

Driver safety comes first

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Driver training is arguably the single biggest intervention that can be made to reduce South Africa's high road accident rate, says Melanie Naidoo-Padayachee, head of people development and culture at Unitrans Supply Chain Solutions.



The logistics service provider has a strong focus on the development and training of its driver core, which sits at the heart of its business. “Improving the skills capability and practices of our drivers holds huge benefit – not only from a company bottom-line perspective, but also for the safety of all users of the road,” she explains.

South Africa's Road death toll has been a subject of much discussion over the years, being one of the leading causes of death in the country. The government estimates the Road Accident Fund will increase to R518bn in the 2023/24 financial year, as it continues to grapple with the challenge of curbing road carnage.

“While there is a deep-seated need to strategise and understand how our industry will evolve and the skills we need going forward to deliver our business goals, we also need to look at the capabilities needed to address the systemic issues in the country and, particularly, in the transport sector where our business operates.”

Solutions-driven

According to Naidoo-Padayachee, the need for ongoing training and development has long been identified as integral to the Unitrans business model. “It produces safety compliance and competitive skills levels,” she says, noting that it also speaks to employee retention, productivity levels and attracting new talent to their business.

“Our belief has always been that the current driver licensing framework is not enough in navigating today's driving landscape,” she says. “With this in mind, we have identified the critical importance of the private sector in addressing road safety and ensuring our employees are equipped with the necessary tools and competencies to do their jobs well.”

Transporters, says Naidoo-Padayachee, must be the change they want to see on the road. “Increasing the skill level of our drivers in such a way that they have a positive impact on road safety is at the heart of our training approach.”

Change in narrative

While training has always been ongoing at Unitrans, the company's approach to training has shifted fundamentally in recent years. The training curriculum centres on intrinsic motivation, essentially driving the value that each employee needs to make it home safely to their loved ones. "It is a partnership with drivers more than anything else," explains Naidoo-Padayachee.

The approach has paid off as the company has not only seen a change in the confidence of its drivers, but also the competence levels showcased on the road.

Bespoke solutions

Capacity building at Unitrans is delivered through a focused and bespoke approach that concentrates on training, technical ability, practical learning, refresher training and monitoring. "Through the analysis of our business needs, we created a bespoke training curriculum with various methodologies and unit standard learning to address the identified gaps," says Naidoo-Padayachee.

With more than 3,000 drivers in the organisation, it is a huge undertaking. "Training takes the unique circumstances that drivers experience into consideration, but also brings context to them, sharing insights as to how their customer interactions and brand representation benefits our business," she explains.

Training, however, cannot only happen in a classroom: practical learning is critical to the programme's success. "We have adapted firefighting and first-aid courses for our drivers, but we don't just teach the theory, they practically have to train in simulated situations," says Naidoo-Padayachee.

This practical training also includes in-cab assessments and video simulations that take truck drivers through various scenarios. Training at Unitrans is also not a once-off occurrence and happens frequently to keep drivers on their toes. "We embed our training into the daily practices of our drivers, making sure they have the necessary skills at all times to deal with an ever-changing environment."

Monitoring is just as important a part of the process as the training itself. She adds: "Not only the monitoring of our training standards, but also the monitoring of our vehicles and drivers through the Unitrans Control Tower to ensure operational excellence."

The organisation has implemented a comprehensive set of in-cab technologies onboard all its vehicles to assess and track driver behaviour. "Throughout our organisation, we are driving a culture of safety that prioritises lives," concludes Naidoo-Padayachee.

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