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Vehicles as a workplace

A guide for plumbers

The greatest serious injury risk for your workers is the use of vehicles. Just as you have a responsibility for their safety on site, any vehicle they use as part of their work is a workplace and the same legal obligations apply.

While everyone has a responsibility to use the roads in accordance with the law, your responsibility goes further to ensure that your workers are not exposed to hazards and that they are as safe as practicable.

This guide provides a step by step process to help you meet your obligations which, in turn should result in a safer and more productive workplace.

What is covered?

It's not just your work utes and vans. Any vehicle that one of your workers, sub-contractors, visitors or others use in the course of your business is a workplace. Your obligations will vary according to how much you can control that use, but you need to consider them.

There can sometimes be a complex arrangement between your business, your workers, labour hire firms or other contractors you supply labour to. Whatever work health and safety (WHS) responsibilities you have in these arrangements also apply to the use of vehicles.

Step 1

Do you know all the situations in which your workers are exposed to road traffic?

- Work utes and vans
- Trucks
- Your own vehicle
- Workers' vehicles
- Apprentices' vehicles
- Plant

This might be travelling between jobs, between the depot and a job or on the site itself, picking up supplies or running errands.



Step 2

What can you do to reduce the use of vehicles or use safer options?

If you are on site for a few days or more, can tools and material be stored on site so that people can catch public transport, or car pool?

Organise the day to minimise travel between jobs and at the end of the day.

Considering these steps should help you make a list of the main situations where road travel needs to take place. You now need a plan to reduce the risks.

The most significant risks will probably be the use of vans and utes – they are what keeps your business running. You should focus on these but don't ignore the other situations that might arise from time to time.



Step 3

What can you do to reduce the risks?

You cannot rely on drivers to be perfect. Research has shown that the great majority of crashes occur not as a result of irresponsible action but as a result of a simple mistake – a moment of distraction or misjudgement.

This guide provides you with a tool to make sure that you have looked at every opportunity to improve safety. This does not remove the need for drivers to drive safely but it provides greater assurance that when mistakes are made, they do not result in serious injuries, or worse.

You also need to consider the reputation of your business. If you take shortcuts with safety on the road, what might customers assume about how you run your business!

Plan the trip

- Have a conversation with your people to discuss the best way to get to the job.
- Avoid peak hours if practicable.
- Stick to major roads where possible as they are safer.
- Try to avoid roads with lots of pedestrians or cyclists, especially if driving a large vehicle.
- Minimise areas where turning or reversing is difficult.

Vehicle selection...

- Pick a vehicle with a 5-star ANCAP rating.
- If people want to use their own vehicles consider mandating similar standards as a condition of use, particularly if they are carrying other workers.

Vehicle modifications...

- Make sure any modifications to vehicles do not affect its ability to protect the driver. Modern safety systems work with the vehicle as it was designed.
- Bull bars, tow bars and external racks should only be fitted where essential and make sure that they meet required standards.
- Internal racking needs to be strong enough to hold up in a crash.
- Use a cargo barrier certified as strong enough for the loads you carry.
- Any equipment in front of the driver needs to be secured and located so that it doesn't affect the driver's ability operate the vehicle and be safe in a crash.
- Talk to your equipment or vehicle supplier to make sure its legal and safe.

Loading...

- Make sure everything is well tied down with the right straps or restraints fit for purpose – duct tape won't do.
- Carry heavy items as low in the vehicle as possible.
- Don't overload your vehicle or any of the racks or trays inside or outside the vehicle – they will do the job only for the weight they are designed to carry.
- Make sure legal loading dimensions are followed.
- Gas bottles should be secured in an upright position. Try to avoid locations, such as at the rear, where they are more likely to be damaged in a crash. If they are inside the vehicle, make sure that it is in a vented cabinet designed for the purpose.



Authorising drivers...

- Make sure all your drivers, particularly P-Platers, are licensed for the class of vehicle they are driving. You might need to provide additional training before you allow them to tow or use manual transmissions.
- Allow drivers time to familiarise themselves with the vehicle and its features prior to beginning a journey.
- Make sure any operators of plant have the right tickets and current knowledge on safe use.
- Introduce procedures to authorise people to drive and require them to notify you of any changes to their license condition.
- Create a system for regular audit of licenses and do spot checks.
- Know who is driving what vehicles at any particular time.

Safe drivers...

Medical fitness

- Make sure your drivers are fit to drive. If in doubt, suggest that they talk to their GP, who can assess their health against national medical standards for driver fitness.

Drink/drugs

- You probably have zero tolerance for drink or drugs on the worksite – the same should apply on the road.
- Make people aware of the side-effects of prescription drugs and other medication (e.g. drowsiness). This is often shown on and in the packaging. Pharmacists can provide further advice.

Fatigue

- The only cure for fatigue is sleep.
- On remote jobs requiring long travel, make sure that you allow time for rest before driving and encourage people to break the journey if they have to.
- Pay special attention to any driving at night or at times when the driver would normally be asleep.
- If working hours have extended to get a job done, have an alternative plan to get the worker home safely if they are too tired to drive.

Distraction

- Make sure that your people understand that it is okay to not answer a phone call while driving (including when you call them). Have an informative voicemail message and return the call as soon as possible – your customers should appreciate your care for safety.
- Allow time in the day so that any in-vehicle work – despatching, sending paperwork, filling in forms etc can be done before the trip or at a suitable opportunity when stopped.
- Don't contact your people when you know they are driving.
- Encourage drivers to activate 'do not disturb when driving' on their phone to reduce the temptation to check messages.

Inexperienced drivers

- Like any workplace situation, don't put an inexperienced driver in a situation where they don't have the training or skills to cope. Provide experienced supervision to let them learn safely.
- Ensure you clearly communicate that safety is #1, especially with young drivers who may make unsafe choices because they are trying to impress.

Safe Speed

- Impress the requirement to always drive at a safe speed within the speed limit. Have procedures in place to track any speeding infringements and to monitor driver behaviour.
- On the open road lower speeds can reduce running costs and don't alter travel time very much – you can introduce your own policies.
- Use technology to advise the driver that they have gone over the limit or control speed directly.
- Support drivers with speeding offences or who have an at-fault crash to improve their awareness of the risks.

Protective equipment

- Seat belts must be worn at all times – it is the law.
- Supply first aid kits to be carried in all vehicles and ensure these are maintained.
- If you have to use motorcycles, make sure that full protective clothing and equipment is used all the time.

Post-crash support

- Remember that the vehicle is a workplace, so you need to establish procedures and provide quick-reference guides as to what to do and who to call if involved in a crash or other emergency.
- Record any incidents in your WHS system and learn from them.
- Being in or witnessing a crash can be traumatic. Consider a mental-health referral process for workers who might struggle.

Step 4

Are you doing everything you can to create a sustainable safety culture at work and on the road?

- Set an example – your people will look at you so make sure you do as you say.
- Make it part of your WHS management – don't treat vehicles as something separate, they are a workplace and should be part of your WHS processes.
- Monitor and review – make sure you know how your people are using vehicles, learn from experience and continually improve your practices.
- Consult – your people know where the potential problems are and probably have a good idea how to fix them.





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