



He who

dares

Truck operators that have taken the plunge with telematics are reporting mouth watering savings, in terms of fuel usage and vehicle maintenance. Ian Norwell reviews this key conference session

For the many remaining telematics-deniers who continue to believe this technology is just not for them, two operators' experiences – revealed, warts and all, at the IRTE 2012 Conference – provide a serious wakeup call. It's hard to ignore statistics such as fuel bills down by 15%, accidents significantly reduced, insurance premiums slashed and customer service improved, isn't it?

And the sense that telematics could, after all, be for you is surely heightened when you hear that the

operators concerned weren't in any way special cases. Indeed, they were at either end of the company size spectrum and running with completely different truck duty cycles – one, a general haulage and distribution SME, and the other a waste management giant.

A small haulier, running just 25 trucks on UK groupage, could easily have stayed away from the telematics party, but Paul Wreaves (left), operations director at Loughborough-based ETS Distribution, said he took it on, because he believed it could make a serious difference to fleet efficiency. In fact, his journey started back in 2007 with four targets: implementing tracking; improving driver productivity; getting incident verification; and, the biggest prize, cutting the diesel bill. He achieved all four in spades.

Key decisions

There were undeniably obstacles to getting telematics working, but Wreaves made a couple of decisions at the outset that have since proved crucial. First, with one brand of truck dominating his fleet (21 out of 25), he might have gone for an OEM system. Instead, ETS selected the independent, but inevitably smaller supplier, MiX Telematics. "At the time, not all the truck makers had fully mature systems, despite their promises," he explained – and his choice led to a big success. Today, the decision would need more consideration, because, as

Wreaves agreed, "everybody's at it."

The second, equally vital, decision – and one that has historically so often been horribly mismanaged – concerned how to introduce the new regime to the drivers. "Driver disaffection was a risk we wanted to avoid at all costs," said Wreaves. With a natural aversion to change and the potential for concerns over the 'spy-in-the-cab', he knew that success would hinge first and foremost on drivers not seeing telematics as a disciplinary tool.

For him, getting the drivers – with whom ETS already enjoyed good working relations – on board was partly about setting realistic goals. This he achieved by letting the MiX Telematics system simply run and record normal operating data for the first month, uninfluenced by any training strictures. That exercise set an 85% performance benchmark, from which gains could be measured, and introduced a competitive starting point. But Wreaves' other

masterstroke was to appoint a full-time driver trainer. That took any adversarial flavour out of the process and, he said, made improvements virtually inevitable.

As the better fuel figures rolled in, the positive vibe was set. All scores were listed in the drivers' lodge and an aspirational target set at 95%. With the trust hurdle surmounted, drivers came to embrace the system and, as scores rose further, it became seen by all as a healthily competitive exercise.

ETS was not sacrificing productivity either, as training was conducted 'on the job', with the trainer in-cab during regular work. When he was not riding shotgun, a simple coaching device installed in each cab monitored the basics to keep improvements on stream. And Wreaves linked the development to a SAFed (Safety Assessment Federation) driver training scheme, which looks at drivers' jobs in the round – everything from walk-around checks to customer interaction and paperwork.

So what have been the tangible benefits for ETS? Wreaves reported a 30% cut in accidents, 20% drop in insurance premiums, 15% reduction in that diesel bill and improved customer service. Future plans include dropping the trucks' speed limiters to 54mph from 56mph and setting a 'zero accidents' target.

Half a million pounds

Wreaves concluded by telling delegates that, if they run a 100-truck fleet and they're not fully exploiting

management, and invested more than £1million fitting out its fleet. Fairly soon, drivers' daily score cards and a welter of data from the vehicles started to pour in. "We probably tried to be too clever, too soon, and we nearly drowned in a data swamp of our own making."

Stubbs made the point that waste management operations are among the toughest on vehicles and people. It's easy to see that 26-tonne rigids with heavy, complex and energy-hungry bodywork, using automatic transmissions and toiling away on a merciless stop-start duty cycle, will always turn in some of the worst fuel figures. But all the more reason, went the initial thinking, to grab as much data as possible and so find hidden improvements. Although Stubbs agreed he could only dream of the kinds of fuel returns available to regular hauliers, he also knew that the percentage game should work in his favour. With an annual diesel invoice for £60 million, it would take less than a 2% saving to put a cool million back on his bottom line.

But with the telematics project just not working, Veolia's decision to take a step back and review its approach saved the day. Stubbs described it as leading to a radical simplification of the system. Hardened data junkies sometimes have to admit that simpler is better, and so it was at Veolia. "We took out the driver training and reams of measurements that were fogging our view," explained Stubbs.

Moment of clarity

Telematics, he said, was boiled down to measuring just three key driving parameters: over-revving, idling and speeding. Daily, weekly and monthly reports were produced automatically and an easily understandable league table of drivers generated. Then the on-vehicle information finally started to transform efficiency, while also delivering health and safety benefits, too.

With 3,500 drivers and 168 operating centres, the investment in telematics soon paid off. In fact, payback took less than one year of operation and the fuel consumption improvement continues, now running at around 7%.

The messages from Veolia's experience are simple. Any fleet can benefit, however specialised, but you must demand a tailored service. Also, focus on walking before you run. And don't lose your nerve, if you don't get it right first time. Keeping it simple will still bring home the promised results.



Rob Stubbs

**Left: Paul Wreaves
"If you run a 100-truck fleet and you're not using telematics, there's £500,000 hiding under your desk"**

telematics, "there's half a million pounds hiding under your desk".

Rob Stubbs, group fleet director for Veolia Environmental Services, told the conference he has a far bigger fleet than that – and so potentially a far bigger prize. And with more than 3,500 vehicles over 18tonnes gvw, mostly employed on the unglamorous duties of waste collection, he wasn't exaggerating. Nevertheless, Stubbs' story showed how close this organisation came to throwing telematics in the bin. Indeed, he said it was a close thing. "When we weren't getting the results we wanted, we could easily have walked away. But that would have been a big mistake."

So what was the problem? Quite simply, too much information: the amount of data that can be drawn from an RCV fleet is considerable and that was where Veolia nearly tripped up. Veolia had selected CMS SupaTrak for vehicle tracking and fleet

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