



INFORMATION, INFORMATION AND MORE INFORMATION

Piles of logbooks, trip reports, travel schedule sheets, fuel dispensing records, field vehicle usage and cost records, excel spreadsheets and **NOW WHAT?**

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Fleet Management like any other form of management requires the collection, analysis and interpretation of information. Humanitarian organizations are generally great at recording all kinds of information and many checks and balances are put in place to ensure accountable, traceable and transparent use of donor funds. The question is how accurate, effective and relevant is the data collected and does the purpose it is supposed to serve justify further investigation?

Management Information Systems

A management information system (MIS) is a subset of the overall internal controls of a business covering the application of people, documents, technologies, and procedures by management accountants to solving business problems such as costing a product, service or a business-wide strategy. Management information systems are distinct from regular

information systems in that they are used to analyze other information systems applied in operational activities in the organization.^[1] Academically, the term is commonly used to refer to the group of information management methods tied to the automation or support of human decision making: Decision Support Systems, Expert Systems, and Executive Information Systems.^[1]

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A 'MIS' is a planned system of collecting, processing, storing and disseminating data in the form of information needed to carry out the functions of management. In a way it is a documented report of the activities planned and executed. According to Philip Kotler "a management information system consists of people, equipment and procedures to gather, sort, analyze, evaluate, to distribute timely and accurate information to management." [2]

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The above statements are key areas this article seeks to explore as humanitarian organizations focus on the regular information systems in use, albeit that they are often of a manual nature (for example log books or fuel dispensing records) within fleet management and not on how the organization interacts with that information and ultimately how these information systems are analyzed and integrated to support management decisions. Another area this article seeks to investigate is where does the information start and stop, where is the line drawn in terms of the actual use of the information and what value does it provide? The clue to some of this can be found in the construction and content of reporting to management and their focus. Is information just a backup in case something is found to be wrong or needs investigation or does it drive effectiveness and efficiency?

In the humanitarian sector a major failing seems to be that the information is only collected because it needs to be and the underlying value of that information never sees the light of day. This lack of interaction between the information and the organization is reason for concern as it leads to inefficiencies that are never identified or rectified.

Findings based on numerous fleet assessments and interaction with fleet and managerial staff in a various African countries from a number of NGO's highlights six major areas of concern with regard to fleet information and its use:

1. Incomplete and often hard to get information on fleet activity, especially from remote programmes and project areas.
2. Time taken to collect and collate information with manual duplicative processes and steps.
3. Validity and information gaps resulting in poor data history.
4. Dilution of reporting on vehicle activities across either project or programmes and not as a distinct vehicular cost centre.
5. Lack of analysis and intervention recommendations, no

trend formulation from historical data or comparison to best in class benchmarks resulting in lack of identifying improvement areas or intervention needs.

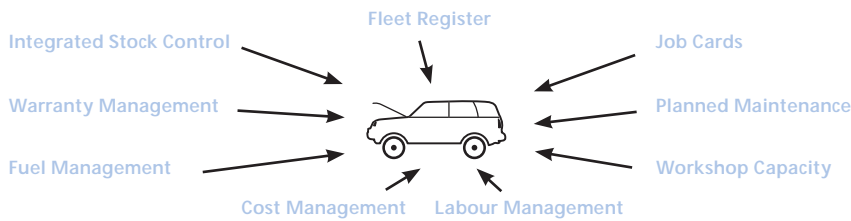
6. Monitoring and evaluation of objectives against KPI's that reflect improvements or increased efficiencies based on industry and best practice benchmarks.

If we look at the six major areas of concern above we need to understand the underlying causes of these problems as they are only highlights of the symptoms of set organizational culture and design:

1. Management of the fleet is often left to the project/programme managers whose primary focus and capabilities are their specific humanitarian goals. They have become fleet managers by default.
2. Fleet management is a non core activity or competence and thus does not hold a high status within most organizations.
3. Reporting requirements are generally against total project performance and meant to offer a certain amount of transparency and accountability, not effectiveness.
4. Projects normally have a budget line for monthly fleet operating costs including; fuel, maintenance and repairs resulting in budgets only being scrutinized when grossly over the collective budget. Projects, development areas or grants are judged according to reporting of overall budget under or overspends against the backdrop of achievement of mission objects not on individual vehicle efficiency.
5. Complacency sets in as yearly budgets increase and diluted reporting does not highlight any anomalies or exceptions.
6. The low status of fleet management in most organizations results in the vehicle fleet not having set objectives or performance expectations.

The key elements of what information needs to be collected, analyzed and acted upon for effective fleet management can often be complex and intimidating, yet even more complex is how to effectively integrate these information systems into a MIS that allows the organization to track, monitor and evaluate the fleet; from a specific vehicle to group of vehicles, a region or even comparisons of a specific vehicle type for various regions or even countries. There are many very comprehensive commercial Fleet Management System applications that are available in the marketplace but one must bear in mind the capacity constraints within most NGO's. It seems best to

Comprehensive fleet management MIS include a variety of modules that can be added as per the individual needs or applications of the organizations as shown above.



These modules although separate information systems then linked to the overall MIS that provides accurate management reporting to ensure optimal lifecycle, cost effectiveness and efficiency of the fleet. It is important to note that the exception reporting is the key to management of any fleet and for this to possible all information needs to be captured accurately and timeously. This can be aided via the use of remote management devices that automatically update the MIS thus reducing human data input errors and also time constraints.

In conclusion many NGO's already collect large amounts of useful data. This data needs to be reformatted into useable electronic formats that can be imported into Fleet Management Systems (FMS) that are more than just information systems to gather, sort, analyze, evaluate and distribute information. Integrated Management Information Systems that provide management with much needed, timely, and accurate information will enhance decisions around fleets ensuring cash to ministry ratios remain high and all excesses and resultant costs are driven out of the fleets.

 **Read more** www.wvi.org

1. O'Brien, J (1999). Management Information Systems – Managing Information Technology in the Internetworked Enterprise. Boston: Irwin McGraw-Hill. ISBN 0071123733.
2. Kotler, Philip; Keller, Kevin Lane (2006). Marketing Management (12 ed.). Pearson Education.