

What a difference a driver makes

by: Bob Alkire



Hiring and retaining highly qualified drivers is among an operator's greatest challenges. With increased ridership and greater focus on public transportation, the pressure to find safe and responsible drivers becomes more crucial as bus operations experience further expansion, but it is not necessarily risky business.

With human lives onboard, the implications for highly skilled and conscientious drivers and safe operations are great. Business owners cannot ignore the increased risk

associated with increased ridership, and must address the issues with a heightened focus on risk management strategy. The drivers on the front line hold the keys to lower insurance premiums. While recruitment programs can help attract reliable drivers, they also require the backing of a well-defined risk management plan. The first lesson is that the most successful risk management program takes time to develop, and the company will rarely see results immediately. Nonetheless, no one can overstate the importance of implementing a comprehensive risk management strategy and maintaining it effectively.

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A November 2008 article from the Arizona Daily Star, Tucson, AZ, underscores the excessive amount of money any type of transportation operation can waste over time on sub-par employees in critical situations.

In this isolated case, a school bus driver ended up costing the Tucson Unified School District \$4.5M as the result of aggressive driving habits. The story recounts a litany of issues including the driver's score of 65 out of 100 on a defensive driving test, in which 80 percent is considered passing. This driver is still at the wheel despite frequent complaint calls. The district even extended his probationary period an additional three months to a total of nine months due to concerns about his driving, not to mention a personal file filled with tickets for minor accidents and traffic infractions.

This driver's record culminates with his running down a teacher while making an illegal left turn with a bus loaded with students. Financially and personally, the impact of his actions proved catastrophic.

Besides the obvious implications of this horrific scene, the blatant warning signs that littered his record are almost more disturbing. This situation further illuminates the

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importance to continually train and monitor the performance of all employees. Roughly 95 percent of vehicular accidents are the result of driver behaviors, while billions of dollars have gone to research to improve road and vehicle safety. Not enough is being done to direct attention to the root cause of the majority of accidents that occur annually.

The time has come for greater vigilance in employee selection.

Role designation is a crucial component

As with the case in Arizona, a risk management system may not be altogether lacking, but it can certainly breakdown. Each individual in the chain plays a specific and crucial role in administering safety policies, and everyone shares in keeping one another and the system in check.

The driver in Tucson is a prime example. He disregarded the rules of the road. Management seemingly ignored signs that indicated he was an unfit employee, and for too long his behavior went unchecked.

When company standards break down and the complaints start coming, training and testing may not be enough. It may signal sterner action that does not rule out dismissal. Apathy is its own transgression. When disaster strikes, the correct and immediate response is as paramount as all the measures to avoid risk in the first place. A pre-emptive approach requires the realization that at some point something will happen, a loss will occur, and a thorough, logistical plan to deal with the inevitable is essential.

Employee selection is an ongoing, not a one time deal. A standard hiring criteria and application protocol must include reference checks, a review of MVRs, a road test and orientation. However, it is just as crucial to implement programs to continually train and re-educate employee policies and practices that include review periods and spell out any impending disciplinary actions.

A transportation company that keeps risk management at the forefront deserves skilled, competent and conscientious drivers. On the same hand, those drivers deserve management's attention to the steps necessary for a safe and pleasant working environment.

At the core, it is the drivers who keep society moving, as passengers rely on their skills and professionalism to move them both quickly and safely. 5Star Specialty Programs understands the extent to which all matters concerning vehicle drivers, from recruiting and hiring, background checks and monitoring to ongoing training, tip the scales in the risk management strategy.

5Star Specialty Programs commends the service and professionalism of all bus and motorcoach operators, and is especially proud to sponsor the BUSRide Safe Driver Hall of Fame, which continues to honor the best in the business.

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