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**Feature Article – By Tim Barker, Managing Director**

**Driver Improvement and Defensive Driving**

“The most dangerous moving part in a motor vehicle is the nut that holds the steering wheel”. So starts an old US Army manual on truck driver training. The manual is not of course referring to the metal fixing device but to the human controller of the vehicle. In the Sixties, when that particular manual was written, vehicles were still fairly primitive. Speeds were far slower than today, which was good because the technology involved with brakes, suspensions and steering were also pretty rudimentary and wouldn't be up to dealing with any greater velocities. Even so, there was recognition that the weakest link in the human / vehicle interface was the part made of flesh and bone. Nowadays technology has gone beyond the imaginings of vehicle designers of a generation ago. Vehicles are more powerful, can accelerate faster and handle immeasurably better. Safety technology has almost kept pace with the performance technology. Traction control, Air brakes, better tyre compounds, ABS, EBD, crumple zones etc have all made vehicles fundamentally safer. Alongside this, and spurred on by large amounts of government legislation, the roads themselves have been improved. From mini roundabouts and traffic calming measures to redesigned road layouts and surfacing improvements, the environment in which we drive is far better than it has ever been. In the UK there is of course a case for saying that some of these improvements are mitigated by the vast increase in vehicle numbers. Even so, there is no denying that the intent, and generally the practice, of both vehicle and road designers are making things safer year on year. The “nut” however remains! The human factor is the variable that technology can't seem to fix. Indeed there is school of thought that suggests the technology that runs our lives, the mobile phones, the faxes and computers, have made our lives even more “nutty”.

There is a very serious point however. In the UK, we are still killing around 3500 people a year in road traffic accidents and are injuring around quarter of a million more, around 35,000 of those seriously. While some accidents undoubtedly have as a contributory factor, faults with vehicles or road construction, the vast majority are the results of the human factor. There is no doubt that a lot of work still needs to be done on the “nut”.

The government and the Health and Safety Executive are now taking an interest in driver improvement and road safety in general. Of the 3500 people that are killed a year, around a third are “at work” when they die. This equates to around 20 deaths and 250 serious injuries a week! In other words those that are killed or injured are operating the buses, trucks, cabs, company cars etc that were the tools of their

everyday job. Last year the Department of Transport and the HSE jointly produced the guidance booklet “Driving at Work – Managing Work Related Road Safety” (available free from the HSE). It considers all aspects of road safety from the legal responsibilities and management roles to risk assessments and driver training. It is a “must read” publication for any manager in the Passenger Transport Industry. Many managers are already addressing the issues it raises. In particular they are looking at the issue of driver training.

The training that drivers receive to enable them to drive safely on the roads fits into two quite distinct categories. Initially, there is the licence acquisition phase, in other words the training that enables an individual to pass his or her PCV driving test. Whilst there are often differences in standards of basic training of bus drivers, the DSA examiners are pretty consistent with their application of test standards. Accordingly, if someone passes the PCV test, he or she has shown they can apply the fundamentals of safe driving. As we all know, however, this is only the start point for learning to drive in the “real world”. This leads us on to the second and arguably most important type of training, the training that takes place after the test. By “after the test” it should be made clear we mean between passing the test and retiring from PCV driving! Academics call this phase “life long learning”. Most of us call it “on the job training.” The best transport companies, the ones that have the lowest accident rates, best fuel economy figures, lowest insurance costs etc are the ones who take this sort of training the most seriously.

In later articles we will look in detail at some of the various courses that are on offer. At this stage however it is worth making some wider points about the nature and value of training. Training for training’s sake has very limited value. The same applies to driver assessments. An assessment will give a “snapshot in time” of how a driver performs and a rough idea of the driving standard of a fleet. If the findings of the assessments are not acted upon however, the value of it will be lost. If re-assessment is not planned at a later date, there will be no knowledge of improvement or decline in standards other than that indicated retrospectively by accident figures. Assessment and training have to be part of a wider plan to be effective. Some progressive companies have called their programmes “Road Safety” or “Driver Improvement” projects. They link in driver assessment and training with poster campaigns, internal and external publicity opportunities and also punishment and reward! There is an emphasis not only on the physical skills of driving, but also the attitudinal and behavioural aspects. In the increasingly busy British road system, it is important that the attitudinal side of a driver is assessed, analysed and where necessary, improved. The end result of a successful driver improvement programme is that it makes the drivers realise that a safe driving culture is the cornerstone of their professionalism and managers realise that it is a major plank to build a successful business.

The Industry has a long way to go before all organisations are taking driver improvement seriously. That said, progress is being made and the HSE are taking an interest in the issue. If we are to successfully address the “nut holding the steering wheel” in Britain’s bus and coach companies, then it is an issue that merits urgent and serious consideration. In a future article we will directly address the best ways to tackle this issue.

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