

STAYING IN TOUCH

Telecommunications is an increasingly important part of keeping your business running smoothly. **Simon Jack** talks to providers and hauliers about how to get the most out of your systems

Whether it's fleet management, customer relations, tracking and tracing, compliance or training, hauliers' telecoms systems support an increasingly wide array of functions within the business.

For this reason it is essential for companies to choose their systems with the utmost care to ensure they get the performance they want and, most importantly, value for money. For companies which just want to get on with the job of moving loads for their customers this can be a daunting task, but experts say there are some key principles that stand out.

Emile Naus, technical director of logistics consultancy LCP Consulting, says that because telecoms consists of many different technologies it

is vital to focus on what is most important to the company.

"You have to be really clear about what you are trying to achieve, so you don't end up paying for something you barely use," he says.

"The industry is moving very quickly so you need to make sure you've got flexibility and that the provider is investing in extending their offer. No-one knows where technology will end up in five years' time."

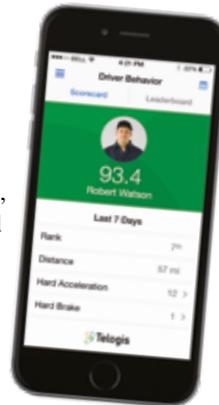
Sarah Windrum, director of IT and communications consultancy Emerald Business Communications, says that reliability is of paramount importance. "If your haulage or logistics operation comes to a halt without access to the internet and telecommunications then you need to ensure that your provider offers business-critical service level agreements. If there is a fault, how quickly will they fix it? Four hours? Eight hours? 24 hours?"

Range of services

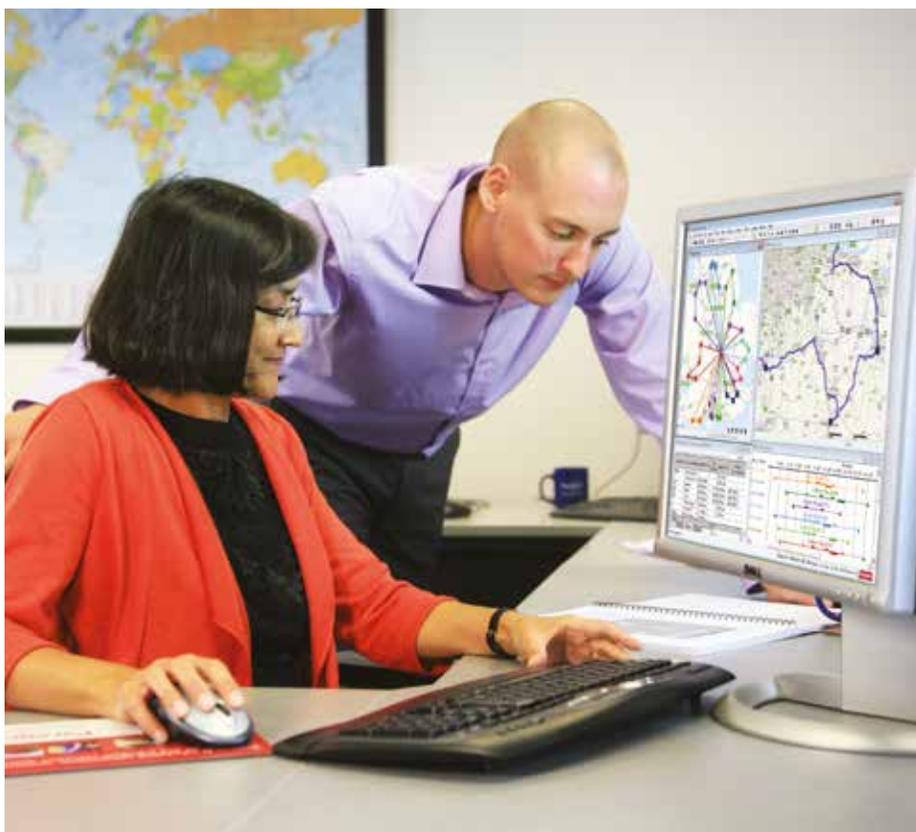
Telecoms providers such as Virgin Media Business and BT Business offer a wide range of services for all sizes of company including SMEs. This can include standard broadband, ultrafast broadband, voice communication and cloud-based services and, in a similar way to domestic services, features are often bundled together and charged at a single monthly rate.

Sometimes these can be carried across one network to save costs. BT, for example, offers larger firms a technology called SiP (session initiation protocol) trunking, which connects telephones, laptops, tablets, desktop PCs, and video conferencing facilities. For smaller firms there is VOiP (voice over internet protocol) which sends telephone calls over the company's existing internet connection, making it unnecessary to maintain a separate telephone system.

Another provider, Cisco, believes that there will be an increasing focus on making communications easier between parts of the same



Below: Paragon's Fleet Controller constantly monitors how deliveries are performing against the schedule



How hauliers are using telecomms

Many hauliers are making use of the latest telecoms systems to improve their businesses. Downton, for example, uses telecoms for a range of purposes including trailer and vehicle tracking and telematics.

Managing director Andrew Downton (pictured) says: “Good communications are more important than ever and provide critical management information.”

In Downton’s case this can include the location of vehicles on their routes, driver and vehicle performance data, compliance information and instant proof-of-delivery



documentation. Each cab contains a tablet and can be used as a general communication device with drivers who can be kept up-to-date about company news and informed about their own performance. Downton uses different providers for different parts of its telecoms and is working on making the systems operate more closely together.

“The next big challenge is to take various aspects of communications and integrate them onto one platform,” Downton says.

Some hauliers are able to use the telecoms capabilities of their telematics systems for a number of tasks. Iain Mitchell, managing director of John Mitchell Haulage & Warehousing, takes this approach with its two telematics systems.

“We use the telematics for limited voice calls, messaging, simple vehicle mechanical/technical analysis, monitoring the driver’s driving style, monitoring fuel economy and satellite tracking,” he explains.

Vehicle manufacturers

also offer on-board technology and communications.

Massey Wilcox uses Mercedes’ Fleetboard product for a variety of purposes including vehicle tracking. This enables it to see which vehicle is best placed to carry out a particular job and then speak to the driver over a mobile phone. The system is also used for messaging, compliance and assessing driver performance.

General manager Ray Conneely says: “The system allows us to get the best out of the vehicle and the driver.”

Telecoms are also vital for New Horizon Logistics which runs more than 30 vehicles and was advised by Emerald Business Communications in choosing its systems. The company, which provides last-minute ad hoc services, knows exactly where its vehicles are and can offer them for a back-load through a transport exchange. It can also contact customers if there are any problems out on the road.

New Horizons’ managing director Paul Massey comments: “It means we can utilise the vehicle out and back and can offer better customer service.”



company, as well as with suppliers and customers. Telepresence – a form of high-quality video conferencing – in particular will grow in significance, according to Donald McLaughlin, director of collaboration for Cisco UK and Ireland.

“It is vital that organisations both large and small adopt collaborative technologies to improve efficiency, aid productivity and ultimately drive business growth,” he says.

The uses for telecoms systems are wide-ranging and include accurate vehicle tracking, which increases efficiency and improves customer service by allowing companies to contact clients about any late deliveries.

GPS technology

Paragon Software Systems’ Fleet Controller software is intended to address this issue and constantly monitors how deliveries are performing against the schedule, using GPS technology, and allows projected arrival times to be updated during the day. As well as informing customers if a delivery is going to be late, in cases where a collection has been delayed an alternative vehicle nearby can be sent to carry out the job.

Often Fleet Controller will work alongside

the existing in-cab systems. Paragon is taking the concept further and has created interfaces with telematics providers and truck tracking firms. Paragon managing director William Salter says: “The system relies on timely, accurate and reliable information through the interface, with decent frequency of data from the GPS.”

Another important advantage of good telecoms is vehicle security, which can be enhanced by sending out an alarm if a trailer is opened. In addition, good communications offer the ability to monitor legal compliance, whether that is drivers’ hours or maintaining vehicles at the correct temperature.

Another way to manage compliance is through a cloud-based self-audit tool called SilkThread, created by Labyrinth Logistics Consulting. After feeding information about a company’s compliance into the system, a dashboard is created which shows areas which the haulier might need to address, either on a single site or across multiple depots.

Sergio Barata – general manager EMEA of Telogis, which provides a comprehensive range of software options covering all parts of a transport operation, including fleet management and



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William Salter, Paragon





Above: Telogis provides a range of software options covering all parts of a transport operation

scheduling – says that the role of telecoms has become more significant in recent years.

“It has become an important enabler. Mobile data speeds, coverage and costs have all improved. Whether for telematics or GPS there is now better quality data that can be sent back to the central office,” he says.

Barata believes this capability is very useful in areas such as training – with some operators allowing time at the end of the day for online training and assessments – and for capturing details of any accidents through pictures and on forms which can be installed on a tablet.

If required, Telogis will provide the telecoms necessary for this through a series of partners, but it also works with a haulier’s own providers if they wish – in which case it will carry out an assessment to check the telecoms capabilities are appropriate for the task.

A different approach is taken by Blue Tree

Systems. The company always provides the telecoms for its range of software, which includes fuel management, driving style management, tachograph management, in-cab communication and temperature management. Product development manager Mark Whitney says this is because the company is able to benefit from scale when negotiating with telecoms firms and can ensure there is the capability and flexibility to meet the company’s needs.

“We have the contract with the telecoms provider so that the hauliers do not have to worry about that aspect any more,” Whitney says.

Vehicle maintenance is another area benefiting from telecoms. RF Tracking, for example, launched a tyre performance management system called PressurePro Pulse at April’s CV Show. This monitors tyre pressures constantly, whether parked or on the road, and issues alerts if they are too high or too low.

Technological advances

Technological advances show no sign of slowing down. LCP Consulting’s Emile Naus believes there will be an increasing use of sensors in the engine to warn hauliers of any problems.

“I think the industry will really go at telematics in the next few years to identify when the vehicle needs a service or is about to go wrong. The technology already exists, although it is currently still pretty expensive to install the sensors,” he says.

Smarter scheduling is another area for future focus. “There are currently systems which tell you where traffic is now but it should become possible to predict where it will build up in two to three hours’ time and actively route vehicles around any problems,” Naus believes. ■

Cloud communications

Cloud-based communications can offer hauliers a cost-effective way to introduce new computer systems without having to invest in equipment and can help link up head office, depots and drivers.

Telogis’ Sergio Barata says that many companies, particularly smaller and medium-sized hauliers, often don’t have the IT infrastructure to run, for example, powerful scheduling and route planning systems.

“With cloud-based technology you can get a turnkey solution without the capital investment in IT. Because you bypass that, you can accelerate your return on investment and see the benefits from the first week,” he says.

LCP Consulting’s Emile Naus adds: “Cloud-based technology means that you only pay for a portion of the system you are using in what

is in effect a shared platform. It’s a bit like someone using a 3PL for their logistics, when you pay a fee for using a shared network.”

However, the cloud provider needs to build in a profit margin and for larger hauliers who might have large and complex IT systems, it can be more cost-effective to invest in their own network, he says.

Emerald Business Communications’ Sarah Windrum agrees that companies can achieve significant efficiencies: one of its clients, Breezamount, uses a cloud-based system to run Ikea’s home delivery operation on a fleet of 250 vehicles. Costs are also easier to manage. “Cloud systems are normally a subscription-based cost per user per month making them scalable and easy to budget,” she says.

There are also security advantages in storing

data off-site. “Using a cloud-based system means your business-critical data is backed up remotely and will not be affected by local hardware failure, user deletion, fire or flood,” Windrum points out.

However, because data is held remotely the use of cloud systems can raise security concerns among some. Windrum says it is very important for companies to know where their data is stored and only recommends data centres in the UK or EU.

Barata agrees that data security should be a top consideration when it comes to cloud-based systems and most hauliers are keen for their provider to demonstrate they are equipped to deliver that. “Best of breed security is nowadays built into customer expectations,” he says.