

3 tips for minimizing distractions (and accidents) on Chicago roads

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Take a drive around the Chicago metro area during business hours, and chances are you'll see many fleet vehicles on the road.

Dispatch-centric businesses rely on the mobility of their employees to get the job done on time with the highest level of customer service. But with Bluetooth-linked smartphones and dashboard infotainment features prevalent in today's modern cars, drivers are overwhelmed with distractions.

New data suggests that distracted driving may be worse than initially thought, especially in urban areas with increased traffic congestion. According to the [National Safety Council](#), deaths due to car accidents have increased 24 percent in Illinois since 2014, one of several states to see an uptick in fatalities in recent years, and a recent study by the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) found that 13 percent of all fatal distraction-affected crashes involved the use of cell phones.

Because mobile employees are faced with a steady stream of information while behind the wheel, employers must balance the need to communicate with drivers while being sure they remain compliant with distracted driving laws.

Many Chicago-based companies with mobile employees are successfully training staff to be safe drivers by installing and using hands-free communication systems in their mobile workforce vehicles and relying on GPS systems to improve communication, efficiency and productivity.

1. Train employees to be safe drivers



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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 their benefits.

Companies with mobile workforces are generally considered legally liable for the actions of their employees who are behind the wheel on company business, so it's very important that employees understand laws pertaining to the use of mobile phones and portable electronic devices while driving. Employers must educate mobile drivers — and dispatchers — on cell phone laws and policies and on how to avoid a distracted-driving accident.

“We have strict guidelines that cover basic safe driving rules and criteria for employee driving records, but we also require our drivers to participate in continuing education and ongoing training programs every 12 months,” said Theresa Springer, general manager for First Transit, part of First Group Corporation that includes First Student and Greyhound. “When we replaced our voice communications system with two-way push-to-talk radios, we spent considerable time designing the system and training our drivers and dispatchers to make sure driver distractions would be at an absolute minimum. They can now communicate quickly and safely with an easy-to-use system.”

2. Use hands-free communication methods

When it's absolutely necessary to communicate while behind the wheel, mobile workers need access to hands-free, easy-to-use systems that accept voice commands or have single push-to-talk functionality. Drivers who use cell phones have to take their eyes off the road to launch an application, send a text or dial a phone number, but with a mounted portable two-way radio system in their vehicle, they would be provided with less distraction and the ease of communicating at the touch of only one button.

Anthony George, vice president and general manager for Aries Charter, which shuttles commuters from train stations to large office buildings in downtown Chicago, installed tablets in his fleet so dispatchers, drivers and clients could communicate with each other, but soon realized they weren't the right solution.

“We wanted to use GPS tracking and status messaging, but at the speed at which our business operates, we needed something that would provide instant communication with the touch of a single button, not multiple swipes or hunting for the right app to launch,” he said. “Switching to Motorola two-way push-to-talk radios allows drivers to press one button to talk to dispatchers and clients, saving them the trouble of scrolling through a contacts list. This has made them more efficient — and safer behind the wheel.”

3. Use GPS to improve driver efficiency and productivity

GPS tracking technology has become invaluable to employers with fleets and mobile workers. It provides the most efficient route to a customer's location, minimizing employees' time behind the wheel as well as reducing vehicle fuel costs. From an employer's standpoint, GPS provides management the ability to reallocate resources based on their driver's location. Travel time from job to job is decreased and they are able to get the closest worker to the client in the least amount of time, which improves driver productivity and operational efficiency thereby resulting in a superior customer experience.

Mike Flood, general manager of Flood Brothers Disposal/Recycling Services, knows first-hand the benefits of both hands-free communication systems and GPS technology. “We needed a reliable way to communicate with our roll-off drivers 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It's been very helpful to see where they are on their routes, send them field updates, and document and manage in real-time any issues like extra trash pile-up. What's been especially valuable is being able to use the service for management reports that provide a detailed overview of arrival and departure times, which allows us to optimize routes and contributes to increased productivity and revenue,” he said.

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 their 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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