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Fasten your seatbelt ... as we travel into the safety zone of the ridesharing landscape

BY JOSEPH MCCULLOUGH

As ridesharing continues to transform and disrupt traditional methods of transportation, scrutiny behind the safety of passengers continues to be a topic for discussion, particularly by the long-standing players in the transportation industry. Driver safety is also a concern.

Transportation network companies (TNCs), also known as ridesharing companies, have modernized the transportation industry, and brought modern regulations. The taxi industry believes these differing regulations give ridesharing companies an unfair advantage. In terms of pricing, for example, ridesharing companies can increase prices during peak times, but taxis can't due to regulatory constraints. They further claim that the regulations surrounding ridesharing don't sufficiently protect the safety of passengers as the legacy regulations do for taxi services. There is no evidence that this is



In this Jan. 14, 2016, photo, a driver waits to pick up passengers at an Uber and Lyft pick up area at the Bellagio hotel and casino in Las Vegas. (Photo: AP/John Locher)

accurate, however, and in fact, ridesharing may actually be safer.

Although most states currently classify drivers as independent contractors, other states — most notably, California — allege that the drivers are really employees. In Seattle, Wash., a local law was passed allowing rideshare drivers to unionize, which would require the companies to treat the drivers as employees. If these movements succeed, the TNCs will suddenly be facing a huge workers' compensation cost.

We begin our journey with the safety of drivers

When considering the safety of ridesharing, the first thing we should examine is the safety of the drivers — an important workers' compensation issue for taxi companies. Taxi drivers face the highest on-the-job homicide rate of any occupation, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, almost twice that of law enforcement officials. This is an issue TNCs have taken seriously by developing features within

their smartphone applications to protect drivers.

With ridesharing, drivers have control over the hours and locations they choose to work as well as the passengers they wish to pick up, mitigating the risk of violent crime in unsafe areas and late-night hours. Drivers have a dedicated mobile application available, for example, "Lyft Driver," recently launched by Lyft. These driver applications provide a passenger rating system to give insight into troubled passengers before accepting the ride request. As added security for drivers, GPS tracking gives ridesharing companies the ability to track routes as well as provide drivers awareness of pick-up and drop-off locations. These identification tools along with cash-free transactions reduce the possibility of robbery, assault and other crimes against the driver.

In addition to the driver application security features, TNCs themselves monitor passenger ratings and have the ability to remove user access. There is a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to harassment and abuse; TNCs are known to give information freely to the police in the event of a crime.

Take a U-turn to passenger safety

In comparison to taxi transportation, ridesharing appears

to be a safer way to travel both physically and technologically speaking. NBC New York reported on a dozen taxi drivers committing credit-card fraud by stealing \$40,000. Many of the drivers set the meter to "5," a rate for negotiated rides outside the city, ran their meter without the credit-card holders present, and then charged exaggerated costs to the stolen credit-card numbers. The credit-card vendors processing the payments noticed the outrageous rates being charged for short trips and alerted the city.

Transportation network companies combat credit-card fraud with cashless transactions drawn from saved credit-card information. The fare is pre-calculated and paid through a third party to ensure the financial data is secure and not made available to drivers, minimizing the possibility of credit-card theft.

The physical safety of passengers using TNCs versus taxis is an area that seems to be more heavily examined, not surprisingly because taxi industry players are leading the charge. If an assault were to occur to a taxi passenger, the passenger would have had to be proactive in taking a photo of the registration and medallion number to assist police officers in tracking down the driver. If the passengers

didn't take those precautions, they may have a hard time recalling information about their taxi driver. By contrast, transportation network companies provide the drivers' identifiable information, which is saved automatically within their smartphone application.

Smart technology via a passenger mobile application provides customers with an additional layer of safety. Before getting in, riders can confirm the vehicle make, model and license plate, as well as the name and overall rating of the driver. The app also gives the ability to view routes in real time with GPS and share with friends and family. The driver and route information provided by the smartphone application is invaluable should anything ever happen to a ridesharing passenger. This technology further enhances safety by keeping phone numbers confidential and randomly matching riders with drivers to ensure there is no discrimination.

Ridesharing compliance makes a right turn

TNC drivers are strictly monitored and the challenge to stay compliant is widely known in the ridesharing community. Stringent credentialing requirements must be verified before they're able to get on the road. For instance, Lyft requires a

criminal and driving background check be conducted, which includes national and county-level records. Drivers also must have none of the following on their record:

- More than three moving violations in the past three years
- A major moving violation in the past three years
- A DUI or other drug-related driving violation in the last seven years
- Any driving-related convictions in the last seven years
- A violent crime in the last seven years
- A felony in the last seven years
- A drug-related offense in the last seven years
- A sexual offense in the last seven years
- Certain theft or property damage offenses in the last seven years

By contrast, there is no single standard or set of requirements to become a taxi driver, the criteria are inconsistent and vary by state and city of residence. According to the DMV.org, a privately owned publishing site

providing consolidated department of motor vehicles information for each state, the following are basic requirements to drive a taxi:

- Meeting minimum age requirement
- Clean driving record free of major incidents
- Submitting criminal background check
- Passing chauffeur's licensing exam
- State issued driver's license

TNCs require their drivers to complete an annual vehicle inspection at pre-approved auto shops or activation centers. TNCs also empower passengers to rate their drivers and vehicles after every ride. TNCs use this continuous feedback to monitor and subsequently suspend or deactivate a driver if their vehicle or experience is not up to par. If a driver receives a rating of three stars or fewer by a passenger, they will never be matched up again and vice-versa.

To put passenger's mind at ease even further, TNCs have adapted liability policies that cover driver

incidents. Lyft has implemented a \$1 million insurance policy for its drivers that covers the moment the passenger ride request is accepted through the final destination. Additionally, Lyft has partnered with corporations, such as One Call Care Management, to monitor and manage rides, adding further liability coverage.

The safety precautions provided by TNCs more than speak for themselves. The concerns regarding safety and insurance regulations surrounding ridesharing appear to be misconceived. The rise and general acceptance of ridesharing paired with the decline in taxi usage should be evidence enough that ridesharing is quickly becoming the preferred method of transportation and is here to stay.

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