In a COVID-19 world, driver safety is more important than ever
As the world collectively fights against the COVID-19 pandemic, we acknowledge the pivotal role that industries who provide essential goods and services (such as delivering medical supplies to hospitals) play in moving the world forward. Yes, they were certainly important before this but with these industries now working harder than before and in challenging circumstances, they need our support and skills more than ever.

Even though the current situation is constantly changing, global governments and their various departments are doing their best to put temporary measures in place to accommodate and support local economies, local industries and employees.

At a time when safety is more important than ever, if you operate a fleet - driver safety should not only be a concern for the sake of your company’s future economic prosperity but it's also in the interest of the public at large. During this time, the term “driver safety” has now taken on two meanings for fleets. Driver safety not only refers to making sure drivers don’t engage in risky driving behaviors (such as speeding) and avoid crashes but now it also includes ensuring drivers practice hygiene and is aware of cleanliness at all times, especially when they regularly come into contact with other people.

Taking both types of driver safety into consideration is important in helping you reduce your fleet risk. Firstly, physically healthy drivers mean that they can come into work as they usually do. This means they can keep on delivering services and goods to those who need it, and keep your company going.

Secondly, drivers who drive safely are less likely to get into crashes so there’s less risk of them needing to take off sick. By keeping your focus on both these types of driver safety, you can also generate greater societal benefits. Drivers are kept alive and healthy enough to return to their loved ones at the end of each shift and your fleet’s due diligence is keeping the health system from becoming overwhelmed, something that is a huge issue to keep in mind during a pandemic.

Now’s the time to step up to the plate and protect both your drivers’ physical health and their safety on the road. Here are some measures you can put in place now:

► Protect your drivers’ physical health

To know how to protect your drivers, you must first know how COVID-19 is spread.

According to the WHO, COVID-19 is mainly spread from person-to-person and contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. It is spread between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 1.5 metres), through the respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or even talks and, by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching one’s own mouth, nose or possibly eyes¹.

Of course, this disease is new so there is still much to learn about how it spreads and how severe it can become. However, we do already know that there are certain measures you can put in place to prevent the spread of diseases that are similar to COVID-19.
Let’s walk you through these preventative measures and how you can apply it to your drivers’ everyday lives:

- Hand washing and hand sanitizing are extremely important. Any time your driver has access to facilities where they can wash their hands, they need to do so. For those times that they do not have access to a sink, soap and water, provide your drivers with hand sanitizer (containing at least 60% alcohol) that they can always keep in their vehicle. Teach your drivers that they must wash their hands for at least 20 seconds (the time spent washing matters a lot in effectively killing germs), to avoid touching their face and to cleanse their hands after they’ve touched surfaces or objects.

- Avoid close contact with other people (in other words, practice social distancing). If your drivers are delivering products or services to customers, they need to do it in a way that keeps a 1.5 metres distance between them and the customer. This extends to colleagues as well. If you need to communicate with your drivers or they need to communicate amongst themselves, use telematics technology and online communication tools to do so. These tools can be used to provide training, feedback and instructions on jobs without the need for physical contact.

- Use protective equipment. It’s your responsibility to protect your drivers during this time by providing them with face masks that cover their nose and mouth (only if you have the ability to procure them) as well as gloves to prevent them from potentially spreading germs or contracting COVID-19 while on the road. Also, remember to teach them to that they also need to clean or replace their protective equipment in between jobs as well because germs can cling to masks and gloves long after they’ve been used. Remember to check whether the equipment you’ve acquired is reusable or not. If they are not, provide an appropriate bin for disposal.

- Disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily. This includes the inside and outside of vehicles including the steering wheel and door handles. Get your drivers into a routine where they disinfect their vehicles (and protective equipment) at the beginning and end of each shift and provide them the tools to do so.

► Protect your drivers from crashes

As we’ve explained, driver safety in terms of getting rid of bad habits that may lead to crashes is another way of protecting them during this pandemic. If you have already implemented telematics technology to monitor and manage driving behavior, you’re already on the right track. Telematics technology provides you with a variety of tools to keep track of your drivers’ movements, the jobs they’ve completed, the hours they’ve been driving and what driving habits may be endangering them on the road.
Now, if you’re in an industry delivering essential goods or services during this time, you may have seen an increase in activity. This means your drivers are likely having to work longer hours or squeeze in more jobs to keep up with demand. This increase in activity along with the stress that comes with dealing with difficult circumstances can easily lead to drivers becoming fatigued, an issue all fleets should be keeping a close eye on.

What many might not know is that sleep deprivation can have similar effects on a person’s body as drinking alcohol. For example, being awake for 18 hours straight makes you drive the same as someone with a blood alcohol level of .05². Driving tired leads to a decrease in concentration and slower reaction times which increases the risk of the driver getting into an accident. Drivers can become fatigued for many reasons but what you need to focus on if you’re managing a fleet is the following:

- **Time of day**: The most common times drivers tend to fall asleep at the wheel are early morning (2am - 6am) and early afternoon (2pm – 4pm). This is when a person’s body clock takes a natural dip that causes drowsiness and reduced concentration³.

- **Stress**: Work-related stress is nothing new. We’ve all experienced it at some point. However, it has become even more pronounced during this pandemic as people are increasingly worried about their own health, the health of their loved ones, job security and much more.

The problem is that two typical symptoms of stress are tiredness and difficulty concentrating.

- **Driving for long periods**: Driving performance deteriorates after two hours of continuous driving meaning slower reaction times and, of course, decreased concentration. The longer a person drives, the more rest they need to recover their driving performance⁴.

So, what can you do about all the above? A lot, actually. Monitoring your drivers’ behavior is one of the first ways. One of the best tools to use is video telematics. Installing and using in-cab camera technology (such as MiX Vision) gives you an inside look into what is happening with your drivers while they’re on the road. You can go back and look at video of your drivers at times when certain driving events were triggered to see if fatigue may have played a role.

Many in-cab camera technology now has live streaming functionality (including MiX Vision) which you can use to monitor your drivers in real time at points during the day when you know they are most vulnerable to falling victim to fatigue (as discussed in the above bullet points). Should you see that a driver is nodding off or not fully concentrating, you can contact them via the in-cab tools at your disposal.
It is also possible to lower the level at which a driving event is triggered to record video more frequently. This means more video footage can be captured for you to review and you can keep a closer eye on your drivers. It might even help you to recognize a pattern of bad habits that may be developing that could potentially lead to a bigger problem in the future. Prevention is better than cure as they always say.

Additionally, be more aware of stress within your fleet. Check in with your drivers on a regular basis to see how they’re feeling. For example, if they communicate that they’re feeling overwhelmed with their workload, see if you can adjust their job schedule to allow more breathing room. Some telematics technology (such as MyMiX) offer job scheduling capabilities where you can assign or reassign jobs to drivers at the touch of a button. There is the possibility that drivers might be hesitant to discuss their stress levels with their fleet manager for fear of being viewed as not capable of coping. To mitigate this, familiarize yourself with the symptoms of stress. If you see extreme stress manifesting in a driver, have an open conversation with them while reassuring them that it’s normal to feel stress and then offer support in whichever way your company can.

Let’s also look at vehicle maintenance. Your fleet’s vehicle health is another important element in keeping your drivers safe during this time. This means frequent and on-time maintenance as well as immediate repairs when a problem does pop up. This is where on-board telematics technology and the engine data it captures and reports on comes into play.

This technology helps in two ways. First off, the software that it usually comes with keeps track of when your vehicles have been serviced and when they’re due for their next service. Reminders are sent to the relevant persons before it’s due. This means you can schedule time for a service months in advance to ensure you get an appointment exactly when you need it. This is especially helpful now as you can contact whoever services your fleet’s vehicles to see whether they can take your vehicle(s) on and also ask what safety precautions they have put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to your drivers when the vehicle is returned to the fleet.

Secondly, engine data can help you spot issues that may not be apparent to the driver while operating the vehicle. These issues can include an overheating engine, high oil pressure, low battery voltage and so on. Should these issues occur during a trip, the fleet manager or other relevant person is notified, and the driver is given live, in-cab feedback. This helps you and your driver to take immediate action to avoid causing further damage to the engine. The action to take can either include the driver returning to home base immediately or stopping where it’s safe to wait for assistance and a new vehicle to arrive.

By heeding to these engine warnings, you can prevent your drivers from experiencing an unexpected breakdown and getting stuck on the side of the road, exposing themselves to potential danger. Less breakdowns equals less downtime and downtime is something that cannot be afforded when essential services or products need to be provided.
Taking preventative measures using engine data and telematics software also saves you money. This is because your vehicles’ engines will have longer lifespans and thus won’t need to be replaced before their time. You also get unfit vehicles off the road so your drivers can continue to safely fulfil their duties without worrying about engine failure. Saving money during the pandemic is crucial as it keeps your business going and, in turn, provides you the opportunity to offer job security to your drivers.

One last thing to help incentivize drivers to keep going during these difficult times is to provide them with daily feedback via messaging, in-app communication or on the phone. This feedback can help give them a sense of purpose and give them reassurance that they’re doing well. The feedback should be based on driving events and the associated RAG score (if you utilize the MyMiX app, drivers can also monitor their performance on their own time). These daily feedback sessions should be a two-way street. Give your drivers the opportunity to, in turn, give you feedback on how you can improve their safety even more, whether that be related to driving habits or hygiene practices.

Try to keep all driver behavior feedback as positive as possible since criticism might lower driver morale in a time when it’s already struggling. In addition, give access to online training tools to keep drivers motivated and busy while also maintaining social distancing (no in-person training needed). Some companies might not think to continue with driver training at this time but it’s even more crucial now than ever. It keeps drivers focussed on a goal to cut through the chaos. If possible, include training related to how to keep safe during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide drivers access to information from trusted medical sources as well.

For more in-depth information you can read through the WHO’s recommendations on how to get your workplace ready for COVID-19.
Conclusion

What we’ve discussed in this white paper are all crucial ways you can help your drivers stay safe and healthy during this pandemic. However, don’t stop doing these things once it becomes business as usual again. All the tips we’ve given above will remain useful and valid long after COVID-19 has subsided.

Your drivers’ safety should always be a priority, no matter the circumstances.

Sources

1. World Health Organisation (WHO) https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1


About MiX Telematics

MiX Telematics is a leading global provider of fleet and mobile asset management solutions delivered as SaaS to more than 812,000 subscribers in over 120 countries. The company’s products and services provide enterprise fleets, small fleets and consumers with solutions for efficiency, safety, compliance and security. MiX Telematics was founded in 1996, has a number of offices globally as well as a network of more than 130 fleet partners worldwide. Shares are publicly traded on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE: MIX) and on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE: MIXT).

© Copyright MiX Telematics