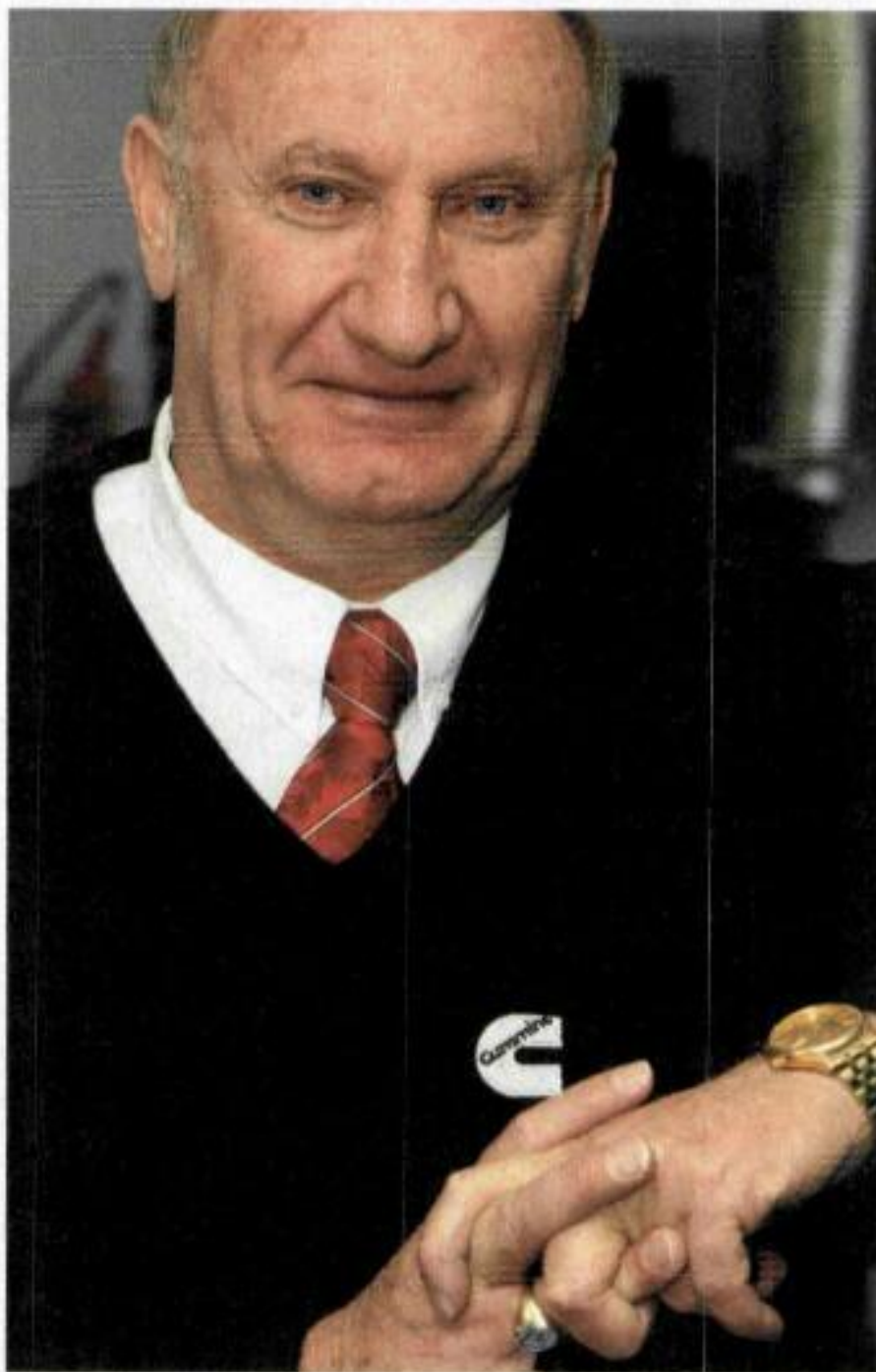
Marius de Lange couldn't agree more. As a small business owner who entered the trucking world as a driver two years ago De Lange got to know the mechanics of the business from the driver's seat. With currently two trucks to his name and two more on the way, it's an approach that's served him well – but not without challenges. "Timing is everything in this business. The smallest delay at any stage of the journey could mean the difference between being at the front or back of a queue of trucks waiting to offload at the next destination, which in turn will create further delays later on."

The seriousness of running a trucking business soon sets in when you consider the costs of operation as well as down time caused by unexpected breakdowns or the like. "Overheads are high – around R100 000 a month – and a breakdown can cost the business anything up to R4 000 a day in lost revenue."

It's here where a good technical support system is vital. "When you drive 22 000km a month a good engine is your saving grace, which is why all my trucks have Cummins engines in them. They're built to pull



There are approximately 1,5m trucks on our roads at any given time



Paul Kable
The trucking industry is in constant flux

the kinds of loads we carry. And the fact Cummins has branches countrywide and throughout Africa helps immensely. When the truck breaks down in a remote place outside Upington or Ojiwarongo in Namibia you want to know a team is going to get to you quickly and put you back on the road."

Another operational challenge is the constant search for good drivers. "There's a huge shortage of Code14 drivers due to poor salaries and tough working conditions." This is a price-sensitive industry, where a

contract can be lost for as little as R500 and those pressures impact on the quality of drivers employed and how they're incentivised. "Underpaid, inexperienced drivers cause accidents. Some companies pay per kilometre and the more drivers do the more they earn. Those guys work too hard and fall asleep behind the wheel."

The RFA says the main reason for accidents is the lack of respect for trucks on the road (cutting in front of vehicles when overtaking, pushing into queues at lights and stop streets). Unfortunately, there are few studies and statistics available tracking the causes of incidents and crashes, but the Road Traffic Management Corporation (RTMC) compiles and researches crash statistics in SA.

Over a 12-month period – 1 April 2007 to 31 March 2008 – increases in fatal crashes were reported in Mpumalanga (9,29%) and Limpopo (0,10%) while decreases were reported in other provinces. The number of registered vehicles increased by 455 615 (5,22%) from 8 727 062 on 31 March 2007 to 9 182 677 on 31 March 2008. With 540 trucks being involved in fatal crashes in the same year, knowing the condition of your trucks is vital.

According to Arrive Alive, accidents involving commercial vehicles are in general more severe than those involving passenger cars and the costs much higher. France has identified speed as the biggest safety problem with trucks. With so many trucks on the road and the numbers increasing yearly proper maintenance is key to safe journeys. ■