FOR FORMS' SAKE

In modern workshops, paper is better used for blotting oil than recording inspection records, as it creates problems for sharing information across the organisation, reports John Kendall

Vehicles need maintenance. Since they consist of complex mechanical systems, parts wear out, sometimes in an expected way and sometimes not. Trying to gather the information needed to build a maintenance schedule for every vehicle in the fleet is a bit like herding cats. Just as you've managed to pin down one, the next has disappeared down the road. But from the perspective of managing a maintenance system, it makes little difference. If the vehicle is on the road, the information you need will be with it.

There is nothing particularly new about workshop management systems, or the now inevitable digital systems that are helping them to advance in ways that were hard to imagine 30 years ago. Like so many other things, it's all a matter of gathering information. The more information you have as a vehicle operator, workshop manager and vehicle manufacturer, the easier it becomes to ensure that your vehicles spend as little time in the workshop as possible, as much time on the road as possible, while performing to the highest standards possible.

The big steps forward to put the whole digital jigsaw puzzle together have been telematics and on board diagnostics (OBD) systems – one of the reasons manufacturers became interested in digital wiring systems over 20 years ago. OBD systems enabled information on the engine, transmission system, axles, suspension, brakes and many other systems to be constantly monitored. If something was not performing as it should, this could be flagged up to the driver with a warning light. That information was also stored in the OBD system where it could be diagnosed in the workshop later.
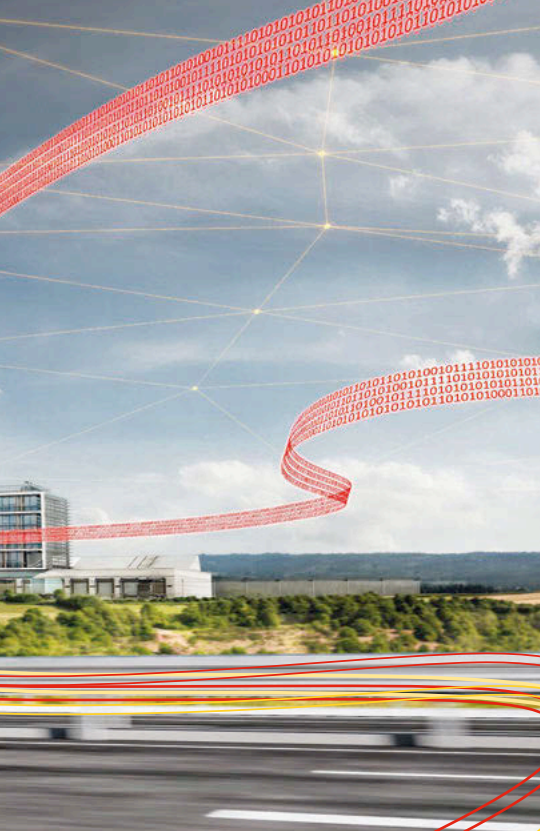
Telematics systems, which in their simplest form permit the transfer of data to and from the vehicle, now enable the OBD information to be monitored remotely. Swift action can then be taken to ensure that costly damage is avoided, workshop bookings made, parts ordered, labour costed and the job seen through to completion with all the necessary checks and balances.

Not surprisingly, this process works in different ways for different truck brands that may also offer different maintenance packages. Operators who do not operate new vehicles may choose a system from an independent supplier, as might an independent workshop. Then there are other forces at play, such as the Earned Recognition scheme.

"Many workshops still key in data from paper inspection reports, job sheets and parts requisitions", says Patrick Tandy, managing director of Freeway Fleet Maintenance Software in the UK. "The transformation has been driven by the development of suitable and affordable systems, improved wireless communications, lower mobile device costs, a desire to control costs and reduce risk, and the 'digital reporting' direction of DVSA (Earned Recognition)."

For example, truck brand MAN's E-Workshop system is used by all MAN UK network members. All maintenance-related work that needs to be completed is logged via the system and every technician has a secure individual log-in. Who carries out the work, what was done, when it was signed off and how

"Truck monitoring today will log a fault code in the system and the workshop can see that it has logged a fault and can call the customer to have it in. The customer will know it has had a fault as well, because it comes up on the dash and the driver should report it."

Bodycot reckons that around 95% of new Volvo Trucks are equipped with TGW.

Third-party supplier r2c has designed a software platform for compliance, workshop and fleet management. The system has been designed to connect the commercial vehicle supply chain, enabling workshops, operators, manufacturers and drivers to enter compliance and maintenance information in one place.
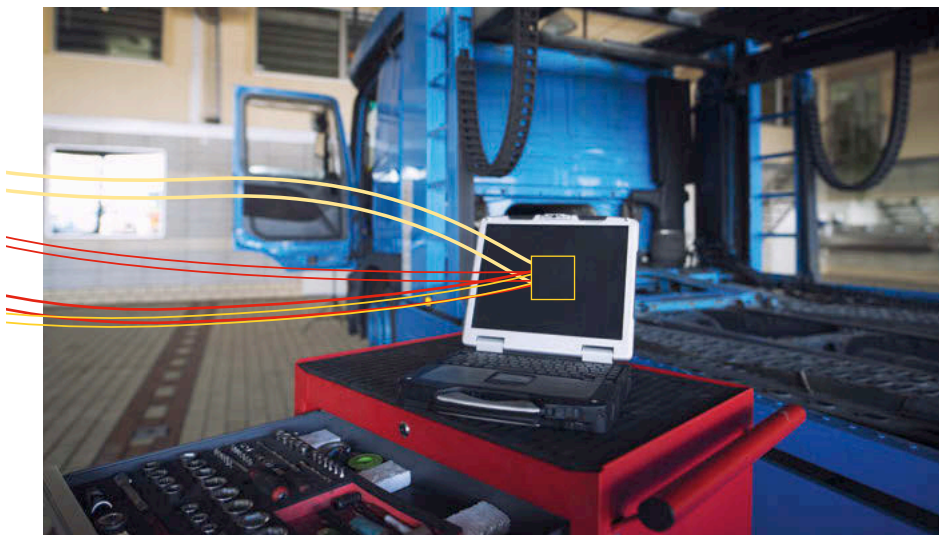
"For workshops, r2c provides tools for digital job sheets, vehicle scheduling, stock management, workload management, job quoting, maintenance and invoicing", explains managing director Tim Meadows. "Compliance and maintenance information is automatically shared between chosen connected users upon selected events, so defects can be reported from driver pre-use check straight to the transport office, where the job can be allocated to the relevant workshop." Photographs

from driver daily checks or additional information can be incorporated to provide more information.

ANOTHER DRIVER

The DVSA Earned Recognition Scheme has also helped to drive the development of workshop management systems. "It's a case of, if you've got nothing to hide, why wouldn't you share your information or your access with DVSA?", says Khan at MAN, which has developed a data-sharing add-on for ER with Microlise. Participation in the scheme can help win tenders, reckons Khan, "To have that as part of your tender package adds value, so it helps operators."

Those who don't choose an OEM package for workshops are urged to think long-term by Freeway's Tandy. "Some systems do compliance or workshop scheduling very well, but areas such as purchasing or connections to other systems are poor. Having a cloud-hosted option will particularly appeal to those with existing or planned multiple sites. Managers should be able to work remotely, so choose a solution with a smartphone app to sign off part requisitions or view activity and performance, for example." TE

long it has taken are all logged on the system.

A second part of this system is the document management database. "That's more for customer access than workshop access", explains Ajaz Khan, aftersales UTP support centre manager, MAN Truck and Bus UK, as it consists of a paper trail of every bit of dealership work.

MAN also provides MAN Check, a remote diagnostics tool, designed for workshops rather than customers. As Khan explains, it's not because MAN is being secretive. "A fault code does not necessarily indicate an actual fault. It could be something that signals that the ignition is on, for example, but from a operator's perspective, it might think there is something wrong with the vehicle."

Scania also recognises this issue. Remote diagnostics generates information from operational data. "From there, parameters are visible to anyone within the Scania dealer network," explains Aaron McGrath, technical manager at Scania Trucks (GB). "If the customer is subscribed to a Scania Connected Services control package then the customer will receive warnings in the Scania Fleet Management portal."

Volvo Trucks offers a similar approach using its Telematics Gateway (TGW), as product quality engineer Paul Bodycot explains:

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