Managing Your Fleet with Enhanced Communications

Thanks to advances in communication and telematics technology, fleet managers have more tools than ever at their disposal to monitor, communicate with, and protect their drivers.

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A fleet manager's job does not end at just knowing where the vehicle is located (Read 5 Steps to Optimizing Fleet Operations). Two-way communications between drivers and dispatchers is the next critical step in ensuring efficient transportation of goods or timely passenger pickups. Fleet managers need to understand how their drivers are performing on the road, predict if weather conditions could necessitate route changes, respond quickly to any emergency situations that a driver may encounter, and be ready for the unexpected. They also need to know that their drivers are operating vehicles at safe speeds without sudden stops – measures that can lead to lower insurance premiums with the help of a timely reminder. While telematics is useful in tracking the fleet's assets, it can do so much more, including keeping in constant touch with drivers.

Today's dispatcher provides an additional set of eyes and ears to the driver. Their activity list includes items such as route planning, order processing, performance management and help desk functions. But a dispatcher's work is most effective when he or she gets timely feedback from his or her crew. Take the case of a driver who reports back that closed roads, accidents, or some other route delay will impede a timely pickup. Having this information, a dispatcher can make alternate arrangements to keep the mission on schedule.

With the right combination of software and hardware, fleets can create a zone of defense that keeps fleet drivers and those they share the road with safe and on track in reaching their destinations. With timely feedback, the driver can correct the course of action and avoid factors that could negatively impact the mission such as traffic, driver behavior, vehicle condition, etc. This involves a combination of the right communication tools, the right interior and exterior safety devices, and a communicative and conscientious driver behind the wheel.

An Overview of Today's Fleet Communication Tools

For fleets today, there are three main types of communication tools that can optimize communication, including enhanced push-to-talk, group messaging/ broadcast calling, and dispatching.

Enhanced Push-to-Talk (EPTT)

EPTT offers fleets instant, one-touch, FIPS 140-2 secure group communication between dispatchers and those in the field and on the road through the use of numerous devices, including cell phones. Fleet managers can communicate with drivers on a one-to-one basis or in large groups of several hundred, and the service can be used with traditional two-way radio systems. Some fleets that might benefit from EPTT include but are not limited to:

- **Towing Services** – Reach out to the tow driver immediately as the towing request comes in and confirm ETA while customer on line.

- **Construction Services** – Check in with field workers with one-click communication or conference in multiple workers at the same time.
- **Delivery/Service Technicians** – Contact any technician or a driver on the road, confirm their status or communicate urgent jobs.

EPTT systems take driver safety into account and can be operated with a hands-free option within the cab allowing them to receive communications safely without the need to activate the device. EPTT also adds a layer of efficiency by offering an instant form of voice communications between dispatchers and fleet drivers. This is important in emergency situations, when navigation changes need to be immediately communicated, or if there is an accident on the road ahead. For drivers, supplementing the system with a Bluetooth PTT button attached to the steering wheel makes answering those communications faster and safer. EPTT can be integrated into other fleet management solutions without the need for a separate login, allowing agencies to initiate EPTT sessions from their fleet solution portal.

Group Messaging/Broadcast Calling

Sometimes making a call to get critical information out to the fleet isn't as efficient as it needs it to be. Instructions in emergency situations, route changes, or weather updates can often be more effective when communicated through group messaging. This gives fleets the ability to deliver notifications, alerts, and critical communications to mobile workers via text messaging to individuals and groups as large as 20,000. A dispatcher can send longer messages than traditional text message services, and the service also sends delivery confirmations, as well as ensuring privacy through secure messaging. In the same vein, broadcast calling allows the dispatcher to employ one-way communication with a large group at the same time.

Integrated Dispatching

Fleet managers can select a solution that already integrates with EPTT into the fleet solution. Alternatively, with just a laptop or desktop computer, fleet managers can oversee their workforce through an integrated dispatch console, which allows them to contact, track, dispatch, and supervise their teams. Multiple groups can be monitored at once to improve efficiency and productivity, communicate instantly with the anyone – or any group – in the field, increase the fleet's workflow through the use of maps, alerts, and logs, and keep calls and dispatches on track and ahead of any changes on the road or along the route. The dispatcher can also access visual location information on the fleet, audio recordings of any calls, and interrupt certain calls during emergency situations.

While audio communication can assist in more ways than many fleets have considered, video is emerging as an additional layer of safety, accountability, and reinforcement that can save fleets time, money, and legal headaches. While some industry experts believe the current penetration of video recorder-based systems is "superficial at best," the

increase in the monitoring and analytical capabilities of these systems will likely see greater acceptance and integration.[1]

While some drivers raise concerns of "Big Brother" watching their every move, some further education on the technology can allay many of the unfounded fears. In almost every instance, a video-monitored driver is a safer driver. While most of the systems are always "on," video footage is only permanently recorded when there is an "event," which could be a crash, an instance of hard braking or acceleration, or an unexpected lane change. The video is then downloaded, reviewed, and discussed with the driver if the fleet manager sees a behavior that needs to be corrected.

Video systems help reduce accident costs by preventing them from ever occurring. But when a crash does happen that is not the fault of the company driver, these systems really prove their worth. Camera footage is admissible in court, giving proof of no wrongdoing in instances where another driver tries to blame their risky driving behavior on one of the fleet's drivers. The camera systems typically include front-facing and in-cab cameras, providing a full picture on the cause and results of an accident.

Drivers can be active participants in using video monitoring. One forward and driver facing system allows the driver to push a button on the steering column, effectively bookmarking a piece of video that the driver feels needs to be reviewed, simplifying the review process by eliminating the need to review all of the raw video, just the section that the driver has flagged.

Navigating Through Unexpected Conditions

Road conditions are ever-changing and fleets need to be prepared. Weather, such as a lake-effect snowstorm, or an accident, such as an overturned vehicle, can affect the efficiency and safety of a driver. Drivers need the most up-to-date information to help them navigate through any conditions they might come upon on the roadways. It is in these situations that fleet managers can turn to their toolbox of communications tools to support and communicate with drivers when road conditions change and they need to reroute or warn drivers of changing road or route conditions.

Smartphones can be set to give dispatchers and managers updated road conditions, such as real-time information on accidents or changing weather patterns. For example, if the dispatch center receives a tornado warning from the weather service, a simple scan of the telematics dashboard can identify which drivers are currently in the affected area, and allow dispatch to reach out with messaging via a telematics onboard device or with a group call over an EPTT system.

This kind of monitoring and communication can be extremely helpful for police, fire, and medical response teams when responding to disasters, severe accidents, or any

National Park Service

When you're charged with preserving the natural resources of America, there is no wiggle room for mistakes or missteps. This is one of the main reasons why communication is so important to the U.S. National Park Service. It might be a routine report of a downed tree on one of the park roads, or the beginnings of a serious brush fire that could quickly require response from not only other rangers but local fire and law enforcement as well.

In these types of situations, it helps to have open lines of communication enable by such services as enhanced push-to-talk (EPTT), as well as asset tracking and geofencing capabilities. With a simple push of a button, the central ranger station can let an entire park full of rangers know when there is a situation that needs immediate attention to both preserve the park and its flora and fauna but visitors and campers as well.

A quick glance at the telematics dashboard gives the current location of all of ranger resources, allowing leadership to quickly dispatch the closest units to the fire or other emergency situation. And if there are weather conditions that drivers need to be aware of, messaging alerts on road conditions and reported areas where roads have iced over or washed out can be sent en masse.

other related emergency situation. Teams can be contacted immediately and in unison, allowing dispatch to give orders on the type, location, and cause of the emergency, as well as any precautionary information.

For utility fleets for instance, asset tracking and geofencing can also help dispatch determine at a glance which teams are closest to a downed power line to reduce response time.

There are other situations in which advanced communication technology can assist in protecting assets from theft or damage. According to a 2016 study, cargo theft increased 7% in 2015, totaling more than $23.7 million in cargo stolen in the third quarter alone.[2] And according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, vehicle thefts were up 3.1% in 2015 over the previous year, totaling 707,758 nationwide and costing more than $4.9 billion in losses.[3] This is where a reliable telematics system can not only save the day, but save thousands for the fleet. With some systems, any time the vehicle is tampered with – for example, moving an asset without powering the vehicle up – an alert is sent to dispatch, communicating the vehicle location and status.

Because of advances in communication and telematics technology, the ability to communicate with drivers has reached levels only dreamed of by sci-fi writers. The evolution of communications technology now allows fleet managers not only to speak with drivers, but communicate with and monitor the vehicle itself. Now, more than ever, fleets need to understand how they can take full advantage of these communication tools and optimize contact with their drivers and their vehicles.

By first defining their communication and telematics needs, fleet managers are able to find the best solutions that reduce risk, increase safety, and improve productivity. Whether the answer is one or multiple technology solutions, finding a provider that can initially supplement and continually support these emerging and evolving technologies becomes the most important goal when deciding what solutions will best fulfill the fleet's needs.

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[1]"Video-Based Safety Systems: Worth A Closer Look?" www.truckinginfo.com. January 2017. Retrieved March 19, 2017. http://www.truckinginfo.com/channel/safety-compliance/article/story/2017/01/with-video-bases-safety-systems-seeing-is-believing.aspx

[2]"Truck Cargo Theft Figures Mixed, Overall Value of Heists Falls." www.truckinginfo.com. November 2016. Retrieved March 19, 2017. http://www.truckinginfo.com/channel/fleet-management/news/story/2016/11/truck-cargo-thefts-figures-mixed-overall-value-of-heists-falls.aspx

[3]"Fleet Vehicles Attractive Target for Thieves." www.automotive-fleet.com. November 2016. Retrieved March 19, 2017. http://www.automotive-fleet.com/channel/safety-accident-management/news/story/2016/11/fleet-vehicles-attractive-target-for-thieves.aspx

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