



Bullwell Trailer Solutions is one among many harnessing digital systems to improve servicing

With so many workshops still wrestling with paper, fax and spreadsheets, Brian Tingham reviews the experiences of organisations that have moved into the digital age

If you're one of the macho workshop managers still working the old way – with paper, fax, spreadsheets and planning boards – but you're tired of errors, queries, delays and the sheer cost of your admin, you may want to think about some of your peers' experiences with digital systems. Not just any DMS (dealer management system), but those designed for the facts of life in the commercial vehicle sector.

Take Keith Sims, group operations director with MAN trucks dealer HRVS, who moved over to an Infotec Odyssey DMS (not to be confused with the Voyager parts price comparison system, also from Infotec, run by DAF dealers and others), having assisted in its development just under three years ago. His system now handles workshop operations across all sites, including its ATF (Authorised Test Facility) MOT test lanes.

That means it looks after bookings, vehicle history and job monitoring, as well as customer databases and parts databases, but also technician time and attendance, sickness, holidays, training, productivity etc – all paperless. And it handles customers' fleet management, in terms of PMIs (pre MOT inspections), MOTs etc, providing the operators' fleet managers with all the information they need online.

For him, the admin savings were difficult to measure, because, as he puts it, the earlier system was so basic. But when it comes to efficiency, it's a very different story. "Productivity is the big thing," he says. "It's improved tremendously – at least 25%.

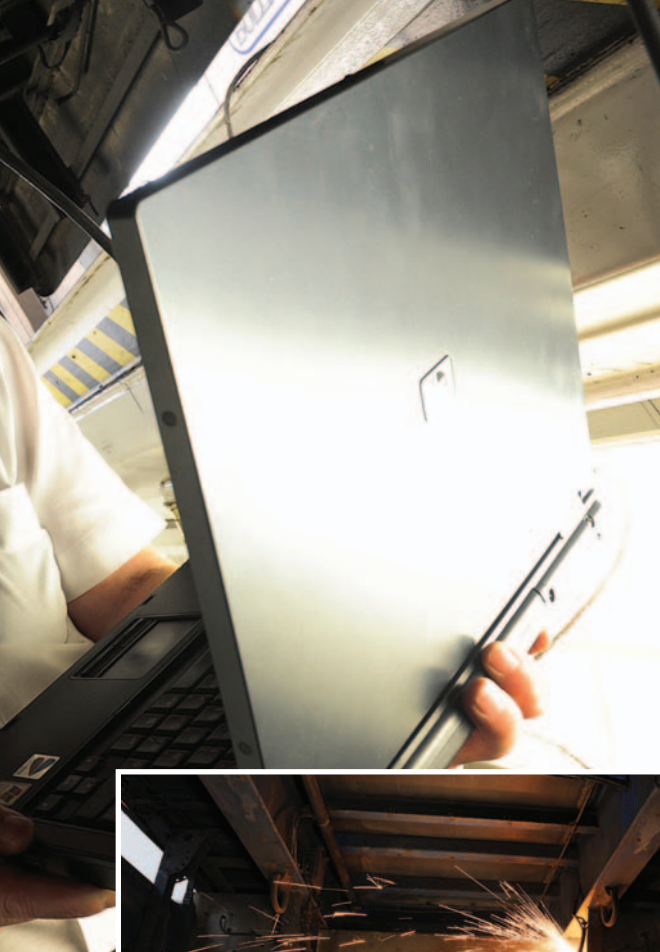
Partly that's because we now have a management tool to measure it with and do something about it. But the system is also so slick and automatic, providing all the information on-screen. For example, we can see time and parts being booked to customers and jobs, set against the standards – which also means nothing is missed and we charge accurately, at agreed rates for the work done."

Informed customers

It's a similar story at Iveco dealer North East Truck & Van, which went for Fdtek's R2c Online web-based system, originally developed with Iveco – and long since the truck manufacturer's preferred DMS for its dealer network Europe-wide. North East managing director Sandy McDonald (formerly chairman of the Iveco dealer association) says introducing the system stripped out the bureaucracy from his haulage R&M operations and improved adherence to procedures among technicians.

"It also helped build our relationships with customers, through aspects such as defect history and analysis, but also communications. It automatically keeps our teams and our customers' fleet managers in touch on everything from scheduling vehicles into the shop to tracking vehicle history and work."

And it's not just dealers that are using modern systems. Kettering-based transport and logistics firm Knights of Old also joined the R2C Online 'compliance network', driven by a requirement to



most valuable benefits of his system is that “everything is in one place”, meaning that each of the firm’s 126 users across its five sites works from the same management and operational information. He also explains that all technicians use barcodes to scan on and off work and jobs, with the system providing job cards, and date and time stamps. As a result, supervisors and managers are kept aware of who is doing what and any jobs running over time. Equally, the system can provide productivity and efficiency reports by technician, by job type, vehicle type, customer etc.

“At the top level, it’s fantastic for franchises, because auditors can instantly see we have a robust system in place,” says Sims. “But, from a day-to-day management perspective, we can also work more efficiently. For example, we can see all regional sites’ available capacity, as well as the bottlenecks, both in the workshops and the test lanes, on a ‘dashboard’ system. That lets us move staff around, if we need to – either to reduce overtime or to keep VOR [vehicle off road] times to a minimum.”

Then, at the workshop level, one of the displays in each HRVS service office shows what every technician is working on, flagged in red or green – the former meaning jobs are slipping beyond standard times, enabling supervisors to go and find out why. “We share recorded performance information with our technicians, but



improve its service scheduling, vehicle checks, equipment performance monitoring and compliance procedures with third-party repairers. Like most transport operations, Knights of Old had been using paper and spreadsheets that had to be manually updated, with everything that means, in terms of delays, errors and cost.

Trucks and ancillaries

Fleet administrator Glenn Kitchen explains that the company was invited to use R2C Online as one of Truck East Wellingborough’s customers, which was then trialling the system. “We have already loaded all our commercial fleet details, including trailers, onto R2C, and are scheduling our inspections and MOTs,” reports Kitchen. “Now we are adding our ancillary equipment, such as tail lifts, cab phones, satellite tracking and our car fleet...”

“Apart from real-time access to all equipment records – useful for VOSA inspections – we now have electronic service sheets and real time job status updates provided by our supplier partners, who are also on the platform. This avoids delays and improves accuracy.”

HRVS’s Sims makes the point that one of the

also use it to look at historical issues, say, with a vehicle. Similarly, with parts we can do complete checks on anything fitted in the last 12 months.”

And Sims argues that there are also benefits for operators’ fleet managers. “Customers can have a user name and password, and look at our web portal. They can see the progress of their vehicles through the workshop, whether they’re awaiting parts etc. Or we can email them and copy in regional engineers, if they’re involved. Also, they can help themselves with downtime planning through our system. And it lets them review what they’re spending by vehicle, against expected norms, and flags up outliers, such as higher than expected expenditure on brakes.”

Sounding good? Back to Knights of Old, and, from the operator’s side of the fence, the plan is not only to improve efficiencies by booking jobs (vehicles and ancillaries) online and moving to electronic records, but also to use the new system to pass all defects to its suppliers electronically. Also, daily driver checks will be completed via an R2C app installed on cab phones and subsequently booked into the workshop through the online system.

“R2C Online gives us end-to-end visibility on all

Gary Bulley:
“With this system, I know instantly what all my workshop and mobile technicians are doing. I can see utilisation, efficiency and productivity against standard times or job times”



jobs,” states Kitchen. “This goes a long way to helping to ensure compliance... It will also help us run our fleet to the standards that provide our customers with the service they require.”

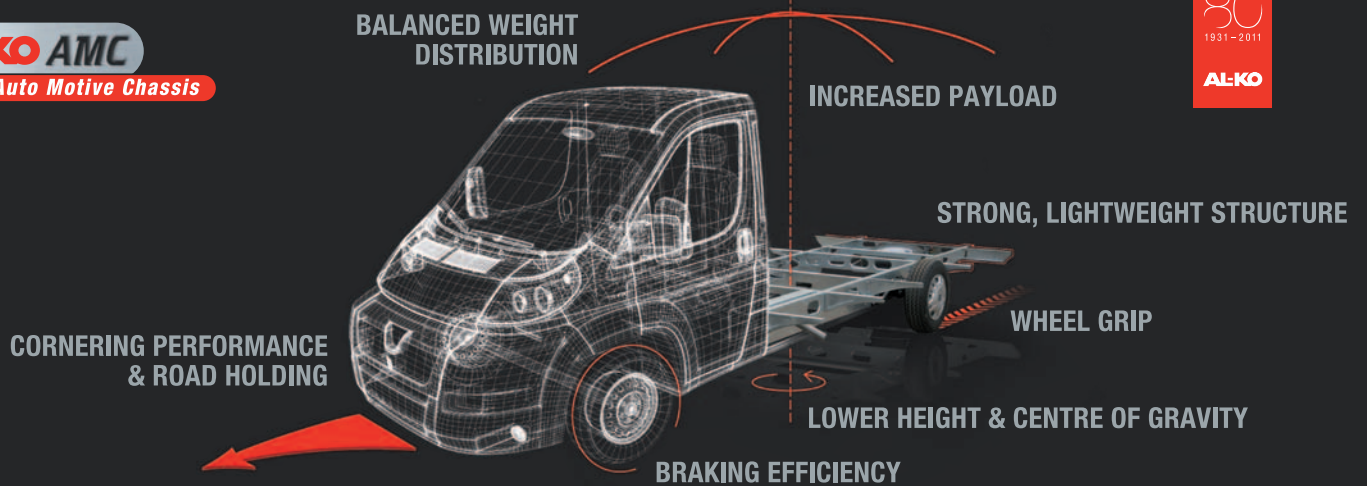
But the last word goes to trailer maintenance specialist Bullwell Trailer Solutions’ managing director Gary Bulley, who installed an Iris DMS (originally Service Director) when he acquired the company six years ago. “With this system, I know instantly what all my workshop and mobile technicians are doing. I can see utilisation, efficiency and productivity against standard times or job times,” he says.

“That’s important, because it’s how I run this business. But the system also tells me about technicians’ capabilities and their motivation. For example, some people might show tremendous productivity, but leave a whole raft of problems in their wake – which helps us decide what training is needed. On the other hand, the system shows me which mobile technicians are accepting jobs at 3am. And I can see what customer satisfaction looks like.”

Bulley, too, likes the fact that the system fires up each vehicle’s service history before starting a job – meaning that, if on a previous inspection the brakes were more than 80% worn, the technician knows what to do – and his PDA is automatically populated. He also rates points such as: job cards create themselves; inspection sheets are all electronic, with vehicle details populated from the database; technicians have to follow prescribed processes; and defect lists are produced automatically, added to the job card and invoiced, again automatically.

And the bottom line: “I reckon productivity has improved more than 33%, net profitability is up 7%, administration is down from 10 to three people, and the system has accommodated a 25% growth in the business, moving up from 39 engineers to 55.” **TE**

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