

James Tillyer – Managing Consultant at Transformotion

Simon: Hello everyone and welcome to Let's Talk Fleet Risk. My guest today is James Tillyer, Managing Consultant at Transformotion, based in Ireland, who are specialists in immersive driver training.

Welcome to the podcast James.

James: Thanks Simon, it's lovely to be here.

Simon: James – perhaps you could start by introducing yourself, and explaining a little bit about who you are and what Transformotion does?

James: Sure. Well, I've been involved in road transport for over 20 years now, and a lot of my time has been spent working on driver development – in terms of careers, training, and engagement.

For Transformotion, it's a road transport consultancy and training developer. We work on projects that focus on things like vehicle autonomy, and what it means for the labour market, as well as driver training. In fact, our latest project is called Gaming DRV, championing the cause for distance learning in formal driver training. We're also developing prototypes for games and gamification in general, particularly where driver CPC is concerned.

In addition to that, we also develop products for fleet managers, to help them manage vehicles and drivers. It's a fairly unique service – or I like to think it is – where we build our bespoke toolbox talks, audits, that sort of thing. And that's offered through a website called EasyFleetr.com.

And then finally, we develop immersive driver training. We use eye-tracking technology – which is a bit of a first in our sector. We use 360-degree video and drone footage to create really engaging visuals, which is all wrapped up into a classroom-based training course. And drivers get to use an interactive app where they improve their knowledge and attention, and it also reduces a lot of the tedious admin tasks because we've wrapped up things like feedback forms and ID checks within the app.

So, we do a fair bit, and we've wrapped that up into three sections.

Simon: Brilliant. This conversation came about because of a chat that you and I had a couple of months ago around driver wellbeing. At Driving for Better Business, we've

been looking around a range of issues throughout the quarter that fall under the broad heading of 'fitness to drive'. So, I was wondering what that term means to you?

James: I remember our conversation very well. I think you've hit the nail on the head with that – because it is a very broad term. And it's sometimes quite difficult to pin down, but for me, it's about being mentally ready to control a vehicle. A lot of the time, if we've got cramp, or a headache, or a cold, it's quite clear. But it's more difficult to know if we're suffering from mental fatigue.

Simon: We know there are rules about how much time you can spend driving in any given day because the concentration required can take its toll over time. This issue of mental fatigue, it's assuming your head is in the game to start with, isn't it? If the driver's got personal issues to deal with, what effect does that have?

James: It's interesting because one thing we discovered with the immersive training is that through the eye-tracking tech, we can actually see how often a driver's eye is looking in a certain direction. And the sheer volume of eye movements to point A to point B in a given journey is enormous – it's huge. And a driver doesn't realise it, because it's an involuntary movement. But it goes some way to explain why a professional driver feels so exhausted at the end of the day. It's not just the physical task of driving, it's also what their brain is doing, and actually where they're looking.

But in terms of personal issues, it's very difficult for anyone to avoid thinking about the general rigours of life – I think we all appreciate that. But the result is almost always emotive. Things like anger, resentment, worry – they all come to the fore.

And in terms of what that means for driving – well that tends to lead to things like erratic driving, risk taking, distraction, speeding. All the negative stuff. And obviously those are really detrimental to the safety of the driver and other road users.

Simon: Just give us some examples of what those issues can be. What sort of issues are we talking about that drivers can bring into the cab with them?

James: It's the ones you might expect. So generally speaking, health issues, money worries, relationships. But more than that, it can be the hum drum. Things like daydreaming about the latest box set, what's for tea, or the next holiday – things like that. All of those factors create a distraction or brain fog that's detrimental to driving.

We very often get into a car or van or truck or bus and we just drive – it's very much an automated thing. We just switch to driver mode – and it's fair to say that some do. But it's not a natural given ability. An argument, for example, that happens at home tends to linger once you're out and about. The issue can fester, and grow in your mind, and take over the rational part of your brain. When that happens, it's an alarm – it's a bit of an issue that can't be reversed. Alternatively, as I said, worrying can cause the brain to become fogged. Which again, leads to late braking or poor judgment.

There are so many different factors, in terms of mental awareness, that have an impact on your driving.

Simon: You mentioned the eye tracker. Did you notice any trends with those eye movements that possibly – I don't know whether you discussed the results with the drivers afterwards and were able to match up certain levels of distraction, or types of distraction, with the behaviour they were exhibiting and the eye movements. Were there any lessons you took out of that?

James: It's very interesting because when you do the study on eye tracking and break down the eye movements, you have the benefit of being able to see – through heat maps and single points on a video – where exactly they've been looking and how often.

What we don't really know is why. So, what we've done in the past is approach the driver and say "look, we've discovered that you've been doing this, do you know why it is?". And more often than not, they don't know. I'll give you an example – we had a situation where we filmed a driver joining a motorway. As he was joining the motorway, he looked twice as much to his nearside than his offside. You'd think that doesn't really make sense, because as you're joining a motorway, you'd naturally look in your offside – looking for traffic and traffic flow, and where the gap is.

He said, "I don't really know why I did that", and we pinned it down to him being so focused on looking at the nearside because of left turns. This was an HGV, he very often drives in London, and his brain has almost tuned in to naturally look at the nearside as a way of protecting cyclists when they're making left-hand turns. So, what we've discovered, is that naturally over time, the brain has been trained, but the awareness just isn't there – because it becomes an automated response. That was quite interesting.

Simon: I can understand why that would be an automated response – he's a professional driver and he's doing it day-in, day-out. But of course, it's important to remember that we're not just talking about those drivers who spend all, or most, of the day on the road. There's many of us – me included – who go out for occasional meetings too.

Presumably, those sorts of drivers are prone to the same sort of distractions – relationships at work that could affect you in the same way as relationships at home, worries about work or deadlines, in the same way as you might worry about health or money at home. Would that be true?

James: Absolutely. I think as an example, if you take a hands-free call, we all know that's a well-known distraction. But how many of us actually think about the effect of the call, once that call has ended? The conversation may have been heated, for example – something you disagreed with. In which case, when you end that call, your

emotions possibly take over your rational driving style. As a result of that discussion, your ability to drive may decrease – which means you increase the risk.

Something that I've researched before is called cognitive tunnelling – it sounds very scientific, and it certainly is, but the fundamentals of it are quite straightforward. Why cognitive tunnelling is important is that it often flies under the radar, but it's the main cause of accidents involving human error. In a nutshell, it's where the brain focuses on a single task or an issue, and neglects the other factors.

As an example: a driver is travelling on an unfamiliar road – which is often the case. They're looking for an entrance. They're so fixated with finding that entrance that things like a cyclist, or a tight bend, or warning alarms, become barely noticed or registered. Of course, what that does, is it means that through cognitive tunnelling, they've created risk for all other factors on the road. That's one to really pin down, because there are so many risks involved there.

Simon: You raised an interesting point about finishing a call, and that still affecting your emotional state. A very good friend at the Driving for Better Business programme is Professor Gemma Briggs, a professor at the Open University who is one of the UK's foremost experts on mobile phone distraction from driving. I had a discussion with her the other day, and she said your brain can take up to five minutes to disengage from that call because you're still thinking about the content of that call, mulling over certain things – you're not back in the game.

It's not a case that you end the call and you're back concentrating on driving – your head is still out of the game for another five minutes after that.

James: I'm not surprised that that research has come to the fore – it's a real problem that we sometimes neglect to remember.

Simon: If we look at this from a driver manager's point of view, an employer's point of view, approaching these kinds of issues with drivers is probably going to be quite difficult. There could be instances where there are signs that might indicate an issue with a driver – there might be some mental health issues, or they're distracted by various things. But probably many other drivers who are suffering in silence are able to hide it quite well.

So, where does a driver manager start with this issue?

James: It's a good question. It's a tricky one, also, because a lot of managers feel as though they don't want to intrude or pry into the private lives of any drivers. Sometimes it's quite difficult to feel as though you're able to cope with that topic.

But there are things that you can do as a manager. For example, you might want to set up an informal get-together. You could nominate a driver to be a welfare rep. With groups where you've got colleagues or peers, that could be very effective.

Of course, not everyone is going to turn up – and again, that’s fine. But if you allow the drivers the time to actually talk to each other, rather than the usual banter, there’s a chance that they’ll build a different culture within the company, and so it becomes easier to talk about this sort of thing.

It’s important to reassure drivers that there’s no judgment or bias – there’s an inherent suspicion sometimes about these actions, but it’s really important to keep them on side. So, avoid talking about things like disciplinary process, or general process, because that just falls into the trap of being a manager. In this case, you want to take a step back and let them have the freedom to talk. But it’s really important to remember that it’s not about prying into somebody’s life – it’s about offering non-judgmental support, if it’s wanted. If it’s not wanted, then leave it. But it’s important to open that up.

Simon: And part of that conversation needs to be to understand whether there’s anything the company or the work environment is doing that is potentially causing that distraction. I can understand why some drivers wouldn’t want to talk about personal issues going on at home, but if it’s relating to an issue that stems from something at work, then it’s incumbent upon the employer to do their best to find out what that is.

James: Absolutely. I think it’s important to take it on a case-by-case basis. You have to react to the issue, but also provide something that makes an impact. As a manager, you can determine quite quickly whether something is a work-related issue, or if there’s more to it. Often, if it’s a work-related issue, then drivers would generally say, “look, I’m having this issue with a certain task” or, “I want more training on this”. When it’s a private issue, generally speaking, they won’t.

But don’t assume it’s right to ask them what they need – because they might have no idea. As a manager, if you ask a driver what they need on a personal or private issue, it sort of puts the pressure back on them, and very often drivers might close up and not feel free enough to talk about that sort of thing.

That’s why it’s a difficult balancing act – but it is possible. Going back to what I was saying a moment ago about having a peer or colleague group, that can make a real difference. But there are also things like resources that are freely available. So, DfBB’s own CALM Driver Programme, for example. There are plenty of resources there for people – and it’s important to take stock of that, and use what you’ve got out there.

Simon: Once that conversation’s started then – if a driver does open up and admit that they’re struggling – what are the best ways that an employer could support them. Are there any resources available to help employers with that?

James: I suppose, in addition to things like the CALM Driver Programme, there are lots of different resources available. You may want to look at how you deal with internal policies, for example. So, when you’re writing a policy, try to avoid dictating – and

instead, explain what the company will do to support the necessary actions. That can have an enormous effect.

If you have shared responsibility within a policy, it makes a huge difference. It tends to stick in the minds of drivers more when they understand what they have to do, but also what the company will commit to do in relation to that process. That can be a big win, because time and time again, companies fall into the trap of writing chapter and verse with safe systems of working, policies, and procedures. It can be detrimental to the end user.

Don't just hand a pack of documents to drivers just to wade through – very often that's the case on induction. Instead, look at how you're communicating. Maybe reduce the number of words you use within policies. Don't write policies for health and safety managers or insurance companies. Instead, write them on the topics that drivers connect with.

Something else to be aware of – and it goes back to what I was saying about cognitive tunnelling – is something called mental modelling. This is a technique which sounds complex but it's quite basic. What it means is that you can develop behaviours, improve performance, and enhance safety standards, by adopting mental modelling. There are generally four good examples of that.

Number 1 – on your way to work, envisage the day. Think about what you'll be doing ahead of time.

Number 2 – during that journey, describe to yourself what you're seeing, and what it means. Talk out loud about what you're seeing – that helps to secure or cement hazards in your mind.

Number 3 – find other people to hear your experiences and talk about them. Discuss them.

Number 4 – force yourself to try and anticipate what is going to happen next. You've got to be predictive.

Then you'll notice what goes unmentioned or unnoticed – not just in the car or van or truck, but also in everyday working life. That can act as a warning sign, so that's quite a useful technique.

Simon: Yes. You mentioned CALM earlier on, and we did some work with CALM a couple of years ago and created what we call the CALM Driver Toolkit, which was a series of resources to go in the vehicle including a leaflet, stickers... basically information to point them in the right direction for helplines or web resources.

Because if there's a driver in a vehicle, quite often they're a lone worker, and if they're not going to put their hand up and offer to talk about it, you've got to put the information

where they're going to have access to it when they really need it – which is probably when they're on their own in the vehicle. I'll put a link to that in the show notes as well – that was a really good pack, it's a physical pack that we don't charge for and can just go in the vehicles to support the drivers.

So, finishing up on that point about creating a good culture, where it becomes easier for drivers to speak up. There are all sorts of things that employers can do, and information that they can put out – we all know that we should eat better, and exercise more, and that can help some of these issues.

What are the key points around creating a culture where we can help minimise some of this, from the employer's side of things and minimise some of the way these distractions manifest themselves with drivers? At least encouraging them to make some changes might minimise the effects – are there easy ways that employers can do that?

James: Yeah. Factoring in issues from home, there's a limit on what you can do. But also, in a way, you can provide information that helps them to make their own decisions. If you have a toolbox talk, or training exercise, where you highlight the impact of what happens at home to what happens out on the road, that could be a huge thing.

Very often we focus on driving for work – we don't focus on just driving, and actually just the commute to work. It's a real missed opportunity. If you want to get the message across, and you don't necessarily want to tap into, or pry into, a driver's life at home, there are things you can do – just to let them know the impact that that has on their working life. Start to make the connection, start to put it all together for them.

When they actually get to work, there are more things that you can do than just having the discussion group, for example. You can tap into plenty of resources. But the fundamentals need to be in place – and the fundamentals are that you don't have office staff that call drivers unnecessarily. You minimise the number of calls that a driver might have. You encourage drivers to put their phone in the glovebox. These are very well known, but these are quite simple ways of limiting the amount of distraction. Because it's not just about that conversation that might create emotion – it's also about the risk of the distraction out on the road.

Fatigue is a big issue – there are things that you can do to look at driver scheduling. Driver routes. How much rest they're getting – but maybe focus on the quality of rest that they get at home. And again, it's not just about instructing them on how to sleep – that would be nonsense. But what you can do is explain the value of sleep, and the right mattress and all of that. It's just recommendations. And all of that can really help a driver to understand the impact and make those connections.

Simon: That's excellent advice. Before we started recording this, James, you mentioned a toolbox talk that you've created to help employers with these issues. Do you want to tell us a little bit more about that?

James: Yes sure. We decided to tackle this head-on. We produced a toolbox talk called 'From Home to Roam'. It's a toolbox talk that does exactly that – it makes the connection between home life and a drivers' ability out on the road. As an exclusive to DfBB, we're looking to make that free for any podcast listeners – we're going to put up a code. The toolbox talk will be available on EasyFleetr.com, and hopefully, you can see what we're trying to achieve.

It's a useful toolbox talk – about 35 minutes – about measures that can make a big difference to a driver's life.

Simon: Fantastic. I really appreciate you extending that offer to the DfBB community James – thank you for that. I will put links to that in the show notes, along with some of the resources that we've mentioned, plus some other resources that we've got around fitness to drive, fatigue, and driver wellbeing – some of the issues that we've discussed today.

Also, I'll point people as to how they can connect with you, James, on LinkedIn, Transformation and EasyFleetr websites as well. If you'd like to get in touch with James, feel free – the links will be in the show notes.

James, thank you very much – really enjoyed that. A very interesting topic to discuss with you.

James: It's been a real pleasure Simon.