

The uninitiated in our industry regard best practice guides as gospel, because they have been published by a government-supported body. However, the view from more experienced transport engineers is that you can never arrive at best practice, because there is always a new management system or technological advance bound to take you further. Also, you are where you are.

For example, maintenance planning is best done on a spreadsheet. But, if the information remains in a computer and people forget to print it out and put it on the wall, it is effectively lost. Planning, then, would be best practice, but expediting maintenance? Certainly not.

Similarly, where technicians use web-based inspection reporting, it is only useful, if managers at the operator's office get it quickly – and read it. Operators are obliged to know the outcome of an inspection – is the truck safe or not? – before they can put a vehicle back into use. How can that work for a truck that goes in for inspection on Sunday at midnight, is inspected at 5.00am and goes back on the road, long before the inspection report even enters a system?

Another point: as an operator, you are required to show that someone competent has inspected your vehicle – and realistically that means relying on the expertise of your contractor. But, if you receive a report later that tells you, "Cut tyre: Report", who do you report that to? Where it reads, "Oil leak: Report", how severe is the oil leak? Is it possible that, by the time you get the report off the system on Friday, your driver has already seized an engine?

More important than supposed best practice, fleet engineers need to make sure that their systems suit their own operations. If you work with faxed information, then you need a system that involves someone at the contractor's office printing off the job sheet as soon as a truck inspection is complete and faxing it to your traffic office – where someone then reads it and confirms issues that need addressing or defects outstanding. Only when repair action is agreed by all parties, and everything is signed off, should you put the vehicle back to use.

A procedure is only best practice, if you pick out the best parts out of it and fit them with your operation.

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Transport Engineer's regular 'IRTE to IRTE' members' column: focusing on the issues, challenges and concerns that matter to transport engineers and fleet managers