

Telematics is among the clear winners in the champions league of technologies most capable of cutting costs and improving truck and van operations - but it's still developing very fast.

Brian Tinham reports

Early adopters of telematics - those who managed to avoid the pitfalls of project creep and drowning in data - can pat themselves on the back.

Not only were they right about the scale of its potential to improve business, but most have since bagged serious cost savings, primarily in terms of reduced fuel costs and administration time. Some have kicked those on to claim further efficiencies - by, for example, using tracking to link into online networks, such as Transport Exchange, and bear down on empty return loads.

But nothing stands still in IT or in transport. Latest developments are making it much easier and cheaper for operators that have not yet gone down the telematics route to achieve similar, or even greater, benefits. And, if you think you've heard it all before, stand by for surprises: some of what can now be achieved is substantially beyond the original systems' capabilities.

PERSONAL TELEMATICS

On the one hand, personal performance tools are now widely available to augment driver training and reward schemes. On the other, most of the main players - including Ctrack, Intelligent Telematics, Microlise and MiX Telematics - are now bundling in extras, such as dash-cams, truck diagnostics and integration with fleet management.

Why do driver performance tools matter? Because the immediacy of front



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line feedback they afford is enabling even hitherto stalled telematics projects to be rebooted. That means further fuel and maintenance savings for operators, potentially alongside worthwhile safety improvements. Microlise product strategy director Matt Hague reckons safe and economical driving can yield 5-10% reductions in fuel and similar figures from improved productivity and reduced maintenance.

And it's a similar story for bundled packages. Fleet managers milk their collective data for additional operational efficiencies and, again, safety enhancements. Some are also finding themselves able to review everything from maintenance scheduling to fleet composition and even acquisition strategies.

David King, group fleet director at £2.9 billion turnover facilities management, services and construction contractor Interserve, is one such. His UK fleet comprises some 5,000 vehicles, predominantly LCVs and company cars

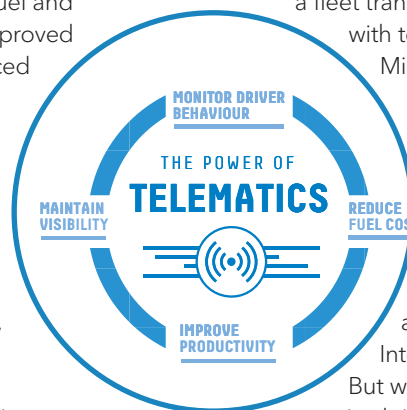
but also HGVs and plant. That's far from small, but until 2012 telematics was largely ad hoc, specified and implemented for local initiatives.

However, as the benefits available from more widely defined telematics became apparent, all that started to change. So the firm is currently well into a fleet transformation programme with telematics - now all Microlise - at its core.

For King, the project was initially about improving fleet efficiency and cutting costs, while also increasing vehicle availability and safety - and reducing Interserve's CO₂ footprint.

But when, last year, the firm acquired rival Initial FM, it took on a new dimension and a new urgency.

"Overnight, we acquired another 1,000-plus vehicles, with fleet operations we knew little about but clearly duplicated ways of working." Aware of the importance of extracting synergy benefits as quickly as possible - but that these require overarching fleet management visibility - Interserve's



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David King (left)

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telematics programme was recast. "Fleet management responsibility was extracted from the divisions and moved up to the group level," he explains. And that momentous step (which, incidentally, catapulted transport on to the boardroom agenda) provided additional impetus to deliver a single fleet management system approach,

with its opportunity for "a single, consistent version of the truth".

SINGLE TRUTH

King says the latter is key. "Whereas before we had five telematics solutions across our acquired and incumbent business - so five lots of costs, charging rates, management reports, etc - we are

now working towards singularity. We are also getting 'commerciality' in spades... Everything, from drivers' licence checking to fuel card management and the telematics, is delivering consistency and improving management decision making. So it is not only cutting costs but also making us more competitive."

He doesn't pretend that achieving these lofty goals has been easy. King emphasises that getting it right is about engaging people at all levels throughout the organisation - including line managers and drivers. "But once they start seeing the benefits of consistent management information coming through, in terms of mpg, maintenance and CO₂ improvements, the momentum grows and you're into a virtuous circle."

The result: King says Interserve's telematics-enabled project is delivering operational cost savings - "improving driver behaviour, and reducing mpg, servicing, accidents, repairs, etc". However, it's also starting to prove itself in terms of helping to verify real vehicle requirements - hence improving sustainability and again competitiveness.

"It's about using the system to help us clarify the numbers and types of vehicles we need by better understanding how efficiently the fleet is being used. But it's also about underpinning longer-term business goals around costs, our carbon footprint and social responsibility. Telematics can help with the bigger picture stuff, too."

Whether smaller operators and others with mixed fleets at the heavier end of the truck spectrum can achieve similar improvements appears to be more about management will than the capabilities of telematics. With systems now integrated into the vast majority of trucks sold - DAF, for example, provides its own version of Microlise on all vehicles supplied on R&M packages - the rewards are there for the taking. **TE**

Technology review

The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, goes the saying. And so it is with bundled telematics systems. Microlise, for example, will happily now supply packages that include four-way 360-degree 3G camera systems as well as data recorders capable of replaying traffic incidents in high definition. As product strategy director Matt Hague puts it: "It's about getting live accident snapshot data in front of people more quickly, with braking data, engine data, truck 'g' force data, etc, all in the one stream."

Similarly, like several others, Microlise has also launched smartphone DPM (driver performance management) apps, aimed at encouraging drivers to improve their own performance. "The approach is one of driver empowerment instead of top-down driver management," explains Hague. "But it also ties into our knowledge portal... If we see drivers consistently going heavy on the brakes, we can serve information to their devices on, for example, anticipation and awareness. But we can also initiate contact with them to suggest a change in behaviour. The benefit comes with being as close to live as possible."

Richard Lane, head of European distribution for Ctrack, describes similar developments. He suggests that operators are increasingly seeing telematics as central to integrating everything from job management to routing, mapping, scheduling and even fleet management systems, as well as vehicle diagnostics.

"Our systems can recognise DTC [diagnostic trouble codes] data and feed that to workshops along with live vehicle context information." He cites vehicle mileage data, but also driver behaviour and incident detection information. And he adds that the scale of integration means no more manual management reporting: moving data between systems can be automated.