



Ken Rayner:

Ontario tow truck operators work around high-speed traffic, serious collisions, and dangerous weather, responding to people in some of the worst moments of their lives. And every shift, they face a question most of us never think about. Will the next driver passing them slow down or won't they? That one decision can mean the difference between life, serious injury, and even death. Today, we're speaking with one of Ontario's leaders in the towing industry to find out what that reality looks like.

Announcer:

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Ken Rayner:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm your host, Ken Rayner. Joining me on today's episode is Max Worth, General Manager at Abrams Towing, who's going to provide his insight on the realities of the towing industry, the workplace health and safety challenges operators face every day, the mental and physical demands of the job, and why Ontario's Slow Down, Move Over law is so important for protecting roadside workers. Max, thanks so much for joining us and welcome to the podcast.

Max Worth:

Thank you so much for having me, Ken. I really appreciate the opportunity.

Ken Rayner:

I'm excited about this. I've been around, obviously, Ontario roads all for my entire life as a driver and have certainly passed my share of incidents. And I'm very intrigued to get into behind the scenes as to what entails the life of a tow truck operator and excited to discuss this with you today. So Max, let's start really high-level. Most people like myself really only interact with a tow truck operator when unfortunately something has gone wrong. What would you wish the average Ontario motorist understood about the towing industry and the people who work in it?

Max Worth:

Right now, something that's really important for just the average motorist to take into consideration when they're in this kind of predicament is to keep in mind that they have the right to choose who comes to service them, to help them out of their very vulnerable situation. And if they don't feel safe, they need to communicate that. Communication is key. And so the more information that you can provide who it is that's there to help you, the safer everyone will be, the more effective everyone will be, and probably the quicker they can get you out of the situation that you're in. So communication is absolutely key.

Ken Rayner:

Okay. So why don't you take us through a typical day of a tow truck operator? Max, what happens from the time one of your drivers and one of your operators start their shift until they finish?

Max Worth:

Yeah. So tow trucks are commercial vehicles. And so under the *Highway Traffic Act*, they're required to do a daily vehicle inspection to ensure that the mechanical integrity of their truck is fit for the road. So that's probably going to be the first thing that they get started on with respect to focusing on their workday, aside from packing their lunch and tying their shoes. And then in addition to that sort of normal commercial vehicle inspection that they're going to perform on their truck, they're also going to check the status of their wrecker, which is where all the towing business takes place.

So they're going to make sure that they have all the tools that they require for their job and that their equipment is fully functioning so that they can perform duties like using their winch, operating their boom. They'll test their flatbed to make sure that the bed can go in and out, up and down, making sure that all of their straps and chains meet the wear and use guidelines for their registered weight load. And then I think making sure in this day and age that they've got all their documents and all their apps and such are functioning and then they're ready to go.

Ken Rayner:

And once they're ready to go, what happens then?

Max Worth:

So a typical day probably would start with all that inspection and then move on to letting their dispatcher know that they're available and ready to work. And then they'll get their first job when it becomes available. So at Abrams, we sort of do a mix of things. So some of it is planned and scheduled. Some of it is sort of spur of the moment, but non-emergency work. And then we've got that emergency work category. So a typical driver may get a mix of that work throughout their day, and then some work in the dedicated division where they're seeing more emergency type work than others would.

So the dispatcher would probably be monitoring the screen with their GPS program pulled up and they'll look and see where different trucks are located. They may coordinate with drivers to tell them areas that they want them to be staged and available for work because they'll understand sort of the mix of business and where it comes from on a given day in their given geography. So that kind of coordination is really important. And then once that first call comes through, the dispatcher will be providing the tow truck driver as much information as available and provide them with some instructions about how to communicate directly with the customer. And yeah, they would just go ahead and go to that location, whether it's a fixed address or intersection or a marking on the highway, and then they would do what they do best.

Ken Rayner:

Right on. And you talked about calls, and you also talked about the mix of what the tow truck operators respond to. Can you give us a sense as what types of calls do your operators respond to most often?

Max Worth:

Yeah, so I think one of the most common is perhaps roadside assistance. So whether you have a membership with a program or it comes with your new car, we may be the service provider selected to provide the service requested. It might be from anything from a collision to your car is just not starting, maybe you've got a dead battery or you have a flat tire, something simple. But yeah, that's a big sort of book of business for a typical towing company. Another area might be performing some kind of service for a municipal police contract or another branch of a municipality, like parking enforcement, and that might be responding to, again, another mix of services. Maybe there's a police officer doing an impound and they've seized the vehicle from somebody that was driving under the influence or speeding in that stunt driving realm. And then maybe they decided to impound the vehicle because it's parked illegally, blocking a fire route or a snow route or something like that.

So we would go and we would interact with the police officer on scene. We'd collect a variety of documents from them, report on our end exactly what took place at the scene, and then we would bring that vehicle back to our impound for safekeeping. And then I guess another line of business would be perhaps a large fleet of vehicles selects a service provider and they want that towing company to come and get one of their vehicles for any number of reasons as well. So it could be that a delivery company has one of their drivers is having an issue first thing in the morning, they can't start their truck because perhaps it's too cold or maybe they had a flat tire from the day before and overnight it's let out all the air and they need that vehicle brought to a mechanic shop to have the tire changed. So those are the kinds of things that we'd typically respond to as well.

Ken Rayner:

So as all these calls are coming in and the responses are happening, what would you say is the biggest misconception that people have about tow truck operators?

Max Worth:

I think the biggest misconception is that it's kind of like when you go to a doctor, that the doctor always knows exactly what's wrong before you tell them anything. And that's why I say communication is the most important piece of the equation. Tow truck operator is not a mechanic, and so you might have a problem starting your vehicle. There could be a number of reasons why and just because you've called the tow truck operator to come and help you out. I mean, they're not a certified mechanic, so they couldn't fix your vehicle on the spot. Another misconception that I could think of is we don't change tires on the side of the highway. If you've got a blown tire on the highway, first thing you should be doing is getting off the highway and not letting somebody change your tire. It's one of the most dangerous situations and most towing companies would not do that.

Ken Rayner:

That would've been one of my misconceptions, Max.

Max Worth:

Yeah.

Ken Rayner:

I would've absolutely thought that that was something you did on the side of the road, but I can completely appreciate why you wouldn't want to do that, nor would any of your operators want to do that in the side of the 400 or the 401.

Max Worth:

Yeah. I mean, safety first, right? So I think if you're on a city street where speeds are like a neighbourhood, residential neighbourhood, 30 or 40 max, that's a lot safer of a location to change a tire. Or even at a gas station where you don't have a lot of moving traffic or even the plaza of a shopping centre, an area where you're going to see speeds of 10 or under is probably ideal. But yeah, side of the highway, it's not the right choice. Maybe the person changing the tire, their back might be towards oncoming traffic. That's never a safe decision.

Ken Rayner:

Right. Yeah, absolutely. So to do all these type of things, Max, what kind of training and skills are required to do this job effectively?

Max Worth:

I think critical thinking is a really important skill. I think most operators who are very successful in this space have a good handle on how to make good decisions quickly. They understand how to and what the right questions are to ask when they're approached by any kind of job or scene. I think another good quality is being somewhat mechanically inclined. If you understand how vehicles work in general, it could be a real asset to you. I think understanding simply some basic laws of physics, what goes up must come down unless it's secure. In some of our load securement training programs, the example is if you secure the vehicle in the back of the flatbed and then you turn the whole thing upside down, will it fall out or will it stay put? Right? So I think that those are really good traits for a tow truck operator to get a handle on for sure.

Ken Rayner:

Okay. So let's go back to talking about the 400-series highways if we could, because to me that's every time I see something on the side of the road with everybody speeding by, certainly I've got a lot of empathy for what's going on there for everybody involved, including the motorist and the tow truck operator that's arrived. So let's imagine a tow truck, one of your tow truck operators has arrived at a roadside incident on a 400-series highway in Ontario. What's going through their mind before they even step out of the truck?

Max Worth:

So, great question. I think idea of situational awareness comes to mind. As soon as they arrive on scene, they're checking everything. They're looking to see how much traffic there is in the lanes near them. They're looking to see if the shoulder is available to pull into. They're looking to understand where the vehicle operator is that they're responding to. Sometimes people stand on the side of the road outside their vehicle when they really should be inside their vehicle waiting for someone to come. I think taking a look and see, is there law enforcement on scene?

Depending on the nature of the incident, there might be some type of leak of chemical coming from the vehicle or if it's a commercial situation there might be some load that was being transported that maybe has fallen out. So it really depends on the size of the incident and type of the incident that they're responding to. I think when we're talking about the highway, number one is definitely speed of traffic around you, and number two is severity of the incident and trying to plan what the next steps are. None of our drivers, at least, are exiting their truck without a plan. If you failed to plan, you plan to fail, right?

Ken Rayner:

Well, let's get into that Max, because you touched on that a little bit. And as you were describing that, I certainly had a lot going through my mind in terms of what would be the biggest health and safety hazards that tow truck operators would face daily. Can you give me a little bit more of a better sense of what exactly those hazards are?

Max Worth:

Right. So I guess the number one hazard is people failing to slow down and move over for tow trucks and first responders and emergency responders. So tow truck drivers are captured under the slow down and move over law, which is part of the *Highway Traffic Act*. And so when you see a tow truck operator with their flashing lights on, it's an indication that they are responding to an emergency situation and the law dictates that anybody passing them has to slow down and move over one lane to give them space. So I would say that that is the number one hazard.

The number two hazard in a situation where there may be fluids or debris that have leaked or come off of the vehicle that we're responding to, potentially sharp objects, potentially chemicals that are not safe to touch with your skin. In the case of electric vehicles, there might be some chemical gas that's leaking out of the damaged batteries that's harmful to inhale. So understanding those environmental factors is really important, and I would say that that's a big hazard as well.

Ken Rayner:

Wow. So Max, sorry, are you suggesting that your, make sure I'm clear on this, is it that your tow truck operators are in close proximity to those environmental hazards or do they play a role in having to clean up what has essentially happened because of the collision?

Max Worth:

It's both.

Ken Rayner:

Wow.

Max Worth:

So under the law, if you make a mess, you're required to clean it up, but the expectation is that the tow truck driver, since they're there and they typically do have the equipment and the ability to clean up, the expectation is that they do so. It's especially important to clean up those kinds of spills and debris so that it doesn't create any kind of secondary incident. If you leave a bumper in the middle of the highway or if there is an oil spill that's not tended to, that can create another series of unfortunate events which pose a risk to public safety. So our tow trucks will be equipped with absorbent sand, an empty bucket, some brooms, shovel, something to sort of absorb chemical and then clean it up and remove it and take it away from the scene.

If you're in a collision and parts of your car come off, typically we're either putting those parts in our tow truck or in the vehicle that was in the collision, depending on kind of available room. But yeah, that's a really important role that we play. And then obviously, if the situation is bigger than what our drivers can handle on the road, we're usually given the responsibility to organize the cleanup. So what that'll mean is our drivers will be trained to identify how big the spill is, what the risks are, whether it's something they can handle or not, and then they would relay that information back to their supervisor or their dispatcher, and together they would make the decision about whether or not a third-party company might be required in order to complete that cleanup and how to go about doing it, right?

And so it's all about timing too. If the roads are jammed and there's lanes that are blocked off and traffic is coming to a standstill for the regular motorist that's sitting behind some sort of collision scene, our trucks are also facing that backlog, as would the environmental cleanup vehicles that are trying to respond to that scene. So the earlier that that assessment can take place, the better it is for the tower, the consumer, the general motoring public, and the better it is for keeping roads safe.

Ken Rayner:

Wow. Max, I'd like to believe that I'm not the only one that that's a surprise to or that's new information about in terms of that tow truck operators also have responsibility for not just clearing the scene of the vehicle, but cleaning it up in terms of any spillage at all and making sure that's all taken care of. Wow. So as much respect I had for tow truck operators before we started this conversation, it's just gone up significantly. Wow, that's a huge responsibility. And you talked about the number one hazard being that near miss. How often is that happening? How often do your staff encounter a near miss of almost being struck by passing traffic?

Max Worth:

Yeah, I would say that once you've been in this line of work for more than six months to a year, you're probably going to have a situation where you're faced with a near miss. The degree to which is going to be variable, but yeah, it's really not that uncommon. I think over the last sort of five to 10 years, it's really improved. There's a lot more people obeying the Slow Down, Move Over. When we're on a major collision and police are involved and their red and blue lights are being seen and identified by the public, that provides us with some coverage as well. People notice those more often. We've been using for

almost five years now an alert system that when our tow truck driver puts on their emergency lights, it'll send out a push notification to anybody driving nearby that's using Waze or Apple Maps.

And some of the Stellantis vehicles have it built into their navigation package as well. So we can send a push notification automatically that'll say, "Slow down and move over. There's a tow truck up ahead." And we find that these types of things all work, maybe not all at the same time, which is why we like to have multiple solutions for this kind of thing. But yeah, it's definitely improving, but there's still situations that take place where tow truck operators are being struck by people's mirrors or parts of commercial trucks are getting really close and it encroaches in their professional space and it makes the job all that much harder to complete. But yeah, you'd be hard-pressed to find somebody working in this line of work for more than a year that hasn't had a near miss situation.

Ken Rayner:

Okay. So let's stay with the Ontario Slow Down, Move Over Law because I think this is critically important, particularly since you just said in someone's first 12 months of working as a tow truck operator in Ontario, they're most likely going to experience a near miss. And I don't care if it's a foot away or two feet away that you've got a car speeding by you at 100 kilometres an hour. The margin of error is so small that that's still significant. So for many people listening, maybe the most important takeaway would be understanding what their responsibility is when they approach an emergency vehicle or a tow truck stopped at the side of the road. So maybe let's get into that Ontario Slow Down, Move Over law just a little bit more, really accentuate why this matters to tow truck operators.

Max Worth:

Yeah. I mean, it's a high-risk kind of job. I'm not trying to scare away potential applicants to the service. It's a very rewarding job as well. And the risk really depends on the type of work that you're doing. And we are talking about these emergency situations, especially on the highway. We track different types of stats and data. And so I know that over the last several years there's been a lot of data collected about tow truck operators being struck and killed on the job. And I know that those stats are lower in the last few years than in previous years. There's been a material decline, but I think in 2024, something like 13 tow operators were struck and killed in the United States during the course of that year. In 2025, I think it was more like 14. I think for other branches of emergency responders, they're experiencing similar numbers—law enforcement, fire, and EMS.

So I think when we talk about what motorists can do—we've got this new culture of being on your cell phone while you're driving—staying focused, staying attentive, paying attention to the road. It sounds basic and it's the stuff that you cover in your license training courses, but it's very easy to get into those bad habits and people should look up, don't be on your phones, be aware of your surroundings, respect the flashing lights. It might cost you a couple extra minutes to reduce your speed and move past them in a safe manner, but you're sharing the road with people who are risking their neck to perform a public service and support the overall movement of traffic in the city. I think there's a misconception about speeding as well, and there's lots of studies about speeding on the highway. And I think it's not interesting to everybody, but speeding doesn't always get you there faster.

Traffic on the highway, and it's that start and stop, start and stop, start and stop, that's usually because somebody way up ahead was speeding or cutting somebody off and it's everybody sort of applying a

gentle brake and it sort of has this trickle effect down the chain and it can carry on for something like 30 minutes or 40 minutes, something ridiculous like that. But the impacts of those bad habits affect everybody else behind you. And you may not know it at the time, but you've experienced it when somebody else was sort of leading that kind of behavior.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah. And Max, our friends at CAA have been very instrumental in lobbying and advocating for the Slow Down, Move Over legislation, ensuring that this includes the tow truck operators, and they've got a great marketing campaign that's out right now to really raise awareness. And just like everything in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, there's a saying that says if it's in there, it's most likely it was written in blood. These aren't made up scenarios. These are things that it's based on real life and incidents happening to people. So I'm sure you've got multiple examples of things that have happened with your tow truck operators that really illustrates why this law is so important and why we need it in Ontario. Is there an example that you'd want to share?

Max Worth:

Yeah. I was speaking with one of our road supervisors, I think it was last week, and he's about same age as me. He's got a young family. Two kids and a wife. And he was telling me about a story that happened to him. I think it was five or six years ago. He was hit by a vehicle and then he was dragged about 80 feet until the vehicle came to a stop, and he sustained injuries that thankfully he was able to recover from. So that's pretty tough. And he's a pretty tough guy, and somehow, some way he decided to stay in the business and he came back to work after his recovery. And yeah, it was really a really difficult story to hear for sure.

And I know that there's another driver of ours who's been with us for, I think close to 30 years. He's seen it all. He's been on some of those TV shows about tow trucks. And I think there's a story about him being at the side of the road, tending to a commercial vehicle that was in a collision, and he left his truck to go examine the scene. And while he was away from his truck, another commercial vehicle, a large commercial vehicle hit his truck and started a fire and his truck perished.

Ken Rayner:

Wow. Real life examples.

Max Worth:

Yeah.

Ken Rayner:

And Max, you were saying earlier when we were talking about your tow truck operators arriving at the scene, that sometimes they're there before the first responders arriving at a serious vehicle collision. So what is that experience really like and how often are tow truck operators exposed to traumatic scenes?

Max Worth:

Yeah, so I think first and foremost, lately, the regulation around our industry has changed such that tow truck drivers are not permitted to solicit business at a collision scene. So if somebody's in a collision, a tow truck operator drives by, they're not permitted to just show up and solicit their service and say, "Hey, I'm going to advertise to you here in the moment." But that wasn't always the case. And these are emergency responders that take their jobs very seriously. And when they want to be able to offer somebody assistance that may be lifesaving assistance, or even if they're called to the scene before the police arrive, because we've got all kinds of cameras in our city now, they may be the first on scene.

And it's almost sort of the nature of the job to be available and ready and looking for these situations because we understand the city and how it moves and where there's particular, sort of, I guess, a hot zone for a collision. And so we'll stage our trucks, especially on the highway, so that we're ready. Ready for something. And because of the contract that we operate on the highway, we monitor the cameras as well. So yeah, we may be the first on scene to some brutal events. There was an event that took place a number of years ago, I think it was about four years ago in a highway situation where somebody was going against traffic and hit somebody else that was going the correct way. I think both parties unfortunately passed.

And I remember speaking with our driver who attended the scene and was actually there before the police arrived because they happened to be staged nearby. And so they did their best to sort of preserve the scene, stage themselves with their flashing lights, went to go and see if somebody needed assistance. He made the decision that there wasn't anything to be done, and police and EMS and fire arrived on scene shortly after. And when they arrived, they're in charge, and so he relinquished control of the scene to them and then waited for his instructions on how to proceed.

Ken Rayner:

So Max, has the Ontario towing industry become better at recognizing psychological and psychosocial injuries such as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD?

Max Worth:

I can't speak for the whole industry, but I can say that I've recognized just being in some of the places that I go, I've spoken to a lot of first responders from fire and police and EMS, and there are programs that are available to them that were never available before. So I think that there is sort of an awareness for first responders that's probably more popular right now than it's ever been before. And I think those kinds of conversations are becoming easier to talk about and bring up. I know that some of the health and benefit packages now have a line available for that type of service. And so we make sure that our staff and drivers are aware of that.

I know at our company, there was a particularly tragic event that took place close, it was not our job, but it happened very close to one of our offices and it was very traumatic. And we hired a grief counsellor to come in and talk to people and just to check in and make sure that people were able to speak to somebody about it if they felt affected. But yeah, I mean, in this day and age, you really have to remember we're all human and we should take care of each other because that's the right thing to do. That doesn't sound too corny.

Ken Rayner:

No. Well said. No, not corny at all. No. Spot on.

Max Worth:

It's a small industry, and we all acknowledge and understand what's available for us to experience out there. So ignoring it isn't helpful. Making sure that those resources are available is helpful. It'd be nice if there was some sort of grant or subsidy from the government to help make sure that that treatment and therapy is affordable and accessible for all first responders, including tow truck drivers.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Max, what about some of the physical demands? When I think of an operator dealing with a collision and having to recover or load a vehicle onto their wrecker, it's not just an easy hook something up, press a button and you're done, right? There's physical demands that go along with it. So what are those types of physical demands that operators face when they recover or load vehicles?

Max Worth:

Yeah. So I think even before the recovery and the loading of vehicles, just remember tow truck drivers are also commercial drivers. And I think a lot of commercial drivers struggle with knee issues from all the sitting. And some days you could be sitting all day waiting for a job. Depends on what your scope of work is and what area you're in. Today I'm working from a standing desk and so I'm always in movement and I find that good for me. But if you're in a commercial vehicle, whether you're driving eight hours to a destination every day or you're sitting staged waiting for one job that's going to pull you in one direction or another, you're doing a fair bit of sitting. And so those types of knee issues are also common for tow truck operators. So we try and encourage guys to get out of their truck when it's safe and they're located in a space that they're able to do that, to do some light stretching and to just make sure they're maintaining movement.

I think once they get onto a scene, being able to bend down and go underneath a vehicle, hooking up straps and chains, there's a lot of dynamic movement involved. And so making sure that you're flexible and that your body is warm to do that kind of work, it's really important. You never know what kind of situations you're going to run into. We had this incredible hailstorm that took place, what, at the beginning of September, and we didn't realize that we were going to be having this flash flooding and hail coming down at us. And I know that one of our drivers had to, I guess he didn't have to, but he decided that he was going to help, I think there was five people that had drove their cars into water that was above their waist, definitely above the engines of their vehicles. So their vehicles, engines flooded and stalled.

So they needed to get out of there. And he arrived with a team of trucks and he went underwater with his chains and hooked up underwater and they slowly removed these vehicles out of this sort of like, it was an underpass to a highway. So the water was especially deep there. So I'm not saying that swimming is a requirement, but I'm saying that you never know what you're going to experience. So staying fit and healthy is important for this line of work.

Ken Rayner:

Absolutely. And I love the fact that you were talking too about just being mindful of those situations as well when there are no collisions, there are no calls that are happening and being mindful of taking care of your body and creating some movement to be able to alleviate some of those stagnant positions that affect things like you said, like knees, right?

Max Worth:

Yeah. And I think maybe that's probably another misconception that I could have brought up earlier is people think tow trucks are busy all the time. We're not busy all the time. And you have to appreciate that it's an emergency service. You don't always know when you're going to need it, but when you need it, you hope it's there, you hope it responds quickly, you hope that it's a truck that works, you hope that it's full of the equipment needed to move your vehicle, and you hope that it comes with a driver and an operator that know what they're doing. So that takes time to build.

Ken Rayner:

Absolutely. Yep.

Max Worth:

One of the other areas where I know drivers face some difficulty is with a piece of equipment called dollies. So if you've got a sort of all-wheel drive vehicle and you get a tow truck that comes up, and it's one of the more traditional looking tow trucks, not a flatbed, but a sort of pickup truck style with a full-body wrecker on the back, we'll lift up the vehicle from one end. And typically dollies are required in this day and age for whatever tires are sort of towards the rear. The reason for that is because with all-wheel drive cars and heavier cars, it's needed to prevent damage to the moving components of the vehicle that we're there to tow. That piece of equipment, the dollies, they're pretty heavy and they're sort of located at shoulder height, around here. So the driver would grab it, lift it up off the back of their wrecker and then put it down gently.

And then they would do that on the other side of the truck as well. And then of course to pack it all up, they've got to lift it back up and put it back on the wrecker. And to do that multiple times a day, every day, you can imagine that it's going to do a number on your shoulder if you're not doing it with proper posture, if you're not doing it with warm muscles and joints. So there's a lot of technique that people should really take into consideration when they're using that kind of equipment and that can really do some wear-and-tear on your body. And so I think it's not uncommon for guys that are doing this kind of job later in life to have some sort of rotator cuff repair surgery. But if you take necessary precautions early on in your career with stretching and building up muscle in that area and focusing on your posture, you can avoid those injuries. But not everybody has access to that kind of information.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah, I can appreciate that. And also just the situation that people are in. So you've got an operator that's maybe been sitting for more than an hour, maybe it's a couple hours and they've been waiting for a call to come in. Now they come in and they arrive at the scene and there's a backlog of traffic, so the stress level has gone up. I doubt in many cases they're thinking of, "Okay, I'm going to have to get this dolly down, but my shoulders aren't warm. I'm going to do some stretching exercises and warm up."

Because they're trying to get everything done as quickly as possible. So wow, that's a tough situation to be put into in terms of just coming in cold and trying to perform all those tasks in as quick of a manner as possible to try and alleviate the situation.

Max Worth:

Yeah. And in those emergency situations, the longer it takes to clear the scene, the greater the chance of a secondary collision. So time is really everything.

Ken Rayner:

And is that just because people have lost patience, Max, in terms of if it takes half an hour to clean up and people have been sitting there waiting and they're looking at their clocks and saying, "You know what? Now I'm behind or I'm late for something." When the backlog clears, the longer it's taken, there's just more of a chance of something else happening because now you've got everybody in a rush?

Max Worth:

Yeah, that could definitely be a factor for sure.

Ken Rayner:

Okay. Well, I mean, I'm hoping that we're raising some awareness here, Max, because I am myself. I know that next time I'm in a vehicle and there's something ahead of me and I can see the flashing lights, I'm going to have a lot more patience because of our conversation right now.

Max Worth:

Good.

Ken Rayner:

So I alone appreciate this and you're going to have at least one more motorist on the road that will exhibit more patience than they have in the past because of this conversation. So thanks, Max.

Max Worth:

Thank you.

Ken Rayner:

Max, what about advances in technology and equipment? Have you seen improvements in workplace health and safety for operators based on advancements of the equipment and the technology you use?

Max Worth:

So the number one interesting piece right now is this remote that allows tow truck operators to remotely control parts of their wrecker. And we find that that's useful when there's lower light conditions and an operator needs to see from a different vantage point while they're using the flatbed. I

think one thing that's been very helpful for safety are cameras. So we have dash cameras installed in all of our trucks and they face forward and then inside the cab. And we promote this as being a safety feature for our drivers. They interact every day with people that they've never met before. They have no idea if they're picking up a school teacher or somebody who's potentially violent or somebody who's going to have a medical incident in their truck.

And so giving them some sort of avenue for protection, sort of documenting what takes place, drivers feel comfortable with that. It was a bit of a tough sell initially, but there were some incidents that took place, not just at our company, but throughout the industry in Ontario that drivers began to talk about and share their experiences about. And the consensus generally these days, I think, is that the cameras do more to protect and even prevent, especially if there's a situation where a driver doesn't want to engage a customer any further. They can say, "You know what? I've got a camera in my vehicle that's pointing towards us. That's my protection. I'm not going to engage you any further. And if you have an issue, take it up with whoever you need to." But at least that driver has an opportunity to say, "Look, somebody else is watching my back." Right?

Ken Rayner:

And Max, your tow truck operators are often meeting people on what could be one of the worst days of their lives. Now that may be a little excessive, but let's even say one of the worst days of their year. How do you approach those interactions?

Max Worth:

Yeah. So I think over time, if you're not born with it, getting into this line of work, with over time, you develop a lot of patience, you develop a lot of compassion, you develop a lot of empathy. People, I think, ordinarily like to be reassured that they're doing the right thing, that the right things are taking place, that the decisions they're making are correct. And I think a lot of our drivers work hard to provide really good customer service. And if a customer is not familiar with our company or not familiar with that particular driver, it's that driver's job and duty to build trust and build a good path of communication so that the customer can feel comfortable sharing things that are going to keep both of them safe, especially in those emergency situations, right?

So I think that that's really important. And yeah, it's arguably one of the worst days of their life if they're in a collision or even if they're broken down on the side of the highway or they got a flat tire on the side of the highway, their vehicle has not been damaged, they've not been injured, but it's a scary place. So being able to come up to that person, introduce yourself, introduce the service you're there to provide, walk them through what the steps are that you're going to take and helping them feel confident and comfortable with you as an emergency responder, as a tow truck driver, it's definitely a skill.

Ken Rayner:

Absolutely. And Max, we've talked a lot about collisions here. Prior to us starting this recording, we've been talking about the industry and we're talking about upset, emotional, angry motorists could happen because of a collision, but can it also happen when someone realizes that they're getting their car towed because they parked in a spot where they weren't supposed to. So there's no collision that's taken place. It's now their car's being removed by a tow truck operator because they've been told to by a bylaw

officer or a police officer. And obviously that's created a difficult situation. So are there some other skills that your operators have that they're able to utilize to de-escalate some of those difficult situations?

Max Worth:

Yeah. De-escalating difficult situations is definitely a valuable tool to have in the kit. And you're absolutely right. Those are situations where people can jump to conclusions. And so another one of those areas where it's like a common misconception, tow truck drivers can't just drive around the city deciding which vehicles to tow away from public or private streets and properties. And I know every jurisdiction in Ontario might be a little bit different, but generally there has to be, or there rather should be some involvement of whether it's a parking enforcement officer or municipal law enforcement officer or even a police officer and whether it's before or even after the vehicle is being towed.

Like I said, certain jurisdictions are different and you need a different layer of permission, but if you've towed somebody's vehicle, you should be letting the police know that you have it in case they come looking for it at the very least. But yeah, in a situation where a vehicle owner approaches you and says, "Hey, that's my vehicle that you're towing," the tow truck driver should be trained and prepared to deal with that situation in a professional way. Maintaining professionalism is really important. Cars and fast moving cars aren't the only danger that they're exposed to. Having a physical conflict with somebody is also a problem. It's not good for anybody, and it's definitely something that could be avoided if you handle these situations with professionalism.

Ken Rayner:

And so these situations obviously arise on a day-to-day basis. I mean, certainly with a fleet as large as you have of different types of tow trucks. So what procedures do you have in place, as an example, if one of your operators encounters a dangerous situation?

Max Worth:

Yeah. I mean, a big reason why we have the cameras, they're very helpful for something like that. So alerting the individual that's approached you like, "You know what? I've got a camera on my truck. We're being recorded. We can handle this professionally." If we've been directed by law enforcement to remove the vehicle, there's typically some rules in place about what to do if the vehicle owner returns to the scene to obtain their vehicle, and we advise our drivers simply to follow that. And I think if all else fails, no conflict is worth the bill. So, make it right with the customer, protect yourself, protect the situation, make sure you maintain your professionalism, and there'll be another job that comes your way.

Ken Rayner:

We just did a podcast with Skilled Trades Ontario talking about apprentices and young workers coming into trades. What advice would you give either a new operator or someone who is considering this as a career to protect themselves and have a long career? What advice would you give them, Max?

Max Worth:

Slow and steady. So before I was the general manager of Abrams, I ran and developed our safety and compliance department. And so I've seen a lot of drivers sort of come through thinking that the job is a particular thing and sort of learning firsthand that if you take on too much too quickly, you can really end yourself up in some trouble. And I think having the right sort of pace to the training, being able to learn something and then practice it in the field, taking advantage of opportunities to practice in controlled environments. We do a lot of that at Abrams where we'll organize training to take place in a controlled environment in one of our yards and we'll bring in a couple dozen guys and maybe separate them into different groups, and they'll be able to perform a rollover in a controlled environment. Maybe they'll do different techniques like taking vehicles off of a Jersey barrier.

Things that if you saw it out in the wild, it's a very sensitive task, but if you're in a controlled environment and you've got a group and you've got somebody leading you and explaining the dos and don'ts, letting you know about what kind of mistakes to avoid, I always say it's cheaper to learn from somebody else's mistakes. And so we take that very seriously here and we try and share knowledge. So I guess in coordination with taking it slow, find a mentorship opportunity, find people that have been in the business or the trade for a long time and you can learn from their experiences. Tow truck drivers like to talk about their experiences for the most part. They like to share different experiences that they've had. We're all required to take pictures of most of our work, so there's certainly lots of that available. But yeah, asking questions and learning from people who have done it before is really important and practice, practice, practice.

Ken Rayner:

That makes a lot of sense to me because you've certainly opened up my mind when it comes to the complexity of being a tow truck operator in Ontario through our discussions and what you've shared today that I wasn't aware of. So I can very much appreciate this isn't a job you learn in a week, this isn't a job you learn in a month. This takes time and there are so many different complexities that go along with this that slow and steady. I appreciate that. Let's wrap it up with one more question here, Max, and I'll leave it to you to leave you an opportunity. If you had one thing that you'd like every Ontario motorist who's listening to this podcast episode to remember when they see the amber flashing lights of a tow truck operator at the side of the road, what would it be?

Max Worth:

Slow down, move over. Has to be.

Ken Rayner:

That's an easy message and it's an important one, isn't it? And just in terms of all it takes is you to be mindful that there's a problem up ahead, ease off on the speed and give that person that's working there enough space to do their job safely.

Max Worth:

Absolutely.

Ken Rayner:

Fantastic.

Max Worth:

It's crucial. You could be saving a life.

Ken Rayner:

Absolutely. And Max, thank you so much for sharing all of the information you did today on the podcast. I learned a lot and I'm sure our listeners did too. So Max, thank you very much for being here.

Max Worth:

Thank you, Ken. I appreciate the meaningful questions and the spotlight on the industry. It's a really important industry and those are really important questions, so thanks again.

Ken Rayner:

Thank you. And thank you for listening to our episode with Max Worth of Abrams Towing. Be sure to like us and subscribe on your podcast channel and visit us at ihsa.ca for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.

Announcer:

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