

Potency of new technologies as management tools

The sharp increase in the use of telematics, combined with the latest fuel-card information technology, shows that most fleet managers acknowledge the potency of the new technologies as management tools.



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But how many are actually putting the torrents of data that rush back from the field to optimal use?

"Just a few years ago the challenge was to get ever more detailed, real-time information from fleet vehicles to head office," says Dr David Molapo, head of Standard Bank Fleet Management. "Now the challenge is to extract and use only the essential information without wasting time."

When they get it right, the results can be dramatic. A good example is Gavin Biggs, owner of a paint retail chain, City Paint & Tools in the Eastern Cape. As owner-director, one of Biggs' many roles is managing his fleet of almost 40 vehicles.

Three years ago, he started using management reports generated from his fleet's use of Standard Bank's Fleet Cards. At the same time, he introduced GPS tracking units in his vehicles that not only measured position, but also speed. Together, the two systems generate torrents of data, but Biggs spends no more than 20 minutes per week on it, and has managed to reduce his maintenance and fuel expenditure by 20%, translating to between R20,000 and R30,000 per month.

Efficient use of data

The secret to Biggs' efficient use of the data is exception management. "I only dive into a report if it is flagged as an exception. I don't get fixated on the data," he says. For example, from Standard Bank Fleet Management's website he draws three reports: top ten travellers, bottom ten travellers and heavy footed drivers.

The top ten travellers' category lists the vehicles that did the most travelling during the preceding week and is checked for signs of unauthorised private use. If necessary, the movement of a suspected abuser can be cross-checked against the GPS tracks recorded through the telematics system.

The bottom ten travellers are checked for signs of slacking, for example, salespeople who are not doing their rounds diligently.

Biggs acknowledges that in between the top and the bottom ten there may be many inefficiencies and abuses, but combing the entire data set for anomalies is simply not worth the while. Besides, curbing the extremes also influences the behaviour of the average driver.

Crucial report

Another crucial report that he draws is a list of heavy footed drivers; those vehicles that have used more fuel per kilometre than the national average for each particular model and make. The national averages against which each vehicle is measured are aggregated from the thousands of vehicles that use Standard Bank Fleet Cards throughout South Africa.

Biggs says above average fuel consumption may be the result of bad driving. Again, this can be cross-checked with reports from the tracking system which flags incidents of harsh acceleration and braking, speeding and sudden swerving. Regular feedback to drivers has led to a sharp drop in accidents.

By showing these results to his insurance company, he has managed to negotiate a reduction in premiums, which goes some way towards covering the monthly costs of the telematics system.

Heavy fuel use can also be the result of fuel pilfering. For example, the Standard Bank report has helped Biggs uncover the actions of a driver who filled up a jerry can for his boat every time he filled up his vehicle.

Mechanical faults

Lastly, heavy fuel consumption could also be the first signal of a nascent mechanical fault. Biggs reckons he saves thousands of rands in maintenance bills through this form of early detection.

Even though he has managed to contain his engagement with his fleet monitoring system to about 20 minutes per week, Biggs acknowledges that it hasn't always been this easy. In the beginning, before the drivers realised that every move they made was traceable, the exceptions flagged by the system were many.

As the message filtered through, however, driving behaviour changed and costs started to fall sharply, as well as the time it took the fleet manager to keep his finger on the pulse.

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