

Confessions of a Business Driver: Understanding Driver Safety Risks

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Introduction

Vehicle crashes are the leading cause of worker fatality in the United States. In any given year, more workers are killed as a result of a vehicle crash than due to any other incident type. In addition to the risk of personal injury or fatality, vehicle crashes that involve business drivers typically result in property damage, lost productivity and/or lost revenue, and increased liability exposure for the employer. Yet, each day business drivers take to the road with attitudes and ingrained behaviors that may hinder their safety behind the wheel. By understanding those attitudes and behaviors, organizations can take the necessary steps to reduce their employees' odds of a vehicle crash and avoid the resulting consequences. This paper will include "confessions of a business driver" taken from the direct experience of one of the authors, who previously served as an outside sales representative spending much of the workday on the road.

Statistics from the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reveal the high incidence and severity of vehicle crashes. According to NHTSA, 6.15 million crashes occurred in the U.S. in 2006, involving 12 million drivers and causing 2.7 million injuries. Last year, 43,443 fatalities occurred on U.S. roads, which equates to an average of 119 per day. The average driver has a 1 in 15 chance of being involved in a collision and a 1 in 65 chance of being involved in a fatal crash in his or her lifetime.

These statistics reflect the experience of the average driver. However, the average driver travels 12,000 - 15,000 miles annually, while many fleet drivers travel 20,000 – 25,000 miles or more each year. As a result, their exposure to crash risks is far greater than the general public's exposure. In turn, it's not difficult to see why business driver crashes are the leading cause of lost productivity and death for the American worker, with a business driver three times more likely to be killed in a vehicle crash than while working in a factory setting.

Understanding the behaviors and attitudes of typical business drivers and what they face in their travels can help safety directors to understand the risks their employee drivers encounter and help protect those drivers by reducing their crash incidence.

Common Collisions

A look at what business drivers may face in their travels must include a review of the most common types of collisions for employee drivers. These include:

- Rear-end collisions
- Parking and backing collisions
- Intersection collisions
- Highway collisions

Rear-end collisions are among the most common on the road, accounting for nearly 30 percent of all crashes, according to NHTSA. These crashes usually result when a driver does not keep a safe following distance or is distracted from the driving task. One of the most effective ways to reduce the odds of a rear-end collision is to maintain a safe distance behind the driver in front of you: at least 2 seconds on dry roads, 4 seconds in the rain and 8 seconds in snow (see Exhibit 1). The business driver is likely to confess: "I can't possibly stay 2 seconds behind the driver in front of me; it's just not practical." In reality, that distance is necessary to give the driver enough time and space to stop safely when needed.

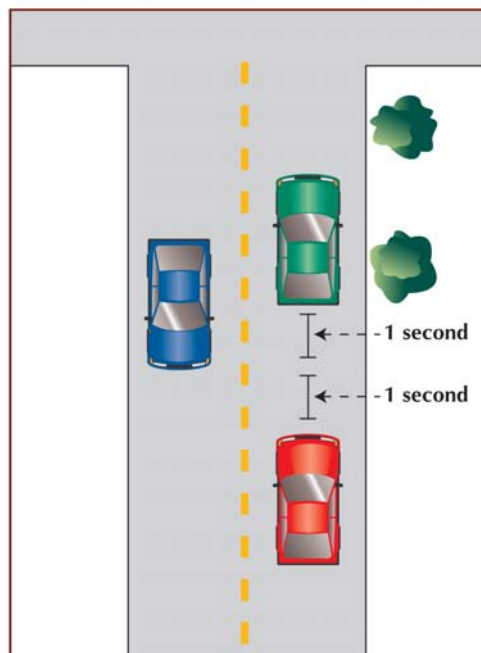


Exhibit 1. Maintaining a two-second distance behind the driver in front of you is a critical driver safety principle.

A second strategy for reducing rear-end crashes is to stay focused and avoid any form of distraction, especially from common sources such as the cell phone. The business driver may confess, “I need my cell phone to keep in touch while I’m on the road. I have to stay connected to my customers and my manager.”

In reality, cell phone use while driving is a dangerous form of distraction, linked to the same level of risk as driving while impaired at a .08 blood alcohol concentration level (enough to be considered legally impaired in most U.S. states). Other forms of distraction – such as maps, newspapers, daily planners, and food – also increase a driver’s odds of a crash. In fact, NHTSA estimates that at least 25 percent of all crashes are caused in part by distraction. If a business driver is traveling at 60 mph and looks away from the road for 1 second for any reason, he/she will have traveled 88 feet, or about 5 ½ car lengths, without looking at the road, as illustrated in Exhibit 2. Convincing the business driver not to talk on the phone or engage in any other distracting behaviors while driving is critical to reducing the risk of any type of crash, and especially a rear-end crash.

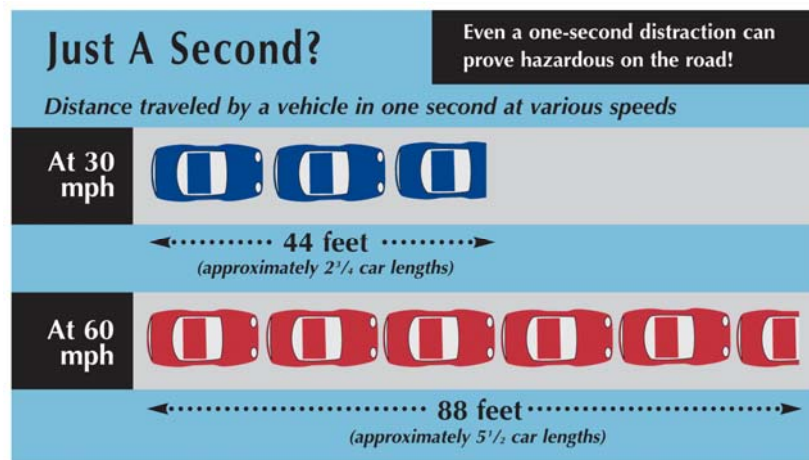


Exhibit 2. A distraction of just one second can translate to a driver traveling a long distance without focusing on the road.

Parking lot and backing-related crashes represent about 20 percent of all crashes. One reason for this high frequency is the fact that drivers have little experience and a lower skill level when driving in reverse, because they do it infrequently. Another reason is that visibility is often a problem when backing and parking, especially if the driver’s vehicle is boxed in on either side by much larger vehicles. A third reason is the fact that motorists and pedestrians don’t always treat a parking lot as they would any other roadway; they tend to be distracted and fail to follow safe principles.

The best way to avoid a parking lot crash is to either pull all the way through to an adjacent spot, so you back out later, or to back into the parking space. The latter enables the driver to back into a controlled environment (the parking space) instead of an uncontrolled environment (the driving lane). The business driver may confess, “I don’t like to back into a parking space because it takes longer and I’m not comfortable doing it. I can’t always find a spot that lets me pull through, and I don’t have time to drive around to find one.” However, these techniques are important to teach and encourage, since they will greatly reduce the odds of a parking or backing-related crash.

Intersections should be an equally important area of focus for employee drivers. A disproportionate number of crashes occur at intersections: nearly 44 percent of all crashes and 1 in 4 vehicle deaths, according to the U.S. Federal Highway Administration. The combination of many different events happening at once and potentially confusing signals combine to make intersection crashes very common.

Despite the fact that nearly 1,000 people are killed and 200,000 injured each year in the U.S. when a driver runs a red light, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, most drivers travel through a green light without scanning. The business driver may confess, “If I’m in a hurry, I don’t have time to scan before traveling through a green light.” Business drivers are also likely to view stopping at a red light as an opportunity to check phone messages, look at a map or directions, or focus on other tasks instead of driving. In reality, motorists need to scan their driving environment at all times – even at a stop – to anticipate potential trouble.

Highway crashes often result from driving at excessive speeds and traveling long distances on straight roads that lull a driver into a state of inattention. Vehicles merging onto the highway or cutting across lanes to exit can also prove problematic. A business driver who travels highways regularly may confess, “I sometimes don’t remember the last few miles I traveled on the highway; but I know this road well, so it doesn’t matter.” Business drivers must understand that distraction at high speeds is especially dangerous, as you will travel a long distance in just a second or two, as previously illustrated. Employee drivers must understand the need to stay focused on the road, even on long stretches of monotonous highway. It’s helpful to build in regular stops to rest, and to keep all distracting items out of reach while driving. Highway travel also offers the business driver many opportunities for escape routes – a place to escape to in the event another driver creates a dangerous situation on the road. The other lanes on a highway obviously can serve as escape routes, as can the grassy median in the center of the road or the shoulder of the road.

The Role of Attitude and Emotions

Driver safety is a combination of skill and attitude. It’s estimated that a driver’s attitude accounts for 60 percent of crashes, while a driver’s physical condition accounts for about 20 percent of crashes, and the remaining 20 percent is attributed to the mechanical condition of the vehicle. Many potentially unsafe attitudes and emotions can plague business drivers in their daily travels. The following are especially dangerous attitudes and emotions for employee drivers.

- **Anger.** A business driver may confess, “If I’m upset about something – personal or professional – then I might take it out on others on the road. For instance, if another vehicle is headed toward me with its high beams on, then I’ll flash my high beams at them to retaliate.” In reality, flashing a driver with high beams can leave them temporarily blinded and unable to control the vehicle. In fact, any form of retaliation or anger on the road will cause an unsafe situation and may even escalate into road rage. The business driver does not know the other motorist’s state of mind and could risk angering a person who is impaired or emotionally unstable and capable of violence.

- Aggression. NHTSA estimates that speeding alone – one of the most common aggressive driving behaviors – contributes to 30 percent of all crashes and more than 13,000 roadway deaths each year. The business driver may confess, “If I’m in a hurry, I’ll drive much faster than the speed limit or tailgate someone to encourage them to move out of my way.” In reality, both are very dangerous behaviors that greatly increase the odds of a crash. The faster a motorist drives, the greater the severity of a collision and the greater the severity of the injuries experienced. According to NHTSA data, for every 10 mph above 50 mph, a driver doubles the odds of dying or being severely injured in a crash. Tailgating is equally dangerous, as it often leads to rear-end collisions. Business travelers also should take care to avoid other aggressive driving behaviors, such as changing lanes often and abruptly, passing on the shoulder, rolling through stop signs, running traffic lights, using offensive gestures and yelling at other drivers.
- Fatigue. A business driver who logs many miles is likely to confess, “I have to drive when I’m tired to stay on schedule. I don’t have time to stop and rest.” In reality, driving while fatigued is estimated to contribute to 56,000 crashes in the U.S. each year. Most of those crashes are severe, in part because they tend to involve high speeds and delayed reactions. Unfortunately, in a National Sleep Foundation poll, only 22 percent of drivers said they had ever pulled off the road to rest when fatigued. Fatigue affects a business driver’s mental and physical performance, making them less alert and less able to focus. Drowsiness also slows reaction time, impairs motor skills, encourages forgetfulness, and promotes poor decision-making. For these reasons, business drivers must have sufficient rest before driving and take regular breaks while on the road.
- Depression. A business driver who is expected to travel daily as part of the job may take to the road when depressed, confessing, “I can’t take time off from the job and I know I’ll be fine on the road. My problems won’t affect me.” In reality, depression can lead drivers to focus on their problems, instead of on driving. Depressed drivers are often distracted and may drive for long distances without remembering the trip. Depression also clouds judgment, which is a vital component of safe driving. In extreme cases, drivers may lose interest in their safety and the safety of others, increasing the odds that they will take risks on the road.
- Rushed schedule. Most business travelers are trying to do more in less time today, and they often perceive that they don’t have the time to stop to eat, make a phone call, or take care of other tasks. But if they don’t take the time to stop safely before attending to these needs, they could end up in a serious crash. Business drivers who state, “I don’t have time to stop” need to be reminded that even a minor incident will cramp an already busy schedule, as the driver loses time to tasks like exchanging insurance information with the other driver, filing claims, notifying the employer and arranging a rental car.

Safety for All Driver Types

While every business fleet is different, all fleets tend to include a mix of drivers who are likely to have different driver safety issues that the organization must address in order to reduce the incidence of crashes.

- New hire drivers. Drivers who are new to the job are at higher risk of a crash than tenured drivers. There are several reasons for the increased risk. New hires tend to overload their schedules in order to impress their managers. They are usually driving unfamiliar vehicles and traveling in unfamiliar territories. They also tend to be pre-occupied with learning the job, including the company's products and policies, so they spend less time focused on driver safety. A new hire driver may have the attitude, "I need to meet my quota so I can prove myself right away." These drivers need training and education upfront, to understand the risks they face before they begin to use a company vehicle.
- Tenured drivers. Employees who have been driving as part of the job for a particular organization for many years may believe their experience automatically makes them better drivers. However, that's not necessarily true. Instead, tenured drivers often fall into a pattern of bad driving habits that become ingrained and difficult to break. They may be set in their ways and unwilling to change, especially if they have not had vehicle crashes in the past and don't perceive themselves as dangerous on the road. Finally, tenured drivers may include the company's "star performers" who are rewarded for outstanding sales results or service performance. If the driver has been with the organization for many years, it's possible he/she didn't receive driver safety training when hired, or completed the training so long ago that it is now a distant memory. These drivers need refresher training and regular reminders of the importance of driver safety as an integral part of their job.
- High-risk drivers. In many fleets, about 20 percent of drivers are responsible for 80 percent of the vehicle crashes. These high-risk drivers often are Type A personalities and are typically assertive or even aggressive, both on the job and behind the wheel. A high-risk driver may say, "I've had a few violations, but that doesn't make me a danger on the road." Or he/she may feel that a strong performance on the job outweighs any bad habits on the road. High-risk drivers tend to respond best to driver safety training when the program is individualized, targeted to their specific issues, and delivered in a one-on-one environment.
- Middle-level managers. Whether or not they realize it, the managers who supervise employee drivers set a tone for the importance of safety on the road. Yet, they often focus solely on other aspects of the job and inadvertently encourage unsafe driving behavior in the process. Some may say, "I'm too busy to focus on driver safety. And besides, it's not my responsibility." By encouraging their direct reports to meet their quotas, they may be sending a signal that it's OK to overload their schedules and drive aggressively to meet those commitments. Including mid-level managers in a driver safety initiative is an effective way to avoid that trap. If they participate in the same driver training classes as their direct reports, they will gain a better understanding of the importance of safe behaviors on the road. They should also be trained on how to conduct a ride-along annually with each employee driver. The ride-along is an opportunity for the manager to observe the driver's behaviors during the course of a normal business day and recommend areas needing improvement.

Understanding how a driver's tenure, position with the company, attitudes, and behaviors all affect their safety on the road is vital for the safety director in any organization that employs drivers. In response, the safety director will be in a strong position to take the necessary steps to protect employee drivers and the bottom line. Developing programs that directly address the typical behaviors and attitudes of a business driver will prove an effective way to reduce their incidence of a crash and the resulting costs and consequences.