

Heavy vehicle accident investigation

By Corinne Watson

It has been said that it is easier to tell a heavy goods driver that he is no good in the bedroom than it is to criticise his driving ability.

As the cost of accidents increases to the operator in both vehicle and driver downtime, the longer term effects of emotional trauma and environmental and legal implications, especially in the case of dangerous goods events - companies are looking for the best way to minimise post accident investigation times and to get back on the road.

In any investigation, all parties will aim to protect their own interests, which can lead to blame, allegations of a cover up, suspicions, lost trust. Ultimately this all means wasted time, spiralling cost and a prolonged accident follow up.

The best accident investigations are based on objective evidence. In the past, this has come down to the last driving assessment of the driver, which may be over six months old, and his last log book entry, which is as accurate as any manual system. For the other party involved, there is likely to be even less evidence. Accident investigation has, therefore, had to rely on anecdotal evidence, of one or both drivers, and any passers by, which is inherently subjective and biased.

‘Black Box’ crash recorders

With the increasing technology being built into the GPS tracking systems available to the road transport industry, accident investigations are being revolutionised.

Not only is the standard data being recorded – including



vehicle activity, speed; time and location of stops, but G-force sensors can detect heavy braking, rapid acceleration and excessive roll around corners. All of this can be transmitted back to the vehicle base and summary reports made available as required. As standard, this information is logged every minute or two.

Using a system similar to aircraft ‘black box’ flight recorders, some GPS companies are now offering a crash buffer recording system that logs data at one second intervals. This detailed information is constantly overwritten, giving a rolling three minute detailed record. A significant event, such as a crash impact, will stop the recording and retain the last three minutes of information at this one second detail level.

The accident investigation can therefore include truly objective information on the precise activities of the vehicle prior to the accident. Not only is accurate information available on the last driving break, but second-by-second detail of speed and vehicle stability is available. Coupled with a survey of the terrain and markings of the accident scene, a much improved understanding of the circumstances of the crash can be gained.

Changing driver behaviour

Whilst this may flush out poor driving behaviour, it may equally serve to exonerate the driver. Either way, it facilitates a much swifter conclusion to the accident investigation, reducing stress for all parties, speeding up insurance settlements and, most importantly getting the business back on the road much quicker.

This technology is not just a reactive tool. The same information can be recorded at a lower level of detail during every trip. How many of your drivers modify their behaviour for an in cab driving assessment? Do you know whether you are targeting the drivers who most need the attention when you design a training program?

Using this information as a way of understanding your drivers normal driving behaviour allows your driving assessors to give them valuable, targeted and - most importantly- objective feedback to help them to improve before an accident happens.

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