

Elements of a FLEET SAFETY Program

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On December 8, 1985, I was in college studying for my final exams when an event occurred that changed my life forever. The next morning at the early hour of 2:00 a.m., I was abruptly awakened by a knock on my apartment door to discover that my older brother, "Jake," was killed in a car accident. As you can imagine, I was devastated by this shocking news because Jake was not only my big brother; he was my mentor, my coach, and my closest friend. It was even more shocking to learn that the other party failed to stop after the crash who was later discovered to be a ranch employee operating heavy equipment on a public road while under the influence of alcohol.

Unfortunately, preventable tragedies such as this personal story occur too frequently affecting many families. Over 42,000 motor vehicle fatalities occur each year in the U.S. (according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics), making motor vehicle accidents the leading cause of death from unintentional injury in the general population and also the leading cause of occupational fatalities. During 2000, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) (Blincoe et. al.) estimated that the total cost of motor vehicle crashes (including both occupational and non-occupational incidents) was \$230.6 billion, which is approximately 2.4% of the gross domestic product. As a result, in addition to humanitarian reasons, there are also significant savings opportunities for firms who own and/or operate fleets by establishing and developing a proactive fleet safety culture.

Whether you have a commercial fleet or use company vehicles to support other business activities, an effective fleet safety program is the cornerstone of preventing potentially large losses. This paper summarizes some important elements of a fleet safety program.

Management Policy Statement

As with any loss prevention program, a clearly written management policy statement should be written and signed by upper management that communicates management's support and commitment to the fleet safety management program. Management should demonstrate that cooperation from all employees is expected and required.

Responsibilities

A fleet safety manager should be designated to coordinate the fleet safety efforts. Additionally, the responsibilities of management and supervisors, drivers, and mechanics should be outlined and communicated to employees.

"You can't escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today." – Abraham Lincoln

Driver Qualification and Selection

The driver qualification and selection process includes the following:

- Obtain and review an application form (designed for drivers) filled out in the driver's own handwriting.
- Conduct a face-to-face interview to further evaluate the applicant's job knowledge and qualifications.
- Obtain and check references to verify information obtained from the application to further assess past performance.
- Obtain a current and valid driver's licenses, compatible for the type(s) of vehicle(s) to be driven.
- Obtain and review the applicant's motor vehicle record (MVR) and determine if it meets your company's MVR criteria.
- Administer a written test on traffic regulations to the applicant.
- Administer a driving test to the applicant.

Substance abuse screening, legal driving history, and experience with other carriers are the top

screening criteria based on a survey of motor carriers with exceptional safety records (Mejza et.al. 26). MVRs should be obtained and reviewed prior to hire and at least annually. MVRs are subject to Fair Credit Reporting Act, and employers are subject to significant penalties if MVRs (or other background investigation reports) are improperly collected and used. Consult with your Human Resources Department to ensure compliance with the Fair Credit Reporting Act. However, in general, you should inform the individual about your company's requirement for obtaining and reviewing MVRs, obtain permission from the individual to do so, provide the employee with a copy of his/her MVR, control access to the MVRs, and inform the individual if his/her MVR meets the company's MVR criteria (Shoeman, Stava, and Wolin 4).

For commercial drivers, medical examinations are required in accordance with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations (49 CFR Part 391 Subpart E).

Figure 1 includes sample driver qualification criteria.

Figure 1 – Sample Driver Qualification Criteria

1. Be at least 21 years of age.
2. Be able to understand oral and written instructions.
3. Have the ability to understand the English language (both written and oral).
4. Be able to drive/operate the equipment that he/she is expected to drive.
5. Must have at least two years of verifiable professional driving experience within the last four years driving the type of vehicle applying to operate.
6. Possess the appropriate driver's license from the state of residence.
7. Have an acceptable driving record, which includes the following:
 - No more than two convictions for moving violations during the five years immediately prior to the date of application.
 - No major violations in the previous five years. (Major violations include, but are not limited to, excessive speed and committing a crime while driving.)
 - No convictions for any controlled substance-related driving offense during the previous five years.
 - Not have been involved in more than two preventable accidents involving personal injury or property damage during the previous five years
8. Pass a written and road test.
9. Comply with substance abuse testing requirements.
10. Able to comply with all the regulations and requirements of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations.

Rules, Policies, and Regulations

Two federal agencies in the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) – the FMCSA and the NHTSA – hold the primary responsibility for developing and enforcing safety standards related to vehicle design and operation. Motor carrier safety is the responsibility of the FMCSA and minimum design and safety performance requirements of motor vehicle equipment are regulated by the NHTSA. Key provisions of applicable regulations should be incorporated in the company's fleet safety program. In addition, a set of safe driving behavior rules (i.e. "rules of the road") should be established and communicated to supervisors and drivers. Each rule should clearly communicate the desired and/or prohibited behavior(s) (e.g., "before starting a vehicle, drivers must inspect the vehicle exterior and the area around the vehicle"). Avoid using general statements such as "drive safely" or "drive carefully" as such terms are vague and subjective.

Driver Orientation and Training

Training should include an orientation on company rules and procedures, new hire driver training, supervisory and management training, regulatory training, and continued in-service training. An accident is most likely to occur during the first 18 months of a driver's tenure with a company and many organizations experience 30 to 40 percent of their fleet accidents from new hires (Moser 40). Therefore, employers should provide some level of driver safety training for all drivers, even if he/she reportedly received extensive training in the past since (in most cases) the quality of the training that was provided is unknown. The new hire driver training should also include a behind-the-wheel driving segment.

Supervisors and managers should receive the same driver training as drivers. In addition, supervisors and managers should receive instructions and training on how to conduct an observation/commentary drive to observe a driver's skills and provide constructive feedback on a regular basis. Continued in-service training may consist of regular fleet safety meetings on topics such as hours of service regulations, pre-trip inspections, accident notification, federal safety regulations, post trip inspections, defensive driving skills, etc.).

The fleet safety manager, supervisors, and drivers should regular meet to analyze the company's incidents and determine how their safety performance can improve. Additional training may be warranted based on periodic performance evaluations and observations of drivers' behaviors.

Applicable regulatory training e.g., OSHA's hazard communication training, DOT's hazardous materials (i.e., HM126F) training, etc. should also be planned and coordinated.

Monitoring Driver Performance

Monitoring driver performance includes monitoring drivers' hours of service in accordance with Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations (49 CFR Part 395), conducting ride-along observations, and providing regular feedback and recognition.

All CDL drivers are subject to the hours of service regulations (49 CFR Part 395) and must complete a daily log (and/or time sheet). These regulations ensure drivers are afforded the opportunity to get adequate rest so they can perform safely. Non-CDL drivers of company vehicles may not have to complete a log or comply with the hours-of-service regulations but all drivers should manage their workday and work week so that they are not driving when tired.

Establishing a formal ride-along observation process provides an excellent opportunity to monitor driver performance, provide one-on-one coaching to drivers, and provide constructive feedback, including verbal praise. Such formal observations also provide a basis for giving public recognition, issuing congratulatory letters from management, and other acts of recognizing safe driving behavior. Conversely, the root causes of poor driving behavior should be identified and corrective actions taken as needed.

Since drivers are likely to have different skill and experience levels, consider categorizing drivers based on their level of risk as a means to systematically allocate accident prevention resources. More resources such as training and supervision should be directed towards those drivers that have the highest risk profiles since 80 percent of crashes are typically caused by 20 percent of fleet drivers (Moser 40).

Vehicle Inspection and Maintenance

DOT regulations require a pre-trip vehicle inspection at the beginning of each shift or trip. Drivers are responsible for the condition of the vehicle being driven and for the load. A thorough pre-trip inspection is important for several reasons:

- To ensure that the tractor, trailer and cargo are not dangerous or a hazard to themselves or others on the road.
- To ask any questions about the load and check shipping papers while in the yard.

- To reduce down time and freight delays created by undetected mechanical problems.
- To reduce vehicle maintenance costs.

Federal and state regulations require certain inspection criteria, which should be provided or at least referenced in your fleet safety program. Such criteria include specific items to be inspected, frequency, procedures, and required qualifications of the inspector(s). Written vehicle condition reports should be completed at the end of each shift or trip. Reports should be handed in promptly so that repairs can be made before vehicles are driven again. Preventive maintenance should be performed in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. An effective vehicle maintenance program will reduce down time, which will subsequently assist in achieving customer satisfaction.

Substance Abuse Screening

CDL drivers are required by DOT regulations to participate in substance abuse procedures. Such procedures need to be documented in a written substance abuse program and should include pre-employment, random, post-accident, for reasonable cause, and return-to-duty testing for controlled substances as well as specific substance abuse screening procedures as required by 49 CFR Part 382.

Incident Reporting and Investigation

Incidents and crashes should be reported and investigate immediately and drivers should thoroughly understand the organizations protocol for reporting vehicle incidents. A primary purpose of investigating fleet incidents is to identify causal factors and trends and implement corrective actions to minimize the recurrence of similar incidents. Establishing an incident review committee is useful in reviewing incidents to determine the preventability, recommend control measures, and analyze incident investigation data.

A checklist for drivers is a useful tool to help ensure that all steps that need to be taken after a vehicle mishap are performed.

The Bottom Line

Companies that develop and maintain an effective fleet safety program may see fleet incidents drop by 40 to 50 percent initially and 20 to 30 percent on an ongoing basis (Moser 40). Management's commitment to establishing a thorough driver qualification and selection process, "rules of the road"

for drivers, comprehensive training program, driver performance monitoring and feedback process, vehicle inspection and maintenance program, substance abuse program, and incident investigation procedures and analysis are elements that contribute to a fleet safety culture that are needed to realize significant savings in both monetary and humanitarian respects.

References

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