7 Ways to Get the Most Out of A Driver Simulator Program

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VS600 Truck Simulator by Virage Simulation

The technology today, however, is more sophisticated, takes up less space and is more affordable.

However, "more affordable" still isn't cheap. To avoid having a very expensive paperweight, following are some tips to choose and implement a driver training simulator.

1. Decide what you want to accomplish

"It's about what are they trying to gain out of their training programs," says Deborah Quackenbush, president of Virtual Excellence LLC. For instance, are you looking to evaluate new drivers without endangering a truck that needs to be out on the road hauling freight? Do you need to train on a specific skill such as shifting a manual transmission or backing? Are you looking to do regular ongoing safety classes? Remedial training for drivers who have been in an incident or crash? Do you want to train drivers how to operate a vehicle for improved fuel efficiency? Train them to identify hazards in their peripheral vision? Do you want to be able to train multiple drivers at a time?

"Simulation customers need to be careful not to get caught up with gadgetry and fancy options," says Greg Collins, contracts/marketing manager for Doron Precision Systems. "Focus on training and curriculum first."

Remi Quimper, president of Virage Simulation, says first looking at your objectives and curriculum help you determine in which areas the simulator will be a better tool than the truck, and vice versa.

"By looking at your objectives you will be using the simulator at its best efficiency. If you use it as you use the truck, you will not be taking advantage of that technology."

Quimper points to features on the simulator you can't replicate in a real truck, such as showing a birds-eye viewpoint, being able to manipulate the environment and the actions of other vehicles, being able to train small groups, and being able to get a nonbiased review of how the driver just performed, as things that make simulators an efficient tool.

2. Learn about the simulator you're considering and the company behind it.

Does the system have the ability to track the driver's progress, offer the driver feedback and provide you with a record? What is the life expectancy of the system, both in terms of physical durability and whether the software is upgradeable or will become dates. "Some companies, after four or five years, say, 'This system is obsolete, you have to buy a new one,'" Quackenbush explains. Will you be able to add new programs to your system as the company develops them? Is the company going to be there after the sale? What kind of train-the-trainer program does your purchase include? "You want to have someone that's going to be a partner with you in your training program," Quackenbush says.

In addition to talking to potential simulator suppliers about what you want to accomplish, Greg Collins, contracts/marketing manager for Doron Precision Systems, recommends asking: How much experience does this simulator company have in the trucking industry? Where can I visit an existing customer? What is this company's track record?

3. Make sure you can get the programs you need

"Above and beyond the simulator, you want to have the appropriate programs that you're looking for that can accomplish what you want to," Quackenbush says.

Mike Speers, director of business development at training company DriveWise Canada, agrees. "The proper training program is needed to maximize the effectiveness of a simulator, so companies should always consider the quality of a provider's courseware, as well as their simulator. Simulators can become very expensive paperweights if not paired with the proper training program."

4. Avoid teaching bad habits

One thing to be careful of in simulators is to avoid negative training, creating or reinforcing bad habits. Simulators should not have drivers do something that he wouldn't do in real life. For instance, Bob David, CEO of Virtual Driver Interactive, tells of a program designed to teach drivers how to identify threats that required them to touch the screen in order to identify them. When the drivers got out into the truck in the real world, they were taking a hand off the wheel to point to the potential threat. So they revised the program to use voice commands.

Virage's Remi emphasized the importance of treating a simulator like a real truck. "So you put your seat belt on. If you stop the truck, you have to stop it properly as you would in real life. Like leaving the simulator without putting on the parking brake, that would be a bad habit you could eventually do again in real life."

5. Don't emphasize performance over prevention

While many fleets like the idea of using simulators to teach drivers how to react in dangerous situations such as skid recovery, Virage's Remi stresses the importance of training in prevention.

"We can teach recovery from a skid, but I'm not sure that's the right thing to do. You may think you can get into that situation and recover. But you don't know how slippery it could be in the next curve. What we have to teach is how to prevent these things, how to steer so we don't get into a skid. If we do teach skid recovery, we have to be careful not to bring the level of confidence too high. In real life you can't control what's behind your tires."

6. Don't neglect the implementation phase

Implemeting the new technology into your training environment takes more than just buying a simulator and saying "here it is." Look for a company that can help you integrate simulators into your training program. There has to be a properly trained trainer who knows how to use a simulator efficiently.

"Simulators can become very expensive paperweights if not paired with the proper training program," Speers says.

7. Choose a company you'll be able to work with in the future

"Make sure you will get the level of support that you want," Remi says. "If you come up with a specific training objective, you want to make sure you're provider will be able to support you on that, and build that," or make suggestions for existing programs that can help you accomplish those objectives.

Speers points out that "simulators and the software that run them are advanced technologies that need support. Knowing that your simulator will be maintained on a regular basis reassures a company that their training schedule won't be interrupted."