Driving isn’t what it used to be
Employers need to step in with standards for employees who drive

While driving to work this morning, perhaps you saw a driver in another car applying lipstick. Or a driver talking on his cell phone. Or another having her morning coffee.

You probably weren’t alarmed. After all, it’s not that uncommon.

Or maybe you barely recall driving to work this morning because a short night’s sleep put you on “auto pilot,” or because you were thinking about a big meeting this afternoon. That’s not uncommon, either.

This is a brave new world of road risks. In today’s fast-paced, convenience-is-everything world, driving has become a time to get things done instead of a time to focus on the task at hand—driving safely.

Drivers are faced with more distractions on the roads than ever before. It is estimated that a driver makes 200 decisions for every mile of driving. That doesn’t leave much room for things like talking on a cell phone, tending to personal hygiene, thinking about personal problems, texting, looking through music CDs, or eating and drinking. Not to mention growing problems like road construction and traffic congestion that fuel impatience and stress.

And there’s more. Commuting time is increasing and personal free time is decreasing. Cars are faster and attention spans shorter. Music is played louder. Tailgating is commonplace and reactions become road rage. Cell phones are in everyone’s pocket and the fast-food drive-thru is today’s nutritious meal—too often eaten on the road.

Business people hurrying to appointments compensate for leaving late by driving faster.

Driving isn’t what it used to be. More people are driving more aggressively. More chances are taken. There’s more rudeness. Changes in driving behavior overall seem to be raising the risks of being on the road.

Even good drivers need to have better defensive skills than ever before.

Yet in many business organizations today, company driving policies are like the horse and buggy—outdated or, more likely, non-existent. Some farsighted organizations, however, are realizing that, even if they’ve not yet had any major driving accidents, it is worth their while to take a look at their organization’s driving practices and maybe take some preventive steps that don’t cost much in time or expense.

They understand that an employee’s personal driving habits may not be good enough anymore. Higher standards sometimes are needed.

They understand that rather than be silent—as many companies are about driving—they need to let employee-drivers know what they expect the employee’s driving practices to be.

In the long run, taking into account the realities of the road and looking pragmatically at ways to influence employees’ driving practices can help you control business costs such as auto and workers’ compensation coverage.

Here are some ideas to consider.

1. Talk to your employees who drive, whether they drive regularly as part of their jobs or only on occasion.

   Review your company policy. Communicate your expectations.

   Actually, communicating your expectations may be even more important than the details of your company policy. You want your people to
know they’re expected to abide by standards that may be higher than their own personal driving habits.

Your company policy, besides covering the use of company vehicles and rules for safe driving, could include specifics about such things as seat belt and cell phone use as well as consequences for citations.

Some companies require employees to wear seat belts any time they are in vehicles being used for company purposes.

Because conversations can be distracting, some companies require employees to pull into a rest area or parking lot to use cell phones regardless whether the phones are handheld or hands-free.

Include your policy in your new employee orientation, or at least review it with employees before they are hired, and then look for opportunities post-hire to reinforce your policy and driving expectations.

Include the policy in your employee handbook so employees know where to look for it. For sample language, download SFM’s “Sample cell phone policy” CompTalk in the online “Resource catalog” at www.sfmic.com.

2. Provide basic information for employees who drive occasionally.

Some employers—trucking firms, for example—are required by their state’s transportation department to conduct formal training for drivers. If you’re not one of those, you may still want to think about doing a mini version of training, something you can do internally and in minimal time. Your purpose here is to get to a point where your employee-drivers are (1) conscious of their driving habits, especially the questionable ones, and (2) aware of your rules of thumb for safe, defensive driving.

You can use the list below of habits and driving behaviors. Most are common sense, but talking them through is a way to help your employee-drivers think more deliberately about what they should and shouldn’t be doing:

- **Inattention.** A major cause of auto accidents. Unfortunately, more and more things are competing for drivers’ attention. Mostly a mental thing and, given the right dose of mental discipline, easily correctable.

- **Not enough time.** Which usually means driving too fast. Typically within the employee’s control, but employers, too, need to be sure they are setting reasonable time expectations, as in making customer deliveries. Also, employees who drive frequently may need to be aware of traffic and weather reports.

- **Not enough space.** Tailgating—and being tailgated—has become a big problem. Know how to leave yourself an out in case you need to steer clear of a sudden situation.

- **Not allowing for mistakes of others.** Drivers often fail to see or anticipate the mistakes of others in time to avoid accidents.

- **Failing to adjust to conditions.** Such as winter’s first snowfall, which typically results in a swell of accidents.

- **Attitude.** Part of this is how a driver reacts to the rudeness of others on the road. Clearly, trigger-temper have no place in the employee’s driver seat. One employee motto goes like this: “Safe driving. It’s not my choice. It’s my job.”

- **Driver impairment.** Alcohol and drugs get most of the attention. But fatigue and illness lead to accidents, too.

Now that you’ve gotten your employees to think more analytically about their driving behaviors, offer them some rules of thumb for safe, defensive driving. You can start with these basic rules excerpted from SFM’s “FIVE keys to safe driving”:

1) **Aim high in steering.** Look as far ahead of your car as you can. Set your sights on where the vehicle will be in the next 15 seconds.
2) **Get the big picture.** Include stationary objects, people and traffic controls. Clear visibility is a must. Seeing the big picture helps you anticipate risks before they result in an accident.

3) **Keep your eyes moving.** Don’t stare. It can cancel out your big picture.

4) **Leave yourself an out.** Don’t follow too close.

5) **Make sure they see you.** Be aware of all the different ways you can communicate with someone who looks like they might cause an accident, so you can react quickly. Making eye contact, flashing your lights, beeping your horn, and using your directional signals are good ways to ensure you are seen by others, such as pedestrians, other drivers, cyclists and children.

3. **Look for opportunities to give employees “drive safely” reminders, such as when seasons and road conditions change.**

Winter’s approach is a good time to help employees get prepared. The first snowfall often catches people before they’re mentally prepared for winter driving. Decreasing daylight, school buses and the children waiting for them pose risks, too.

4. **Take stock of individual employees’ driving capabilities.**

Supervisors may have occasions to see employees’ driving practices firsthand. Some tactful on-the-spot feedback may be appropriate. Or it may suggest a need for later follow-up.

5. **Do your part to minimize employee driving time.**

Plan ahead. For example, if you’re in construction, ensure that your workers have all the materials and equipment needed at the job site so they don’t have to make extra trips.

Consider alternatives. Meeting customers face-to-face is a highly effective and necessary part of

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### DRIVING FACTS

Seat belt use can prevent more than half the fatalities in auto accidents.

– National Safety Council

Drivers using cell phones are four times more likely to be in an accident.

– National Defensive Driving Association

Tailgating is the No. 1 driving error and the cause of most rear-end collisions.

– Smith System, a professional driver training firm.

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6. **Include checking driving records in your hiring practices.**

You may need to make a good driving record one of the qualifications for a job, especially if it tends to attract younger people, who are greater driving risks. It might state that applicants cannot have, say, more than three moving violations in a 36-month period. You can obtain a motor vehicle record through your state’s motor vehicle licensing department.

7. **Review regulations for age and vehicle requirements.**

A legal reminder for those who need it: Make sure your employees are old enough to drive the vehicles they’re assigned to and are properly licensed. For example, a driver needs a Class B license to drive large vehicles such as a dump truck or passenger bus. Proper licensing, because of the qualifications required of the driver, reduces your potential for accidents.

Of course, once you’ve done all you can to prepare your employees, don’t forget to ensure that the vehicle is safe, including routine maintenance work.
Winter driving tips

Driving can be difficult in the winter months. Be sure your employees practice these winter driving tips to reduce the chance of driving accidents in winter.

Drive defensively.

Start by winterizing your car. Be sure to have your car tuned up and brakes, battery, fluid levels and exhaust system checked. Then, prepare yourself.

- **Slow down.** Allow more time to get where you’re going.
- **Reduce the danger of skidding.** Brake lightly and extend following distance.
  
  If you begin to skid, DON’T BRAKE. Take your foot off the accelerator and turn your car in the direction you want to go.
- **Never tailgate.**
- **Watch for other reckless drivers. Stay clear.** You may be driving safely, but others may not be.
- **Be careful on bridges and overpasses.** They may be slippery when regular roads are not.
- **Don’t stop on the side of the road.** You may skid off the road or be hit by another motorist.
- **Be aware of carbon monoxide poisoning.** You could be poisoned if you are stranded in your car.
- **Inform others of where you are going.**
- **Listen to the weather forecast.**
- **Stay back from snowplows.** You should be at least 300 to 500 feet behind the snowplow. Never pass a snowplow. Snowplows create artificial snow clouds that may cause low visibility. And always yield to snowplows.

In the end, a big part of this is about managing behaviors. It can be a win-win for everybody. The standards and expectations you set for people driving on the job are likely also to improve their driving habits off the job. And that’s something they might thank you for.

For more safe driving tips, visit SFM’s online “Resource catalog” at www.sfmic.com.

For more information, contact SFM’s Loss Prevention team leader at (952) 838-4200 or (800) 937-1181.