

Fleet Management: The Journey

Proper trip planning is essential to ensure the safe and cost-efficient operation of all commercial fleets. As a fleet manager, it can be challenging to find the most cost-effective route – while controlling the working hours of your drivers. Driver fatigue poses a serious safety threat, and there is understandable public concern due to collisions caused by drivers falling asleep at the wheel.

No matter how skilled or experienced a driver is, collisions can happen at any time.

As a fleet manager, you can take some proactive steps towards collision prevention by ensuring your drivers have a pre-planned route – so they can give their full attention to the road.

Pre-trip planning

Before a driver begins any trip in a fleet vehicle, think about how to prevent fatigue on the road. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is the trip absolutely necessary? Are there any alternatives such as telephone or video conferencing?
- Can long drives be avoided or reduced by using other forms of transportation, such as bus, train, or plane?
- Will time pressures or tight schedules encourage the driver to press on, without a break?
- What is company policy on the need for breaks or overnight stays, and other safety precautions? Are all drivers clear on this policy?
- Are overnight stays scheduled in advance, rather than encouraging the driver to make a return trip the same day?

Route planning

Careful route planning is critical on any trip, especially when the route or destination is unfamiliar. Identify the following ahead of time so your drivers don't have to do it on the road:

- detours and alternatives
- major intersections
- tricky turns
- distances between locations
- specific destination addresses



Remember, the shortest route isn't always the best route. With careful planning, you can determine local traffic patterns, construction zones, and expected weather conditions to minimize driver frustration and time pressures.

Maximize safety and minimize time behind the wheel by planning routes that:

- stick to major highways, where possible, which are statistically safer than rural roads
- use roads suitable for the type of vehicle used, especially with larger trucks and vans (making sure they're safe for all overpasses and bridges)

- take into account when the driver will be in the area – avoiding school zones, rush hours, holiday traffic, special events and other high-risk or heavy-traffic times.

Tools to help you plan the safest trip

There are many ways to make route planning easy and straightforward, such as:

- online mapping services
- weather channels on the radio, TV and online
- all-news radio stations with frequent traffic reports
- maps, route planning and other information and services available from the Canadian Automobile Association (CAA)

Keeping trip schedules realistic

It's important for fleet managers to be aware of the legal driving requirements and hours of work for the specific areas where drivers will be travelling.

For car and van drivers it is recommended to take a 15-minute break for every two hours of continuous driving.

What about those hours when a driver isn't on the road? Think about it: it's not uncommon for car drivers to travel over 200 km to attend meetings, and not return home until late at night. This would result in a total working day longer than normal hours of work and make driver fatigue more likely to occur. Commercial drivers are restricted by law for their hours of driving and on-duty service, it is suggested the Fleet Manager be fully aware of drive times for private passenger vehicles or service trucks where drivers can still be involved in a collision due to fatigue.

Heavy scheduling often means early starts. So, plan trips that start after 6:00 a.m. so as not to interfere with the body's natural sleep cycle. Similarly, trips shouldn't end too late in the day, and the day shouldn't be excessively long. Statistics show that fatigue-related collisions are most likely to occur between the hours of 2:00 a.m. and 6:00 a.m., and between 2:00 p.m. and 4:00 p.m.

Time management for drivers

Ensure that your drivers are not setting unrealistic targets for their appointments or deliveries. It's easy to underestimate the time spent in each appointment, or the time it takes to travel between appointments. This can lead to:

- increased pressure on drivers to meet deadlines, increasing their stress levels
- higher chances of dangerous activity such as speeding or running yellow lights to make up time
- an increased risk of being involved in a collision

Reduce the risks for your drivers by minimizing tight schedules at all times.

Make allowances for weather conditions

When planning routes, be sure to take into account any adverse weather conditions such as snow, fog or high winds. Adjust your driver's schedules accordingly and allow for flexibility.

Many Canadian drivers may think they can handle any weather conditions, but not every one is sufficiently skilled and experienced at driving in bad weather, or knows how to adjust driving habits when needed. It's up to fleet managers to emphasize safety and develop driving policies and defensive procedures that take all weather and road conditions into account.

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