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Development and Implementation of Effective Driver Training Programs

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Why Training is Important

The toll of fatalities and injuries on our nation's highways every year is staggering. Collisions have a personal cost many of us have felt. Our companies have a large exposure to liability from operating vehicles on our roadways. The impact of a serious collision on an organization can go well beyond the "insured loss" with a high impact on the organization's bottom line, time, and resources. Some organizations can even struggle to survive if their employee is involved in a serious incident.

It is important to note the authors will use the term "collision" to refer to what is more commonly called an "accident." There is an important paradigm shift when using "collision" in reference to the unpleasant event with a vehicle that can lead to property damage or personal injury. "Accident" implies a situation in which we don't have control and bear no responsibility. Over 90% of all collisions are the result of driver error. An important way to address these errors with a driver population we have control over is through a driver training program.

When contemplating the cost/benefit of employee driver training programs, one overlooked aspect is how well defended a claim can be based on the driver training controls in place. One of the first items of discovery a plaintiff's lawyers will seek is company training records. Even if an organization's driver "wasn't really at fault," the level of their training can weaken the defense of their case. Having a robust and effective driver training program can demonstrate to plaintiffs and juries how important the issue is to the organization and blunt claims of negligence.

An organization's employees are an important and valued part of its fabric. No one wants to see them injured or killed on our nation's highways. But our highways are a hazardous place to work and conduct business. Recognizing this major exposure to our employees and addressing it with effective safety management controls will reduce the likelihood of an incident. Many components contribute to an effective fleet safety program: a written program, driver selection criteria, periodic MVR checks, etc. The basic components can be found in the recently published standard *ANSI/ASSEI Z-15.1(Safety Requirements for Motor Vehicle Fleet Operations).*

One of the underutilized aspects of a fleet safety effort is driver training programs. Having a policy that requires employees to "operate their vehicle in accordance with the law" does nothing to reduce an employee's exposure and is routinely used as punishment once an incident has occurred. Proactively creating an expectation and transferring skills to an employee through an effective driver training program can and does reduce their exposure on the road.

Spectrum of Training Programs

Driver training efforts span a wide spectrum of potential solutions, each carrying their own cost and benefit. All training efforts aren't created equal and the results will vary widely. In many aspects, driver training follows the old axiom, "You get what you pay for." Organizations have a very real choice to make in determining what level of driver training they will require of their employees. Table 1 (at the end of the article) details the attributes of driver training programs; below is a summary of those training program efforts:

- Nothing
- Booklet
- Website Information
- On-line Training Program
- On-line Training Program with testing
- Classroom
- Simulators
- Classroom with behind the wheel
- Reaction and skid pad programs

Having no driver training program must be considered a choice the organization has made and carries certain ramifications. Employees may not verbalize it, but they realize the lack of a driver training program demonstrates a lack of commitment towards them. This can and does carry a great deal of negative baggage, particularly when a collision occurs.

Brochures, informational websites and distribution of training materials, while low cost, provide very little benefit on their own. However, they should not be overlooked as support to a comprehensive fleet safety program. Employees rarely reference the materials and retain very little when they do. For instance, few people read the owners manual of their car, which is easily accessible and contains a great deal of good and important information about safely operating the vehicle. The learning style of individuals today requires a much more interactive approach to be effective.

Differing levels of interaction can be accessed in distinct driver training programs, from a computer program testing an individual's knowledge prior to letting him pass through, to simulators that create situations requiring a reaction, to classroom interaction, to behind-the-wheel programs. Generally, as the interaction with drivers increases, so does the cost and the benefits that can result.

Whatever driver training program is chosen, it should be viewed as an investment for the organization, one made for the benefit of the employees and the organization. In general, the less that is invested, the smaller the effect on the organization's exposure and rate of collisions will be.

Attributes of Effective Training Programs

In the authors' experience with designing and implementing training that has impacted thousands of drivers, several key attributes have been found to be essential in making the program effective. Without these elements, driver populations will feel almost disenfranchised from the training process and question its applicability to them and its importance. These feelings can erode a training program's value and any resulting benefit.

First, a training program should be customized for the organization. The question of what exposures an organization faces and how they should be addressed in the training needs to be taken into account. For instance, if a fleet operation requires drivers to park in residential areas, then that exposure and its controls need to be included in the program. Likewise, a standardized training program for delivery trucks that get used for passenger car drivers loses all credibility for the drivers being trained. Several training programs exist for general types of fleets, like utility vehicles, and these are much better than a generic training program. However, to gain the maximum benefit, the program should address the organization's specific fleet of vehicles, the exposures, and common loss types. A customized program built around a strong core of defensive or behavioral safety principles will bring the highest value to the drivers and the organization. The higher the level of customization a program has around the organization's fleet, the more effective the program will be.

A successful driver training program should be both meaningful and relevant for the drivers. Customized training certainly accomplishes these attributes; however, they also stand on their own. As an example, one often overlooked aspect of training is how to adequately perform an inspection on a vehicle. Employees are asked to perform this on varying timetables, but how many are actually trained on how to perform one? Classroom training alone is never adequate in enhancing the skill level of the drivers asked to perform this task. It only becomes both meaningful and relevant when an inspection protocol is demonstrated on the actual piece of equipment the drivers use. There are far too many nuances on differing pieces of equipment to adequately train someone in a generic fashion.

When possible, specific equipment should also be used in over-the-road training to make the training meaningful and relevant for the operator. In the same way we want to road test drivers on that specific piece of equipment, we want to work on driving improvement in the same manner. To further extend that specificity, the routing and driving conditions should be matched as closely

as possible to the actual driving environment the driver will operate in. If, for instance, if a large amount of driving will take place in residential areas, the driving improvement opportunity shouldn't take place on the open highway.

Implementation

While designing a program to meet the needs of a driving population is challenging in and of itself, implementing that program presents its own challenges. Implementation is fairly straight forward if you only have information you are pushing out or are rolling out an online program. The challenge arises when you move to a classroom based on an over-the-road training system. The choices made as to how the trainers are chosen and developed are critical to the success of the program.

Many organizations will designate an experienced, accident-free driver to become the trainer. In the authors' experience, this approach is fraught with pitfalls, not the least of which is the attributes that make a successful driver will not necessarily make a successful trainer. These people are often thrown into a training situation with few expectations and no training.

Our experience shows three critical areas for the successful implementation of a training program with trainers. First, the trainers must be carefully chosen. Selection criteria that makes for a successful driver trainer and carefully screening candidates for this duty are critical. Willingness to participate is key. Second, the trainers need to have specific accountabilities in their role as a driver trainer. These will be very different from their driver responsibilities and its effects will be felt across pay, incentives, and personal job satisfaction. The final area important to a successful driver training program is providing training for the trainer through a trainer certification program. This will provide a framework for the trainer to utilize in addition to skill development in topics such as communication.

Measuring Effectiveness

Traditionally, collision frequency and severity are used to measure the effectiveness of fleet safety efforts. These important measures are widely understood, simple, and easy to produce. However, something serious has to happen before the data for this lagging measure can be defined and produced. It is even longer before corrective measures can be designed and implemented. This same dynamic is at work for driver training programs.

With a little creative effort, you can be proactive in measuring the success of a driver training program. Driver behaviors are one way to track the effectiveness of a training program before a serious collision occurs. You can track specific driver behaviors you know could lead to a collision. For instance, drivers should check their mirrors every five to eight seconds under normal driving conditions. A measurement can be taken of the number of positive or negative behaviors witnessed during a specified time period. Not only is feedback available to the individual driver, the organization as a whole can track this and use it to modify training to achieve the desired compliance level.

Conclusion

Driver training is an integral part of a fleet safety effort. Written programs alone will not lead to changes in driving behavior that ultimately result in a lower number of collisions. Not all driver training programs or efforts are created equal, nor will they yield equal results. A careful selection from among the choices needs to be made as this investment is contemplated. Far and away, engaging the learners in the process and actually getting them behind the wheel will create the highest program effectiveness.

Table 1. Index of the Attributes of Driver Training Programs

Driver Training Program	Cost	Benefit	Positive Attribute	Negative Attributes
Nothing	None in the short term	None, may actually be negative	Requires nothing of the organization or the employee	• Long term cost may be quite high due to incidents and litigation • Employees recognize no effort is made to address exposure
Brochure	Very Low	Marginal	Easily and widely disbursed	• Effort is rarely taken seriously or utilized by employees
Website information: policies, suggestions	Very Low	Marginal	Easily referenced	• Generally low utilization rate • No interaction or feedback
Video or Online Training (passive)	Low	Questionable	• Allows training to occur anytime • Low cost delivery method	• Customization adds significantly to the cost • Relatively low retention rates • Low effectiveness due to lack of interaction.

Driver Training Program	**Cost**	**Benefit**	**Positive Attribute**	**Negative Attributes**
Online Training with testing	Low	Questionable	• Testing requires at least some knowledge • Demonstrate some level of knowledge across operation through minimum scoring protocols	• Customization adds significantly to the cost • Interaction is limited to producing the desired information with no need for long term retention
Simulators	Low to very high	Questionable	Aids in recognition of hazards	• Employees perceive as an unreal task • Difficult to translate to real world driving tasks • Advanced systems with "cabs" are very expensive • Seen as a video game
Classroom	Moderate	Can have a dramatic positive affect on the organizations losses	Can reach a large population of drivers. Generally higher level of information retention than information only or online methods	• Lower effectiveness if the program does not include participant interaction. • Transfers information only, may not change behaviors
Classroom with Behind the Wheel	High	High	• Demonstrate training concepts • Practice using new knowledge to lock it in • Overcome resistance to change in driving behaviors	• Takes organizational commitment from the top • Requires a commitment of resources • Doesn't stand alone, needs to be linked together (i.e. structured classroom instruction and behind the wheel)

Driver Training Program	Cost	Benefit	Positive Attribute	Negative Attributes
Advanced reaction driving and skid pad	Very high with need to travel to and rent a facility and possibly provide specialized vehicles	High	• Defines driver and vehicle limits in a hands on manner • Allows drivers to experience skidding and other emergency maneuvers in a controlled and safe environment	• High cost of the program and limited number of facilities limits those allowed to participate • For maximum effectiveness there is a need to have a strong underlying training program in place • Not a stand-alone effort, provides limited aspect of driving experience