



RISK BULLETIN

Office On Wheels: The Benefits Of Mobile Communication Systems



With the skyrocketing costs of fuel, labor, and vehicle maintenance, transportation companies need an edge to reduce expenses and stay competitive. More fleet managers are turning to mobile

communication systems to maintain constant contact with drivers and transmit important data concerning vehicle diagnostics or operations. The systems can be quite expensive so you should understand their capabilities and your needs before purchasing a system.

IMPROVED DRIVER COMMUNICATIONS

The simplest system of communication available to fleets is the cell phone. While relatively inexpensive and easy to use, it is invaluable when drivers must be contacted quickly to relay a change in delivery instructions or other vital information. Cell phones are also a good choice for drivers or field workers who must spend long periods out of their vehicles. The drawback of cell phones is that they cannot be used if they are shut off, lost, stolen, or if the driver is injured or incapacitated. Cell phones also do not transmit information on the truck's condition or its where-

abouts. For security reasons, some fleets are purchasing cell or Nextel radio phones with built-in Global Positioning Systems (GPS). The GPS can relay the longitude and latitude of its position, which in turn will help authorities locate the driver and the truck.

SMART TRUCKS

Since cell or radio phones typically stay with the driver, the next step up in continuous connectivity is in-cab electronics that convert the truck into a real-time communication center that is rarely out of contact with dispatch. Lower end, in-cab GPS systems allow dispatch to track data such as location, direction of travel, and speed. This is useful to monitor driver behavior and assist in DOT hours of service compliance. Fleet managers also indicate GPS improves productivity and driver performance, significantly reduces speeding events, and eliminates disagreements concerning actual time billed and customer perceptions.

For large fleets with bigger budgets, cellular modems or custom fleet management systems connected to the vehicle's electronic systems can collect and automatically transmit a variety of information to a mainframe computer located in your terminal. Data can include diagnostics, engine use, idle time, speed, odometer readings, and numerous other reports that help manage the fleet and the drivers.

SAFETY

Safety is an important consideration. Studies show that any type of distraction increases driver

reaction time and decreases driving performance, increasing the likelihood of accidents. Drivers talking on cell phones have been compared to alcohol-impaired drivers. These in-cab distractions can be detrimental to a fleet safety program if used while operating the vehicle, and need to be addressed through company rules and policies. The safety of the driver and other drivers on the road must take precedence, so some common sense rules are appropriate. Restrict use of communication to safe times, such as when the driver is on break or the vehicle is being unloaded. Drivers should never read or enter numbers and coordinates into electronic devices while driving. Fleet management systems can be programmed so that they will not send or receive text messages unless a truck is parked, removing such temptations. Instruct drivers and dispatchers to limit communications to off-peak traffic times, and drivers should not use electronic devices during other hazardous driving conditions such as inclement weather or reduced visibility in fog or night driving. If a driver receives a text message or cell phone call, they should be instructed to respond to it when the vehicle is parked at a safe location.

COSTS VS. SAVINGS

Such communication systems can run as high as \$6,000 per truck, so management must carefully consider what information or functions are most valuable to their operation and then focus on the hardware and software that best meets their

needs. Decide first if you want to improve productivity and customer service, reduce operating costs, better manage your personnel, track vehicle reliability and service needs, or some combination of these. To limit costs, avoid transmitting more data than you will actually use, and consider whether costlier, real time transmissions are really necessary. Most transmission services charge "air time" just like a cell phone service, and offer multiple services that might sound appealing but may not be valuable in meeting your specific goals. Like cell phones, mobile communication hardware and software costs are dropping as technology continues to improve. But paying for something you don't really need is never a savings.

BENEFITS

A well-chosen system can bring rapid returns on investment if you keep your goals in mind. Mobile communication systems can improve driver and cargo security, enable dispatch to accurately inform customers of delivery time, predict a mechanical failure before it happens, help maintain DOT records, and streamline dispatching. Balance the costs with improved efficiency and reliability and maybe your office on wheels can help you edge out the competition.

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