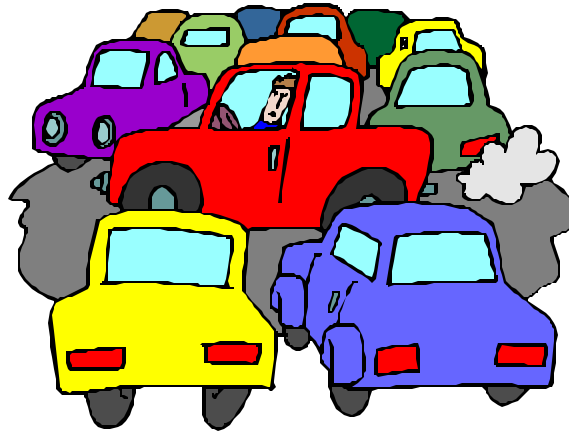




It would be safe to say that most drivers do not put 100% of their attention into their driving all of the time. Even without phones or passengers to converse with, our minds become distracted with events of the day or unconscious stress presented by our lives.

The business driver has the potential for innumerable other distractions which compete with strategic driving tasks for valuable brain space. The classic image is of the salesperson frantically negotiating the deal of a lifetime while simultaneously negotiating Dead Man's Curve.

Increasingly, service representatives, inspectors, consultants and a myriad of other business people are facing more windshield time than they ever have before. The virtual office of the future will put more and more demands on drivers in their mobile offices.



Brains 101

Think of the brain as a juggler and the balls being juggled as bits of information that the brain has to manage. In the early days of motoring, all the balls represented the physical functions necessary for keeping the engine running and the machine moving. Electronics have taken over many of these functions, but the driver still has to steer and control speed. Many more strategic safety functions must be monitored due to traffic density but experienced drivers judge that they are able to take on increasingly more complex non-driving tasks. Gerald Wilde, in his book *Target Risk* (PDE Publications, 1994), builds a model of risk taking behaviour based on the concept of homeostasis. That means that risk or our perception of risk approximates a target level. A simple illustration goes as follows. A twisty section of road is re-built with smoother curves as a safety intervention. Drivers perceive that the road is safer and

consume any safety benefit by driving faster. Lessening the physical tasks of steering through the curves has not been replaced with a higher order skill of making better judgements about overall risk.

Three Good Things

These three good things will make it easier for the brain to juggle all its tasks. As attention demands on the business driver increase, it is critically important that they are thoroughly grounded in a reliable set of good, fundamental habitual skills. World series champions practice the same fundamentals that little leaguers do. Similarly, if a driver has a solidly built habit of checking the mirrors every 5 seconds, it is more likely the habit will be sustained even when the task of talking on the telephone is added.

1 Good task management means that the business driver will select a proper mix

of tasks. Certain very simple telephone conversations may occur while on a busy freeway but more involved subject matter should wait until traffic demands subside. Many conversations should be conducted only when parked in a safe place, especially when other tasks are involved such as consulting notes, using a lap-top, calculator or palm pilot.

2 Good organization means that the business driver will not be collating the presentation on the dashboard while driving to the meeting. Do your homework at home. It only takes a few seconds for a courier or service rep to get waybills, orders or clipboards sorted out before heading off to the next call or delivery.

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3 If your work requires that you travel to unfamiliar cities, prepare by studying maps and getting exact destination instructions. Internet map services and software programs can be a good place to start. To aid travellers, some car rental companies are installing GPS navigation systems. Whether consulting a paper map or a VDT, reading anything takes the driver's eyes completely away from the road, and must only be done when parked in a safe location.

Attention Switching

The brain can make risk calculations that result in lessening the tasks at hand. The juggler has fewer balls to keep in the air by lessening a physical demand (go slower) or lessening a cognitive demand (end the phone call). Business people may be better at making decisions of these types because work demands it whether they are at their desk or in their car. Some people are better at multi-tasking than others, but it can be learned.

What drivers don't practice as often is rapid attention switching. When facing an emergency, the juggler has to quickly grasp one ball and let the others fall. For a driver this "ball" has to be the right one; i.e. whether to brake or swerve. Not only is it important that the driver select the right "ball", but they must focus on it exclusively. Trying to do two relatively simple tasks simultaneously under very stressful conditions will result in the performance of each being compromised. This can easily be demonstrated in simulated emergency exercises. Drivers often have trouble reciting simple multiplication tables while correcting a skid.

Despite what psychologists have learned about brain functions, we are a long way from developing a process of testing drivers for cognitive functions. Drivers could be evaluated for their ability to multi-task or attention switch, which would provide a better framework for them to structure their risk decisions upon. Training could be more specifically tailored for individual needs and has huge implications for dealing with novice delivery and issues related to elderly drivers. Until then, companies and individuals have to set their own policies for balancing all the tasks in the mobile office.