Driving efficiency

Workshop management systems can make or break dealerships' and independents' operations. Brian Tinham looks at developments, and what's in it for operators

In recent years, operators have flocked to outsource repair and maintenance, because of the perceived cost benefits and the argument that servicing vans and trucks isn't core to a business that's supposed to be making money by shifting goods. However, for some, the tide is turning as they decide that, overall, there's now money to be saved by bringing vehicle inspections and servicing back in-house. But the issue then is: what systems do operators need to manage their reborn workshops?

TIP Trailer Services, which operates 10,000 trailers in the UK alone (reefers, curtainsiders, skeletals and all makes – most its own, but around 2,500 other companies', managed through its FleetCare operation), is one example. Dave Parr, TIP's maintenance lead for the UK and Ireland, who took on responsibility for workshops as they started coming back into the fold four years ago, says coyly that you need "to make the correct, not the easy, decision".

What does he mean? "There are a lot of systems out there, so operators and workshop managers need to do the analysis of what's going to work for them," explains Parr. "And that depends on their size, the number of vehicles they need to maintain, the number of workshop locations, how many technicians they have, their contracts and clients, how much they are prepared to invest and how much visibility management wants."

Dieter Hughes, head of workshops for fleet services specialist Venson, adds that management systems are developing all the time, so fleet and workshop managers should be reviewing what they have, in light of what's now possible – often at modest cost. "There are so many workshops out there running on old, antiquated systems that can't measure efficiency or utilisation, for example. I can't imagine running a workshop without that information. Business today is all about effective management and availability for the customer. If you're working from the old regime with T cards, it's not efficient and you can't even see live data without progress chasers."

However, Neil Fearn, who heads up transport, and health and safety for LBS Builders Merchants, suggests that transport operators need even more, if the goal is upping the ante on productivity. "We outsource our R&M, but, until recently, that meant all I saw from their workshop system was the inspection sheets. As an operator, and someone who has run my own workshops before, that's not enough. I need access to all my cost centres, across all assets, and that means being able to see what every job is costing me, ideally with everything on a single database – legal costs, R&M costs, safety inspections, tyres, repairs and whether they're due to RTAs or wear and tear, telematics, everything."

Long, hard road

So what should you do? Parr's experience is telling. He first explains the thinking behind TIP Trailer Services' change of heart: "We did the analysis and found that the way vendors were booking hours to us meant we could be cheaper if we in-sourced... Now we have 11 workshops across the UK, staffed by 97 technicians, eight workshop managers and six apprentices, as well as 35 fully equipped mobile service vans."

In terms of taking control of all that, TIP took what Parr describes as "the long, hard road", developing its own workshop system in-house, using parent GE's massive IT organisation. "We made that decision, because it was right for us," he says. "GE has a very metrics-orientated culture that says 'you can't manage what you can't measure'. So we knew we needed to be able to understand in detail what was happening in our workshops. We did look at a few 'off the peg' systems, but, for various reasons, we developed our own, called GetSmart [GE Trailer Service Maintenance and Repair Tool], which has since been rolled out across Europe and links into our internal systems,

including our existing costing system, ALS [Automated Lease System].”

Parr says that what TIP needed was a system capable of showing efficiency and productivity (basically labour time per job line, measured against standards) in its workshops. It also had to help workshop managers to schedule and allocate work to technicians. And it needed to be flexible enough to cope with different local requirements.

“GetSmart doesn't do the invoicing [that's on a separate linked system], but it does provide excellent visibility of labour times against each job in all our workshops,” explains Parr. “It also allocates technicians to jobs and builds up VOSA-compliant electronic service sheets. And we get data integrity, in terms of what has been done [with drop-down menus to standardise terminology] and who did it – with the old advisories replaced by dialogue boxes that open automatically next time that vehicle is being booked in.”

Scheduling software

TIP also gets parts information via supplier InterTruck's web portal, which links into ALS, and then marries up labour information through GetSmart. Most recently, Parr says that the organisation has also completed a module in ALS that creates quotations for additional vehicle work discovered on inspection. This will shortly be integrated with GetSmart for direct emailing to customers. And the final link in that chain will be more advanced scheduling software that smoothes this kind of reactive work into the workshops.

Meanwhile, Venson has taken a different approach, standardising on Kerridge systems over the last two years for all its workshops. Hughes explains that Kerridge covers everything from vehicle parts and kitting, to workshop scheduling (including maintenance programmes for O licence management), job and time recording, progress status, analysis and invoicing – with different rates available for different clients.

“From the workshop manager's perspective, it measures everything from the moment a vehicle is booked in,” says Hughes. “So if you've got 10 jobs on top of a vehicle service, you can add labour lines for each, and then technicians clock on and off them as they go. Workshop controllers can then see what's happening and how long jobs take – and we have a traffic light system that makes it very easy to visualise. In our case, yellow is vehicle arrived and awaiting labour; blue is vehicle work in progress; and pink is job completed.”

At its most fundamental level, the system manages Venson's technicians, helping controllers to see problems before they become crises.”If the system flags a job running out of time, our controller can talk to the technician and find out if he needs more time or if he's already on top of it.

> *“We did the analysis and found that the way vendors were booking hours to us meant we could be cheaper if we in-sourced… Now we have 11 workshops across the UK, staffed by 97 technicians, eight workshop managers and six apprentices, as well as 35 fully equipped mobile service vans” Dave Parr*

The problem with ageing workshop systems

In general, workshops are good at doing the engineering side of their work, but they're so busy keeping customers happy that they forget why they're there. And that, says Graham Helliwell, managing director of Technopoly, which supplies the Accelerator workshop management system, is to make money.

"In my experience, they're often two to three months behind with their invoices, so cash flow is terrible – especially with those that are owner-managed," he says. "Those are the people who should be invoicing £40,000–50,000 worth of work a month, but end up doing their paperwork at the weekend when they've forgotten what went on, so miss out on chargeable items and technician time."

Helliwell catalogues common failings, resulting from poor systems, as including: letting vehicles go, but then failing to ensure they come back; and allowing individuals to be the sole guardians of customer rates and parts mark-ups. He also cites spreadsheets and accounting packages as part of the problem, simply because of their limitations.

He recommends challenging workshop system vendors against his own system's capabilities. "With Accelerator, workshop staff can book vehicles in quickly and produce job sheets in 10 to 15 seconds. They can also find vehicles' entire maintenance history, all in one screen. Labour rates and parts mark-ups can all be set up, with links direct into the Sage accounting package. Technicians can add jobs at any time, and supervisors can see how much has been spent and how much money they're likely to make from any job. They can also record conversations with customers and store images to validate estimates of repair work when quoted, as opposed to when the vehicle comes in – with more damage."

Dieter Hughes, head of workshops for fleet services firm Venson, agrees and emphasises the point that some systems are very antiquated. "They also don't do half the stuff they say on the box. We invested heavily in time, working with various off-the-shelf systems, and many just don't match up to what they say they can do," he says. He suggests looking for functions such as: reminders for next inspection, next service, tacho, tax and defect advisories; as well as the ability to set up standard jobs and estimates for near identical vehicles.
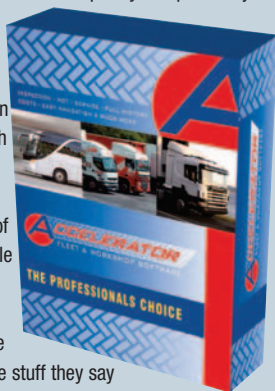
Automotive Electrical accelerates workshop service

40-year old Automotive Electrical, whose workshops handle everything from vehicle electrics to fuel haulier vehicles' R&M and also bodybuilding – designing and equipping specialist vehicles such as police surveillance cars, mobile cafes and camper vans – has upgraded its workshop management system to Accelerator.

Says director Andrew Hodgson: "The previous system cost us a lot in monthly payments and any updates cost us extra… It was [also] hard to use – the accounting module was very difficult and it took ages to move from having one piece of information on your screen to finding another… It could take us ages to track down a 20 pence part for a customer – and that can't be the right way to run things."

Now everything has changed: "With Accelerator, we told them exactly what we wanted and why we wanted it that way – and they set it up, just as we asked. The great thing is that it has made things so much easier. It is so simple to get any information up on screen. Everything, from the accounts side through to the workshop and stores, is so much easier to run. It means we can get a lot more out of reports and the back-up service is second to none."

Hodgson also says he's not a great computer person and didn't want to change the way the company worked. "But, after having Accelerator for a short while, I've changed the way we do some things to suit Accelerator, simply because its way of doing things is better than what I was doing."

So he can deal with it there and then, without wasting man hours or letting customers down."

Hughes also explains that, although Kerridge was originally developed as a retail automotive dealership tool, with standard ICME job times built in for cars and car-derived vans, Venson uses information from Autodata to generate 'standard' times for the heavier end of commercial vehicles. "We're currently looking at getting Autodata into the system portal, so it's there on the screen for building more accurate workshop schedules. We're also working on an enhancement that will allow customers to see vehicle status and any defects found by our technicians."

All well and good. But LBS Builders Merchants' Neil Fearn wants more – and reckons that, with help from Magic Internet (which owns the fleet and workshop management software firm Truckfile that his operation runs), he is going to get it. And, by the way, he believes that may well solve a dilemma for those many operators on R&M packages that still want access to detailed vehicle maintenance history and cost information.

I want to know

"As an operator, I need to be able to get a full history of my vehicles – and other assets – that I'm running, to control my fleet efficiently. We lease these trucks and I want to know what's going on with them," explains Fearn. "So, for example, for each cost centre, I want to see invoice numbers, job sheet numbers and the detail of the suppliers – not just electronic inspection sheets. I need all that so I can interrogate and report on any vehicle and find out how much I've spent on tyres, repairs, accidents and exceptional maintenance work, such as a new gearbox or clutch. I need that history so I can see if a vehicle is giving me problems: maybe 19 months ago our supplier had to replace the fuel system and now they're saying we need another."

Just like so many other operators on R&M packages, at the moment LBS has to find all such information itself, going in and out of various software programs and databases to do so. "That's a drain on my time and it can be difficult to collate the information. Which is why some transport managers just don't bother," he suggests.

Fearn tells he's been working with Magic Internet and Truckfile for over two years, and that the end game is now in sight. "Everything will be on the one database – not just workshop management, but information from the drivers' first use checks, vehicle mapping and tracking. And the beauty is that it will all be in one place. Currently, Truckfile is even experimenting with adding a module for monitoring tyre pressures and load weights sent from the vehicles to the system database."

He accepts that changing what's available – either from other workshop management systems

or R&M service providers – isn't just about building a new system: it's also about persuading manufactures and dealerships running the R&M workshop packages to allow remote electronic access to data from their systems. However, he says that Truckfile's negotiations so far with Mercedes (his main vehicle supplier) and Kerridge (the workshop management system on its R&M side) are going well. "I had a chat with them and they say that if it can be done without causing any kind of corruption, then there's no problem. Truckfile is obviously hoping they'll say 'why not just put the whole lot on their system?', and that would make it a lot easier for me, in terms of safety inspections."

Either way, Fearn continues: "This is going to be a complete management tool for operators' fleet managers, from start to finish. I've put a lot of effort into this, because I was frustrated with the original system. It's been refreshing working with Truckfile and I'm looking forward to getting a real one-stop system that will provide efficent compliance and cost benefits to us."

So what are the takeaways? Hughes' advice, in terms of workshop management systems, is unequivocal: "Everybody says that profitability is key. But, for workshops to be profitable, they

need an efficient working system in place. It's not only about getting more throughput from your workshops; it's also about keeping customers happy. Technicians may not cost the business that much, in terms of overheads, but it's also about having auditable processes in place for gaining the accreditation you need, particularly on the commercial and passenger vehicle sides."

Parr agrees and suggests that workshops make sure they have enough PC workstations, so that technicians can easily enter the data that's needed. He says much the same for mobile service vans – but reveals that laptops for instant reporting have proved problematic, in terms of connectivity, while trials with PDA are looking more promising. He also advises workshop managers to consider useful add-ons, such as modules that instigate audits for environmental health and safety compliance. "That way, you get the dual comfort of knowing that, not only are your technicians doing what they say they're doing, but also they're doing it safely." **TE**

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