

Is Driving a Truck Hazardous to Your Health?



TruckSure
By Trevor Toohill

In the June issue of Truck Journal I wrote about drivers' health as directed to the individual owner driver.

It is a topic I feel passionate about and I was recently engaged to address this issue for one of our clients who runs a large passenger transport fleet. The brief was to investigate health and wellness programs as applicable to the transport industry in general, and recommend to them a meaningful program for their company in particular.

During the course of researching the brief I discovered that my recommendation equally applies to fleet operators transporting all freight – both line haul and metro, logs and livestock, tankers and toys!

So this article is directed to all transport fleet operators concerned about driver health and wellbeing.

A Synthesis of Safety Practice

The "Commercial Truck and Bus Safety Synthesis 15", an extensive study of health and wellness challenges and best practices, notes that "most industrial health professionals say the return on investment (ROI) for a good wellness/disease management program is somewhere in the neighborhood of 3:1 to 4:1." It adds that the leading transportation companies in this area report a range of bottom-line benefits, including:

- Improved corporate image
- Controlling insurance premiums
- Continually improving safety records
- Maintaining corporate leadership
- Improving employee morale and job satisfaction
- Helping to attract and retain healthier, safer drivers

The road to those benefits is not without challenges, but today's affordable, software-based solutions for training, safety, health, and related areas can help considerably.

Should your company ramp up driver wellness efforts?

Here are four potential drivers:

1. Risk Management

Statistically, there is solid evidence that drivers who don't attend to wellness (diet, exercise, weight control, not smoking, stress, etc.) present increased risks for driving problems, absenteeism, and accidents.

The link between wellness and accidents is obvious with a high percentage of those involving cardiovascular disease, which afflicts many commercial drivers due to lifestyle and work-related factors. It's a real crash risk factor, and driver wellness

programs, which directly address many leading causes of cardiovascular disease, are an effective way to reduce the risk.

Sleep apnoea is another example showing it represented a two times to seven times increase in risk of motor vehicle crashes. Sleep apnoea is often preventable and almost always manageable – weight and physical activity, for example, are contributing factors.

Compliance issues aside, minimizing these risks, and any risk impacted by wellness, is just good business.

2. Cost Control

In an industry known for low profit margins, controlling costs is critical. Even relatively small driver wellness initiatives can deliver big results in this area. It is estimated that 50% to 70% of all illnesses and medical problems can be tied to a handful of lifestyle choices: obesity, smoking, inadequate exercise, poor nutrition, and inability to manage stress.

Would a 20% reduction in costs help your company?

3. Health Matters – More than Ever

First, let's acknowledge that drivers face unique challenges just by the nature of their jobs. Long hours of being sedentary while dealing with elevated stress from traffic, bad weather, deadlines, and so on are the norm. Options for good nutrition and exercise on the road are limited and require more planning and commitment. Additionally, drivers often face exposure to high noise levels, diesel exhaust, carbon monoxide, and other hazards. Some of these factors are unavoidable, which makes it even more critical to address health factors that can be improved.

The lifestyle choices and resulting conditions that affect drivers most are the staples of any good wellness program: weight, smoking, exercise, stress, cholesterol, and high blood pressure. Regular exercisers achieved higher job performance ratings, stayed longer with their company, and had lower absenteeism rates, than those who did not exercise. Another cited study showed that employees who received stress management assistance saw doctors 34 percent less than did other employees.

Addressing health and wellness is also becoming more important because of the aging workforce. As more workers enter their 50s and 60s, companies will see increases in lost time, and other age-related problems. The percentage of older workers is even higher in transportation than in

most industries. It is estimated that up to 25 percent of commercial drivers will be older than 65 by 2025. Putting strong health and wellness programs in place now is the best long-term strategy to cope with this trend.

Of course, a wellness program pays off only if drivers participate. Low participation undermined some early programs and remains a legitimate concern. But drivers, like the general population, are more aware of health today and have more reasons to see health and wellness efforts as benefits rather than intrusions.

4. Be a Good Corporate Citizen – not just the dollars

With rising fuel prices and operational costs hitting already slim profit margins throughout the industry, anything that provides a competitive edge is critical. As examples in this report show, many top transportation companies see strong driver wellness programs as part of what keeps them at the top. In reviewing such companies, "Synthesis 15" concludes that "such programs lead to improved employee morale, lower driver turnover, reduced medical and ACC costs, and improved profits. Such forward thinking human capital strategies can help a company to maintain a position of excellence in the transportation industry".

In the report's Trucking Industry Manager Survey, the reasons that company managers provided for investing in driver wellness were equally telling: 84 % said "to reduce occupational injury," and "to enhance productivity," while 74 % said "to reduce accidents," and 68 % said to "reduce absenteeism." No matter what size your company is or what sector you're in, those all mean stronger business performance, reputation, and competitive position.

And it's not that difficult to start the ball rolling. Programs can be started simply by administering a health risk appraisal to drivers to determine the most pressing needs.

You have resources in place for driver safety and health compliance. Shouldn't you get more out of those resources than mandated certificates and temporarily appeased regulators? Clearly, everyone must find an approach that fits their culture, budget, and business objectives. But to ignore these issues is really not an option.

Next month I will offer some conclusions and recommendations as Part 2 of this article.

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