

# Workplace safety should encompass the roads staff travel daily

BY DAVID BROWN

Probably because it has become such an unavoidable, every-day part of life, many people tend to forget driving a car is an extremely complicated and thoroughly dangerous activity.

Each year thousands of Canadians are killed and hundreds of thousands more injured while on the road. Sending employees out onto the roads is a risky proposition and as the Canada Safety Council (CSC) warns, "If you have company vehicles, you will have collisions."

In Ontario in 1999, lost-time claims due to transportation accidents represented 2.8 per cent of all claims accepted by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board; fewer than those for exposure to harmful substances at 4.4 per cent, but more than assaults and violent acts at 1.5 per cent. In Alberta in 1998, motor vehicle accidents accounted for more than \$25 million in injury claims.

Beside the obvious costs of workers' compensation and insurance deductibles that arise when an employee is in an accident, there are secondary costs that come with a lost-time incident, like decreased productivity and hiring and training a replacement.

It would be impossible to protect travelling employees from every possible danger on the road, there are just too many uncontrollable variables, but research has proven driver im-

provement programs can reduce driver error and mitigate bad habits like speeding or aggressive driving.

According to Alberta collision statistics provided by the Alberta WCB, the top four errors that result in collisions with casualties are:

- following too closely;
- running off the road;
- turning left in front of oncoming vehicles; and
- disobeying traffic signals.

Speeding is a major factor in fatal collisions, one study has suggested speed could be a major contributing factor in as much as 60 per cent of fatal collisions though the government of Canada puts it at closer to 20 per cent.

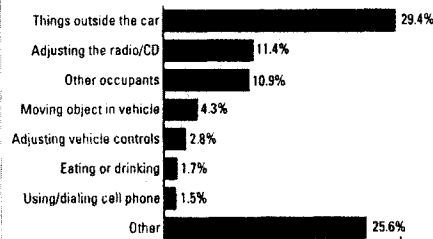
Regardless, the greater the speed, the greater the likelihood of a collision, and higher speeds increase the severity of accidents. If you are driving a vehicle at 100 km/h when you see an obstacle blocking the road 70 metres ahead you will collide with it at a speed of 44 km/h and if you are driving at a speed of 120 km/h when the obstacle is spotted, you will collide at a speed of 93 km/h. A crash at that speed can be fatal.

Many Canadians feel aggressive driving is on the rise and while most believe it is a safety concern, 85 per cent also admit to committing at least one aggressive driving act in the last year. Most feel that stress and frustration is to blame for aggressive driving.

Fatigue is also a major factor in fatal collisions. Drowsiness affects drivers in much the same as

## Types of distractions causing accidents

A May 2001 report by the American Automobile Association identified driver distraction as the cause in nine per cent of serious or fatal crashes, with the types of distractions as follows:



Source: American Automobile Association

alcohol, slowing reaction time, decreasing alertness and impairing judgement. It's been said that for people who work nights, the most dangerous part of their day is the drive home. Night-shift employees have often been awake since mid-afternoon the day before and therefore up for nearly twice as long as the daytime worker who drives home at 6 p.m.

### The cell phone debate

The dangers of talking on cell phones while driving is receiving a great deal of attention. The focus on the safety of cell phone-using drivers was particularly intense earlier this year after four Quebecers driving through Maryland were killed when a young woman crashed into their car. The women, who was also killed, was talking on a cell phone at the time and there were renewed calls to ban cell phones use in cars outright.

Cell phone use by drivers remains a hotly debated, and largely unresolved topic. The CSC weighed in against a ban. The council maintains there is no credible conclusive evidence that cell phones are making the roads less safe. They point out that while wireless subscribers have more than quintupled since 1994 (from 1.8 million to more than 10 million today) road fatalities have dropped by 10 per cent.

What's more, a ban would eliminate the safety benefits of having a phone in the car, explained the CSC in a press release put out just after the tragic accident in Maryland. "When you're stuck in traffic, calling to say you'll be late can reduce stress and make you less inclined to drive aggressively to make up lost time." There are also more than three million 911 calls per year from cell phones to report emergencies or dangerous situations.

The bigger issue is driver distraction generally. "Driving is not a passive task," states the Alberta WCB in its *Working safely behind the rule booklet* (available online at [www.wcb.ab.ca/html/safewheel.html](http://www.wcb.ab.ca/html/safewheel.html)). "In some respects, driving a vehicle is more complicated than flying a fighter jet. A fighter pilot has about 300 items to keep track of during a regular flying mission in a non-combat scenario. The average driver has to keep track of about 3,000 things when driving during rush hour — these include pedestrians, lights, signs, passengers, road conditions, construction, other vehicles, cell phones, pagers and objects on the road."

### All distractions are dangerous ones

Our society has to a great extent condoned multi-tasking while driving. Most vehicles have cup

holders. Many also have complex radios and sound systems. Omnipresent drive-throughs encourage drivers to pick up food and beverages. Drivers eat, discipline their kids, use cell phones and even shave or apply make-up on the road.

One U.S. study concluded about nine per cent of all serious or fatal collisions involved driver distraction and only 1.5 per cent of these involved cell phones but in more than 11 per cent of those accidents the driver was adjusting the radio and nearly 11 per cent were talking to other passengers.

Some people have suggested that hands free cell phones minimize the distraction associated with cell phones, but a new study, released just last month by Transport Canada, suggests this is not the case. On the contrary, the increase of hands free cell phones could lead to a proliferation of accidents.

The study examined the impact of cognitive distractions on driver's behaviour. Voice-based interactions are not effortless. Drivers will be able to maintain better visual contact with the road, but conversations represent what the authors call a significant cognitive workload increase, meaning more time is spent looking forward and less time scanning the periphery or checking instruments and mirrors. In some cases drivers shed those tasks completely.

What's more, most business conversations also represent a challenge for drivers, more so than casual conversations that can be more easily paused or ended. An interface may be hands-free, but the conversation itself could be a source of considerable distraction under certain conditions.

### What can employers do?

Whether it's on the commute or during working hours, employers can help reduce the chance staff will be involved in auto collisions. Here's a few suggestions:
 

- work to raise awareness of factors that can lead to accidents;
- offer defensive driving courses;
- provide taxis for employees who are fatigued after a long/late shift; and
- ensure all vehicles owned/leased/operated by the organization are in sound condition.

## What's the point in speeding?

One German study examined just how much time was saved by speeding and at what risk. One driver was told to get to the destination as quickly as possible and the other driver was told to avoid risk, and move as traffic permitted.

	Fast Driver	Safe Driver
Distance	1,600 km	1,600 km
Time	20 hours, 12 minutes	20 hours, 43 minutes
Time saved	31 minutes	
Vehicles passed	2,004	645
Passed by	13 vehicles	142 vehicles
Used brakes	1,339 times	642 times



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