

Driving – The Forgotten Side of Safety - 08/23/2005

Is your company taking steps to prevent the leading cause of injury and death for American workers?

by *Phil Moser*

Lockout/tagout, head and ear protection, slips, trips and falls, hazmat and ergonomics. They are all important safety terms and issues easily recognized by safety professionals. Less easily recognized are escape route driving, scanning 360 degrees, foul weather driving and recovery steering. If you are a safety professional, it isn't surprising if you aren't familiar with these safe driving terms. However, when you consider that traffic crashes are the leading cause of injury and death for American workers, it is easy to make the argument that driver safety is long overdue for more attention.

Understanding The Problem

Traffic crashes far exceed any other cause of death for American workers. About one in four fatal work injuries in 2003 occurred in highway incidents. Annually, nearly twice as many people are killed in the workplace as a result of traffic crashes than for any other reason. A person who drives as a part of the job is three times more likely to be killed or seriously injured than a person who works in a controlled factory environment. So why does driver safety receive so little attention?

Many organizations will not address driver safety until an incident occurs involving a fatality, litigation or both. Organizations that instead take a proactive approach to driver safety soon learn the benefits this approach provides. By improving the safety environment of the driver's workplace, they also obtain a substantial return on their driver safety investment.

Securing Buy-In

So, how do you get this "forgotten side of safety" unforgotten? For your driver safety initiative to be successful, it is important to obtain buy-in from upper management. You can work with your human resources department to obtain information regarding worker's comp claims resulting from vehicle crashes. Then, determine the percentage of employees who reported injuries as a result of crashes. Compare that number to other reported employee injuries, and you can begin to build a pretty strong argument.

It's also important to document the impact of a crash on the bottom line. According to a survey conducted by NETS (Network of Employers for Traffic Safety), an average corporate crash costs \$18,000. Between deaths and injuries, the resulting workers' compensation claims, vehicle repair and replacement, property damage, lost earnings and litigation, it is a wonder the cost isn't higher. Do a math model based on your organization's crash rate, and then demonstrate the potential savings with a 10-, 15- or 20-percent reduction in that rate. Emphasize that fleet safety is an investment in the well-being of your employees and the well-being of the organization's bottom line.

Getting Started

When you're ready to begin a fleet safety initiative, a good place to start is by running driver record checks on all employees who drive for your organization. This should be done at the time of application and on a regular basis, which emphasizes that your organization is serious about safe driving.

There has been litigation brought against organizations that do not run driver record checks, based on a claim of negligent entrustment (defined as an employer's responsibility to act reasonably and with prudence). The litigation contends that, before an organization allows someone to drive on its behalf, it has an obligation to make sure the driver has a valid license and a safe driving record. Otherwise, the employer creates an unsafe condition by putting an unqualified and/or unsafe driver into a position where that driver can cause death and/or injury.

When running driver record checks, you must comply with all fair credit and reporting act requirements, which may differ by state. Typically, the vendors that provide driver record checks take care of these regulations.

If you have not run driver record checks before, you may be surprised at some of your employees' records. Some will be suspended, or have multiple speeding violations, or have fled from police or even have DUI infractions.

A word of caution: If you run record checks, be prepared to act when you find drivers with bad records. It is a bad idea not to run driver record checks. It is worse to run them and not act on the information, which constitutes the epitome of negligent entrustment.

Areas of Focus

There are four groups to focus on when creating a successful driver safety initiative: all drivers, new hires, mid-level managers and high-risk drivers.

All Drivers

For drivers to be held accountable for their actions behind the wheel, they must understand what they should and shouldn't do while driving. For example, how can you hold a driver responsible for a hit-from-behind collision if that driver was not aware of the proper techniques for maintaining a safe following distance? Provide all drivers with the knowledge and skills to avoid the most common collisions, and emphasize that it is their responsibility to drive safely.

New Hires

New hire drivers crash more often than other drivers. Many are learning a new job, in a new territory, driving an unfamiliar vehicle and overloading their schedules to make a good first impression. That's why it's important to get new hires on board with your driver safety initiative from the start. By teaching them safe driving techniques at the time of hire, you help your drivers develop good driving habits they will carry throughout their careers.

Mid-Level Managers

The managers who have direct responsibility for the employees who drive are vital to the success of any driver safety initiative. They set the tone and the example. If the manager has an overloaded schedule, is distracted while driving and disobeys traffic laws in the presence of their direct reports, those employees will emulate that behavior.

Mid-level managers need to understand that they play a very important role in helping drivers stay safe. Involve your managers by educating them on how to conduct driver safety ride-alongs. Most managers conduct regular assessments of the employees they manage; make safe driving a part of this assessment. Many organizations require managers to conduct safety ride-alongs twice a year, sending a clear message that driving safely is an important part of the culture.

High-Risk Drivers

As mentioned earlier, it is imperative to run driver record checks and take action if you find a driver with a questionable record. Establish three levels of risk with interventions that increase as each level increases. Be proactive; don't wait for a driver to reach the highest risk level before you take action.

Level I: For level I drivers, those with the lowest risk of a crash, consider cost-effective techniques to reinforce safety and help drivers maintain a good safety record. Delivery vehicles such as CD-ROM and online training make it practical to provide driver safety reinforcement regularly. When paired with a test, this approach documents the organization's efforts to reduce the driver's risk and measures retention of key concepts.

Level II: For level II drivers, those with slightly more severe or frequent incidents, a more aggressive approach is needed. One of the best interventions is a training program combining classroom lecture with hands-on, behind-the-wheel training. This approach educates drivers about the importance of fleet safety and teaches them practical techniques they can apply in their daily travels. By providing the opportunity to practice newly learned skills in a real-world setting, the organization will greatly improve drivers' retention of safety concepts.

Level III: Level III drivers, those who demonstrate a pattern of frequent crashes and severe violations, will require more personalized attention. It can be very effective to train them on a one-to-one basis, allocating a full day of attention to their specific issues. This technique helps to hone in on the cause of their driving problems, while demonstrating the severity of the risk and the organization's commitment to reducing it. It also documents the extent of your efforts to keep this driver safe and minimize his/her risk of a crash.

On Going

You can make substantial, positive gains by establishing a plan of action that takes into account these four groups of drivers. However, to sustain substantial results, it is vital that you provide all drivers with ongoing safety reminders. Safe driving is a learned skill that must be practiced all of the time. Unless it is kept in the forefront, drivers will gradually lose much of what was taught. Reminders can come in the way of safety publications, e-mail messages and presentations at regularly scheduled meetings.

Driver accountability is important, but so is positive reinforcement. Establish some sort of recognition for safe driving, such as a vehicle upgrade, gift certificates or a letter from a senior manager.

Some safety managers believe driver safety isn't within the realm of their job and should be handled by the fleet department instead. However, fleet managers may believe they are responsible for the vehicles and that the safety

department should handle driver safety. Why not involve everybody? By involving more people, you may have a better chance of moving this initiative forward.

The end result of establishing a comprehensive driver safety initiative is a safer work environment for the employees who are at the greatest risk of injury or death. Don't forget, you can make a substantial difference in the lives of these employees.

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