



New workshop management systems are claiming to boost technicians' performance and efficiency, not least through their automated communications. John Challen finds out whether they are worth the price

Go wireless

Systems developers have lately been singing the praises of cloud-based systems – which enable managers to order and track parts on the internet, and replace phone calls and paper with emails, text messages and electronic files – all without worrying about IT. The clear benefit: improving productivity for operators, managers and technicians alike.

Does it stack up? One recent example concerns the integration of r2c Online – a compliance, quoting, job authorisation and invoicing system – with Isotrak's vehicle telematics and tracking technology. r2c is a web-based tool that claims to maximise efficiency by connecting vehicle manufacturers, dealers and repairers with workshops and fleet operators. As a result of its tie-up with Isotrak, managing all aspects of operator compliance, as well as controlling maintenance and repair costs, can now be done in one place.

Alan Gunner, Isotrak's sales and marketing director, believes that linking the products will help operators improve their fleets' maintenance and operations. "r2c is a de facto standard for operators of vehicles and related assets that are serious about VOSA and regulatory compliance," he asserts. "Interfacing with Isotrak provides telematics

intelligence direct to r2c, enabling operators to consistently meet service level agreements and maximise the availability of their fleet assets."

The functionality provided by r2c has recently been updated to include electronic driver pre-use check software that can be employed on mobile devices or integrated with r2c's online service network, which controls the defect management lifecycle. Gunner reveals that the system provides a complete audit trail for each defect, with date, time and ID stamps, and a record of actions taken.

Sounds impressive? Well ahead of the curve is Bullwell Trailer Solutions, which was an early adopter of wireless communications, introducing handheld devices into its workshops six years ago. Helped by a £250,000 investment, the maintenance provider now boasts a full complement of Motorola ES400 PDAs for its technicians, who use them to record work, as well as to calculate costs, raise invoices etc at the point of use.

Its PDAs were built in association with software supplier Iris and mobile data provider Cognito. Garry Bulley, managing director of Bullwell Trailer Solutions, says their development was part of a much-needed overhaul of his management systems. "It was very important that we found a solution that worked both in the workshop and for our mobile engineers, while

also covering from MOT inspections and tests to breakdown and repairs,” he explains.

“PDA information can be seen by every Bullwell employee, meaning there is no need to print off documents for other staff members. Additionally, it means records are stored digitally – so no more having to trawl through filing cupboards for information on past jobs. This allows all activity to be streamlined and reduces administration, as the engineers themselves are able to book customers into the workshop and manage progress.”

Keeping clients content

Meanwhile, at MAN's service network, many workshop functions are still based around human interactions, such as phone calls to remind operators of service dates and times, or progress updates for vehicles in the workshop. But John Davies, head of UK service at MAN, reveals that things are changing.

“We already communicate by text and email, and have our e-workshop – a system where a technician inspects a vehicle and loads an electronic inspection sheet to a virtual location, where the operator can see it,” he explains. “That system can be set up to email individuals at specific times and also allows customers to send us emails to make bookings. It also applies to inspections and service work, tachograph calibrations, LOLER [Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations] tests or anything for any part of the vehicle.”

However, already armed with an online workshop menu pricing system, MAN's plan is next to roll out functionality to include scheduling of workshop appointments, says Davies. “If an operator had a truck and they knew it needed a set of front brake pads, then, with their username and password, they could sign in to menu pricing, see how much the pads would cost, how many hours it would take – and book it in, 24/7,” he explains.

MAN's scheduling system is already being used by the dealer network and performing well, says Davies. “We had a target time of generating an email quote in 30 seconds, but, in reality, it is more like 10–15 seconds,” he states, adding that the service should be available to customers soon.

Bodyshop solutions

As well as covering servicing and routine maintenance, workshop management systems are also proving their worth in the body repair market, with, for example, Ross Gordon Commercial Bodyworks benefiting from a bespoke program.

“We'd been searching for an accident management system designed solely for commercial vehicle bodyshops,” explains commercial sales director Patrick Farbrace. “But all the people we met provided cloud- and server-based systems that were designed with car-derived products in mind. Because commercial vehicles are more diverse, we




needed a system that could integrate tracking and management of repairs with ordering parts, whether for a truck, trailer or 7.5-tonne van.”

Farbrace was put in touch with Keynote, an automotive sector software house that creates “programs that improve the customer experience”. The result was a cloud-based vehicle inspection system dedicated to his business – the first of its kind in the CV world, he says. “We gave Keynote a wish list and it designed the system to our specification, adding in options they thought would be beneficial to us,” he explains.

“We can now store the details of trailer manufacturers, as well as all of the tractor unit companies. So we have all parts options listed for Lawrence David, Montracon, Schmitz, Gray & Adams and Krone,” continues Farbrace. “Once we have built up a history, we will be able to replicate what is available on the passenger car side.” And, following an initial trial, that system has now been rolled out, with Farbrace insisting that customers are benefiting from extra efficiencies. “We can now give them instant updates on the status of their vehicles via SMS or email,” he confirms.

More good news for his clients is that they won't see bills increasing. “We believe the cost of the system will be absorbed by us, because ... it will save us time previously spent on management and administration,” explains Farbrace.

Keynote's Steve Edwards confirms that the goal now is to move the system beyond the bodyshop. “The natural extension is into the workshop bay,” he states. “Software companies haven't developed management tools for workshops that deal with fleet or leasing services, for example.” 

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