T-Mobile takes the green road to safety

Case studies

Mobile services phone and data providers T-Mobile has seen huge financial savings and improved the safety of its employees after equipping 250 vehicles with technology to monitor driver behaviour...

The programme, which saw Hatfield-based T-Mobile become the UK launch partner for GreenRoad Technologies' Safety Center system, was introduced after the company witnessed a plateauing of its road crash rate following the use of more 'traditional' risk management techniques.

At the time of going to press, T-Mobile was considering whether to install the small dashboard-mounted display with green, red and yellow lights to cue drivers in the remainder of its current 580-strong company car fleet as well as in vehicles driven by its 800 cash allowance employees.

A small device in the right hand corner of the windscreen is all that is visible of GreenRoad Safety Center.

The initiative has seen T-Mobile become a 'business champion' as part of the Department for Transport's 'Driving for Better Business' programme, which is managed by RoadSafe.

The in-vehicle sensor portion of the technology monitors 120 driver actions involving speed, braking, acceleration, lane handling and turning, sending the data in a continuous stream to GreenRoad's web server. The data is then analysed to provide almost instant information about a driver's safety performance. Feedback is given to drivers using the dashboard lights and optional SMS or email messaging.

Big brother

To overcome 'Big Brother' fears among employees, functionality that enables T-Mobile to identify individual drivers is not switched on so line managers are unable to identify high-risk drivers. However, in the future, that hurdle maybe overcome.

Nevertheless, Nigel Wilkinson, T-Mobile's head of health, safety and environment, says the technology has more than paid for itself as the company has witnessed a £417,000 saving in bent metal costs and fuel savings of around £20,000 (a 3% saving) in just 12 months as well as huge reductions in staff sickness rates and administration relating to road crashes.

Overall the technology has helped T-Mobile achieve a 49% reduction in vehicle repair costs in 2007 versus 2006 as its crash rate fell by 20% over the same period. Vehicle wear and tear-related costs have also reduced.

The dashboard lights measures drivers 'unsafe manoeuvres', which could include incidents such as speeding and sharp braking. T-Mobile recorded 41 such incidents every 10 hours of driving last year compared with 81 every 10 hours during a late 2006 'blind' trial.

Mr Wilkinson explained: "Employees have modified their driving behaviour. On-the-road driver training is very good and it identifies bad habits, but in my view it is a limited intervention. We have introduced a permanent intervention, which, every time an employee drives their vehicle it monitors their behaviour."

Monitoring

That monitoring includes both business and private mileage and it was to overcome employee fears that additional functionality, such as vehicle tracking being used by management to discriminate against them, is presently not used.

Mr Wilkinson said: "We use the technology purely as a risk management tool, we did not want employees to feel discriminated. Management cannot see individual data, only collective data."

He joined T-Mobile in an advisory role in 2000 and immediately noticed that the company did not have an occupational road risk strategy. At the time the business operated a fleet of about 1,500 company cars – the size of the fleet and the overall number of vehicles driven on business has dropped over the years due to company restructuring – and had an 80% accident rate.

Invest

"It was clear that we needed the business to invest so we set up a driver training programme and gave all company car drivers one-to-one on-the-road tuition. That resulted in an immediate cut in the number of incidents over the following 12 months," said Mr Wilkinson. Employees who were involved in multiple

incidents in a 12-month period underwent additional training.

The company's claims record was so high that insurance premiums doubled from 2001 to 2002 to around £1.1 million. On the strength that the driver training programme would result in a crash reduction, the T-Mobile board decided to switch from a comprehensive insurance policy to third party and selfinsure for accident damage. It was, said Mr. Wilkinson, a gamble that paid off.

The programme was followed up with each driver undergoing a refresher course 12 months after their initial training. Additionally, all employees who drove a company car and cash allowance drivers - about 2,200 people in total - completed an e-learning risk module.

By early 2005 the company's incident rate had dropped to 55%, but Mr Wilkinson wanted further improvements as he could see that the rate of crash reduction was slowing down. It was then that he was introduced to the Safety Center technology.

Initially, T-Mobile equipped 20 vehicles with the system in late 2005 and, with the scheme deemed a success, a cross-section of 250 vehicles - such as those driven by 'high risk' field-based engineers in country areas - as well as some management cars and those driven by the health and safety management team, were fitted out in late 2006.

"I wanted management cars and my team's cars fitted because I wanted the company to lead by example," said Mr Wilkinson, who gave the order for the devices to be enabled after the three month 'blind' profiling exercise as employees got used to the system.


Nigel Wilkinson

While the dashboard light system gives drivers immediate feedback as to whether they have committed an 'unsafe manoeuvre', they are encouraged to log on to their individual website weekly to analyse reports on their own driving.

An incentive points-based programme called 'Safety Stars' enables employees to collect company-

funded vouchers to spend in High Street stores which are gained depending on the number of 'unsafe manoeuvres' committed.

Acceptance

"There has been great acceptance of the initiative because employees do care about the way they drive. From the company's perspective we want to protect our staff. The great risk to T-Mobile is that one of our employees is killed or seriously injured in a crash," said Mr Wilkinson.

Meanwhile, all at-work drivers that don't have the technology in their vehicles complete an at-work e-learning module. Additionally, driving licences are checked annually and the company's in depth occupational safe driving policy limits the use of hands-free mobile phones to 'urgent calls only', which should only be answered when safe to do so.

Results

Mr Wilkinson believes the results of the programme in its first 12 months are 'fantastic' and now wants to spread the best practice safety message to other organisations. He is also hopeful of being given the green light to install the system in the remaining vehicles driven on business.

"T-Mobile wants to be leaders in the health and safety protection of employees and becoming a 'business champion' is helping us to do that. The Government is right to encourage employers to take steps to protect their at-work drivers and hopefully we will see a reduction in road traffic accidents," said Mr Wilkinson, who became involved with the 'Driving for Better Business' programme as a member of the CBI's health and safety advisory panel.

Virgin invests in technology

Billionaire Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group led a $14.5 million investment earlier this year in GreenRoad Technologies...

The five-year-old Californian-based company has funding from previous venture capital backers Benchmark Capital and Balderton Capital as well as the Virgin Green Fund. Sir Richard started that fund in 2006 with $400m intended for investments in renewable energy and other so-called 'cleantech' companies. In a statement Sir Richard said: "By deploying GreenRoad through their fleets, companies can play an important role in reducing fuel consumption, lowering harmful emissions and fostering safe driving habits."

GreenRoad says Safety Center users have reduced accidents by 54% on average, cut accident costs by about 65% and lowered carbon emissions by 7%.

The new funds will expand and support GreenRoad's global operations and serve its fleet and insurance customers as they enhance driver safety and reduce fuel costs.

Up for a challenge

GreenRoad Technologies has launched the GreenRoad UK Fleet Safety Challenge, promising new adopters of its Safety Center that they will see a 50% reduction in risky driver behaviour over a three-month pilot period...

The company says its new initiative offers a 'no-risk opportunity' for fleets to take an active role in improving employee safety on the roads whether travelling for business or using a company car for pleasure.

The company says its UK Fleet Safety Challenge is a comprehensive offering including installation of the SafetyCenter in-vehicle hardware, ongoing risk consulting, custom analysis, internet applications, measurement of results and product support, all for one inclusive price. At the end of the three-month pilot period, GreenRoad says it guarantees that fleet driver risk will be reduced by 50%, or customers will be under no further obligation to continue the programme.

Aidan Rowsome, vice president of GreenRoad EMEA, said: "Customers such as T-Mobile in the UK have already demonstrated how easy it is to reduce accidents and save on fuel. We are so convinced of the savings fleets can make that we are willing to offer this risk-free promotion to UK fleets."