

Let's Talk Fleet Risk - Episode 22

Peter Golding – Founder and Managing Director of FleetCheck

Simon: Welcome to this edition of Let's Talk Fleet Risk – a podcast for those who manage drivers and their vehicles and want to reduce road risk in their organisation.

Hi everyone, and welcome to Let's Talk Fleet Risk. My guest for this episode of the podcast is Peter Golding, who is the Founder and Managing Director of fleet management software specialists FleetCheck. Peter, welcome to the podcast.

Peter: Thank you Simon.

Simon: Now, a little-known fact is that FleetCheck was actually the first commercial organisation that partnered with Driving for Better Business. When I started as campaign manager way back in 2016, I wanted to create a useful online resource that would help engage our audience of Fleet Safety Managers. I'd already known Peter for a few years by then and the new FleetCheck had created an online Fleet Management questionnaire some years previously – but it wasn't being heavily promoted, and needed updating.

Peter and I rewrote the questions, FleetCheck's IT team did the programming for us and we relaunched it as the Driving for Better Business Gap Analysis, in partnership with FleetCheck. It's now been through a couple of major updates since then, but our current Gap Analysis still has that original work at its core.

So, Peter, you've always put helping Fleet Managers in this type of way at the forefront of the FleetCheck ethos. So where does that come from?

Peter: Well, Simon, thank you – and I appreciate the opportunity of being on this podcast. For me, I suppose it sort of started with the 10 years at the beginning of my career working within the main dealer network, and experiencing the service sector. But really predominantly from the 15 years' experience of running my own garages. During that time I'd come across hundreds and hundreds of businesses who we supported – it was obvious we were very essential to them maintaining their fleet. What I identified from that is there are literally tens of thousands of businesses out there who really are unaware of the challenges they have. In my industry, there are some very good software solutions out there – they were very much geared around the larger fleet operators.

At the heart of what we wanted to do with FleetCheck is be the voice of the SME. To build something really designed for the small to medium sized fleet operator. We focussed massively on the commercial vehicle fleet – so we look at the van and truck side, but especially the van side because it's the area that is most often ignored. I

wanted to create something that was intuitive and easy to use, and really help the sector that were ignored, in my opinion. And now I'm delighted to say we are the leading provider of support to the SME of fleet operators in the UK.

Simon: Yeah, and I can vouch for that because prior to DfBB I ran two small fleets; one with just a handful and then a second company which had about 10-12 cars. And this information just wasn't available to me at the time. I wasn't aware of the responsibilities. And it was very difficult to find that help and support. And what you've just been outlining would have been hugely helpful to me in both of those roles.

But another project we worked together on more recently – probably a couple of years ago now, when we originally launched it – is the Fleet Confidence Challenge, a free online course containing over 30 short videos in 3 modules. I think it takes just under a couple of hours to get through all of them.

The first module tells the story of a van driver involved in a serious accident with a car driver and a cyclist. And it goes on to examine where both the driver and the employer were at fault. And we use this scenario as the basis for a mock trial presentation that we did just last month – a mock trial prosecution of a company. Why did you want to create the challenge, and why did you ask us to get involved?

Peter: Well, I think one of the biggest issues is that the individuals that often operate fleets... some of them are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they have an interest in vehicles and they've been given the job of fleet or vehicles – management of the drivers – alongside their other roles. So what we have there is a challenge, where often the businesses that rely very much on these vehicles are being managed by somebody who hasn't necessarily been given the formal training required or hasn't got the time available to be able to properly and fully understand the implications.

What I wanted to do was created something intuitive and easy to engage with, and something relevant to the sector we were talking to. There's been some fantastic work that's been done previously, and I've seen information that can be associated with some very serious situations – the corporate manslaughter situations were, and still are, very prevalent – but it doesn't apply necessarily to everyday events. And the challenge we wanted to create was something that every single business could easily experience.

Why with DfBB? Well, as you've already said Simon, I'm delighted with the work we've already done with you over so many years. And it seemed a really good fit working with you and creating something free-of-charge that was really a help to educate fleet operators – who, as I say, may not necessarily be trained. And maybe look at the sort of scenarios they might experience and identify perhaps the areas that they may not have initially thought about. So that was really at the heart of it – to provide an education tool that was free-of-charge and easily accessible to anyone who wanted it.

Simon: And it's an interesting point, about the distinction between fatalities and injuries – obviously with the very big fleets in the country there is a statistical likelihood that they will have to deal with fatalities at some point, often more than one a year. But with the majority of companies with a small or medium-sized fleet, that's possibly something they'll never experience. The scenario we picked was about an injury

collision with a cyclist, and we used that to our advantage with the mock trial, because there was a recent introduction of a new offence which is Causing Serious Injury by either Careless or Dangerous Driving, depending on the severity of the offence. And that makes it much more realistic to fleets, doesn't it? Because according to government statistics, there's about 40,000 a year of those.

Peter: Yeah, and I think that's one of the important parts of it. When you look at the very small number of prosecutions for very, very serious accidents which escalate to the courts, if you look at serious injuries – I think, as you say, it's in its thousands – but almost every business you talk to, even the smallest one, will have a driver running into the back of somebody at some stage, or reversing into a post, or maybe having a complaint from the general public. So we wanted to make it real, and as you say, I think the headline interests really were large corporate events and activities. But this is really designed to make it relevant to anyone, regardless of the size of the fleet they're operating.

Simon: Obviously I've mentioned this mock trial presentation a couple of times now. It was at a 3-day Health and Safety Conference and we've got a video of that now available on the DfBB website, under the Events tab at the top – look for 'Health and Safety Event 2023' and you'll find that there. But the purpose of that session, Peter, was to highlight the importance of accurate record keeping. So, why is that so important in your view?

Peter: What you have to be able to recognise is that you need to be able to demonstrate to the authorities that you are running a safe and legal fleet. So many of the businesses we talk to, and now almost a majority of those we support and help, are really reliant on spreadsheets, fragmented data that may be on whiteboards... a lot of what we try to do is to give companies that confidence that they can rely very much on remote access to data that's a holistic view of what they're trying to do, rather than looking at it in this fragmented way.

Often businesses we talk to have got leased vehicles with maintenance, and there's a misconception within a lot of fleet operators that we talk to that because they lease these vehicles and maintenance is provided as part of the lease, that the leasing company themselves are responsible for record keeping. That they're responsible for these vehicles being maintained correctly. And what we reinforce with them is that if something were to happen and they have a serious event with a vehicle that wasn't properly maintained then it would be them in court, not the lease company. So, having records and having accurate information so that you can be confident you know what needs be done and when – you can only do that with a robust audit trail. And it should stand up. And if companies are investing in spreadsheets, and investment in time is where we're looking at it, then you are massively exposed. Data could be deleted or easily corrected within that format.

Simon: Yeah, there are a couple of really important points to reinforce there. While you can delegate the management of that risk, i.e. the maintenance of the leased vehicles to the leasing company, you cannot delegate the ownership of the risk. The company always has the ownership and the responsibility to make sure that risk is managed. And it doesn't matter what you did to manage that risk, what matters is that you can prove you did it, which is why record keeping is so important. So what are the

key things that records need to be kept for? Those responsible for driver and vehicle safety, what should they be making sure that they accurately record?

Peter: Okay, really good question Simon. In fairness, the basis we start off with is get the essentials done first. It can sometimes feel like there is so much to do and they don't know where to start. Our recommendation is exactly as you said – drivers and vehicles. Let's focus on the fundamental requirements first. You should be confident that both the vehicles and their drivers are legal, and you can demonstrate that by appropriate record keeping.

So the areas that are prerequisite for drivers, for example, would be licence checking, medical records, training information – are they competent to drive the vehicle you're putting them in? Incidents are something that happen so often that businesses are not recording information on. For example – a complaint from the general public. We had a scenario – I won't say who – but it was a driver who was going the wrong way around a mini-roundabout in Swindon. And if anyone's been to Swindon you will understand it is an experimental town with roundabouts. But this particular driver was going the wrong way and the general public sort of shouted at the driver and the driver and the driver flicked the v's back in a sign written vehicle. To give you an example on that one, the pedestrian reported it and wrote to the directors, but he also copied Wiltshire Police in. Wiltshire Police arrived and wanted to know what the event was, if they had recorded it, and what actions had they taken on it.

And I think something as innocent as a complaint from the general public, or a speeding event, or a parking event, or reversing into a post... these things should be recorded. And looking at trends, a lot of businesses invest in telematics, and there can be frequent occurrences when you get speeding and things like that again. So, driver incidents and high-risk drivers are a key issue. Fitness to drive – are your drivers showing up to work fit to drive? This should be confirmed every time they're in the vehicle.

The vehicle side – this is a big subject, and I'm only going to skirt over some of the areas, but you've got all the fundamental stuff. The road tax, the MOTs, the servicing. Probably the area that, as an engineer in my previous life... defect management is quite close to my heart. And if companies are – and a lot of businesses sadly aren't – making sure the drivers are doing regular safety checks, it's not just the inspections that the driver has done and defects there, the other area we do need to look at is advisory notifications coming through. So if you're talking about recording information, it could be MOT records coming through, advisory notifications coming through from the garages letting you know the vehicle will need maintenance – maybe in 6 months' time. But you combine that with some of the equipment fitted to vehicles, LOLER inspections, there's a myriad of things across the board. So start off gently – get the basics first, but this really does illustrate what I said earlier about spreadsheets being an inadequate method of recording such an enormous range of data that's required.

Simon: I've brought this up in a couple of conversations recently but an example that illustrates that very well is the Glasgow bin lorry incident where the driver had heart trouble while driving and crashed, killing a number of people. But Glasgow Council were exonerated of any blame because they were able to prove they'd done all the relevant checks and they had done everything reasonably practicable to ensure the

driver and the vehicle were safe, so the driver was held fully responsible for that and his employer, by dint of their exceptional record keeping and procedures, were in the clear over that, which I think is what all of our audience would be hoping for.

Peter: Yes, but I think I said earlier, a smaller enterprise which doesn't have the same level of infrastructure could easily have fallen foul and failed to have asked the appropriate questions or have the audit trail to prove that that's being done. Fitness to drive, within our walkaround inspection app, is the very first thing that drivers have got to say before they actually drive the vehicle in the morning. Are you under the influence of alcohol or drugs? Are there any medical conditions that could impair you? So it's not something they do once. They do it every single time they get in the vehicle.

Simon: When we did our mock trial presentation, the fictional company we presented in the court got a lot of things wrong. Where do you commonly see fleets make mistakes with record keeping?

Peter: Well as I said earlier, it is to do with defect management and how often there is a lot of focus on making sure the drivers are completing inspections on vehicles to prove there are nil defects on vehicles. This is so important – not to prove there's nothing wrong with the vehicle, it's so that when there is something wrong, it's being identified and tracked through. We've unfortunately heard many cases before we get involved where drivers complained that they are regularly letting the office know that there is something wrong with the vehicle, but nobody actually takes any action on it. So it is a matter of getting this data and doing something with it. And ensuring that they can prove beyond any doubt that the vehicle is not only being maintained in accordance with the manufacturers service intervals, but also that the vehicle – especially now, because gone are the days when we could inspect a vehicle and be fairly confident that it would be maintained properly – now the onus and responsibility is very much on the operator of the vehicle, not the garage. With the extended service intervals of 2 years, 40,000 miles, it is the company's responsibility to make sure the vehicle is legal.

The other area we do see companies fall foul on is licence checking. Often, they'll be quite vigilant at the beginning when drivers first start, with the appropriate documentation to prove they can drive. This should be risk-based, and done on a regular basis – minimum once a year. If they have more points, then it should be done more frequently. But we do see companies often just assuming that they can just look at the plastic part of the licence and think they're fit to drive. Or even just use their national insurance details and their driving licence number to go in and get the data from the DVLA. That is something no company should do. It's a breach of the data protection and security areas on that so every company should be really careful to properly risk manage their drivers. It's a criminal offence to drive a vehicle without a licence so it's a fundamental requirement. That and managing defects are just two of the areas that I would highlight.

Simon: And managing defects – if you don't deal with them, small defects can turn into larger defects quite quickly. We've obviously got the cost of living crisis and everything from vehicle repairs to fuel and insurance costs are going through the roof. So surely keeping proper track of fleet activity can make quite a significant contribution to cost control?

Peter: Absolutely. If you're talking about a very common advisory – it would be that when brake pads themselves are getting low, failure to replace those on time means you're going to have to buy new discs, new pads... the cost could be 3 or 4 times the amount, not taking into consideration the down time that brings. And the last forecast of that I saw averaged between £700-800, and I've seen many companies where there are multiple drivers and the cost of vehicles being off the road for a day can be much higher than that.

As far as the maintenance and management of that side is concerned... it's preventative maintenance. I'm always going to be an advocate of this as an engineer. We are seeing vehicles being kept on fleet longer now than ever. There are critical events that need to be done – for example a cam belt is something that if you've only had a vehicle for 3 or 4 years and you've run it up to 80,000 or 100,000 miles this might be something that you've never experienced needing replacing but a cam belt failure, in a lot of cases you could write the vehicle off. So these are preventative maintenance issues but being proactive rather than reactive can substantially reduce the downtime, and if you are relying on vehicles staying on fleet now longer than in the past, you really do need to look at this very carefully. It's really important.

Simon: Now, we often talk about fleet safety, and historically we've been talking to fleet managers – and a lot of them are responsible for driver safety, but a lot of them really only have responsibility for fleet as more of a procurement and maintenance role. And we've recently realised that a huge part of our audience are safety managers. Not fleet managers, but safety managers, and driver safety comes under their remit. And research shows that driver safety is consistently in the top 3 concerns for safety professionals at all levels. So, they understand the relevant legislation – the Health and Safety at Work Act – but they don't always understand how driver safety fits into that. So, what would you think was the most important thing for them to focus on? They're not fleet professionals but safety professionals with a responsibility for vehicles and drivers.

Peter: It's a good question. And one that across all organisations we talk to is one of the biggest challenges. But it is communicating with drivers – that's the number 1 thing businesses have got to do. If you look at the first step, it's creating, communicating and monitoring your policy and making sure it is in circulation, that all of the drivers are confirming they've got it, receipts that they've got it. And any updates that are required to go through. So the focus on fleet is around what fleet managers are dealing with. And the single biggest challenge they've got is the drivers and what they're doing. Telematics can play a part, but only one part. It doesn't actually eliminate the responsibility – if anything it heightens that requirement to look at the data and act on it. It can be very useful to prove where people are at certain times – for example when there are events, an accident or something, it can exonerate the driver and prove that they weren't responsible.

We talked already about safety checks, as far as the fundamental requirements – we've seen this a lot – because it's difficult to do, a lot of businesses have a policy to say that vehicles should be inspected, but they don't adhere to it, and the drivers don't get chased, so they really condone it in that type of attitude. And if something awful happened, the drivers would say 'I know I've agreed to this, but nobody asked me for

it', so it's important to be constant. And if there are problems and people aren't doing what they need to... and let's be fair, everything to do with fleet management is common sense. The vehicles need to be legal – you cannot have a vehicle with tyres less than 1.6mm. We'd recommend less than 2mm. 3mm is a far safer option. These are common sense areas companies should look at. Can they all with confidence go out into a car park and look at every vehicle they've got – and often the tyre companies come and do an audit for you – and to prove whether or not the vehicles have got legal tyres on them. And I think about 60% of the tyres in tyre depots are replaced while they're illegal. How many of those could affect organisations that you're talking to now?

But I would finish it with one of the biggest problems we see – although communication is absolutely imperative – you have to have senior management buy in and recognise the importance so there is that authority, that push. So when there are drivers not adhering to what they should be doing because it's getting the job done rather than making sure the vehicle is safe, senior management should be supporting fleet managers or safety managers to give that strength there to make sure there is adherence to it.

Simon: My final question Peter is this – at the top of the discussion, in the first question, we were talking about how common it is for people to manage fleet activity and safety on spreadsheets and paper bases and filing systems. What are the main benefits that come from using a proper integrated fleet management software solution over those traditional paper-based systems?

Peter: I often refer to what's happened in the world of accountancy. If you look 15 or 20 years ago, they were bookkeepers. They were manually keeping records, and this was very labour intensive. Nowadays, HMRC have mandated that you have got to submit returns electronically, and we're seeing a trend now towards this in the fleet industry. And really, we would expect to see within 5 or 10 years that this will be the norm. If you are submitting defects, or operating HGVs and on the Earned Recognition Scheme... as a prerequisite for that from the DVSA, you have to submit electronic record keeping and prove that the vehicles are being inspected correctly, MOTs are being carried out correctly, and the failure rates are appropriate. And you have to make sure that the vehicles themselves are checked for safety.

So I think it's an inevitability. We've seen it in some respects where the road tax has been removed from screens many years ago now. Driving licence paper mandates and MOT records being computerised. So I think it's an inevitability, digitalising data. Why? Well, you can look at, for example, fuel analysis – an area we often work with businesses on that maybe spend two days a month pulling all the data across to try and prove what the consumption figures are – which we would definitely recommend everyone does. We can do that for them in a 5-minute report. So we can save two days' work.

So there are massive benefits in time saving. I've not yet met anyone who's operating fleets who wouldn't agree that time is one of the single biggest challenges they have. Also, we've talked about this, the cost of fleet – it's the second largest overhead outside of payroll, often. Putting controls into that... accurate record keeping means you can start running meaningful reports and look at where savings can be made. We've talked about vehicles running for a longer period of time nowadays – so even

more time and effort needs to be put in to look at which of those vehicles should stay on fleet, which ones shouldn't.

But at the heart of what we're talking about today is the awareness and duty of care and Health and Safety implications. And what we do see in the hundreds of companies and thousands of vehicles we manage is this peace of mind that you have when all of your information is in a central database, accessible remotely. And assurance that if anything happens, that you can very, very quickly verify what's been done and when it's been done. So peace of mind, time saving, and cost savings are the three main benefits that you get from the investment. And the return on that investment is very, very easy to show. But fundamentally there is a legal requirement to manage your vehicles correctly. And I think from my side, often vehicles now are equipped with very high standards of equipment – cameras, telematics... so the vehicles themselves are with all the right safety measures.

Really, you should be giving the person whose job it is to manage those vehicles the tools to do it. And that's really what we do.

Simon: Fantastic. I would agree whole-heartedly with all of that. I'll put some links to resources in the show notes for this episode. FleetCheck and Driving for Better Business collaborated on the Gap Analysis which you can find on the DfBB website – I'll put a link to that. I'll also put a link to the Fleet Confidence Course, FleetCheck's free online introductory course. And as part of that, Peter you mentioned that one of the first key points was getting your Driving for Work policy written and communicated to drivers, and there's a free, fully editable Driving for Work policy as part of that Fleet Confidence Course, so that could be interesting there. But Peter, thank you very much for your time today.

Peter: Thank you very much for inviting me.

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 @DrivingforBetterBusiness 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.