Vehicle technology, safety bonuses and improved worker engagement have all helped Mobile Mini drive down accidents and in turn, insurance premiums. We find out more.

Reducing vehicle incidents by 90% over six years is something most health and safety managers would be proud of. But when this is allied to significant cost savings from greater fuel efficiency and lower insurance premiums, as well as improved worker satisfaction, engagement and training, the wider benefits of investing in health and safety become clear.

At Mobile Mini UK, which provides portable site storage solutions and accommodation units, these results were achieved by focusing on improving safety within its 50-strong fleet of HGV loader cranes (Hiabs). “We started the improvement process around five years ago,” explains Chris Watcham MIIRSM, Mobile Mini’s Health and Safety Director. “The volume of accidents per year at that time was quite significant, at 51 in both 2010 and 2011. Though there were no injuries and the vast majority of incidents were not major, the sheer volume was unacceptable and our insurance liability was increasing.”

Taking a three-pronged approach that combined bespoke professional training, investment in on-vehicle cameras and other technologies, and a robust driver bonus scheme, Mobile Mini has brought these incidents under control. The results were immediate and the improvement has continued. In 2012, the number of incidents more than halved, dropping to 21. “This year so far, we’ve only had four incidents,” says Watcham, “which is remarkable considering the 50 HGVs and 39 service vans we have on the road around the country.”

Nuclear to residential
Mobile Mini operates a national network of 16 sites, providing more than 36,000 portable accommodation and storage units to about 11,300 customers, which range from nuclear and construction sites to shopping centres, hospitals and schools, as well as individual households. Each of these brings its own unique set of logistical and safety challenges.

“We have the really highly regulated sites such as nuclear power stations where their checks are in-depth, and they set their own rigorous safety requirements that we must adhere to,” explains Watcham. At these sites, for example, there may be security checks on individual drivers and vehicle cameras might need to be disengaged. Then there are construction sites, including those in busy central London, where the HGVs are coming close to members of public, other vehicles and construction workers, as well as having to manoeuvre under pressure in tight, crowded spaces.

“So at one point, we could be servicing a petrochemical or nuclear site, then at the next point at Marble Arch in London, and then there are the schools, supermarkets and smaller building or residential sites, which though less intrinsically hazardous bring their own challenges because of the presence of children and other members of the public,” Watcham explains. “It requires a lot of thought and that’s where the technology also comes in. We have cameras fitted all around the vehicles, which helps the driver during manoeuvring, and we’ve got pedestrian warnings so if someone does come close to the vehicle, there’s an audible warning inside and outside the cab.”

Tech specs
Mobile Mini started its programme by analysing the types of incidents drivers were involved in. These were mainly reversing accidents; they didn’t involve injuries but vehicles were hitting other parked vehicles or property. After identifying reversing as a priority, the company looked at both driver training and vehicle technologies. “We brought in the Road Haulage Association (RHA) and trained the guys specifically on reversing and manoeuvring,” says Watcham.

Alongside this, camera technology was fitted to the Hiabs. At first these were reversing cameras on the back of the vehicles and trailers, which provided an in-cab visual to help drivers when reversing. The success of the reversing cameras encouraged the company to go further. The next step was to fit forward facing dashboard cameras, which provide an accurate picture of any accidents that occur, so help with internal investigations and help insurers in defending accidents that are not Mobile Mini drivers’ fault. “We initially looked at it in London,” says Watcham. “And it was the drivers in London that were asking for them because they were more exposed some had been in collisions where they...
Vehicles also have reversing and left turning cameras which record any impacts in those areas and provide the driver with even better vision. The next step in terms of technology is an automatic emergency braking system that prevents collisions in front. These can be supplied in new vehicles, but are prohibitively expensive to retro-fit in the existing fleet. “We recently met with camera providers and there is now a wide-angle camera you can fit, which is also a sensor,” says Watcham. “So for those vehicles that haven’t got the automatic emergency braking system, what we can do is put in another kind of detection/warning system.” As drivers travel down a road, the camera on the dash picks up hazards, such as pedestrians or cyclists, and the warning systems tells the driver if they are too close. Going from green to amber to red. This technology is cost about £650 per vehicle, which amounts to around £25,000 for the fleet. “We have had some low speed incidents historically – where a vehicle rolls forward in traffic, for example,” says Watcham. “So I think this will be our next focus.”

As well as the Hiab fleet, Mobile Mini operates a fleet of white transit vans as well as service vehicles, which go out to service other areas of the fleet, or a broken light. “They’re on the road all day every day,” says Watcham. “So we got telematics fitted to those as well, and the newer vehicles have sensors. Our focus was on the Hiab’s initially because that was where the potential risks and consequences were greater. But we used what we had learnt and applied that to the service vehicles too.”

Keep it professional
To complement the technology investment,Watcham’s team also looked drivers to suggest areas for further training. “We tied this into drivers’ ongoing legal requirements for the Certificate of Professional Competence,” he explains. The RHA designed a bespoke course that met Mobile Mini’s specific requirements. “What we didn’t want,” he stresses, “was an off-the-shelf course where our guys went to watch a DVD with drivers from a variety of sectors and then signed a sheet to say they had done so.” Instead, the company asked the RHA trainers to come on site, explained the challenges and highlighted where drivers were having problems. The result was mainly one-to-one training out on the road. “There was some classroom content too but the theoretical side was minimal,” says Watcham.

The training has been so successful that the company has continued it even now the number of incidents has fallen. The RHA’s training and mentoring right.”

The initiative was driven by the HR manager, who Watcham admits that at £700–£800 per employee, cost. But he believes it has played a key role in improving the safety record. “I think that they felt would be most useful. One suggestion was for an in-cab heat/air-conditioning unit that did not run off the engine. "They didn’t want to leave the engine running because they’d been on the safe and efficient fuel course, it was a great idea, so we did it.”

Drivers also asked for ladder racks to be placed in different locations for easier access and an extra storage bin. Most of the changes improved working conditions and welfare but there was an element of safety too. In the past, drivers sometimes had to get on the bed of the vehicle to get ladders off. “Now, by redesigning the spec – where we put the ladders, chairs and accessories – we’ve moved away from a driver having an accident that could have been prevented, they can now lose part of their overall bonus.

Golden hat-trick FORS first came to Mobile Mini’s attention in the Mid 2009 when the company was starting to make it a contractual condition. “To carry out work on the Crossrail project, for example, we have to be FORS accredited,” notes Watcham. “So we got the bronze accreditation for commercial reasons, but we soon realised there were benefits to going through to the gold standard. It was good for business, improved safety and showed our clients that we take these issues seriously.”

Mobile Mini replicated the FORS standard across UK – that every vehicle is fitted out to the same standard. The fleet, which was the first mobile container supplier to do so, has now held the award for the past three years. “It’s a huge commitment,” Watcham acknowledges, “but our big construction clients and other large companies want to see it; it gives us an edge in the industry.”

More widely, the whole fleet safety programme has been a significant investment. “It’s a serious message that we want to send out,” emphasises Watcham. “Internally, we discuss all the facts and figures at board level, so we never forget what we’ve invested in and how it has benefited us.” One of the most tangible results in monetary terms has been in reduced accident costs. “We reduced our insurance premium by just over £100,000 (a 40% fall) at the last renewal there are clear benefits there,” he adds.

To help maintain the momentum, the company recently appointed a dedicated national transport manager, with 25 years’ experience. “As in the past, the focus will be on what we can do. We’re looking at ways of continuously improving safety and efficiency,” stresses Watcham. “We want to maintain the improvements we’ve achieved and to push on further.”