

A new era of engineering to tackle the tough times

As world markets teeter on the brink of forcing further bank meltdowns, yet more national bailouts and even potentially another global recession, transport professionals can only watch and wait, with their fingers crossed. Or can they? Indeed, should they?

This industry, more than most, is well used to living with financial adversity, in the form of increasing costs and reducing margins, largely beyond our control. So, with pundits predicting a juddering halt ahead for debt-driven western growth – and one that's likely to last for the foreseeable future – perhaps it's time to redouble our efforts, and find new ways to get costs down and what amounts to waste out of our operations.

While many managers may consider it trite to suggest that engineering is key to providing sustainable solutions, enlightened transport engineers will have a very different view. They might point, for example, to the power of recent telematics and tracking systems in transforming the management of everything from driver behaviour to truck maintenance and even customer service. Equally, engineers could cite increasingly sophisticated powertrains that not only meet ever more demanding emissions regulations, but also push down fuel consumption. And technicians would be well within their rights to include their diagnostic tools' abilities to improve on vehicle uptime. The list goes on: aerodynamic bodywork, lighter weight components and innovative energy-saving and re-use technologies are all playing their parts in improving efficiency.

For transport engineers, the message seems plain. Staying on top of engineering developments, and investigating and implementing those that turn out to offer clear cost-benefits, regardless of opposing custom and practice, is a good starting point. The only problem: securing the inevitable investment required. Even the best articulated case to the Dragons' Den will fail, if money dries up in the face of our aforementioned market situation.

The truth is, for the vast majority of operators, workshops and the rest, there is unlikely to be a single silver bullet, and best advice is probably to keep improvement initiatives simple – meaning low initial cost and relatively easy to deliver. Also, we need to be aware that, for some seeming solutions, there may well be barriers waiting in the wings.

Look, for example, at the EC's proposal – currently being fought by the Freight Transport Association and others – to impose a limit of four metres on the height of semi-trailers, for type approval purposes, and to remove the UK's existing derogation. If passed into law, this edict will not only reverse the considerable fuel, driver and truck maintenance savings achieved by hauliers that invested in multi-deck trailers to 4.88 metres and above, but also rack up carbon emissions and costs for hard-pressed businesses, and ultimately consumers and the economy, as truck movements are forced back up.

Engineering, when released from the shackles of bureaucracy born out of dogma, rather than common sense, can, does and will make a difference. So there is our challenge. We need to work collectively to increase our influence over the law makers, while also improving the confidence of the money men and women by delivering real, technology-led solutions.



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