

Men behaving

With the burgeoning market for driver monitoring systems – urged on by insurers and fleet operators – there are now plenty of technology choices, writes Robin Dickeson

Above: Units to evaluate driver performance are becoming more commonplace in commercial vehicles

Right: Ashwoods' Lightfoot driver monitoring system

Among van fleet operators, there is rule of thumb that the first dent is the most expensive. Once dented, a vehicle looks unloved and soon suffers more damage. Fix it fast and you may save more than you spend. Better still, though, avoid dents.

Until recently, that was easier said than done: almost all knocks are 'someone else's fault' and no one ever admits to bad driving. But, now, we can measure and monitor driving behaviour and use that data to help people learn. And that can solve two quite different parties' problems – insurers worrying that young people can't afford cover, because of their higher risk profile, and transport operators concerned about drivers' fuel consumption.

In-cab technology can also deal with the well-known issue of bad habits reappearing when the trainer moves on, so that improvements quickly reverse. Accurately and continuously monitoring a driver's behaviour offers him or her a chance of sustainable improvement – particularly if the system provides live driving feedback.

Hence the uptake among some insurers, and also truck and van fleet managers of 'black box' data logging systems. For many, the results have been outstanding, with fuel, accident damage, insurance and maintenance costs all cut dramatically. Indeed, many report that their investments show a solid return within months.

Gender bender

But recent legislation has accelerated developments. In March 2011, Belgian consumer lobby group Test Achat won a sex discrimination case in the European Court of Justice, which argued that it was unacceptable to charge men and women different prices for the same insurance. So European Union law changed and, since 21 December 2012, gender-biased insurance sales have been banned in the UK – with, as it turns out, far-reaching consequences.

When suppliers spot money-making opportunities, technology mushrooms. And so it is

that driver monitoring equipment – from sophisticated systems to free apps for smart phones – has been on the rise.

GreenRoad, for example, has systems working with 70,000 vehicles around the world and more than 50,000 in the UK. The company's Mark Hampson says its system dramatically cuts accident, insurance, maintenance and fuel bills, often delivering a return on investment in just 60–90 days.

Meanwhile, Ashwoods' Lightfoot driver monitoring system – introduced at last year's CV Show and providing instant feedback via a dashboard display – has also been proven to improve driver behaviour. Indeed, the firm argues that it has a greater impact on fuel reduction than telematics systems, with 10% savings common.

One caveat: "The only way you'll get the results is to involve the driver," warns Hampson. And he also advises that unions generally react well, particularly once they realise that the



Right: GreenRoad systems have helped many operators cut cost, risk and accidents

badly



data can help drivers defend their behaviour. That point is confirmed by Unite's national officer for road transport, Adrian Jones, although with a cautionary note. "While we don't oppose the use of technology to improve road safety and even efficiency, we do not condone employers using such technology as a 'spy in the cab'." His concern: drivers worrying about action from their employers may "put their focus in the wrong place".

However, Hampson counters that some bus operators are now using GreenRoad's data to persuade local authorities to review problematic road layouts. On-board systems can give vital evidence about local safety risk hotspots, such as awkward mini roundabouts.

The point is this technology works. In 2006, Ian Brown, now managing director of Towergate's Smart Motor insurance business, set out to use driving performance as the basis for quotes. Towergate subsidiary iKube has successfully offered 'black box' insurance to young drivers ever since. He says that the data helps drivers improve. "77% of our renewals got a driver-related discount on top of their no-claims discount," he explains.

Truck makers take a different approach, using on-board technology to deliver fleet management information that includes driver information. DAF Trucks' new Euro 6 XF105 tractor unit is a good example. The truck has an optional Driver Performance Assistant

that provides live feedback. "Drivers like it," says Tony Pain, UK marketing director. "They tell us they enjoy trying to beat their own fuel records."

All truck brands have similarly sophisticated systems. Mostly, their priority is fuel consumption, rather than driver safety. But, as the two are sides of the same coin, the driver also gets useful feedback on risk-related behaviour. And van makers, too, offer similar services, mostly through links to third parties – such as Citroën's deal with TrafficMaster – or directly, as in Mercedes' FleetBoard system. Ford says it will "have more to say" on fuel use and driver monitoring at this year's CV Show.

Just one issue: Derek Beevor, managing director at RoadTech Computers, warns that operators of mixed brand truck fleets may have problems with the vehicle makers' kit. "It's not often compatible between makes, so a multi-make fleet may have difficulty getting consistent data across all its vehicles." That's why many operators use independent systems such as his.

Spoilt for choice

This is a serious growth area, with more systems designed to monitor driver behaviour coming onto the market, and more insurers and driver training firms keen to differentiate themselves in what is fast becoming a ferociously competitive market.

US-based DriveCam's fleet management services – which in the US serve more than 400,000 drivers across 500 fleets – is due to open a European office in London this spring, aiming at commercial fleets. It claims return on investment "after just six months" and 15 years' experience. Meanwhile, Aviva launched a smart phone app for android phones last autumn and plans an iPhone version soon. Both will record driving style to calculate insurance discounts.

TomTom, which claims over 60 million users worldwide, now measures acceleration, braking and cornering. It also uses digital mapping from subsidiary Tele Atlas and its systems underpin many of the 'black box' insurance schemes.

It's all about stopping men (and women) behaving badly. For fleet operators, the only remaining issues are probably which system to choose and who to engage for driver training. For the industry, however, other concerns might be who decides what is good, bad or average driving, and maintains consistency?

Why? Because to date there are no standards. We talked to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, figuring that if anyone knew about standards it would. It didn't. For example, drivers need to stick to speed limits, but, as Duncan Vernon of RoSPA (the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents) points out, while Ordnance Survey supplies data to virtually all sat nav firms, it doesn't collect speed limit information. "There is no national map of speed limits and the government needs to do more work on digital mapping," he says. 

