Connecting the little guys

BigRoad shares its big vision for bringing telematics to smaller carriers

Today's telematics solutions – like GPS tracking, voice/data communications, and fleet management systems – can help fleet managers squeeze every efficiency out of operations. But there's a huge gap between what's available for use and what's actually in use, according to Kelly Frey, who heads BigRoad, a new entrant in the mobile communications market bent on significantly reducing that gap.

For smaller fleets operating on slim margins, investment in telematics is a luxury, argues Frey. Generally, only the industry's better-capitalized large commercial fleets have tested and adopted advanced solutions. He points to Frost and Sullivan's 2011 report *Strategic Analysis of North American Medium and Heavy-duty Commercial Vehicle Telematics Market*, which presents the startling conclusion that 85% of trucks on the road today still operate without the support of systems that optimize operations and increase safety.

But for small and medium-size fleets to adopt telematics, a solution that better fits their needs is required, according to Frey, who has a transportation industry background with CN Intermodal and Descartes. That is now made possible by the preponderance of inexpensive and feature-rich mobile technologies. Hardware in the form of a smartphone or tablet, user-friendly apps, and the simplicity of cloud-enabled solutions all combine to significantly lower the barrier to technology entry for even the most basic trucking operation, he points out. The mobile app phenomenon is also a viable way to get drivers, who may otherwise be averse to learning to use new tools, using the technology that helps operations gain more efficiency.

While client/server solutions dominate the fleet management system landscape, BigRoad's solution for fleets and drivers leverages many of the flexible features of Web and mobile applications.

BigRoad offers two separate applications that can be used independently, but realize the greatest benefit as a tandem. Each app serves the other with status updates, automated documentation sharing, and analytics that help fleet managers and drivers identify and realize productivity gains.

BigRoad Driver is a free mobile app for Android smartphones and tablets designed to make life simpler for drivers. Features include in-app messaging for easy smartphone use, HoS documentation, and real-time navigation with traffic.

"The driver app is free and will always be free," Frey says. "I wanted to focus on the driver's needs. I wanted to give something to the driver that they will want to use to make their day easier, to help with compliance work, staying in touch with family, staying in contact with dispatch." He adds that if the driver likes it, the solution will be "backwards infectious" to the fleet.

BigRoad Fleet is a Web-based desktop application for use by fleet managers and dispatchers to more effectively assign work, monitor operations, and adjust on the fly to changing conditions. As Tandem Apps, the mobile app and desktop app inform each other both passively and proactively. For example, a driver's HoS status is fully transparent to dispatch, informing which drivers are best positioned to accept and execute a load.

One of the first trucking firms that worked with BigRoad in developing the product is Trafalgar Supply, based in Woodstock, Ont. Owner James Neely sees the potential to improve his operation by equipping his drivers with the BigRoad mobile app and having dispatchers use the Web app to manage load assignments.

Neely says customers often call at 8 a.m. and want to know the status of their loads right away. What Trafalgar Supply used to do is put the customer on hold and call the driver. Neely estimates that six out of 10 times the dispatcher gets the driver right away and he tells you where he is and when he will make the delivery. "That's six out of 10 and the customer's happy. The other four times you get voicemail and you have to go back to the customer and say I don't know where your load is." Neely says that can paint an unfavourable picture in the customer's eyes.

"Now I can open up the BigRoad Web app and find out the latest status. I can tell the customer exactly where the truck is that minute. That's a top benefit for us."

Another key feature for Trafalgar Supply in BigRoad is dispatching. Prior to BigRoad, they handled dispatch over the phone. The driver would call in, the dispatcher would read out the details, and the driver read it back to confirm. That process takes up to seven minutes and can leave as many as eight other calls on hold, according to Neely.

"Now with BigRoad we e-mail the information through the app and the driver has the information right there on their phone. It's also great for multitasking. You can be on the phone with the customer and be typing a message to the driver at the same time."

"BigRoad definitely has the ability to change the way we do business," Neely concludes. **FE**