Using Keyless Tools and Modern Motorpool Management to Optimize Vehicle Fleets

Today's cars and trucks are essentially mobile computing platforms. But most of the processes state and local governments use to manage their vehicle fleets are decidedly analog, with employees manually entering data into spreadsheets and passing around physical keys to whichever drivers need them.

"The vast majority of fleets have no technology — they're just handing out keys," says Daniel McGehee, head of sales for U.S. and Asia/Pacific at Ridecell, which builds software for automating and optimizing fleet operations.

Modern technology helps agencies control costs, optimize vehicle usage, and automate manual processes like assigning or reserving vehicles and handing out keys. Thanks to advances in data analytics, Internet of Things (IoT) devices and cloud-based mobile software, agency managers can gain better visibility into the health of their fleets while monitoring the habits of drivers and simplifying the supervision of vehicle fleets.

Traditional motorpool management can be wasteful and inefficient. Managers lack real-time data on the location, condition and availability of vehicles, and they may spend inordinate time assigning drivers to available cars. There are also notable inefficiencies in shared fleets. For instance, social workers often need vehicles after hours and on weekends, while public works professionals may need cars during weekday office hours. As a result, one agency's cars wear out while others go unused, creating imbalances in fleet usage and costs.

Legacy processes also make it harder to schedule available vehicles, especially when reconciling competing needs of different drivers, some of whom may require a car at a moment's notice. Handing out keys is a cumbersome process that requires significant time and staffing. Lost keys are expensive to replace, and car doors left unlocked raise the risk of theft, damage or misuse.

To modernize their motor pool management, many state and local agencies are adopting technologies that depend on telematics, the automated transmission of vehicle data. With telematics tools, agencies gain instant visibility into which cars are available, and drivers can easily reserve the vehicle they need. Mobile apps leverage telematics to identify available cars, show users their location and grant access via keyless devices.

These tools yield multiple advantages for state and local agencies:

Convenience and control. Fleet managers always know every vehicle's location. And fleet users have a more seamless experience of acquiring, driving and returning vehicles.

"Giving fleet managers a way to digitize their processes lets them see who's using the vehicles and when," McGehee says. "On a departmental and individual level, they can be smarter about how they assign those resources."

Managers can control access to vehicles remotely – locking the doors, say, or preventing the engine from starting – providing an additional layer of security.

Cost. Automation can reduce staffing requirements and free up managers to focus on higher-value priorities. Going keyless also eliminates replacement costs and reduces theft risks. Users can easily report damage or performance problems, preserving vehicle value. And managers gain greater visibility across their fleet, enabling them to balance usage of different vehicles. That prevents some cars from wearing out too soon from overuse while other cars collect dust.

"This gives managers the ability to reduce the fleet size in a lot of cases, shifting to a smaller, more efficient fleet," McGehee says.

Analytics. Motorpool management software is configured according to business rules that tell the software what to manage and report on. Data and analytics tools help establish parameters that drive business insights and efficiencies.

Everyday issues like refueling, maintenance and minor repairs can be tracked at a granular level. Driving behaviors can be documented for hard braking, excessive acceleration and sharp turns, allowing managers to extend the life of their fleet vehicles.

MODERNIZING FLEET MANAGEMENT

The latest mobility management technologies have three core functions. They:

- Connect with fleet vehicles' onboard diagnostics systems
- Deploy IoT devices and keyless tools for security, telematics and location tracking
- Integrate with mobile apps to automate a broad swath of fleet management operations

To get started with modernizing motorpool management and operations, agencies typically initiate three phases:

1. Software preparation. Agency leaders start by mapping out all the functions they need from a fleet management solution. The software requires business rules to determine which data gets collected, analyzed and reported, which means decision-makers must have a clear understanding of how they want the system to be configured. This requires documenting fleet operations and the rules to be enforced, such as hours of use. It also requires billing departments by the mile, and establishing geographic boundaries for parking, fetching and returning vehicles.

2. Hardware installation. Vehicles require a GPS tracking device that connects with the onboard diagnostics system and sends real-time location data back to the home office. Keyless technology typically requires a separate device connected to the GPS tracker.

3. Training, onboarding and implementation. Users must be trained to use keyless technology and online check-in/check-out software. Apps must be installed and configured on users' smartphones. Users and vehicles must be added to the system.

"It's a good idea to start with one department to get people comfortable with it, and then do a phased rollout to the entire fleet," McGehee says.

The tools are designed to be intuitive. Still, developing and implementing a new system – and getting drivers comfortable with using it – can be somewhat complex. That's why agencies should seek a technology partner that has deep experience implementing fleet management technologies.

"The right partner has a simple and easy-to-use set of tools that allows you to run your fleet in the background without having to actively manage it day in and day out," says McGehee.

Some key components agencies should look for in a motorpool management solution include:

- **Scheduled and on-demand usage.** The software should accommodate scheduled vehicle checkout as well as on-demand users who need a vehicle immediately.
- **Fluid user experience.** Technology should be intuitive, both for drivers and IT staff.
- **Quick timelines.** Tools should be simple and able to be installed within a few weeks or months.
- **Actionable data and reporting.** Analytics should provide ample visibility into fleet usage, driver behaviors and inefficiencies. The tool also should provide accounting data for usage and interdepartmental billing.
- **Easy acquisition.** Tools should meet generally accepted procurement standards, and they should be readily available on widely used cooperative purchasing platforms.
- **Multiple partnerships.** Providers should have an extensive ecosystem of partners for extending the solutions' capabilities.

With the right solution in place, state and local agencies can vastly improve the efficiency of their fleet management operations, ensuring vehicles are ready and available to help public employees deliver crucial government services to the communities they serve.

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