

GPS tracking becomes affordable

Getting the employees on board can still be a tough sell

By Simon Blake

Two things have changed in the two years since *P&HVAC* last reported on GPS tracking systems for service vehicles. Competition in the marketplace has reduced the cost while the technology has improved significantly.

"The whole GPS industry has changed. Everybody's in it now," reports Mark McKibbin, vice president and general manager of Applewood Air Conditioning, Mississauga, Ont.

When he installed it about three years ago, there were only two companies. The cost was about \$3 per day per truck for leasing and monitoring. "Now you can get everything all in for about \$50 per month."

A global positioning system (GPS) can bring enormous benefits to a company in terms of quicker response times, fuel savings and better management of both employees and equipment. The detail on the dispatcher's screen is substantially better today than it was just two years ago.

There is one thing that hasn't changed though – employees are leery of a device that virtually puts the boss in the passenger seat.

But tracking employees, in itself, isn't the primary reason for using GPS. Contractors want to achieve a greater number of calls per day. "In order to do that, you've got to get a handle on where the inefficiencies are... If the company can get more calls per day with the same assets and the same number of employees, their profitability goes up," reports Vince Arone, P.Eng., vice president, business development, for PinPoint Solutions Inc., Mississauga, Ont.

"It's a service tool," says Ed De Marco, service manager for Delta Mechanical Ltd. (a division of Plan Electric) in Richmond Hill, Ont. "When a customer has an emergency, now you can look at the screen and see where the (technicians) are."

Getting the employees onside

When a contractor decides to install GPS, the way in which he breaks the news to employees will make a big difference in how readily they accept it.

"It's how you approach it," says De Marco. "You have to treat the guys like adults."

It's important to be up front about it, he adds. Delta Mechanical



Delta Mechanical's Ed De Marco is smiling now that he knows where his guys are.



And so is Applewood Air Conditioning's Mark McKibbin.

brought their refrigeration and plumbing staff in for a meeting, told them that the company was planning to install GPS, explained the reasons why and answered questions. "We knew weeks

before," reported plumber Kevin DeSousa.

"An open and honest approach" is the best path to get employees onside, agrees Arone. "When I meet with clients or prospects that say 'I'm not going to tell my employees,' I put up the red flag... Secrets eventually become known and you really have a bigger issue on your hands about mistrust at that point than you would have had with just putting GPS in to start with."

One of the key factors in convincing employees is pointing out the direct benefits they will enjoy – particularly in areas like safety and dispute resolution. "It's not his word against the client's word anymore. The office knows when the technician arrived and how long he stayed there," says De Marco. On the job site, there are fewer disruptions because the dispatcher no longer needs to call to find out where they are.

Safety is substantially improved too. "A lot of our guys work alone, so if you can't get ahold of them you can drive over and see where their vehicle is," he added.

DeSousa notes that one of the reasons that some technicians have such a problem with GPS is because they are used to working alone – in fact that's a key part of the job's appeal for them and they take the "big brother" aspect of GPS very personally. And there are

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always those that don't like any kind of change, added De Marco.

However, as long as the employee doesn't feel that he is being micro-managed, they get used to it quickly, remarked McKibbin. "I wasn't playing big brother and chasing them around with it, so they got comfortable with it."

De Marco had the GPS installed in his own truck, which, among other things, means any of the employees can

ones idle their trucks excessively, and all kinds of things about their routes to work and to job sites.

"Don't sweat the small stuff," applies. There's no point in confronting an employee unless it's about something important, says McKibbin.

And it's critical to have all the facts, adds De Marco.

One day, when looking over the GPS reports, he noticed that one technician had been idling his truck outside a job site for over an hour. However, upon checking, he found the building owner hadn't shown up and the technician had phoned the dispatcher five minutes after arriving. The owner had forgotten the appointment and asked that the technician stay, promising to cover all costs.

De Marco also quickly realized that he had three employees with lead feet, often driving at 130-140 km-h on the freeway where the speed limit is 100.

"Nobody does 100," he added. "You have to be reasonable with the guys and, at the same time, when they get the information they have to look at it and say: 'You know what, you're right, I can't (drive like that).'"

"We have the speed limits for roads all over North America in our system,"

"Probably 90 percent of our calls in the last three months are as a result of trying to manage and maintain fuel costs."

take a glance at the big screen when they are in the office and see what the boss is up to. "The guys are more comfortable if they know management is doing it too," he says.

Dealing with incidents

The way the contractor handles the incidents that do occur is critical as well. During the first few weeks of operation, the employer will quickly learn which drivers habitually speed, which



GPS is not a big deal for technician Kevin DeSousa.

explained Arone. As a result, the contractor's report shows the speed

limit and the actual speed the truck was
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Trucks for the Trade

GPS

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traveling. "Everyone speeds from time to time, but you can see whether it's the rule or the exception."

Saving fuel

High fuel costs have become a key issue. "Probably 90 percent of our calls in the last three months are as a result of trying to manage and maintain fuel costs," says Arone.

Reducing speeding, idling and improved routing can result in significant savings.

Contractors are typically surprised to find out how much their trucks idle, says Arone. De Marco found that in the wintertime a couple of his guys would start their trucks and then go for breakfast, leaving the trucks idling for 30 to 45 minutes. "Their average came down after we made them aware of it. Now they warm up their vehicles for five minutes."

(NRCan estimates that just letting a vehicle with a five-litre (302 cubic inch) engine idle for 20 minutes a day will consume 366 litres of fuel over the course of a year.)

As well, he used to have all the technicians visit the shop every Monday to hand in paperwork. It didn't take long to realize that bringing 18 trucks from all over southern Ontario was costing about \$400 per week in gas. Now he has them fax in their time cards on Monday and drop off their paperwork when they are in or near the shop, which they typically are at least once a week.

Like many companies, Delta has established an electronic "box" around each employee's home. If the truck moves beyond that area when the employee is off duty the dispatcher receives an e-mail alert.

Today's technology

The latest GPS systems allow the service manager to zero in on a particular building or rooftop, a considerable aid in both estimating and supervising a job. He can direct the technician directly to the correct piece of equipment. The satellite images on De Marco's 42" screen, which has its own dedicated computer, are as clear as a photograph.

"We deal with a lot of new construction and often the streets didn't have names yet. They wouldn't show (with the old system)," said McKibbin.

Today contractors are asking that GPS be integrated with existing business software. "The challenge with it is there are so many different systems used for dispatching, accounting, etc.," says Arone.

Different GPS companies offer different methods to accommodate this. PinPoint, for example, offers automated reports that can be e-mailed weekly or daily and in many different formats. The contractor can burn these to a CD for a permanent record.

Many contractors use their GPS systems to schedule maintenance. E-mails are generated automatically when a truck needs an oil change or other programmed items. Today's GPS systems

even keep track of battery voltage and can send out an automated e-mail if the voltage falls below a certain level and the truck is unlikely to start in the morning.

And if a truck goes missing, GPS will be a big help in bringing it back and apprehending those responsible. In the U.S., this has resulted in insurance reductions up to 25 percent on GPS-equipped vehicles. So far, Canadian insurers haven't given their customers the same break, lamented Arone.

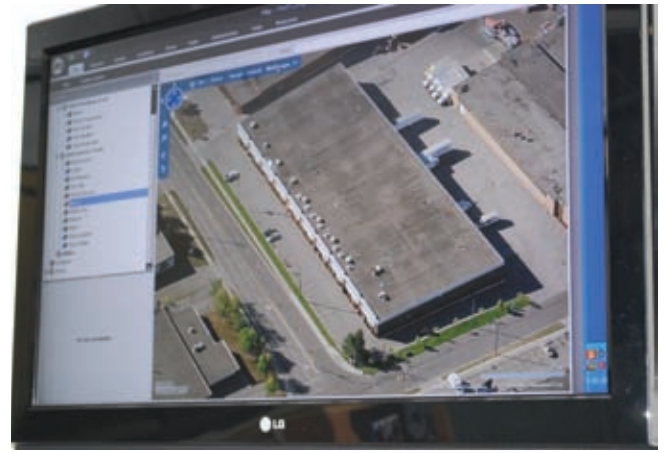
From a technical standpoint, installing the equipment and software is pretty straightforward. The GPS supplier installs their unit under the dashboard, hard-wired into the truck's electronics.

It won't likely be long before GPS systems become standard. The companies

that have had it for several years automatically put it in new vehicles, reports Arone. And each of those companies adopts it to their particular needs.

"Once they get past the barriers (the cost and employee objections), it's a no-brainer. It's a lot cheaper than paying someone full-time to keep track of vehicles and, because of the automation, the records are always there..."

"The bottom line is that the owners are trying to grow their business while



The ability to zoom in on rooftops has proven key for De Marco.

remaining profitable and they need tools that can help them manage their business better," he says.



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