

Check Rides Still Have Value after You Hire

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Experienced recruiters spend a lot of time and effort trying to ensure they hire the right people for the job. Candidates are screened based on qualifications and abstracts alike. There are reference checks and road tests. Then everything is followed up with formal on-boarding programs and company-specific training.

It explains why managers are so shocked when these same employees run into trouble.

Drivers with the most impeccable safety records can still become complacent and slip into bad habits, and some fleets may not even see the problems coming. Troublesome traffic citations might not be referenced in a driver's file because they happened after an abstract was generated.

To compound matters, fleets that are growing through mergers and acquisitions may end up working with drivers who never faced the same rigorous checks and balances. And would long-term drivers pass the tougher screening processes that were introduced in later years? Maybe not.

It all makes the case for regularly scheduled driver reviews and check rides. One of the most powerful screening tools at a fleet's disposal comes in the form of an in-cab evaluation every one or two years – and certainly in the wake of an incident like a collision.

There are plenty of things for an assessor to note during these sessions. Is the driver demonstrating a commitment to defensive driving? How are they dealing with coworkers and customers around the dock? The soft skills are just as important as the gearing and steering.

The reviews offer great opportunities to reinforce messages about issues such as following distances, maximum speeds, and how to identify potential threats up the road. Simply acknowledging the proper actions will help to stress that the rules are important to the organization. If someone has slipped into a bad habit, the issue can be corrected.

The driver's file, meanwhile, could identify shortcomings that were noticed during the last review. Did the retraining on that matter stick? Or is the driver still struggling?

Some employees will require more attention than others. In addition to having a spotty motor vehicle record/abstract, struggling drivers might be prone to an unusually high number of hard-braking events or high speeds, both of which can be identified by studying engine data. Substantiated complaints by customers or other motorists may also point to underlying problems.

The best check rides also take a practical look at what drivers face every day. They review pre-trip inspections and coupling procedures, everyday routes, and interactions with everyone the driver encounters. The length of the review makes a difference as well. Most drivers will be nervous at the beginning of a trip, but should relax

and fall into their typical patterns after a half hour or hour. One of the best ways to ease the tension is simply to talk about common interests, and make mental notes rather than staring at a clipboard. There's always time to write a few quick notes when the truck is stopped and the driver is not looking.

Of course, choosing the right assessor can be just as important as hiring a skilled driver. The best candidates for the job may not even be the employees with the most seniority. The people who are best equipped to conduct check rides tend to be knowledgeable about equipment, defensive driving techniques, and rules of the road. They're also friendly and relaxed. When errors need to be addressed, they can display a firm but helpful demeanor.

Some job-specific training can help prepare them for the role. Programs are available for driver evaluators, addressing topics such as adult learning methods, what to watch for during an in-cab evaluation, and the all-important people skills which apply to every job.

Communication skills will be just as important back in the fleet office, where they will need to convey findings and be able to comment on the broader picture. After all, some issues may have more to do with working conditions than a driver's skills at the wheel. For example, tight routes and cramped docks might require operation teams to adopt single trailers rather than long-spread tractors and multi-axle "Michigan" combinations.

It is not an approach to suddenly spring on employees.

The most effective evaluation programs are explained in advance, stressing that the steps are in place to help improve skills rather than to penalize anyone. The findings help to focus training and retraining courses of every type.

Best of all, they ensure that everyone remains prepared for the job at hand.