

Let's Talk Fleet Risk - Episode 19

Paul Aldridge, WJ Group - Sustainability Director

Simon: Welcome to the February episode of 'Let's Talk Fleet Risk'

In the first quarter of this year, the Driving for Better Business campaign is taking a deeper look at the area of fitness to drive and driver wellbeing.

This month, we've published a revised risk management case study for WJ Group – one of the UK's leading road safety and highway maintenance businesses. With over 650 employees and a fleet of more than 400 vehicles, driver wellbeing is a big focus for WJ.

My guest today in WJ Group's Sustainability Director Paul Aldridge, and we're going to talk about how WJ Group mitigates the effects of what is a physically and mentally demanding job role, on its staff. Especially those who also drive the company vehicles.

Paul – Welcome to the podcast.

My first question is obviously why wellbeing is so important to WJ? As a company, WJ seems to go further than most employers, so perhaps you could tell us about the challenges your staff and drivers face as part of their jobs, and what drives this commitment to their wellbeing?

Paul: Sure. Wellbeing is critical to most businesses, I believe. It's about looking after the whole person, so we've got health and safety and wellbeing, and they fit into this group - it's better for the company – better for productivity - and better for the people that work for us. What could be wrong with that?

Our people face a lot of hazards – we're working in the middle of the roads putting lines down, and working with hot materials is one of our principal activities so it's fundamental to what we do. The obvious hazards are materials and the vehicular activity so it's providing a safe space – that's important. Over the last few years for everyone working in the public realm there seems to be increasing abuse that people have to face. It seems strange to me that somebody feels they have the right to shout and swear at the people that work for us. They'd feel weird if we walked into their offices and did it to them, but they feel they have the right to do it to our workers – it's not good for general wellbeing. There are also wider problems – air pollution is a real big problem for us as a society and by the nature of our work we contribute to it. There's the physical risk – muscular skeletal risk, and as I say, the hazards of working with hot materials. Some years ago we started looking at this and we looked at the idea of stealing the title from our work with Business in the community – what if your job was good for you? We divided wellbeing onto several pillars – physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, financial wellbeing and social wellbeing and it all fits together in trying to provide a holistic wellbeing for our people.

Simon: I think that's really important. I like the idea of the pillars, So, if we drill down into the physical one to start with – tell us about the impact of poor fitness and what you do to help them.

Paul: A lot of the work we do – and we can't forget those who don't work on the roads – it's a physically demanding job – but there's lots of manual handling problems. Do they lift properly? We have added issues around the heat of the materials. There's a lot of driving - sitting in a driver's seat – so designing things as ergonomically the best it can be. We design equipment fundamentally for safety but also so its easy to use. So there's splashguards in place, height protection for the back of a vehicle. Interlocks so moving parts don't get in the way. We ask our people to contribute to the design of the vehicles they use. We have an SOS system – safety automation - so people can communicate with the safety and design team on improvements they can see on the vehicles or their working environment to reduce risks. It helps them better able to do their job.

Simon: It's ot physical strength is it – they're out on the roads all day – difficult to maintain reasonable diet, stay hydrated that kind of thing?

Paul: It's a really good point. I think, we didn't think about these things back in the day. We tended to live on the food in the local garage – and there's a lot of night work so it's hard to maintain a good diet – but we try to give advice. In our driver's handbook we have a section on nutrition. We do work on occupational health – the employees have medicals – people from 21 to 60 have a medical every 3 years and if you're over 60 you have it annually. If you have a medical need we review it annually and part of the process is the nurse talks to people about their diet and it helps pick up any problems with health early. We do regular eyesight checks every 6 months. Everyone who drives a company vehicle has one. We had lots of people starting to wear glasses – it helps pick up residual problems like cataracts – it's good for your life beyond work. I believe it should extend ito their whole wellness.

Simon: You obviously take this approach with all your operational staff but some of those are going to have to drive your vehicles between jobs and then back again at the end of a gruelling shift. You mentioned earlier some is carried out overnight. How do you deal with things like fatigue and ensure they're still able to concentrate and do that safely?

Paul: Fatigue is a big risk for us and others in our industry so we have a fatigue policy which is regularly updated. We have a set of rules about rest – planning it properly and not too many shifts consecutively so there's time for rest. Sometimes shift run over, and people end having to stay on site due to other circumstances, something further down the cycle so if people work a longer shift we have to have something in place so they aren't going to work the following night – and that is a really important part of what we do. It's vital we understand fatigue and mitigate the risks.

Simon: So let's talk about mental health now – we've done some work with the suicide prevention charity CALM so we know 75% of all suicides are male – which means that every 2 hours, somewhere in the UK, a man takes his own life. I imagine most of your operatives are male and I know you take this very seriously so talk us through how you support staff on mental health.

Paul: Unfortunately we have lost colleagues who have taken their own lives. Its terrible for all involved – so desperately sad. Many years ago under the auspices of our Safety Director, Craig Williams, we set up a mental health first aid group. That came out of those tragedies. Craig made it his mission and we set up a strong group of mental health first aiders across the company. We began to see other things happening that people were doing in the industry. A few years ago we engaged the services of a mental health counsellor. The

results have been remarkable. We do a staff survey every 18 months and we collect information about disability. The survey results were astonishing – we have 14% of employees declaring a disability – on the face of it it's potentially worrying but actually it reflects the national statistics and it made us proud of the work we have done.

In 2021 our counsellor conducted 227 sessions – wellbeing checks, management support meetings – teaching managers how to deal with mental health of colleagues, 38 crisis risk assessments with 71 additional meetings and that wasn't because it was a bad place to work - I think the numbers reflect what life is like for people in society in general.

We 'are really pleased we've been able to offer that support. We do red flag training – it's about getting our staff onto this course – and some people don't want to do it and that's fine – but those who do are taught to look after colleagues and learn about the red flags. A chat often helps. It takes the stigma out of mental health and wellbeing. We all suffer with doubts and mental health problems from time to time and having that time and to see it as normal – going back to the statistics about men being very vulnerable in this area, the more we can do to overcome the stigma, the better off we will all be,

Simon: That sounds like an excellent programme. It works both ways, doesn't it? Not only picking up on others with problems but identifying issues you may have yourself?

Paul: I think the figures I went through actually reflect that. People have reached out about things and were we not doing this they may not have had anywhere to go. As an organisation we are pleased we have done this. We all have those moments of doubts and most manage but if we've helped people struggling to recognise it's not something they should cover up – we help them manage and they can help themselves to manage.

Simon: And, of course, stress and pressure don't just come from the job itself, they come from outside in their personal life as well, in the employee's personal life. How do you support on that?

Paul: Yes – that's the whole point of the wellbeing programme. There's the physical and mental side – there's the financial side with the cost of living crisis- we know people are struggling across society. I was in a meeting earlier, a business community meeting, talking about hygiene poverty. Which has an effect on working life – some employees couldn't afford to keep themselves clean so they are skipping work.

If you're driving down the road and your head is full of worries about bills, how are you concentrating on driving and will you spot that person who steps in front of you – the pedestrian or the cyclist, the horse rider – financial worries have an effect and they are a problem. We have provided access to financial advisers for our employees so if they catch things earlier it's easier to mitigate. We also provide schemes for discounts and vouchers – money off shopping and spectrum health – little things that help.

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Simon: It also helps in making your staff feel valued – that you put all that effort into supporting them. You sit on the Committee for Fairness, Inclusion and Respect in Construction so you're obviously personally passionate about these issues. Tell me a little about your work with the committee and something that I believe you call 'Social Wellbeing'

Paul: It was set up a while ago – 2013 – CICA, the CITB and the Supply Chain Sustainability School. It's about making the industry better for everybody. Better for business – about treating everyone fairly and including everyone with respect. It's about treating people with equity and compassion and discouraging inappropriate behaviour like bullying and increasing the diversity of our work force.

Construction is a male dominated industry – providing opportunities for women, for people across different backgrounds, for people with disabilities., The statistics tell us that the more diverse a company and its culture, the better performing that organisation is. I'm on the steering committee and it provides materials to help people look at the business case for inclusion. Going back to wellbeing it's making work more inclusive. You can't run a safe site if everyone is not included,. It uses simple language. People shy away from ED and I – equality and diversity inclusion – because they are worried about being predominately a white male industry. What this message is - we need to improve but we are where we are so it's about measuring our statistics and helping us to help ourselves. We have a skills shortage – we need to attract people from every walk of life. The social mobility does encourage people – the opportunity is out there. It takes us into schools – we won an inspiring change award for that work – we do product talks, road safety campaigns for schools and it takes you into places you would never have thought you could go to – but you are putting something back into society.

Simon: Final question Paul as we start to wrap up. We've just published your updated case study and WJ is well known in the highways industry for its commitment to safety management in all areas of the business, and I know you view driver safety and wellbeing as just another area of employee safety that needs to be managed to the same high standards.

The case study showed that over a period of 15 months you reduced collisions by 40% and associated costs by 45% plus significant reductions in fuel use and emissions. And that's on top of equally impressive reductions from your previous case study. **It really speaks to how healthy and safe staff help drive the business to new highs for performance and efficiency, and that genuine long-term commitment from those at the top of the business drives continuous improvement, doesn't it?** How important is that commitment at the top?

Paul: Absolutely vital – making employees feel valued. They are fairly paid – it's that interaction between the people. We should all be part of one team. **It's about designing our jobs better with wellbeing in mind and that is got to be your first priority as a manager.** Our driver behaviour scheme has worked incredibly well for us. It's based on a carrot not a stick – based on telematics. The reductions you quote came out of that. Every month at each of our depots there's a £100 prize for the best driver and also £50 - for the most improved – I think in my own mind that's the good prize.

And a £1000 prize at the end of the year for the best driver. The savings that have been made pay for the prizes many times over. It's about trying to look after people as a whole. Safety doesn't stop at the site boundary - and wellbeing certainly doesn't

Simon: I think that it's clearly testament to the results you've seen – it's clearly working for you. Thank you so much for being our guest today and for your continued support of Driving

for Better Business. I'd like to applaud you for everything you're doing on this vital subject of wellbeing. I think that you're making your staff and drivers feel extremely valued.

We've published your revised case study on our website and also a feature on the work you're doing on wellbeing and some of the things we've discussed today. We'll put details and links in the show notes.

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Simon: If you manage drivers and their vehicles, and you face similar issues to those discussed in this podcast, there are links in the show notes to some useful resources on the Driving for Better Business website. And these are all free to access. If you enjoyed the conversation, please don't forget to hit subscribe - so you know when the next episode is released. And please also give us a 5-star review, as this helps us to get up the podcast rankings, and makes it more visible to others who might also find it useful. You can follow us – that's Driving for Better Business on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. And most importantly, please help us to spread the word. All our resources are free for those who manage fleets and their employees who drive for work. Thank you for listening to Let's Talk Fleet Risk, and I look forward to welcoming you to the next episode.