

Responding after a fatigue incident

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For any transport business, managing fatigue is crucial.

Fatigue accounts for around eight per cent of all large-loss crashes. It's also the largest cause of crashes where truck drivers lose their lives, according to the latest NTARC report.

No safety system is foolproof and human beings are complicated, fallible creatures.

This fallibility means that, no matter how good your systems are, sooner or later, your business may still see a fatigue incident.

How you respond will say a lot about your business and your values and can significantly impact your culture, staff morale, and ultimately, your business's future.



Overview

A little planning now can save a lot of trouble later.

It's critical to understand all loads you carry and their potential safety, environmental and other impacts if not contained during an accident. With this in mind, you can put plans in place to manage any fatigue incidents that occur.

Adam Gibson, NTI's Transport and Logistics Risk Engineer, says you need to have 'pre-emptive hindsight'. It's an exercise in imagination; think about how you'd respond now to an incident with your current plans and procedures in place. Then ask yourself:

“When you look back on that point in time, what am I going to wish that I had done?”

Adam says the key is to “frame it in terms of ‘what would the incident report say about what we did?’ If it's not flattering, then you've got some work to do.”

Beyond having an incident plan in place, there are four things you should do to respond to a fatigue incident:

- 1) Look after your people:** ensure all involved parties have appropriate medical care, accommodation and repatriation as required.
- 2) Look after your business:** ensure the load is managed, whether that is journey continuance or a salvage and clean-up operation; consider any reputation risks that can be managed at this point as well.
- 3) Review and learn from the event:** ask why the event happened, what risk controls didn't function properly, what additional or alternative risk controls might have worked, what were the human factors?
- 4) Look after your people again:** once the dust has settled, follow-up to ensure your staff are okay.

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– Adam Gibson, Transport and Logistics Risk Engineer, NTI

Prepare your plans

Prior preparation prevents poor performance – nowhere more so than when it comes to incident responses.

When an incident happens, you won't have the luxury of time; you'll need to respond in a fast, controlled manner to contain any problems and minimise further risks.

Having a defined incident response plan in place is the key.

– Adam Gibson, Transport and Logistics Risk Engineer, NTI

“Having a defined incident response plan in place is the key,” says Adam.

Your plan needs to cover immediate responses, such as calling emergency services and notifying family members. But it also needs to go much further and take into account containment and clean-up and the different cargoes you might be carrying, such as dangerous or refrigerated goods. Livestock is a great example, as Adam explains:

“If you're a livestock person, then you've got a bunch of issues around animal welfare, veterinary care, maybe even euthanasia.

“For animals that survive, you need to consider herding, transport, storage, food and water.”

Finally, make sure everyone has a copy of, or knows where to find, the plan, and make the chain of command clear.

If the nominated responder isn't working when an incident occurs, you don't want your response falling flat.

The critical question you can ask yourself is:

- Would your drivers know who to call if they had an incident?
- And if that person was called, would they know what they're meant to do next?

Look after your people

The number-one priority after a fatigue incident is to look after your team's safety and health.

Create plans to cover different scenarios, such as drivers in metro and remote areas, incidents involving dangerous cargos and so on. The driver concerned is the obvious starting point, but you also need to consider other team members who may be affected.

“Try to strike a supportive and caring tone with the driver,” Adam says. “No one wilfully goes off and crashes.”

It's usually a good idea to get the driver away from the scene, and another company employee on-site, as quickly as possible.

“They've just been in a serious vehicle crash, so as soon as you can get someone else on site who can manage things, pull them out and get them elsewhere.

“Drivers who've sustained injuries, or who are buzzing with adrenaline, aren't in a position to make the best decisions.”

And make sure that you don't abandon them. Your driver might have been taken to a police station or hospital; you don't want them released onto the streets of a remote town with nowhere to stay and nowhere to go. Including driver repatriation is critical.



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no one wilfully goes off and crashes.**

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Look after your business

The first port of call here is to look after the load. Containment and clean-up will be priorities, but you'll also want to have plans to continue the shipment. Can you arrange another truck to come and take the cargo?

Do you need specialised clean-up crews or gear? Salvage costs and operations are best arranged ahead of time; your insurer or vehicle vendor might have plans or systems that you can use to reduce time and cost. Use them.

Be sure to gather good information from the scene and from the vehicle. The driver's account is your starting point. You should also collect whatever other data is available.

"Think ahead about how you'll get objective information about an incident," Adam says. "Will you get photos of the accident scene? Is there a dash camera? Can you get telemetry?" Adam asks.

"In the 48 hours after the incident, gather as much information as you can."

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— Adam Gibson, Transport and Logistics Risk Engineer, NTI

You might also want to consider reputational harm. The press may attend the accident site and, if so, will be wanting statements from as many people as possible. Specify in your plan who is authorised to talk to the media and make sure they're available.

It might even be worth engaging some communications professionals ahead of time to prepare some statements or communications guidelines.

The key is to get out ahead of the press with a statement that you control, rather than having the press decide what the story is.

Learn from the event

There's nothing good about a fatigue incident, but that doesn't mean you can't learn from it.

Once the immediate crisis has passed, you should review your safety and risk management procedures.

Ask yourself and your team if there were any risk controls in place that didn't work; if there are any risk controls not in place that might have worked; and what were the human factors?

“The goal is to improve your understanding, so you're better placed to stop it from happening again.”

It's vital to review the incident with the driver but bear in mind that when you ask anyone 'what happened?', they'll either say 'I don't know' or try to tell a story that makes sense.

If the driver's story contradicts what the data tells you - for example, that they heard a 'bang' and then crashed, when the data

clearly shows the 'bang' was their truck going through a safety barrier after the incident had occurred - don't assume they're lying or covering up.

“You don't stop people falling asleep by threatening them,” says Adam. “You need to create an environment where they're at low risk of fatigue and feel empowered to stop if they are fatigued.”

Finally, if you're not already deploying safety technologies such as driver management systems (DMS), forward collision warning systems (FCWS) and electronic braking and stability control systems (EBS and ESC), then you should consider doing so. They can help reduce fatigue incidents, lower incident numbers and improve compliance with road rules and your driver policies.



Create an environment where [drivers are] at low risk of fatigue and feel empowered to stop if they are fatigued.

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Look after your people again

Don't stop supporting a driver that's been in an incident once the incident is over. Even a relatively minor crash can have a significant impact on their confidence and overall wellbeing.

You don't stop people falling asleep by threatening them.

— Adam Gibson, Transport and Logistics Risk Engineer, NTI

The week after the incident is important but don't stop there. "Use your existing systems, whether they're paper or electronic," says Adam, "to put reminders in your calendars or whatever you use, to check in."

Without making a big deal of it, ask the driver:

- Are they okay about the crash?
- How are they feeling about the underlying causes?
- In the case of a fatigue crash, could the driver have sleep apnea and if so, is it being effectively treated?

Consider introducing a simple protocol, like the STOP-BANG tool (snoring, tiredness, observed apnea, blood pressure - BMI, age, neck circumference, gender), to determine who might need support to improve their overall health and wellbeing.

It's tempting to consider any such expenses as 'non-core' but your drivers' ability to function well is perhaps the most critical part of your business. Any expenditures or adjustments you make will be repaid handsomely.

"This might include a period of local work while they get their treatment under control," says Adam. "It might include putting an inverter into their truck so they can power a CPAP machine while they're sleeping in the bunk."

"Whatever it is, come back and check later on. Most modern machines include logging and reporting, so they can tell you what's going on and how many apnea events you're having."

Conclusion

No business and no driver ever wants to be involved in a fatigue-related on-road incident. But they do happen, and you need to be prepared.

By planning ahead, prioritising your drivers' wellbeing and learning from every data source available, you'll minimise the number of incidents that occur and also - hopefully - minimise their severity.

A black and white close-up photograph of the front of a truck. The image focuses on the two large, circular headlights, each containing four smaller lamps. Above the headlights is a smaller, rectangular light. Below the headlights is a horizontal LED light bar. The truck's grille and bumper are visible in the lower part of the frame. The overall image has a high-contrast, industrial feel.

‘Safety first’ might be an old cliché but it’s also a powerful mantra for any and every transport business.



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