

Transport Topics

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How Accident Recorders Can Improve Driving

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Those familiar with accident event recorders know this technology offers many valuable benefits for transportation operations. AERs, which record both video and audio when a driving incident occurs, can help to improve driver performance, reduce accidents and save lives. The technology also offers other significant, but less publicized, advantages such as decreased expenses and enhanced driver/management relationships.

A recent study funded by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration and conducted by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute found AERs reduce risky driving events by as much as 52%. Likewise, AER vendors say figures for overall loss dollars may decrease by an estimated 30% because expenditures for repairs, downtime and workers' compensation claims are lower.

It's not surprising that safer drivers have fewer and less severe accidents, resulting in improved claims experience and lower insurance premiums. An improved safety record also could mean additional savings if you are in an insurance program where you assume risk, as in the case of self-insured and captive plans.

In case of an accident, the AER's video clips provide an irrefutable witness and streamline claims-handling. Claims adjusters can make quick and informed decisions based on actual facts, at times virtually eliminating costs related to accident reconstruction and litigation.

Videos also can protect your drivers when they aren't at fault. Nearly anyone responsible for a commercial motor vehicle will tell you that, despite the time-honored custom of assuming a defendant is innocent until proven guilty, they have felt "guilty until proven innocent" looming over their litigation experiences. The video can clear your driver by showing what really happened and removing any chance for misjudgment based on bias.

For example, one trucking company reported that a driver involved in an intersection crash was exonerated completely by AER video showing the other driver making an illegal turn right into the truck's path.

As fleet operators seek to reduce turnover and retain the best drivers, AERs can be a powerful means of enhancing employer/employee relationships, because they offer tools drivers need to advance their professional driving skills.

The ability of AERs to help trucking companies isolate potentially serious driving patterns and reinforce good performance can make coaching and training more effective. They also can help companies stage more successful safety meetings by providing real-life examples and driving trends analysis.

Operators contemplating installing an AER system often worry about driver resistance, fearing the units may be perceived as just one more invasion of privacy. There's admittedly some truth to that,

but there's also much the trucking company can do to overcome that obstacle and help drivers recognize that AERs serve to protect them as well as the company.

To smooth the introductory process, I recommend that operators offer training prior to installation to demonstrate the camera, explain benefits for drivers and show sample video clips.

I've found the best way to gain driver acceptance is to emphasize they always will have a witness onboard to back up their story.

Explain to your drivers that while AER cameras are always recording while the vehicle is in use, they *save* the video for viewing only when triggered by events such as hard-braking, swerving, rapid acceleration and collisions. And when the video is saved, it's only the few seconds just before and just after the triggering event, not the hours of ordinary driving that came before.

Having the incident on tape allows the trucking company to witness the behaviors that caused the triggering event, helping to eliminate risky driver behaviors. While some drivers may be upset at first about "Big Brother" watching them, when a driver is exonerated by video clip evidence, he or she quickly becomes the system's most fervent advocate.

Many operators insist they already run a safe operation, so why do they need AERs? The answer is that the devices can help save money on fuel, maintenance and repairs. For example:

- AERs help eliminate fuel-wasting driving habits such as speeding, hard-braking and rapid acceleration. As your drivers learn to avoid fuel-wasting maneuvers, you may realize approximately a 5% reduction in fuel costs. How does the system detect speeding without knowing the local limits? The camera can be triggered by the g-force created when the driver makes a jack-rabbit start or speeds abruptly or excessively. Or, the device can be preset to save the video when the driver exceeds certain speed thresholds.

- Improved driving skills result in lower maintenance and repair costs — typically by 10% to 15%.

- Do vehicles ever return to your lot with "mystery damage?" Using an AER could help reduce repair charges by as much as 50%.

AER technology will continue to evolve, and that brings up another point: Because technology improves over time, why not wait for the next generation of AERs? The answer is that every driver and vehicle you have on the road today is at risk, making every day you wait the equivalent of throwing money out the window.

National Interstate Insurance Co., Richfield, Ohio, is a specialty property and casualty insurance company that focuses on the transportation industry.



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