Route masters

There are two kinds of fleet engineer: those who have embraced telematics and those who will go bust, if they don't, says Ian Norwell. For truck and bus transport engineers, there is now no hiding place

The complexity of heavy duty diesel engines, and the impact that a poor driving style can have on your bottom line, now make even a basic telematics package inescapable for truck and bus fleet engineers. But there are two sectors of the market that continue to claim and counter-claim against each other. It's the OEMs versus the aftermarket.

In 2002, when a common fleet management system (FMS) interface was agreed by all the major truck makers, the route was cleared for aftermarket systems development. So which is the best path to tread? And is a telematics system without a driver training programme only of limited use?

As well as two sectors providing the technology, there are two distinct groups who need it – and for two different reasons. There are those whose sole aim is to monitor and reduce fuel usage, primarily by driver training and routing. But there are also others additionally harnessing tracking as an integral part of their businesses – in parcel delivery, for example.

Phil Moon, product marketing manager for DAF Trucks in the UK, explains the technology dilemma, since resolved. "In the early days, there was a deluge of data that put a lot of customers off, but the market has recovered from that, with the advent of bespoke systems."

It's a crucial point, but, when most transport engineers run a mixed fleet, an OEM product may be fine for the trucks or buses for which it was designed, yet of less use on other makes. DAF is

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Steve Lovatt, head of UK sales, Daimler FleetBoard

one of the few truck manufacturers that does not have its own telematics product. It is certainly not saying 'never', but for now it points its customers towards either aftermarket providers or even other truck OEMs.

Why? Probably because system requirements really depend on the customer's business model and exactly what is wanted. In other words, it's not as easy to pigeon-hole a truck operation as many believe. Even two different parcel companies may need a different product. DAF's decision to leave telematics provision to the likes of Microlise and Isotrak has echoes of its non-declaration on Euro 6 – arguably showing the most measured of approaches.

On the right road?

It's not all about fuel, though. Iron Mountain, a US-owned data management organisation, uses GreenRoad on its 450-strong fleet. UK general manager of national logistics Rory Morgan was keen to improve the company's safety record and save money on fuel, too. Not having a common embedded telematics system across his fleet's various brands, he took a trial of GreenRoad's driver monitoring system – helped by TfL and encouraged by his insurer. Iron Mountain's 30-vehicle trial with GreenRoad in 2010 gave positive results and the system is now installed fleet-wide.

Says Morgan: "It's a GPS-based driver behaviour monitoring system that has a simple traffic light display in the cab. It measures a range of events, including harsh acceleration and braking, and inertia to left and right, as the basics." The results are hard to argue with: accidents down 14%, third party claims cut by 37% and an improvement in fuel consumption of 15%.

"I have a staff of five dedicated driver-trainers, but they can't be in the cab with the driver all day. But GreenRoad can," comments Morgan. And he claims to have also discovered the Holy Grail that should accompany an improved safety record, but has unfairly eluded most in the industry for so long. Zurich has cut his insurance premiums by 14%.

But there is another way. Truck makers are keeping a close eye on telematics specialists and some have taken the pragmatic option by tying in one of them as their provider. Iveco's Blue & Me Fleet was introduced at the 2008 Hannover Show. That was the result of a joint venture between Iveco and Qualcomm, whose telematics services are compatible with its Blue & Me Fleet onboard computer platform – allowing operators to obtain real-time information across their fleets.

That system is able to interrogate the vehicle CANBus to obtain data, including fuel consumption, distance travelled, speed and overall usage. It can also connect to the digital tachograph to allow remote authentication and download tacho data, thus avoiding the need for the fleet operator to directly access the vehicle.

Scania Fleet Management's marketing manger Darrell Taylor confirms this truck maker's stance. "Scania Communicator, our latest telematics offering, is being fitted as a no-cost option to all new trucks, together with a complimentary six months' subscription to entry-level reports," he says. This system aims to draw together the logic behind the Swedish OEM's driver training and proactive maintenance programmes. And while it may be a sprat to catch a mackerel, the lure of easily digested data that will save big money on fuel is bound to be an attractive one.

Meanwhile, Daimler's FleetBoard in Germany is pushing the market hard by making it a standard fit in the new Actros as well – with the data provided free for the first 16 weeks. However, this will now not be the case in Britain, says Steve Lovatt, FleetBoard's head of UK sales, who comments that the firm will tailor it for the UK market.

"Our assessment for the UK is that customers will be far more likely to take a telematics system, if the costs are transparent and contained," reveals Lovatt. "We will do this by linking it to an R&M [repair and maintenance] contract. We will be dropping the sign-up fee [€800 in Europe] and set a reasonable monthly cost for the data." He indicates that this will be substantially less than the €59 per truck each month, which has been mooted for Europe.

One more point, though: with truck applications now setting the pace, it's easy to overlook the reason they are there in the first place – trailers. Telematics designed for the trailer keep tabs on where they are and at what time they delivered. They also monitor brakes, doors, fridges and tyres; it's all useful information. Indirectly, when coupled, they obviously also track the truck's movements. Hardware starts at €500, with typical monthly subscriptions from €10.

Nick Rens, Wabco vice president for trailer systems and aftermarket, says: "In Europe, TrailerGuard is installed on over 35,000 trailers." He asserts that damage and theft reduction rates alone pay for such systems quickly.

So fleet engineers are spoilt for choice. Each of the OEM's systems will provide functionality, albeit a little reduced, across other marques. Equally, the aftermarket products may well provide you with all the data you need. As ever, the deciding factor will be cost. The devil will be in the invoice.