SAFETY ISSUES

Good behaviour at the wheel

Maurice Glover on computerised monitoring

Fleet drivers are being asked to take part in computer tests to help fleet operators assess how they behave behind the wheel.

Developed by Cranfield University and Peak Performance, a driver training company, the online risk assessment programme takes minutes to complete and an hour to alert employers to factors that could lead to accidents.

Harnessing psychometric principles and based on two decades of research into the psychology of driver behaviour, the Fleet Driver Risk Index has been created by Lisa Dorn, director of the driving research group at Cranfield and research director of DriverMetrics, a company set up by the university to handle its launch and implementation.

Dr Dorn is one of the experts featured in the BBC's *Road Rage* television series and is an adviser to the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety.

She says: "Human factors contribute to 95 per cent of road traffic accidents and this approach allows fleet operators to identify more accurately high-risk driver behaviour and implement the specific training needed to tackle it.

The index has applications for corporate, public sector, and emergency services fleets and is claimed to help companies meet their health and safety duty of care to employees who work at the wheel, as well as reducing the legal, financial and human costs associated with crashes.

Training courses have been produced by Peak Performance, which was set up in Chesterfield 17 years ago and supplies driver training and risk assessment services for a large number of corporate clients.

All have been tailored to address the behavioural issues identified by the computer tests.

The index classifies drivers as low, medium or high risk after measuring 12 factors and also takes into account age, gender, mileage, task, driving experience, penalty points and previous accident records.

James Sutherland, managing director, says: "We believe the Index represents a world-first that will have significant benefits for fleet operators.

"By identifying an individual driver's behaviour characteristics, training can be targeted in a much more effective way and the driver can more easily understand what behaviour is likely to result in accidents.

"Because it is so targeted and precise, it identifies those who may require additional training while removing the need for a blanket approach calling for all drivers to be trained."

An early adopter is the London borough of Havering, winner of the 2005 Prince Michael of Kent fleet safety award for its efforts in introducing in-car and workshop driver training for its fleet of 250 vehicles.

The council brought in Peak as part of its efforts to reduce expenditure by fostering a safer driving culture among its employees. As a result, accident rates have fallen by up to 25 per cent.

"This award is a great achievement and one that vindicates the council's decision to invest in driver and awareness training despite a difficult economic environment when money has been tight," says Allen Burbidge, transport commissioning manager of the council.

> 'It identifies those who need training while removing the need for a blanket approach'

According to Mr Burbidge, drivers of the council's fleet of cars, light and heavy commercial vehicles, passenger coaches, and buses have benefited from the courses, which have highlighted risk awareness.

"One of our most effective initiatives has been workshops concentrating on solving the difficulties that are associated with parking and manoeuvring," he says.

"Most of our vehicles operate in and around Romford, a mainly urban area, and a high proportion of the accidents occurred in low-speed reversing situations."

Even though these areas of driving instruction have been particularly relevant, the next phase of the council's safety drive will be online risk assessments for managers, social workers and home-help assistants who use their own cars on council business.