Transportation Research Part F 40 (2016) 145–155

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Transportation Research Part F

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/trf

Too individualistic for safety culture? Non-traffic related work safety among heavy goods vehicle drivers ☆

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 16 June 2015
Received in revised form 4 February 2016
Accepted 17 April 2016
Available online 17 May 2016

Keywords:
Non-traffic related work safety
Heavy goods vehicles
Mixed methods case study
Safety culture

ABSTRACT

Introduction: This article reports on a study of non-traffic related work safety among drivers of heavy goods vehicles in Denmark. In the heavy goods vehicle transport (HGV) sector only 6.4% of workplace accidents involving drivers are traffic related. HGV work is characterised by solitary work, as drivers tend to work at a physical distance from their own company and their working environment is also influenced by the working environment of other companies e.g. the places where they deliver goods. This study focuses on an analysis of HGV drivers' and managers' differentiated understandings of risk and safety and its management within an organisational context. The situational focus involves viewing HGV drivers' working environment as a part of the organisational structure as well as of other social relationships. An understanding of safety culture as practice is applied with the view of identifying values and attitudes as well as organisational and technical aspects in relation to how individualist or collectivist understandings of risk and safety influence the working environment in HGVs.
Method: The study applied a mixed methods approach and in this article the qualitative interviews conducted with drivers and managers is the primary data source.
Results: This study suggests a widespread understanding of drivers as being individually oriented in their work, from drivers and management alike. However, the study also demonstrates that, in conducting their work, the drivers are actually interdependent, and share knowledge frequently, albeit informally. The organisational structure of the company shapes their individual attitudes towards safety but they also report being dependent on relationships with, and information from, their fellow colleagues, former colleagues and friends who shape their understandings and attitudes towards hazards and safety practices. The analysis points to risk-taking and unsafe practices as prevalent among HGV drivers, who often refer to risk as trivial and the management of such risks as one's own responsibility. Knowledge of how to manage risks in everyday practice is shown to be principally related to personal experiences but also to the good advice and examples of fellow drivers.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.trf.2016.04.012

Conclusions: The analysis points to interdependent and collectivist practices among HGV drivers even though they are perceived as being individualistically oriented when it comes to safety. Therefore, non-traffic related safety practices, in this case the loading and unloading of vehicles, occur in the grey zone of organisational safety management. Despite the fact that organisational safety initiatives are initiated, the management sees limited possibilities for enforcing them and hence safety practice is often left to the individual driver.
Practical applications: A safety culture perspective might enhance work safety among HGV drivers if we are able to understand workplace culture in a pluralistic way. Collectivist practice among the drivers can be utilised in order to improve knowledge sharing and situational safety practices. The informal communication identified among the drivers might offer a new model for safety initiatives based on more collectivist, albeit informal, safety culture practices on behalf of HGV companies.

1. Introduction

Non-traffic related work injuries among drivers of heavy goods vehicles (HGV) are consistently reported as being a challenge in the trucking industry across different countries (Edwards, Davey, & Armstrong, 2014; Irvine, 1967; Leigh, Waehrer, Miller, & Keenan, 2004; Shibuya, Cleal, & Kines, 2010; Shibuya, Cleal, & Mikkelsen, 2008; Shibuya, Hannerz, Mikkelsen, Cleal, & Gubba, 2008; Smith & Williams, 2014; Spielholz et al., 2008). While factors pertaining to traffic-related accidents and injuries affect the broader public (e.g. Adams-Guppy & Guppy, 2003; Bunn, Slavova, Struttmann, & Browning, 2005; Campagne, Pebayle, & Muzet, 2004; Taylor & Dorn, 2006) non-traffic related accidents impact upon the workplace health and safety of people working in the industry (Smith & Williams, 2014). It is important to acknowledge that HGV drivers may cause others harm, yet the degree and extent of the harm resulting from traffic-related incidents does not mean that non-traffic related occupational safety incidents are a trivial issue. It has also been shown that the job-group in which HGV drivers are included has a heightened risk of disability retirement resulting from occupational injury (Hannerz, Mikkelsen, Nielsen, Tuchsen, & Spangenberg, 2007).

In an analysis of the Danish National Work Injury Register for the 10-year period 1993–2002, it was shown that only 6.4% of workplace accidents in Denmark involving HGV drivers were traffic related (cf. Shibuya, Cleal, et al., 2008). What emerges from a close analysis of the data is that the vast majority of occupational injuries experienced by HGV drivers are a result of activities relating to the loading and unloading of vehicles (Shibuya et al., 2010). This was also found to be the case in Washington State, USA, where the overall majority of injuries were non-vehicle related (Rauser et al., 2008). Of course, the volume of incidents tells us little of the relative risk and Danish accident data cannot further assist us here. Other sources can, however, clarify the extent of the problem. Data from the Danish Work Environment Survey of 2000 revealed that 5.8% of all HGV drivers will experience an injury resulting in absence from work per annum, placing them at 0.5 percentage point above the average Danish worker (Mikkelsen, 2000). It has also been shown that Danish HGV drivers had significantly higher rates of hospital contact due to injury than the Danish male skilled/semi-skilled workforce in general (Shibuya, Hannerz, et al., 2008).

This risk in HGV drivers is, however, barely reflected in the approach to safety from within the industry. In a study of Danish transport companies it has been shown that the majority of the companies reported having an inactive or passive approach to workplace safety (Mikkelsen, Dyreborg, & Spangenberg, 2003). To some extent, this can be accounted for by the nature of the industry and the fact that the vast majority of transport companies are small and medium sized enterprises, often lacking the resources to take a proactive and explicit stance towards safety (Dyreborg et al., 2008). In the USA, however we see that, even if measures to improve safety are in place, there are significant differences between employers and drivers when it comes to how they perceive the causes of accidents in the industry (Spielholz et al., 2008). Spielholz and colleagues found that, while employers attributed the causes of accidents to individual drivers, and saw the drivers' risks, perceptions and lack of attention as the main barriers for implementing injury prevention solutions, the drivers themselves pointed to causes related to environmental, technical and organisational factors. This differentiation of views regarding causes of, and solutions to, injuries and accidents calls for organisational dialogue and a more situational focus on workplace safety in heavy goods transport, a perspective that has been called for in previous studies (e.g. Shibuya et al., 2010). Moreover, the prioritisation of tasks versus safety and concepts of 'what ought to be done' in a transport company needs to be understood as part of the actual context of which workplace safety practices form a part (e.g. Edwards et al., 2014).

1.1. Safety culture in HGV companies

Ever since the concept of safety culture was first suggested it has mostly been used as a normative concept, referring to safety culture as a state that can be valued as 'good' or 'bad', i.e. as something that might be lacking (see Brinkmann, 2007; Edwards, Davey, & Armstrong, 2013). This understanding presupposes an important role for top-management in the implementation and administration of good safety culture, in order to facilitate good safety practice or behaviour in a workforce (Glendon & Stanton, 2000; Haukelid, 2008). Considering safety from the point of view of organisational culture, Glendon and