



TECHNOLOGY

ELDs: The Extra Benefits

Now that the mandate for ELD usage is underway, companies and drivers are discovering additional gains, both subtle and obvious, gleaned from the devices

Michael Catarevas | Mar 19, 2019

These days, ELDs mean different things to different people. For some they're Error-Laden Drags. To others—Excellent Little Doohickies! It all depends on who's judging.

Of course, ELDs (electronic logging devices) have been making news for over a year now, since officially becoming part of the trucking industry lexicon last Dec. 18, when

their usage was mandated for most commercial truckers by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) and Dept. of Transportation (DOT) in order to improve road and personal safety. ELDs have generated a lot of talk, action and reaction. Some organizations and associations have sought exemptions and delays in having to use them, mostly without success. There have been exemptions for short-haul operations within a 100-air-mile radius and agricultural operations within a 150-air-mile radius.

“If all you see in ELDs is a tendency to generate extra costs and remove truck capacity from the market, you’re focusing on the wrong things,” said Will Salter, CEO of Paragon Software Systems, which provides routing and scheduling software used by global transportation operations. “There’s a fantastic opportunity to drive significant improvements for everyone by mining the rich data from ELDs. Using routing and scheduling software, that information can be leveraged to create unprecedented levels of efficiencies in truck operations.”

Reza Hemmati, vice president of product management at Spireon, which produces fleet and trailer tracking software, is in agreement.

“Telematics data allows fleets to evaluate load margins, improve asset utilization, understand loading and unloading habits of customers to reduce detention time, and reduce the cost of insurance,” he explained. “The combination of ELD and telematics data offers a new world of possibilities for fleets to improve safety, efficiency and their bottom lines, and the industry is still very ripe for innovative ways to further achieve these goals.”

Some benefits, such as improved safety, reducing driver time on deliveries, and the administrative tasks related to logging, were anticipated when ELDs were legislated onto trucks.

While many long-time truckers have grouched over having to change course from notating their data in paper logbooks well into their careers, American Trucker was told by ELD manufacturers, trucking firm executives, and technology consultants that there are many more gains from the devices than had been expected.

Here are their thoughts on the benefits, intended and otherwise.

- **More data means more ways to perfect the system.** “Fleets which have gone the full-featured ELD route now have a ton of data on fleet operations they didn’t have before,” noted Brian McCoy, vice president, MiX Telematics, a global provider of fleet management, driver safety, and vehicle tracking services and solutions. “That’s enabling them to find additional opportunities for improvement; preventive maintenance, scheduling, staffing, you name it. Data and measurement are crucial for operational improvement.”

Eric Witty, vice president of product at Trimble Transportation, which provides integrated onboard computing and mobile communications systems enabling fleets to get data-driven business intelligence, noted that more than the driver and fleet owner can benefit from ELDs.

“Adding them can provide data to make better decisions and be more efficient,” he said. “In addition, if the right product is purchased, the ELD technology can be a platform that opens the door to using third-party applications, customer-created applications, and other features that the technology itself enables. ELD products are becoming more open and collaborative and enabling technology versus the traditional purpose-built systems of the past.”

Ozzie Flores, marketing and product manager, Teletrac Navman, which provides cloud-based GPS fleet-tracking software, said that “the GPS tracking capabilities on ELD

systems should help with flexibility as it gives carriers better insight into where a driver is located and why a driver is in a certain situation in regard to their shipments.

“Notation capabilities through ELDs allow fleet managers and carriers to see if a driver is stuck in traffic or off the road due to adverse weather, off duty at shops for repairs, or waiting to load or unload, which can build the case for revisiting the split sleeper berth provision,” he continued.

• **Easier to pinpoint route problems and other issues.** “ELD’s are showing carriers where the inefficiencies are in their customer bases and routes, if they are looking,” said Thomas Bray, a transportation industry consultant with J. J. Keller & Associates Inc., which provides electronic logging and mobile technologies, training materials and tools, consulting, and managed services. “Progressive carriers are using this data to drive discussions with their customers and drivers.

“Other carriers have seen the introduction of the ELD as an opportunity to incorporate improvements, such as better communications with the driver, position and route tracking, delay tracking, driver performance tracking, and actual fuel mileage tracking,” Bray said. “In many cases before ELD’s, the carrier knew or had seen inefficiencies and issues within the operation but was unable to get accurate tracking to see where the problems actually were since many drivers using paper logs were very good at hiding the inefficiencies and issues. When an ELD with extended capabilities is used, the actual issues become visible and then they can be addressed. This then can help the bottom line.”

Andy Oleson, product manager at Verizon Connect, explained that ELD’s allow drivers more time for addressing other concerns now that they don’t have to fill out daily written logbooks.

“From a broader fleet management perspective, it’s important to use fleet compliance software that complements e-logs drivers use to record hours of service,” he stressed. “By doing so, drivers will have a streamlined process to record hours of service that will keep mistakes to a minimum and reduce the stress of completing a daily HOS log.”

• **More rest for drivers.** “With the flexibility of paper logs being gone, drivers using AOBRDs/ELDs properly (not falsifying) are actually getting more rest than in the past,” said Bray. “This is because several of the tricks that were available when using paper logs to shorten the 10-hour break are not ‘transferable’ to electronic logs. When using an electronic log, 10 hours means 10 hours, not six or seven hours plus three or four hours of delay time moved from the workday into the break (a common trick when using paper logs).”

Taylor Howerton, head of SunTrust Bank’s logistics & supply chain industry vertical, had a more cautious opinion.

“We’re hearing anecdotally that the rule has increased safety overall,” he said. “The debate arises when looking at relative sleep patterns within individuals and the limited flexibility for a driver to take rest breaks when and where their body may be telling them they need to on any particular day, which we know can vary greatly between individuals. Future adjustments to HOS rules will likely center on building in more flexibility around rest breaks to account for this variation.”

Drivers should be able to make the decision when to rest with no worries about HOS, Flores said.

“A professional driver should be able to determine when they need to take a rest break and manage their fatigue, but they’re often forced to make difficult decisions and trade-offs between managing fatigue and dealing with operational challenges like traffic, shipper delays, or difficulties finding safe parking,” he said. “If drivers are given more

flexibility, it may allow them to operate more efficiently and with less fatigue, but that remains to be seen.”

Flores is also optimistic ELDs will eventually make a difference. “Even though we’re a year in, I don’t think we have enough conclusive data to prove ELDs have improved drivers’ sleep patterns,” he admitted. “However, one of the by-products of ELD implementation is the recent discussion about potentially revising the split sleeper berth rule. ELD data can show when drivers are at a shipper or receiver and waiting in line to load or unload, as many times they’re in a staging area. Parking problems alone are a reason to support flexible sleeper berth rules.”

• **Lower driver turnover.** “I believe ELDs will help with driver retention over time,” stated John Wilbur, CEO of Roadmaster Group, a specialized transportation company. “The number one complaint of many drivers is lack of respect. On the road, this lack of respect is often communicated through time.

Companies must optimize the productivity of this time to be profitable, and I would argue that most drivers have a higher level of satisfaction when they are performing activities that add value to their companies.”

Introducing ELD data into routing and scheduling automation software also means you can generate transport plans that are based on the true availability of all of your drivers, according to Salter.

“This should appeal to drivers, as you help maximize their earning potential within the HOS limits while avoiding fines,” he said. “You can also be sure the assigning of routes to drivers is done on a completely unbiased basis. The system can even factor in an individual driver’s needs, such as shift schedules or days off. All of these are important factors in retaining them.”

• **Tighter and more profitable delivery schedules.** “Many shippers are becoming more enlightened to the issues related to capacity constraints and are demonstrating a willingness to work with their carriers to speed up delivery at their facilities, provide a safe, clean environment and treat drivers with more respect,” said Howerton.

“Continued delays at the docks, inaccurate information regarding time and destination, or any issue that may cause a driver to sit waiting for a load longer than they should is going to cause carriers to look elsewhere for loads. This market has way more freight than capacity, which will help carriers procure faster freight at higher margins.”

Salter noted that implementing advanced routing and scheduling software can bring savings of 10-30% in freight operations. The greater variety of data you can feed into it, the more money you are likely to save.

“For example, you might have planned for a 20-minute stop at a delivery location, but the stop is consistently taking 90 minutes,” he said. “Feeding that data back into future plans improves the process. Ideally, to continually maximize route planning efficiency, you establish a constant feedback loop on any given route, taking captured data—whether it’s simply hours driven or tracking information—and adjusting the next route plan accordingly, over and over. Integrating vehicle tracking systems with routing and scheduling software is a good way to achieve visibility and future efficiency.”

• **Truck maintenance and other savings.** “As more carriers begin to share data from their ELDs, there is greater overall visibility into the supply chain, which benefits everyone from driver to consumer,” said Witty. “The accuracy of the data used to make decisions and move freight is leading to better performance and productivity for all.

“In addition, most ELD systems are capable of capturing data on vehicle performance, faults, and efficiency as well as driver behavior, performance, and efficiency. The opportunities for gain beyond basic ELD functionality include vehicle fault management and maintenance, fuel tax data capture, vehicle fuel efficiency, visibility of vehicles/load

location, and automated load ETA information for customers,” he continued. “Some of these items might fall into the category of ‘intended’ uses of ELDs, but since many are purchasing ELDs simply to be compliant, those users gain many other helpful benefits in turn.”

In Flores’ opinion, fleets that adopted a basic ELD system ahead of the deadline were taking steps to be compliant, but those systems don’t necessarily offer the same wide-reaching capabilities as a more robust telematics solution, or ELDs integrated with fleet management software.

“As fleets get more comfortable with their technology and data, it’s likely they’ll look for more areas throughout their entire fleet and organization for improvements and efficiency gains,” he said. “These add-on features or fleet management technology systems can allow a fleet to monitor things like driver speed, driver performance, idling, harsh braking, maintenance, fuel usage, engine hours, and more.

“Data-driven insight into idling, distance traveled, and fuel usage can help a fleet make decisions about fuel expenditures while monitoring driver behaviors and can enable fleet and maintenance managers to create preventive maintenance programs,” Flores added. “As fleets see the advantages and ROI, they can work directly with telematics partners to identify other use cases as well.”

“We have seen a lot of fleets that initially explored low-end ELD tools eventually opt for full-featured ELD solutions that provide more value over the long term,” noted McCoy. “They have a bigger up-front investment but which can pay for themselves over time in the form of improved safety, lower fuel and insurance costs, and higher efficiency.”

• **Equality and better deals for drivers.** “ELDs have helped to level the playing field by having a standard set of rules that all carriers must follow,” said Wilbur. “The implementation of ELDs is changing the industry’s mindset on non-driving hours. They

have brought about an awareness to the abuse of a driver's time, which can no longer be covered up through interpretive logbook editing. With the clock always running, carriers must be compensated for excessive wait times. The data provided through ELDs provides the carrier with quality wait-time information that can be presented back to shippers. ELDs establish proof of a driver's downtime."

Salter remarked that ELDs, by their nature, provide reliably accurate data on truck-driving activities, including hours driven, idling time, and being stuck in slow traffic. When that data is put to good use, it reduces inefficiencies in the system and extra costs.

"This removes the need to manually manipulate the data to ensure HOS restrictions are adhered to," he said. "If a driver is habitually using less than the maximum HOS on a particular route, the routing plan will automatically add a delivery leg, or move the driver to another route that maximizes use of the allowance. With more accurate route plans, you can push drivers' hours on the road to the absolute maximum, confident they won't get stranded with a load at the end of their 10- or 11-hour shift."

• **Forcing shippers to improve their operations.** "ELDs, onboard recorders, and other telematics systems have certainly provided more data to carriers," explained Howerton. "In turn, carriers are using this data to help negotiate with shippers and incentivize them to improve performance and readiness at their docks. Better information also fosters increased carrier-shipper collaboration, which has been a theme as capacity tightens.

"In any environment," he said, "there's an incentive to create more density in your lanes, reduce empty miles, and select accounts that provide the best efficiency and margin to your operation. Increased information coming out of tech-enabled fleets is helping carriers build smarter networks and can accelerate their profitability if they are disciplined in their approach to the marketplace."

Flores reported that Teletrac Navman's research found approximately 28% of carriers report drivers losing available HOS time due to delays in loading and unloading at shipper or receiver locations.

"I also have personal experience with peers and friends who have been negatively affected by situations with inefficient time usage," he said. "In many cases, drivers who were paid by the load were able to prove through GPS tracking, location data, and ELD detention time that they were unable to make the required delivery amounts due to these types of extenuating circumstances and were able to recover lost wages as a result."

REEEFER SADNESS: A long-haul trucker's ELD lament

The email from Ralph Picardo surprised my inbox one recent weeknight around 8. The 54-year-old food-and-plant long hauler with 30-plus years behind the wheel had an axe to grind and time to grind it, as he was parked... and blocked in.

"ELDs are causing a parking nightmare," he wrote. "If anybody thinks they have made the roads safer, they haven't really examined the full extent of it. I've never seen such confusion on the road in all my life."

I hit him back asking for more info. His next send showed and told it all.

"I'm parked in a legal spot in North Carolina right now," he answered. "Another truck driver just parked right in front of me, blocking me in. She walked up and said she's going to leave at 5 a.m. and is that okay. I said, 'Can't you find a better spot than that one?' Her response was that she's out of [HOS] time."

I asked for a picture, meaning of him, but what he sent was better—a shot taken from his cab showing the truck that was keeping him and his reefer captive.

Picardo's frustration is what he insists almost every trucker agrees with, and that is while ELDs may have been a noble idea in theory, in reality they have proven way more trouble than they're worth, at least to the men and women doing all the driving.

The main complaint? That the ELD rules are forcing truckers to stop when they're often not ready or prepared to, and that causes problems.

"You see guys that have been around a long time racing and rushing through parking lots like there's no tomorrow, honking the horn at each other," said Picardo, who with a partner runs Ashman Fast Trucking, headquartered in Raleigh, NC. "Either that or they're cranking 10 miles an hour so as not to set up their e-log while trying to find a place to park. It's one extreme or the other."

Picardo noted that fear of negative consequences is forcing drivers to pull over for the required 10-hour break regardless of where they are.

"You see guys parked on the side of the interstate with their triangles out when their time is up, even if they're only four miles from a truck stop," he said. "They're so deathly afraid to get a three-minute violation. Normally, they would bring their trucks to a lot. They're working for a big company and don't wanna go a minute over. A lot of them are younger drivers who don't really know how to manage their time properly."

Up to last year, when paper logs were still in use, Picardo said he would just notate why he had to keep his truck moving a bit longer than he was supposed to, and that would be that. Now, there's no wiggle room.

"I don't see how ELDs have made anything safer; it's a parking dilemma, with people beached all over the place," he said. "Guys are afraid to go 10 minutes over when you used to pencil in 'no safe haven' and had to maybe go an extra 15 minutes to get to a

truck stop because you were stuck in traffic all day. It's not about running 19 hours a day. There's no flexibility there. Guys are afraid to get a violation."

The rushing has not only not made things safer, but Picardo feels ELDs are actually making it worse.

"If there's anything I've learned over the years, it's that when you rush is when you make a mistake; you break something, you hit something, or have some kind of mishap," he said. "I just don't think there was enough research done."

Picardo also disagrees that ELDs will have a positive impact regarding trucker jobs and finances.

"I read that ELDs are gonna create more jobs," he said. "Well, trucking is about the only industry in America that always has vacancies. All ELDs have done is put more trucks on the road from 9 to 5 when it's the most congested time, because drivers don't want to get stuck somewhere at night. During the day, it's just ridiculous out here."

It hasn't helped that, according to Picardo, this year's rates are lower than last year's, causing more competition between independent haulers.

So, what's the answer?

"There's got to be revision in HOS and how it's implemented," Picardo concluded. "If I wanna lay down for six or seven hours, it shouldn't kick off my time of driving. But if I do that prior to my 10-hour break, it does. It's counterproductive. ELDs were implemented without proper forethought."

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