For many years, the transport and logistics industry has been seeking new technologies to overcome the fleet and service management problems which exist at the core of its business.

Companies are always looking for ways to extract maximum output from employees and the supply chain to increase company efficiency and ultimately, profit. Visibility in the supply chain has been identified as the key to achieving this objective and as such its importance in the supply chain process has reached new heights.

Traditionally, only larger companies – be it Tesco or TNT – have been in a position to implement such strategies with businesses across all sectors, endeavouring to extract maximum benefit from their supply chain operations through increased visibility. By deploying technology capable of harnessing supply chain and mobile workforce information, they have been able to increase visibility, security, co-ordination of the supply chain, employee efficiency and reduce overall costs.

However, for every one of the ‘big boys’ leading the charge, there are many hundreds of small and medium sized businesses (SMBs) that are having to re-evaluate their approach as a result. In fact, for smaller companies, unable to absorb the historically high, initial front footing technology costs, the practicality of implementing a solution of this type was small.

The application service provider

In my opinion, the crucial area in which fleet operators and logistics providers in the SMB sector can add value to increased visibility is through historical and real-time location data. The ability of SMB logistics to plug into a retailer’s own supply chain management systems, without any major investment in time and money, goes a long way towards levelling the playing field with the larger logistics companies. Such data is fundamental to the visibility of the entire supply chain for all of its customers – not to mention the efficiency of its own business operations!

As already mentioned, the cost of instigating a supply chain strategy has been an expensive process. The advent of Mobitex and ASPs (Application Service Providers) has gone a long way to providing members of the SMB community with a means of increasing their visibility of the supply chain.

Unlike the original processes involving ISPs (Internet Service Providers), ASPs have enabled companies to subscribe to dedicated services hosting one or a group of related applications, eliminating the need for additional and unnecessary email, Web access and Web hosting facilities which the company already has! In addition, the company then has the capacity to manage its own supply chain by simply connecting a computer from HQ to the ASP, allowing it to monitor and provide real-time updates for the entire fleet from the comfort of its own office.

Given that the competitive nature of the market has driven the need for implementation of more advanced workforce and supply chain monitoring solutions, transport and logistics companies of all sizes have had to concern themselves with providing visibility throughout the supply chain if they are to continue their relationships with large-scale customers. This has become a particular necessity for members of the SMB community who rely on established connections with the bigger, more demanding companies, supplying a significant proportion of their business.

Monitoring the supply chain

What we have noticed, however, is that, in the rush to deploy a solution, many SMBs have not fully understood the level of visibility that is required or expected by their customers. And what’s more, the level of investment that needs to be made is something many are finding themselves needing to seek consultation on. For example, there is really no point in deploying a sophisticated fleet management solution capable of tracking 1000 lorries when all they have is 50!

This is something that we take very seriously at Transcomm and we highly recommend that companies seeking fleet management solutions speak to a variety of providers to make sure they are happy that the people supplying the technology know what they are talking about and have the experience and knowledge to explain why certain packages would be better than others. After all, a fleet management solution is supposed to streamline costs, not siphon off profit!

Moving forward, let’s take a closer look at some of the other pressures also acting on SMBs. The supply chain is essentially the lifeblood of any transport and logistics company. Through monitoring the supply chain, companies can identify areas that they need to improve, streamline or alter completely. It is only through being able to see these problems in the first place that a company is able to act on them. However, it is not restricted to merely solving problems spanning supply chain inefficiency, co-ordination, security and cost-effectiveness of the fleet.

In the short-medium term, compliance
New Mobitex modems give fleets a boost

NEWEST name in wireless communications is Mobile Expertise, a UK company launched at last month's conference of the Mobitex Association in New York. Mobile Expertise is the result of a de- merger of Maxon Europe last December, and has been formed to continue the development of Mobitex and other data products. Its product portfolio includes PMR, Mobitex and GSM/CDMA devices.

"We've set ourselves tough goals to achieve product excellence, superior service and value for money", said sales director Robert Johnson. "By investing in research and development and post-sales support, Mobile Expertise will design, manufacture and support its own new products and offer exceptional OEM capability."

Integrated GPS

At the Mobitex Association conference, Mobile Expertise announced two new products: the ME-D400, a 10 watt Mobitex device targeted at vehicle use, and the ME-D200, a general purpose 5 watt VHF/ UHF FFSK/GMSK modem. These join the existing range of products from Mobile Expertise, which include GSM and CDMA handsets, GPRS modems and PMR/TWR devices.

Currently the only 10 watt Mobitex device available in Europe, the ME-D400 has a wideband 405-465 MHz radio coverage and a rugged IP54 construction. With its integral GPS receiver, it is suitable for mobile applications such as in vehicle fleets, including those of supermarkets, courier companies and emergency vehicles, where managers require essential data concerning their vehicles' whereabouts.

About Mobitex

Mobitex is a packet-switched wireless data transmission system which provides high reliability and security of data transmission. The system serves a wide range of markets, from machine- to-machine communication to fleet management.

Trevor Parrett, head of devices at Mobile Expertise, said: "The Mobitex network offers fleet manager secure and guaranteed data delivery, ideal for mission critical data essential to so many businesses today."

Over 20 public and private Mobitex systems are in operation worldwide. In the UK, a nationwide Mobitex network is operated by Transcomm UK, a part of BT.

From Mobile Expertise: the high-powered ME-D400 wireless modem, described as the only 10 watt Mobitex device available in Europe. Features include an integral GPS unit mobile applications such as in vehicle fleets, including those of supermarkets, courier companies and emergency vehicles, where managers require essential data concerning their vehicles' whereabouts.

Also from Mobile Expertise is the ME-D200 range of 5 watt VHF and UHF modems for voice and data, including telemetry. They can be powered simply by a 9-18V battery.

The ME-D400's GPS receiver provides accurate vehicle location tracking and multiple I/O lines to provide data about the load or to report alarms triggered on the vehicle, giving efficiency and maintenance savings.

The modem's high output power enables it to log and communicate essential data even in remote locations or built-up city environments.

Also new from Mobile Expertise is the ME-D200 range of 5 watt VHF and UHF point-to-point modems, offering voice and data for applications where cable is difficult or too costly to install. It can be powered by a 9-18 volt battery supply. The IP54-rated compact enclosure is designed to resist rain and dust, making the ME-D200 useful for measurement telemetry - for example, in public utilities' applications, warehouses, updating of instrumentation signs and for mobile asset tracking using the integral GPS receiver. These modems cover both European and US frequency allocations.

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