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News

Alert but not overloaded - strategies to tackling driver fatigue

6 Feb 2015 As the go-to insurer for the transportation and logistics industry, Zurich has an acute understanding of road safety.

Zurich shared its expert knowledge and research about road safety with corporate customers at their first Road Safety Forum in November 2014.

One of the key note speakers was Dr Adam Fletcher of Integrated Safety Support.

Dr Fletcher focused on human-related risks in road safety, looking particularly at sleep, fatigue and distraction. 'Fatigue can build up more quickly in monotonous jobs, but it is also an issue if you have a job that is consistently demanding,' said Dr Fletcher.

Bored or overwhelmed – the sweet spot is in the middle

'If you have too little complexity and engagement, you can get bored and fall asleep. Too much workload and you easily become overwhelmed and make more errors. So there is this real sweet spot in the middle where you are well-rested, well-trained, experienced and you are getting enough engagement to keep alert but not overloaded.'

Dr Fletcher has worked with transport companies, changing schedules and shift lengths to simultaneously enhance safety and performance.

'Possibly one of the biggest results achieved was with a road transport company we worked with over a 12 months period. We were able to improve their driver retention by 250%. That was huge, saving the company money on recruitment, induction and training, while also being a clear positive indicator of workforce satisfaction. It was obvious to them that they were getting something right,' said Dr Fletcher.

Optimising work patterns for drivers

However, when it comes to long distance road transport, there are fewer variables to manipulate to optimise work patterns.

'You've got a monotonous task by nature, and you've got an individual, not a number of team members that can share the load. You can't manipulate those realities but there are still ways to optimise safety and performance. A lot of it comes down to building contingencies into the work schedule, so that drivers can be empowered to use a flexible approach to the management of their rest breaks. It is safer and ultimately more productive to build in around 20% of the schedule as discretionary time for drivers. That allows them to only work when they feel safe while also giving them the ability to work efficiently and productively for the business.

'When professional drivers can manage their own time, they will do what they need to do to be safe. And they *will* be productive, they *will* have good run times because they don't want to waste resources.'

Technology and fatigue management

Dr Fletcher believes that advances in technology offer good prospects for improved road safety. 'We've seen quantum leaps in individual monitoring with a number of reliable systems that can be used in road transport cabs to monitor drivers and tell them things they are often not fully conscious of, about the state of their own alertness or the risk of them having a micro sleep.

'But while there have been huge jumps in the technology, there hasn't been much successful progress with many companies' ability to get long-term benefit. Real benefits will only build when there is a clear focus on simultaneously creating value for individual drivers, the operations, and the company itself. If the drivers aren't feeling the benefit, it's not surprising that they find ways to subvert the data stream, sometimes by losing, breaking or forgetting to turn on the technology.'

Dr Fletcher has had a relationship with Zurich for over 15 years. 'I was keen to be involved in this workshop because it is a natural extension of the work I have done with Zurich on human-related risks and how they can be managed in complex corporate systems. We are both aiming to keep people safe and productive,' he said.


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