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Safely Using In-Vehicle Technology

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The availability of in-vehicle technology can provide many benefits for utility fleet vehicle operations. Laptop and handheld computers, wireless internet (wwan) and smart phone technology now provide end users with access to remote network functions, real time GPS navigation as well as countless other benefits that have only recently become available. Applications previously required frequent visits to the office for network synchronization which required time away from important tasks.

There is considerable evidence that the users of these systems are frequently distracted by the in-vehicle technology. Many argue that these in-vehicle technology services should not be available if they are considered to be dangerous to road users. Safety is of the utmost importance and technology must be designed so as not to distract drivers dangerously.

Though there are many challenges to overcome, it is possible to design mobile office solutions that can be safely implemented. This article addresses some of the basic do's and don'ts, as well as clever hardware solutions for designing a safe mobile office environment.

Safety solutions for the mobile office can be classified into a variety of categories, including but not limited to: Ergonomic Effects of Mounting Mobile Computer Hardware, Safely Securing Mobile Computing Hardware and Mobile Computing and Distractive Driving Habits.

Ergonomic Effects of Mounting Mobile Computer Hardware

Ergonomic concepts are very well known, but rarely are they properly used when designing and implementing a mobile computer workstation solution.

Trent Slack, National Sales Manager for MobileDesk.com of Cincinnati, Ohio points out these considerations when mounting a laptop computer, mobile printer or other mobile technology hardware in a vehicle:

1. Choose a mounting position that is close enough so the user doesn't have stretch, twist or stoop to use the hardware.
2. Purchase a mounting solution that is correct in height for the user and adjustable to the point that it can easily be put in the perfect position for usability and stored out of the airbag zone when not in use.
3. Second only to vehicle accidents, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is the number two cause of work related injuries that affect mobile workers who use laptop computers in a vehicle. Most concerns can be addressed by

choosing a laptop mount that provides multiple adjustments with a degree of tilt and swivel for an ergonomic working environment.

Safely Securing Mobile Computing Hardware

Securing mobile computing devices out of airbag zones and preventing laptop computers and other devices from becoming flying objects should be of great concern when designing a safe mobile office environment.

Rick Hirsch, a partner of SVP Manufacturing in Phoenix, Arizona suggests the following safety measures for securing and mounting mobile computer hardware in a vehicle:

1. Choose a mounting device that will hold a laptop or other mobile device securely in place.
2. If securely mounting the laptop in the vehicle is not a viable option, the next best thing is to protect it in a ruggedized case and store it on the floor in the backseat of the vehicle. There is a lot more laptop damage and injuries that occur in a vehicle from unsecured objects than most of us realize. How many times have we placed our laptop in the front passenger seat of a vehicle only to stop short and have to reach over to prevent your laptop from flying off the seat and on to the floor?
3. By using a stand-alone console organizer, the mobile user can easily organize paperwork and hide and store mobile devices securely.
4. By utilizing a console organizer with an integrated computer mount the user can also ergonomically mount a laptop computer.
5. Consider using the SVP mfg Back Rest Buddy; an organizational device that hangs on the back rest of a vehicle will organize paperwork or securely store a laptop, handheld computer or PDA all at the same time.

Mobile Computing and Distractive Driving Habits

When I first tell people that our company manufactures computer mounts for vehicles many of them will give me a funny look, not because they didn't understand what I said but because of what I know is processing in their minds. "Makeup, cell phones, text messaging and now laptop computers to distract drivers - now people can type on their computers and drive at the same time!"

And even though every piece of literature we print and our websites carry multiple warnings that clearly state that our products are "Not To Be Used While Driving", we still get hate mail about the subject. Since our desks are not to be used while driving we are the biggest advocates of not using a laptop, cell phone or anything else for that matter while driving. I actually tried it in a parking lot once to see if it was possible. I found it extremely difficult to do if not impossible and though I have personally never seen it I am sure that there is somebody out there that has done it or thinks they can do it safely.

The fact is, with all the distractions we have on the road everyday, the thought of somebody driving down the road and working on their laptop is simply absurd and could possibly be the most dangerous thing anybody could ever think about doing. We have two customers, one in Pennsylvania and one in Florida (both of them insurance adjusters) that have been ticketed under illuminated display laws that were originally put in place to prevent the driver of a vehicle from watching TV and now probably portable DVD systems. With all the hoopla recently about driver distraction and the fact that we manufacture computer mounts, we felt it was necessary to develop a simple device that would address the issue of driver distraction with a laptop screen blanking technology. We call it Screen Blanker and it's designed to operate independently off the laptop's USB connection and is USB powered. This device is so simple and easy to use that all one has to do is plug into a USB port and load a small software package. This technology is currently being utilized by a number of utility companies that are using Screen Blanker Technology to reduce vehicle accidents as well as insurance rates. The savings for some of these companies are estimated to be in the millions.

As in-Vehicle technology evolves, we are bound to be bombarded by new and clever distractions. The best way to deal with these distractions is the way we have always done it, good old fashion common sense. If you work in your vehicle and you use in-vehicle technology, simply keep your computer, phone or PDA stored safely, don't try to use them while driving and keep your eyes on the road.

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