

Beyond The Cab

The only safety management newsletter dedicated exclusively to addressing injury prevention and workers' compensation cost control for trucking companies.



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Could a Simple Questionnaire Improve Safety?

Becoming the safety manager or safety director is a noble and rewarding career choice. However, with that career choice, the measure of your effectiveness is very heavily dependent upon the actions of other people. For that reason, it can be a very challenging and often frustrating field as well. For safety managers within the trucking industry, the challenge is understandably even greater.

In a traditional work setting, the safety manager has the benefit of being able to identify and control hazards within the workplace. Simply by taking the time to walk through the workplace and be observant, a safety manager within a manufacturing plant can identify guards that have been removed from machines, employees failing to follow safe work procedures, etc.

However, within the trucking industry, much of the work setting (with the exception of the company property and the truck itself) is far from being under your control. The roadways, docks, parking lots and truck stops that comprise the drivers "work setting" can be a minefield of hazards that are completely out of your control.

Furthermore, in a traditional work setting the safety manager has the benefit of employee supervision. Unsafe acts can be observed and corrected on the spot by supervisors who are working in the same general area as the employees for the entire work shift.

However, within the trucking industry drivers are unsupervised virtually 100% of the time. Unsafe acts, such as jumping from the steps of the cab, yanking a fifth wheel release while in an awkward position, or not using proper body mechanics while lifting, go unnoticed far more often than not. Similarly, drivers who perform daily tasks in a safe manner go unrewarded.

This challenge forces safety directors who are ambitious and aggressive about preventing driver injuries to think "outside the box." This

newsletter provides a look at how one *outside the box* solution could work to produce results in a your company.

The method is simple both in concept and implementation. But before we delve into how and why this might work for you, we should first define what we would like to accomplish.

Because so much of the drivers' "work setting" is beyond their control, one of our primary goals is for drivers to avoid behaviors that have a strong association with injuries. More specifically, we'd like drivers not to jump when getting out of their cab. We'd like drivers to anticipate a shifted load when opening their trailer doors. We'd like drivers to use a hook when pulling the fifth wheel release. And so on.



As suggested by the title of this article, a simple questionnaire may be a tool that can be used to help trucking industry address the unique challenge of having unsupervised employees functioning in work settings over which the employer has little control.

The questionnaire lists approximately 5 behaviors (in question format) that you want to impact, asking drivers to self-report on their actions relative to the behavior. For example:

Today I didn't try to carry anything when getting in or out of the cab. Both my hands were free and I used them to help maintain 3 points of contact every time I got in and out.

1 ----- 10
Never Always

The questionnaire is completed daily by each driver and is submitted anonymously.

Drivers can (and should) be told from the very start that they are participating in a study to determine the effectiveness of the questionnaire as a safety management tool. It should be

explained to drivers that there's no benefit to completing the questionnaire inaccurately. There's no prize for the "right answer" and no punishment for the "wrong answer."

A sociological principal called the "Hawthorne Effect" explains why such a simple process may produce desirable effects. Applied in this context, the Hawthorne Effect implies that when employees know management is paying attention, employees improve their behavior to meet or exceed expectations. In short, the mere fact that drivers are being asked to report on their behavior could have a strong enough effect to influence a change in their behavior.

Another explanation for why such a simple process may produce desirable effects is explained by "top of mind presence," a marketing principal that was explored in a prior issue of this newsletter. "Top of mind presence" is the term used to explain why we instinctively think of a particular brand whenever a certain product is mentioned (such as fried chicken, diapers or soda pop). By placing key behavioral safety issues in front of each driver every day through the use of the above-described questionnaire, you are not only planting a seed in the mind of the driver (as with traditional safety training), but you are watering that seed every time they see the questionnaire. Ideally, the key behavioral safety issues that are placed in front of the drivers in these questionnaires will become so entrenched in their minds, that the first thought that they have upon exiting the truck will be "3 points of contact. The first thought that they have when repalletizing freight will be to "avoid twisting." And so on.

Does this just sound too simplistic to work? One company had some of its drivers describing the process as a "personal safety meeting." Other drivers described it as "just another form" to fill-out. But regardless of what the drivers "say" our goal is to impact what they "do," and there's reason to believe that this works.

As a safety director of a trucking company, you don't have the luxury of direct supervision, nor do you exercise control over much of the work setting. If you want to succeed in impacting voluntary driver behavior, you're going to need to think *outside the box*.