

PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

Thought Leadership:

Missing a trick: Safety of light vehicle drivers takes a 'back seat'

Increase safety, productivity at same time

OHS and Chain of Responsibility have become an everyday part of the transport business. However, getting everybody home safely has mostly focussed on general workplace safety or heavy vehicle drivers. When it comes to driving light vehicles for work, it seems we're 'missing a trick' that could increase safety and productivity at the same time.

The economic consequences of motor vehicle crashes globally are estimated at more than [\\$500 billion](#) each year. In Australia, work-related traffic crashes are the number one cause of workplace death, accounting for [33 per cent](#) of all work-related fatalities. And with one third of road users being work-related drivers, there is a great opportunity to improve workplace road safety.

Government and industry efforts to improve workplace road safety have mainly focussed on heavy vehicle drivers, through things like [Chain of Responsibility](#), and occupational health and safety legislation.

When it comes to light vehicle drivers, there is little regulatory or industry focus on improving workplace road safety, meaning regulators are missing an opportunity to improve safety for a large percentage of the driving population and business owners are missing out on productivity and efficiency gains while improving safety.

Where the opportunity lies

Researcher [Sharon Newnam](#) has worked in road safety for 15 years. Along with colleague [Amanda Warmerdam](#), also from the [Monash University Accident Research Centre](#), Sharon investigated the risk management and organisational practices that support and restrict safe driver behaviour among work-related light vehicle drivers.

As part of the research, the pair interviewed almost 1200 people in the transport industry (see breakout box) to find out about the organisation's work-related driving practices and policies, how they were implemented and what consideration was given to driver safety.

Their aim was to explore how industry management practices influenced safe driver behaviour, and therefore the potential for management to create an environment that supported safe driving, and to map risk management practices in workplace road safety.

What they found was a lack of integration of workplace road safety into OHS and organisational systems, and that leadership practices related to safety while driving were missing or not supporting light vehicle drivers, mainly because driving was usually considered secondary to the primary job role.



PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

Inside knowledge

1200 transport industry people interviewed:

- 911 'occupational drivers' across 37 organisations
- 161 supervisors with responsibility for those drivers
- 83 senior managers in OHS or fleet management.

So what?

Sharon and Amanda's research confirms that workplace road safety needs to be better integrated within OHS and operational activities within organisations, and that light vehicle driver safety needs to be considered when management practices are being designed and implemented.

The result would be improved safety as well as productivity and efficiency gains for organisations.

"There has to be investment from the management level to start off with," Sharon said, "and that not only involves the financial investment in terms of resources to devote to a fleet safety risk management program, for example, but it's looking specifically at the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the safety management of drivers, including supervisors of drivers, to ensure there are efficient practices in place within the organisation.

"At the moment, we don't have clear roles and responsibilities within workplace road safety and the Chain of Responsibility for light vehicle drivers, the effect being that management and organisational systems just aren't set up in a way to support safe driving behaviour.

"You get a situation where safety is often given the back seat – pun intended – to productivity and efficiency demands."

Sharon suggests regulators and the industry both need to play a clear role. Regulators can help put light vehicle workplace road safety on the agenda, focussing on education as well as compliance, while industry operators can consider it as part of everyday operational practices.

"If you think about the extent of the problem, you've got 30 per cent of the traffic volume at any one time being work related drivers, so you could estimate that a high percentage of the road traffic injury and fatality statistics are those work-related drivers," she said.

"There is enough evidence to suggest this is a big problem. Organisational data suggests this is a big problem. So regulators need to take responsibility and start prioritising the light vehicle work-related driver more within prevention efforts.

"The motivation for employers is not only from the obvious benefits of having a safe and healthy workforce, but you're also talking about productivity gains as well. If your people consider their health and wellbeing valued and prioritised by leadership, they're going to be more efficient in their work roles.

"There's a lot of research to establish the relationship between productivity, efficiency and safety."



PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

The take-home message

Research has established a direct relationship between safety outcomes, including performance and injury rates, and how much safety is embedded within daily organisational practices. These findings highlight the role of senior managers in the safety management of light vehicle drivers through risk management and broader operational practices and provide impetus for industry, regulators and government to play a more influential role in the systematic management of workplace road safety.

Workplace road safety recommendations

(grouped by WHO five pillars of road safety)

Road safety management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared ownership for driver safety between management and drivers Safety policy and procedure communicated and understood, using range of communication methods so messages are accessible at all levels Novel technologies to assist communication, but retain human element
Safer roads and mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Journey management policy Integrate new technology into reporting systems and evaluate them
Safer vehicles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Risk assessments to determine individual driver needs Electronic systems to manage vehicle maintenance Empower fleet managers to allow more informed decisions based on safety and ROI for vehicle procurement Consider safety implications of increasing fleet vehicle age
Safer road users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandatory induction and training in workplace road safety programs; stop relying on licence checks Supervisor/manager-level responsibilities around driver behaviour
Post-crash response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve (driving-related) incident reporting processes and train staff to use them Standardised electronic incident reporting systems Relevant incident-related data, integrated in safety management practices