ARTICLES

Driver management – a crucial element of safety culture

INTRODUCTION

The notion of Driver Management, as a strategy in addition to Fleet Management, sits comfortably with OH&S principles in that it recognises the function of driving as an issue to be managed in order to ensure the health and safety of the employees who drive vehicles in the course of their employment in addition to vehicle management considerations.

The responsibility at law for employers to ensure the safety of their drivers is well documented in the literature. A comprehensive literature and best practice review by Haworth et al (2000), asserts that the vehicle is a workplace or plant and this extends to novated lease and private vehicles where those vehicles are driven as part of the employee's work. Furthermore vehicle safety problems that contribute to crashes whether inside or outside work time may constitute an offence by employers under OH&S legislation.

THE SIZE OF THE PROBLEM

There is ample testimony that there is a serious problem in relation to the use of vehicles in the workplace evidenced by published statistics (Murray et al, 2002). It is estimated that 27 percent of all corporate fleet drivers are involved in a motor vehicle collision in any one year. Forty nine percent of all workplace fatalities occur on the roads (National Occupational Health and Safety Commission 1998). Even after adjusting for kilometres, company cars are involved in almost 50% more crashes than "ordinary drivers" (Lynn & Lockwood 1998). The increasing number of WorkCover claims associated with vehicles crashes indicates a shift in understanding about employer liability for driver and passenger safety at work. For example statistics supplied from a NSW human services employer indicated 47% of all WorkCover absenteeism resulted from work place vehicle collisions.

In addition to the collisions that result in injury and deaths, a far greater number of smaller collisions occur causing vehicle and property damage.

Statistics, usually generated by vehicle/fleet insurers, mostly attribute workplace crashes to driver error (driver at fault) and do not take into consideration the organisation's cultural characteristics that may prevail. The over simplification of OH&S strategies that direct attention to employee behavioural flaws (Quinlan et al 1991) leading to conclusions that crash causality is mainly a driver issue and then applying cure-all remedies such as punishment or training to correct the problem, overlooks the organisational and cultural factors that contribute to risky environments for drivers.

DRIVER MANAGEMENT

Determining that a driver's behaviour is dysfunctional in complex and ill-structured environments (Pidgeon 2001) will depend on the context in which the driver's behaviour is reviewed. A driver who achieves high sales figures but speeds between sales calls may be a valued employee but the risky behaviour is a consequence of performance expectations that do not harmonise with safety

objectives. The likely cognitive dissonance for drivers in such circumstances may reduce because the consequences of failing to perform are usually perceived as greater than the negative consequences of crashes, events which are statistically rare for most drivers. Clearly there is a need to understand what motivates employees' behaviour and to establish organisation policies and practices to achieve a culture that is in tune with employees' perceptions (Sirota, D. 2000).

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Additionally the vested interests of employers, insurance companies, researchers, driver training providers, fleet management consultants and road safety bodies, creates a political context that often avoids established effective human resource and OH&S management systems working together to achieve a safety culture.

While human behaviour is a contributing factor to most incidents and crashes, reducing at-risk behaviour and increasing safe behaviour requires understanding about how such behaviours are motivated by system and cultural influences. Some evidence arising from organisation case studies demonstrates that the safety culture of the organisation has a positive effect on the safety performance of fleet drivers (Cook, R.1998).

The problem is that research about safety culture, which is a complex multi-faceted matter, has lacked a systematic joining of theory and practice through a genuine inter-disciplinary approach that explores wider complex human issues than just attitudes and behaviour (Pidgeon 2001). If culture is a reflection of sociological, economical and political factors then the human factors need to be considered within this context and how this may have a bearing on driver safety at work.

A driver safety culture can only be achieved through a systematic approach to safety generally and specific strategies in relation to driver management that are integrated with the organisation's other policies and systems.

The key elements found to be effective for driver management were surveyed with organisations attending "Drivers in the Workplace" seminars in Sydney and Melbourne in July 2004. The survey (See Fig 1 and following explanation) demonstrated wide practice variations in integration of policies and some organisations did not apply their normal human resource management policies to drivers at all.

Within a NSW employer 47% of all WorkCover absenteeism resulted from workplace vehicle collisions

A brief explanation of the elements of the survey follows:

Driver Management Policy
A policy that goes beyond vehicle considerations and addresses driver behaviour and obligations as a function of the employment contract.

Linkage of Driver Management Policy to Human Resources and OHS policies
This strategy recognises driving at work as a normal component of work and as such falls under all other policies that address employment conditions. It follows that driver management is an issue for HR and OHS professional and responsibility for effective implementation of the policy rests with the manager of the driver and not isolated, to say, the Fleet Manager.

Effective dissemination of policies to all drivers
Effective policies must be available to all drivers. Obviously this should occur at induction but review of policies can be included in driver education programs and policy summaries can be included in a driver handbook and provided in each vehicle.

Leaders should regularly refer to the policies in training sessions, meetings and company communications.

Risk assessments for driving tasks and demands
Like road safety initiatives, occupational health and safety strategies often fail to address the complex issues associated with operator behaviour and motivation. Workers sometimes take short cuts, fail to use safety systems or equipment and have poor perception of the risks and hazards. Like drivers they are sometimes more focused on completing the task than

on their safety. Identification of hazards requires regular inspections, audits and reviews of vehicles including purchasing, use and application to specific work, maintenance, design and safety features. Additionally, drivers will need to be assessed in terms of their skills, behaviour, attitude, awareness and motivation applicable to the demands of driving as a component of their work.

The multi tasking requirements of driving combined with the demands of achieving work performance outcomes need to be taken into account. Call rates, distances travelled, localities, unfamiliar territory, loads, rest breaks and use of mobile phones are just some of the matters that will need consideration.

Risk assessments should extend to use of the company vehicle by an employee's partner or driving-age children.

Position Descriptions describing driving tasks and demands
Ensure position descriptions contain accurate details of the driving tasks and requirements just as they describe other aspects of the employee's work.

**Recruitment process that addresses applicants' driving and incident history**
Safety culture starts at recruitment. Before hiring employees who will drive as part of their work, organisations should clarify the driver safety criteria and the driver safety profile including driving record in relation to collisions, incidents, violations, vehicle maintenance history and vehicle asset value preservation. Requesting a pre-employment driver declaration from the prospective employee is legitimate provided the nature of the driving requirement as detailed in the position description and a specific driving risk assessment is provided to the applicant.

Communicate the driver management policy during the interview process. Review driving records at the same time that reference and background checks are carried out. In doing so it removes poor or high risk candidates early in the process and also clearly communicates the organisation's position on driver safety before an employee joins the workforce leaving no doubt what standard of performance is required once appointed.

Induction of drivers including driver management and vehicle use requirements
Driver safety induction training should be provided as soon as possible to new

Figure 1 Survey of Organisations attending Drivers in the Workplace Seminars 2004.
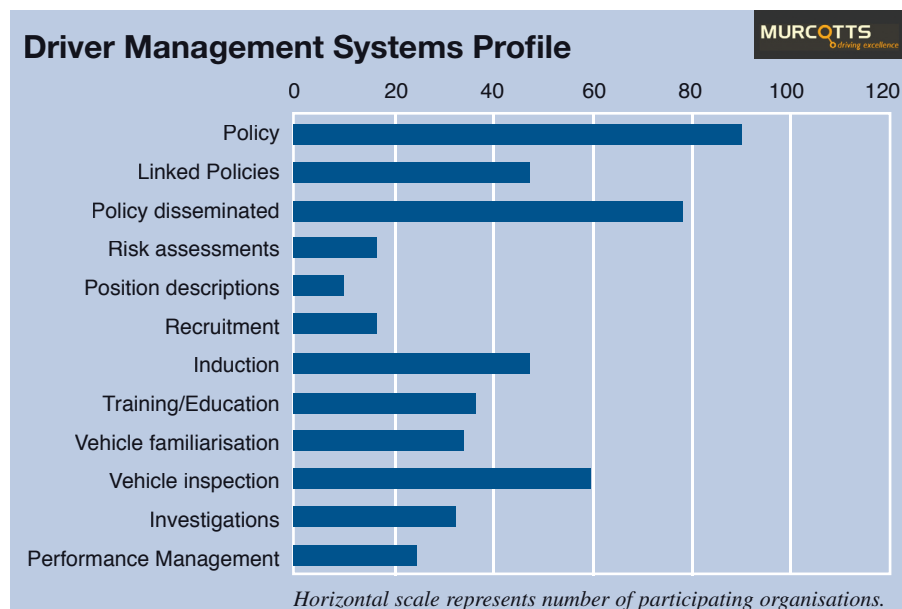
Horizontal scale represents number of participating organisations.

The safety culture of the organisation has a positive effect on the safety performance of fleet drivers

employees before they are assigned a company vehicle and as part of normal induction. When driver safety is provided in the same context as other organisational information and policy introduction, it elevates the subject to the same importance as the other components and sends a strong message that the organisation views driver safety seriously.

Driver training and education

There is conjecture about the effectiveness of driver training. As with the control of many occupational risks, appropriate training is required as a component of an effective risk management program but the type of training is crucial.

Training is required under OH&S legislation and is supported by state Health and Safety authorities as per the following examples:

"...road related work injury is very concerning and an employer of drivers of any type carries responsibility to ensure their safety. The circumstances under which they work, the conditions they may encounter, the appropriateness of the vehicle used and the adequacy of the training provided are all factors to be considered". Minister for WorkCover Victoria Mr Bob Cameron.

"...employers should assess associated risks and where necessary put in place control measures. In the case of the introduction of a different model/make of car these might be simply identifying to drivers the new location of the wiper control, light switch etc. In other cases, such as the introduction of ABS or front wheel drives, it would be appropriate to arrange some theory

and practical training". WorkSafe Western Australia's Chief Inspector Mr John Randall.

Establishing drivers' learning needs is essential rather than simply sending them to a course as a quick fix (Thomas, 2002). The training needs to be tailored to recognise different learning styles and to address the wide variety of problems encountered by drivers. Providers should offer a range of programs and be prepared to design in-house programs ranging from one-on-one coaching, computer aided training, workshops and practical in vehicle courses.

Vehicle familiarisation

Obviously vehicle familiarisation should occur for special vehicles or plant that employees are required to drive or operate.

Familiarisation may be required, however, for ordinary light vehicles that differ from the type of vehicle the employee drives privately. For example station wagons, 4WD and even larger or smaller vehicles may require basic introductory familiarisation training.

Vehicle inspection systems

A simple vehicle check system should be implemented that helps drivers carry out basic safety checks and allows for easy referral to maintenance for rectification. Most employees will avoid onerous checklists especially when they are applied to pool vehicles.

Incident/crash investigations

Incidents (crashes) indicate defects in the systems of work and therefore must be reported and investigated. Incidents that do not result in injuries also should be investigated to identify causal factors that may contribute to a recurrence.

These basic principles should apply to all vehicle incidents. During crash investigations, contributory factors to do with the system of work should be thoroughly analysed rather than focusing only on driver error.

Investigations involving vehicle incidents and crashes are useful educational opportunities for all staff. A team approach to problem analysis should be used to engage staff in the process.

The manager responsible for the work area should initiate the investigation rather than assign the task to the Fleet Manager or leave it to the fleet insurer.

Performance Management

The performance management system should prescribe acceptable driver behaviour criteria including the number of violations or other incidents permitted while employed with the company and the penalties or interventions that will take place if a driver fails to perform.

The organisation's driver safety culture is achieved more effectively when it is reinforced positively rather than based on punishment. Fleet drivers should be rewarded for clean driving records (an absence of violations or accidents over a specified time period). These rewards can include a congratulatory letter from an executive, small rewards such as tyre pressure gauges or street directories, upgraded vehicle options such as a sunroof

or CD player, and even driving courses for members of the employee's family, especially their children.

Performance reviews can involve a conversation about driving issues, incidents and follow-up to training programs.

Remedial interventions may require personalised coaching and sometimes referral to a counsellor to address dysfunctional behaviours such as road rage incidents.

CONCLUSION

A driver safety culture, as with any desired feature of organisation culture, requires demonstrated management commitment, principle centred leadership and above all, action.

The elements described in this article provide a guide for organisations to address the increasing concerns arising from driving at work and to practically implement strategies that have delivered driver safety improvements in other organisations. In doing so the organisation will embark on cultural change which will generate its own challenges particularly as it may conflict with existing driver optimism as well as those strategies used for improving driver safety in the community.

The consequences for maintaining a limited approach to this serious workplace health and safety issue will be both costly and litigious.

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