

Fleet management tools and software

Pencil to telematics – fleet tool history



Martyn MOORE

Computers control our lives, why should fleets be any different? Your job is to help keep a workforce mobile and motivated: the right cars on the road, well-maintained, driven by the right people to the right places at the right time. Data analysed by software programmes can help you do all that easier, cheaper and cleaner. How did we ever manage without it?

“The world in 2009 is all about efficiency and you can’t have that without measuring and reporting.”

Nowadays, every aspect of fleet management is supported by software tools, and telematics make the critical link from office systems to vehicles working in the field.

Back in the old days a fleet manager could be seen wandering around the company car park with

a clipboard and a tyre gauge, muttering about the dangers of carrying live animals in your car.

Their desks were buckling under the strain of mounds of paperwork that never contained the document the police had just asked for. A pan-European fleet would have a broken desk for each country it operated in and the man responsible (it was always a man) had a nervous twitch. He could get a BMW with leather seats but it would take four months and it would be lime green. The world of the fleet operator

today is very different. Today the person responsible for the fleet is a finance wizard and a systems analyst. There’s at least a 50:50 chance that it will be a woman and she will be able to generate a CO₂ graph for the fleet in Poland from her laptop in Lisbon. OK, the odd lime green BMW might still sneak through, but online remarketing will find a buyer for it in Italy in four years’ time. How is all this possible?



Staying connected

Every aspect of management is supported by software tools, from invitations to tender, specifying and ordering cars, maintaining service, driver and incident records, pursuing environmental and financial efficiencies right through to de-fleet and remarketing.

Improved database compatibility means that systems talk to each other and moving between providers is not a nightmare.

Companies like epyx offer a suite of compatible products. Fimasys can make systems work with your other internal systems, or, like NorthgateArinso, can develop business systems to support your entire company.

Telematics, using a black box or a smart navigation system, make that critical link from your office systems to vehicles working in the field.

Computers and software

Initially, it wasn't very special software. All it had to do was store and retrieve lists of information. Spreadsheet programs like Microsoft's Excel soon found their place in fleet management with their ability to slice, dice, re-order and export numbers. It became much easier to see when a car was last serviced and how much it cost.

The arrival of document scanning meant that those creaking desks and bulging cabinets could be replaced by a golf game and a houseplant. The copy of your worst driver's licence was now a terrifying PDF file just like the one held by Interpol.

Cars could be ordered online by the driver and the system would laugh and tell him he can't afford those alloy wheels. Then just as fleet managers were starting to wonder if they'd have a job in three years' time, somebody invented global warming. And the credit crunch.

Fleet management software is an integral part of the operation of any big, successful business. If you have more than ten vehicles and you are a responsible company, environment and cost-conscious, you will be looking at the state of your fleet on a computer screen. If you lease those cars, somebody else will be looking at it too. The world in 2009 is all about efficiency and you can't have that without measuring and reporting.

How good it really is

The website of FleetVision tells you the company is producing tools directly concerned with the day-to-day management of car fleets. Hans Damen is a managing partner based in Belgium. Hans explains what his company's fleet tools are

doing for operators: "We provide insights into the flexible management of the fleet while capturing all related costs (TCO) and the ability to benchmark both fixed and variable costs between cost centres, branches and countries."

Hans is proud of his tools' user-interface. "Managing a multi-country, multi-company fleet requires an easy-to-access, high level overview," he says. "Our dashboards are just like the ones in a car. If there is nothing flashing or any dials in the red, then you are OK and can focus on the road ahead.

"Whether you are driving policy changes, OEM restrictions or pushing for a reduced CO₂ footprint, our dashboards will tell the story in less than a minute – based on your target, your baselines and your timelines."

The biggest challenge has been getting internal and external systems to talk to each other. Without automated import and export of data, the risk of errors is increased and a manual transfer process is clumsy and time-consuming. There are companies that can help with this, either by building bespoke systems or creating intermediate solutions to aid inter-dependency and compatibility.

Grégoire Evrain is sales engineer at French business systems developer Fimasys. He is excited by the way his company is bringing together separate applications. "Inside one software system we can bring together procedures and processes which may currently be spread over separate systems and manual

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processes," says Grégoire. "This reduces the number of potential sources of data distortions or mistakes."

About the future

Predicting the future in the world of technology is always exciting. Who would have predicted ten years ago that we would be able to carry around the best work of Angelina Jolie and Lady Gaga in our pockets?

TomTom WORK believes that in future all cars will be connected to the office. "Systems will become smarter," says vice-president sales Michael Geffroy, whose company looks at the benefits of managing the workforce through the fleet. "Mainly because of the expanding real-time information from the fleet and the combination with location based type of services, such as TomTom HD Traffic. Productivity and service can be increased, costs can be reduced by knowing where the workforce is."

Companies like CFC and epyx are moving towards 'cloud computing' and software-as-a-service (SaaS). Neville Briggs, managing director of CFC Solutions says:

"The advantages of SaaS are numerous – the upfront cost of adopting a system is minimised, the cost of buying and using the system is easy to understand, users always have access to the latest version of the software because it is hosted by the provider and systems can be easily scaled up or down as the fleet grows or shrinks." Ken Trinder, head of business development at epyx, developer of the successful 1Link products, has a similar view. "All our e-commerce systems are charged per transaction and are available online through any web browser," he says. "Fleets like this approach because it makes systems easy to adopt and because our charging model is transparent and linked directly to usage."

In ten years the fleet operator following cars on a spreadsheet and buying software on a disc will look as outdated as the grumpy guy with the clipboard and tyre gauge. ■

