

Transforming Safety Culture in Freight Operations

The OPC and Freightliner share news of a sector-leading, Non-Technical Skills (NTS) initiative that has significantly impacted the safety culture and operational performance in the organisation

Rail freight plays a vital role in the UK economy, transporting essential goods like construction materials, fuel, and consumer products. Freightliner is the UK's largest maritime intermodal logistics operator, and is a leading player in the rail freight market. With growing commercial pressures and the challenge of sharing infrastructure with passenger services, maintaining high safety standards is crucial.

Freightliner's commitment to safety is hugely evident through its focus on continuous improvement throughout all levels of the organisation and its significant investment in its employees. One standout

initiative is the recent Non-Technical Skills (NTS) development programme devised in collaboration with the OPC. This comprehensive programme covers the breadth and depth of its driver population and ground staff teams to help enhance safety and performance, positioning Freightliner as an industry leader. So, what is the programme and why now?

A deep and all-encompassing change programme

Freightliner has implemented a comprehensive Non-Technical Skills (NTS) programme starting with a two-day workshop for senior leaders and an overview

for the Executive team. This initiative expanded to include a three-day workshop for operational trainers last year, closely followed by an immersive 'Train the Trainer' programme. Specifically tailored and delivered by the OPC, these sessions were designed to fully equip the internal team with in-depth knowledge of NTS, enabling them to lead and implement the internal change programme effectively.

Chris Fowler, Professional Head of Competence and Assurance at Freightliner said: 'This is an important internal change programme for our drivers and operational frontline teams. It represents significant organisational buy-in and investment with



‘I really enjoyed the course. It was well-delivered and effectively connected to train driving, highlighting the importance of NTS for everyone working in a safety-critical environment.’

Driver Manager



the introduction of a specific NTS training manager and plans to expand that to a team. We are going ‘all out’ for NTS. This initiative goes far beyond just a surface-level effort for a select group of drivers. It encompasses all frontline staff, including every single driver, ground staff, and the engineering teams, as well as our Driver Managers, assessors, and mentors.

In total, nearly 1,200 people will be NTS trained over the next twelve months. For us, this wasn't simply about meeting an industry standard; it's about genuinely empowering our teams to set new benchmarks in the industry – becoming not just safer and more effective, but truly leading the way as top-performing freight operators.'

Developing a bespoke programme

The NTS programme was developed specifically for Freightliner's unique needs—not a generic NTS solution, but one tailored to reflect the specific demands of freight operations.

While all 26 NTS are important, the OPC conducted an internal survey to identify the most critical NTS, ensuring the programme was bespoke. The survey identified six key NTS.

To successfully rollout the program, Freightliner appointed Samantha Boucher as the new Training Manager for Safety and Non-Technical Skills, reflecting their ongoing commitment to investing resources in this change initiative.

Training programme overview

Having identified the top six key NTS, Laura Hedley, and Freightliner's new Training Manager developed tailored training programmes.

Laura Hedley, Head of Consultancy and Talent Services at the OPC, highlighted the need to tailor NTS training programs to the unique challenges faced by freight

drivers. ‘Unlike other roles, freight drivers navigate diverse routes over long distances, often with varying frequency, making some routes less familiar. They must be ready for unexpected changes and disruptions, letting other trains pass. They frequently encounter restricted signals, requiring heightened vigilance and anticipation of evolving risks.’

She added: ‘Overfamiliarity with routes can lead to a diminished ability to anticipate potential risks. Adapting to varying train lengths is crucial; for example, a passenger train driver might stop short at a station when driving a longer train, while a freight driver may mistakenly attempt manoeuvring a longer train into a terminal, highlighting the importance of customising Freightliner's NTS training.’

Manager's NTS workshop

The two-day NTS workshop was designed for Driver Managers (DM's), supervisors, mentors, and assessors. It provides an in-depth understanding of NTS, highlighting their foundational role in improving driver safety and effectiveness and the fit alongside technical skills. The course offers reflective strategies to help managers support their teams in applying NTS and using them for development or incident investigations.

Chris Fowler said: ‘It's really essential that all our DMs, mentors and assessors have an extensive, in-depth understanding of NTS and the practical execution of our top six. This has been essential for the application of NTS across the driver teams. They are the backbone of the implementation, providing crucial support to drivers as they apply NTS differently, out on their routes, every day. This forward-thinking, empathic team will allow our drivers to truly grasp the benefits of NTS.’

Driver's NTS workshop

The one-day workshop for drivers emphasises the impact of NTS on their roles,

‘Very, very useful skills to use at work. Definitely worth doing!’

Ground staff

doing a deep-dive into the six key NTS and their practical applications.

Samantha Boucher said: ‘The driver's workshops are very reflective. They help them to create personalised development plans that identify specific improvement areas in their day-to-day driving and any safety performance improvements. Participants work on an NTS reflection log for each of the top six skills, outlining their focus areas, action steps, and new techniques to use representing a real commitment to their performance development.’

Achievements to date

Since the programme's launch, the team has delivered over 118 training days, averaging up to three sessions per week since January. Initially focused on the driving team including shunter drivers, the programme is quickly expanding to include other frontline operational teams.

Chris Fowler said: ‘Out of 750 drivers, managers, and mentors, we've trained over two-thirds of the team, with course feedback being over 98 per cent positive.’ He added: ‘We're really proud of what we've achieved in such a short time. Many teams have come together to successfully promote and deliver the NTS programme, it's really exciting to be leading the way in the industry with the implementation of this initiative across our entire operational teams.’

Sam Boucher said: ‘As you'd expect not everyone was on board at the start of the programme. Naturally, there are always some who feel their NTS are already good

'I didn't know half of what you talked about and now I have lots of really good techniques to help me be a better driver.'

Driver

enough and that a training programme 'doesn't apply to me.' However, I've had some of those same drivers come back to me afterwards and say, 'I thought it would be really boring, but it wasn't at all – it's completely changed how I approach my driving. No doubt about it.'

The impact on daily driving

Sam Boucher expressed enthusiasm about the progress in safety culture surrounding the NTS programme, noting that both trained drivers and those awaiting their turn are engaged: 'There's a remarkable attitude emerging among our drivers – NTS is now a hot topic of conversation in the mess room and the wider operations community.'

Regular briefings are communicated to driver managers and assessors and displayed in team rooms, alongside NTS techniques and shared learnings. NTS now features in quarterly team briefings, each focusing on a different category with reflective questions and practical tips.

Sam Boucher said: 'For drivers who've completed the training, it's about building on their skills and expanding their knowledge of NTS. For those yet to attend, they're already getting a head start, with some eagerly looking into the earliest available course slots.'

'I'm hearing stories of drivers proactively discussing NTS with their managers and reflecting on how to approach situations differently. This proactive mindset is evident before they start work, as they think about risk anticipation, and apply their new personalised NTS techniques to enhance their driving performance. We're witnessing tangible improvements in safety, driven by the attitude and actions of our drivers and managers. It's inspiring to see people openly discussing their mistakes as learning opportunities, and willingly giving them as 'case studies' for their peers.'

'On the flip side, when a driver experiences an incident or near-miss, they often hold themselves to high standards and feel the weight of that responsibility. They'll grab me in the corridor or reflect on their actions with their manager, looking for new techniques to avoid repeating mistakes. In these situations, DMs are quick to get them on my course, or arrange additional tailored support. If a driver is temporarily stood down, and concerned about returning to driving, they might proactively seek NTS

re-training or ask for a cab-buddy, which our mentors and assessors fully support.'

'Incident reporting is viewed not as a punitive measure but as a pre-emptive strategy for improvements across the entire team. Drivers are now using innovative techniques to enhance their safety practices. For instance, some will step away from the cab driver's seat during long waits, before returning to perform thorough checks and sequencing to ensure they're ready to go safely. Especially when moving off a restricted signal. This commitment to learning and change are transforming our safety culture.'

Laura Hedley noted: 'This positive approach to open discussion and continuous learning about safety, indicates a continually developing strong safety culture at Freightliner.'

Where next?

NTS is now embedded in safety briefs and forms part of new, and experienced driver training. It's become an integral part of what Freightliner trains and how they train, alongside integrating NTS with technical assessments.

'The next step is to fully integrate NTS into the daily routines of all our operational teams, while continuously supporting and tracking the programme's effectiveness. We also want to explore ways to capture positive KPIs, particularly where incidents or accidents have been avoided thanks to NTS. Encouraging proactive reporting of these successes will allow us to share best practices across the operational team and support one another.' Chris Fowler explained.

Sam Boucher added: 'Word is spreading, and we're swiftly incorporating other divisions, like maintenance and engineering, once we've expanded the training team. We're already forward planning the next NTS training. At each course, we survey drivers to identify their top six NTS priorities, ensuring the programme is dynamic, evolves with their needs and empowering them to focus on the safety issues that matter most to them. A rolling program will help drive continuous development and upskilling, contributing to genuine internal change.'

Chris Fowler encouraged the Freightliner team, saying: 'For those who've completed the course, keep using your reflection logs and applying the techniques learned. Even small changes can significantly impact how driving and operational tasks are approached with greater safety and effectiveness. Share your experiences with colleagues – it's not what you do, but it's the way that you do it that counts!'

He acknowledged the OPC's invaluable support in the development of the programme, saying: 'The OPC has a proven track record in making significant contributions to the rail industry for NTS.' He continued: 'Their safety-critical expertise has been hugely beneficial for us. Collaborating with this experienced team



from initial concepts through to rollout and review has allowed us to establish a highly effective programme. This initiative will upskill our teams, enhancing safety performance on the ground and reinforcing a stronger safety culture across the business.'

Laura Hedley added: 'It's been incredibly rewarding to see how Freightliner has fully embraced NTS. Their commitment not only enhances safety and performance but also sets a benchmark for the wider rail industry. By investing in this tailored approach, they've shown how NTS can drive positive change within Freightliner and the sector. We're really proud to have partnered with them on this journey, putting safety at the forefront of their operations.'

To learn more about how NTS could transform your operation's safety performance, get in touch with the friendly OPC team today. **RP**



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