

Technology and the future of driver training at Schneider National

Donald Osterberg, v.p. safety and training for Wisconsin-based Schneider National, Inc., is a man on a mission: utilize technology to take driver training to the next level. While Schneider has some 16,000 drivers to train, what is happening today in Green Bay should be of interest and help to fleets of any size that want to get more out of their own investments in driver education.

Osterberg is leading an initiative that will combine driving simulators, online training and instructor-led courses into an integrated program of constant driver training, performance monitoring and retraining. The ultimate goal is zero serious accidents. It is a lofty target and an exciting task, according to Osterberg, who was introduced to simulators during his career as an Army officer, where he had the chance to see first-hand what an effective training tool they could be.

Q: How has training been handled at Schneider National?

Osterberg: Right now, in addition to our initial driver training program (currently being certified by the Professional Truck Driver Institute), we bring all our drivers in for what we call "sustainment training" twice a year. We also do remedial training. It is a time-centric and time-intensive process. We want to train to standards not to time, and we believe technology can help us get there. The work we're doing now is dramatically transforming our driver training program; the future will be quite different from today.

Q: What are the basic elements of the new program?

Osterberg: There will be three "legs" to the training program. The instructor-led training that we do now will continue to be an important part of the new system, but we will add computer-based training and the driving simulators. We want to move our sustainment training to the computer, for example, so that drivers can complete it at any time at any Schneider facility or at truck stops. Eventually, we want to pipe full-motion video training right to the truck cab. It is inherently doable.

Right now, fleets are faced with a tough decision when there is an accident. Do you immediately route the driver to the nearest center for remediation training? What if something happens on the way? In-cab training will give us another option.

Q: How do the driving simulators fit into the training system?

Osterberg: Simulators let us safely train for things that we can't do in real life, such as unexpected black ice, a blow-out on a steer tire, etc. At Schneider, we already have a skid pad we use for training, but that experience is still quite different than the surprise of hitting a patch of ice on an overpass, for instance. With the simulator, we can create all sorts of challenging driving situations, such as dark, rain, snow, fog or ice. We can match remedial training sessions as closely as possible to a real event a driver was involved in.

The simulator even allows us to tape drivers so that they can see how they reacted and do a self-critique of their performance with an instructor. It's very effective. We're already seeing improved safety and driver retention.

Q: Do you also use the simulators for entry-level training? How do drivers respond?

Osterberg: A significant number of our drivers come to us without a CDL and we train them ourselves to be professional truck operators.

Shifting, for example, is a major reason people wash out of the program. We have discovered that a couple of hours practicing shifting in the simulator can make a huge difference. It can give new drivers the skill and confidence they need to get them ready for on-road training. As a basic rule of thumb, one hour in the simulator equals three or four hours in the truck. Training in the simulator is a much more intensive experience. You can do far more repetitions of a task (like shifting) in the simulator than you'd have the opportunity to do in the real world.

Our beginning drivers are responding very positively to the training simulators. I think they do a lot to help reduce some of the anxiety associated with trying things for the first time, such as backing, shifting or descending steep grades.

Q: How many simulators are you installing?

Osterberg: We are purchasing about 55 simulators through MPR Ship Analytics, a part of L3 Communications. The company was originally called I-SIM before it was acquired. So far, it has been an excellent partnership. When we first started talking with I-SIM, we challenged them to make their simulation graphics more real. I knew from my experiences in the military what was possible. They made a huge improvement. Driving in their simulators today feels "real." You can emerge white-knuckled from a session in the simulator.

We have six training academies around the country: at our headquarters in Green Bay, Wisconsin; in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Los Angeles, California; Charlotte, North Carolina; Dallas, Texas; and in Ontario, Canada. So far, we have simulators installed at Green Bay, Harrisburg and Los Angeles. We'll roll out to the last three locations in the first quarter of 2006. Eventually, I see them at all 28 of our operating facilities.

Q: Does Schneider also do driver performance monitoring to evaluate training results and/or check for potential problems?

Osterberg: Yes. We monitor driver performance in several areas, including speed, over-speeding and hard braking. We are currently working with Qualcomm to monitor hard braking in real-time. Our goal is to identify aggressive drivers by comparing their hard-braking rates with the general driving population. For example, if the average is one hard-braking incident per month and a driver has ten incidents per month, we know right away that we have a problem.

It is important to correctly diagnose a driving problem so that you can respond to it appropriately and effectively. Monitoring helps us to do that. Sometimes remedial training is the best solution; sometimes discipline or even dismissal is called for.

Q: How do you feel about your progress so far?

Osterberg: I have to say that it is very satisfying to be doing what we are doing at Schneider. I believe we have a moral obligation to promote safety and that starts with training. I truly believe we are saving lives. There is a higher likelihood that drivers will respond properly if they are well trained.



Don Osterberg