

Abstract 3

Fleet safety: Risk reduction for work related vehicle use

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Research has demonstrated that driving a vehicle for work is potentially one of the most dangerous workplace activities. Although organisations are required to meet legislative obligations under workplace health and safety in relation to work related vehicle use, organisations are often reluctant to acknowledge and address the risks associated with the vehicle as a workplace. Recent research undertaken investigating the challenges associated with driver and organisational aspects of fleet safety are discussed. This paper provides a risk management framework to assist organisations to meet legislative requirements and reduce the risk associated with vehicle use in the workplace. In addition the paper argues that organisations need to develop and maintain a positive fleet safety culture to proactively mitigate risk in an effort to reduce the frequency and severity of vehicle related incidents within the workplace.

Paper 3, Fleet safety: Risk reduction for work related vehicle use

In Australia fleet vehicle account for approximately 75% of all locally produced vehicles and more than half of all annual new vehicle registrations (AFMA, 2008) indicating that the majority of vehicles used in Australia are used for work purposes. Previous road safety research has demonstrated that road crashes are the most common form of work related fatalities (Haworth et al., 2000) and work related road crash injuries are also approximately twice as likely to result in death or permanent disability as other workplace injuries (Wheatley, 1997). The average time lost due to injury in work related road crashes is also greater than any other workplace claim (Stewart-Bogle, 1999). Workers compensation fatality claims show that vehicle accidents are the most likely mechanism of injury and are up to three times higher as the next most common mechanism of injury which is injury from chemicals or substance (Australian Safety and Compensation Council, 2006).

Unfortunately, although driving a vehicle could be considered one of the most dangerous activities within a workplace, many organisations risk management practices do not extend to the same level of diligence as other risky workplace activities (Davey, Wishart, Rowland, Freeman & Banks, 2008; Wishart, Davey & Rowland, 2004; Wishart & Davey, 2004). In order to address the fleet safety issue, future organisational strategies need to recognise the high risk associated with work driving and adopt thorough risk mitigation strategies in the workplace.

Safety Legislation and Risk Management Accountability

Arguably the most notable effect upon work related driving from an organisational point of view has been the increasing focus on the issue from a legal perspective within Australia (Rowland, Davey, Freeman & Wishart, 2008). While many organisations are committed to

maintaining the health and safety of employees within their traditional workplace, for many organisations this does not extend with the same level of commitment or diligence to work related road safety and risk management processes with their own vehicle fleet. Under all Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) acts in Australia, a vehicle used for the purpose of work is classified as an extension of the workplace under those OHS acts (Hoskins, 2003). Therefore, Australian Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) legislation, including State WHS Acts as well as accompanying regulations and codes of practice, impose legal obligations on employers and employees at workplaces to prevent or control hazards that may result in injury, illness or death. Risks must be assessed and control measures implemented and reviewed to prevent or minimise risks. Employers who fail to take reasonable care to avoid exposing employees and others (e.g., members of the public) to unnecessary risks of injury can face substantial fines and even imprisonment. Consequently, there are ample court judgements that demonstrate that an employer can be held liable through not discharging obligations and ensuring a safe system of work in relation to motor vehicle use for work: *Manning v Taroom Shire Council & Ors* [1994] QCA 430; *Suncorp Insurance & Finance v Workers Compensation Board of Queensland* [1990] 1 Qd.R. 185; *Curtin bros, (Qld) Pty Ltd v. FAI General Ins Co* [1995] 1 Qd.R. 142; *McEwan v. Gold Coast City Council* [1987] 1 Qd.R. 337; *Brew v. Workcover Queensland* [2004] 1 Qd.R 621.

Risk management is recognised as an integral part of good management practice (Grammeno, 2006) and legislative legal requirement. It is an interactive process consisting of steps, which, when undertaken in sequence, enable continual improvement in decision making. Risk management is the term applied to a logical and systematic method of establishing the context, identifying, analysing, treating, monitoring and communicating risks associated with any activity, function or process in a way that will enable organisations to minimize losses and maximize opportunities. The risk management process is not a one off

activity, but should be ongoing and a part of the organisational process of continuous improvement.

Currently, a national legislative model of workplace law is being developed and is set to commence in early 2012. While there is a trend toward harmonisation of national standards regarding OHS processes in Australia, the risk management of work related processes, policy and procedures related to work-related road safety will continue to be the responsibility and obligation of organisations.

Driver and organisational aspects

Traditionally in attempting to address fleet safety risk, work related driving risk management strategies and research has primarily focussed on driver aspects such as behaviour, attitudes and motivations. However, along with individual factors, fleet safety risk management must comprehensively investigate and address influences within the organisational context. For example workload, work pressure, organisational driving culture, and management commitment to fleet safety. For instance, recent research has investigated fleet safety climate, self-reported work-related driving behaviour and past work-related crash and offence history, and found a significant positive relationship between fleet climate perceptions and safe work-related driving behaviour (Freeman, Davey, Wishart & Rowland, 2008; Rowland, Davey, Freeman & Wishart, 2009; Rowland, Freeman, Davey & Wishart, 2007; Wills, Watson & Biggs, 2005). In contrast, a perception of pressure by drivers to meet organisational demands relating to productivity and the completion of job-related tasks revealed that those drivers were more likely to exhibit aberrant driving behaviours (Rowland, Davey, Freeman & Wishart, 2008a). Despite this growing body of evidence industry operating vehicle fleets are still reluctant to address organisational aspects influencing driver safety (Freeman et al., 2008).

Instead improvement strategies primarily focus on the driver and do not often address

organisational influences. A driver focussed approach, although providing some short term improvements in work related road safety often fails to provide an appropriate framework and supporting organisational procedures to facilitate ongoing long term improvements. Therefore even though organisations may believe they are addressing their work related safety issues primarily with drivers, they often fail to address central workplace issues that increase work related road safety risk. Many organisations appear to have a proportion of drivers who could be considered “high risk” due to particular personal attributes and behaviours, some organisations could be considered more “at risk” than others due to the particular levels of work related road safety risk mitigation strategies implemented or otherwise. It is not surprising, therefore, that fleet safety practitioners and researchers are calling for organisations to become more proactive with work-related road safety and apply the same workplace health and safety principles used in other areas of the organisation.

Fleet Safety Risk Reduction

Under all state Workplace Health and Safety Acts and accompanying regulations and codes of practice industry organisations have statutory obligations to ensure the safety of all persons at the workplace, including work-related vehicles. However, organisations may discharge these obligations by preventing or controlling hazards that may result in injury, illness or death. Reece (2001) proposes a number of key factors that should be considered within any health and safety system or program and thus vehicle use, including management commitment and employee involvement; hazard identification and assessment; hazard prevention and control; information and training; and evaluation of program effectiveness.

Management commitment has been recognised as an integral component for the implementation of successful safety programs, systems and practices (Blake, Kohler, Rask, Davis & Naylor, 2006). Proactive and positive management commitment is the driving force behind any successful safety program as it enables effective allocation of resources and

conveys to employees that management values safety and is committed to the health and safety of their staff. Furthermore, consultation with and involvement of employees is necessary to ensure that accountabilities, responsibilities and processes associated with fleet safety are reasonable and practicable within normal work procedures and tasks for employees.

Risk management is an essential element of an organisation's Workplace Health and Safety legislative obligation and a process for the prevention of vehicle incidents occurring. Risk management involves a five-step process that assists organisations/individuals in the identification and management of health and safety problems. For example, identification and assessment of the hazards and associated risks, implementing sufficient safety controls or strategies to proactively prevent incidents occurring, and continuously reviewing and monitoring the process to ensure that strategies/controls are achieving their purpose and any changes to the situation are adequately identified and actions taken to mitigate risk (Reece, 2001). The risk management process is not a one off activity, but should be ongoing and a component of the organisational process of continuous improvement (Gadd, Keeley, & Balmforth, 2004).

Additionally, developing and maintaining a positive fleet safety culture is essential to ensure continuation of risk reduction within an organisation. The characteristics that have been found to underlie a positive safety culture within an organisation include safety knowledge, user/interpersonal skills and appropriate attitudes and beliefs (Dingsdag, Biggs, Sheahan, & Cipolla, 2006). Furthermore, training, education, knowledge of rules, good communications and interpersonal skills coupled with motivational factors and actions that enforce and monitor safety are key factors in contributing to a safety culture (Dingsdag, Biggs & Sheahan, 2008). These characteristics of a positive and effective safety culture should be engrained in the corporate governance of organisations so as to promote zero

tolerance towards work practices (including work-related driving) that increase injury risk.

Conclusion

There is a diversity of organisational, behavioural and cultural factors that contribute to work-related road incidents that are not acknowledged nor addressed by organisations. Although a legal requirement, Workplace Health and Safety including Risk Management provides organisations with a framework to systematically address work-related driving safety risks. There is a need for organisations to firstly recognise not only the legal implications of a vehicle as a workplace but also acknowledge the high risk associated with work related vehicle use. Secondly once this has been acknowledged, organisations should embark upon a risk mitigation process with the same level of commitment and diligence that is directed toward other workplace hazards and risk. These strategies combined with a positive safety culture may enable organisations to not only mitigate their legal obligations associated with workplace health and safety but also proactively reduce the burden of fleet incidents.

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