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ON THE ROAD

3 TIPS FOR BALANCING EMPLOYEE EFFICIENCY AND DISTRACTIONS WHILE ON THE ROAD



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Take a drive around the Houston metro area during business hours, and chances are you'll see a lot of fleet vehicles on the road. Whether it's semi-truck drivers delivering freight, service vans on the way to a maintenance call, or couriers delivering critical documents, businesses rely on the mobility of their employees to get the job done on time with the highest level of customer service.

However, statistics show that drivers are being overwhelmed with distractions. On just one day in the U.S., at least nine people are killed and more than 1,100 are injured in crashes involving a distracted driver. Research commissioned by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration shows the odds of a being in an accident are 23 times greater for drivers of commercial motor vehicles who text while driving than for those who do not. While casualties are the worst effect, businesses must also be concerned about property damage, company liability, loss of productivity, and reduction in brand favorability.

1. TRAIN EMPLOYEES TO BE SAFE DRIVERS

It's critical that companies ensure that their employees understand all applicable laws when it comes



to communicating while driving. While most states ban texting while driving, some states also ban using hand held phones while driving, requiring the use of hands-free systems. Also, several federal groups, such as the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, have policies that apply to commercial drivers.

All companies should develop policies to help minimize distractions. For example, many businesses prohibit the use of personal cell phones while on the job. The National Safety Council has tools available for businesses to develop their own policies and protect employees.

School districts and their transportation vendors are keenly aware of the importance of training drivers how to be safe behind the wheel. "Our drivers

attend mandatory driver training and are required to participate in continuing education and ongoing training programs each year," said Kirk Wilkie, vice president at GoldStar Transit, which provides transportation for school districts throughout Texas.

But drivers aren't the only ones who receive this kind of specialized training – the dangers of distracted driving are included in the overall safety-training program for dispatchers as well. "Every vehicle in our Houston-area fleet is equipped with a Motorola two-way radio system, which makes it easy for dispatchers and drivers to safely communicate in real time. Our dispatchers are also qualified to drive, so they fully understand that training on distracted driving is just as important for them as it is for drivers," said Wilkie.

While not every accident can be avoided, there is plenty that companies can do to minimize the effects of distracted driving while still providing efficient service.

2. USE HANDS-FREE COMMUNICATION METHODS

When it's absolutely necessary to communicate, employees should have access to hands-free systems while on the road. Whether two-way radios or cell phones, ensure that the systems are easy to use.

For example, systems that accept voice commands or have single push-to-talk buttons are highly preferred over systems that require launching an app on a device or dialing a phone number. The goal is for employees to not have to look at their device while driving.

Edgar Villegas from High Protection Security Corp., a company that offers security coverage in industrial, commercial and residential areas of Houston, recently replaced cell phones with push-to-talk radios in order to better communicate with employees at various job sites throughout the city. "An essential part of any security officer's job is the ability to communicate in a timely and reliable manner, and two-way radios allow me to quickly reach my officers, get real-time updates during an emergency situation, and respond immediately," he said. "If I have officers en route to a site and a situation arises where instructions and information need to be relayed quickly, the time it takes for them to pull over and stop the vehicle, dial a phone number, and wait for the other person to answer can mean the difference between life and death. With push to talk, it's instant connectivity with the press of a button. Plus, the clarity of

communications with a two-way radio is outstanding. There are no dropped calls or interference like you get with cell phones."

While hands-free systems do significantly reduce distraction over hand-held phones, hands-free systems aren't perfect, and still provide some level of distraction. That said, instant communication granted by the press of only one button is what makes two-way digital radios and products such as DispatchPlus from pdvWireless, which uses Motorola radios, the optimal choice in handheld mobile devices for many dispatch-centric workforces.

3. USE GPS TO IMPROVE DRIVER EFFICIENCY AND PRODUCTIVITY

GPS technology has become invaluable to employers with fleets and mobile workers, allowing them to track assets and remain vigilant to the well-being of their drivers while on the road and on the clock. But employees also benefit greatly from the use of GPS-based software.

GPS provides the most efficient route to a customer's location, minimizing time behind the wheel as well as the amount of fuel consumed by the fleet. Drivers who spend less time traveling to assignments will have less fatigue and increased bandwidth to perform additional tasks. As a result, this increase in driver productivity will result in a cumulative increase in the fleet's overall productivity and contribute to generating more revenue.

Employees become more responsible drivers when GPS monitoring is in use, knowing that dispatchers can see where they are going (and where they

have been). Today's GPS systems are robust enough to monitor routes for speed and recommend changes on the fly whether the driver is going to point A to point B and back to point A, or if the driver is going to Point A, then B, then C, D, and E, and so on. In addition, knowing where drivers are during the course of the day allows management to reallocate resources based on driver/worker location. This not only minimizes travel time from job to job but also gets the closest worker to the client in the least amount of time, providing for a superior customer experience.

Another advantage of using GPS systems is that they allow companies to look at the overall efficiency of their drivers and discover and reward best practices as well as identify and address areas that need improvement. GPS data can help companies identify drivers that may not be following policies, giving them the opportunity to be made aware of these issues and retrained if necessary.

There are a wide variety of technologies available to improve the performance and efficiency of mobile employees, but it's up to management to ensure that these technologies are implemented properly and that employees are trained to use them to maximize those benefits. It's also critical that companies have policies in place so that employees and management are on the same page when it comes to combating distracted driving.

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