PREVENTIVE MAINTENANCE – WHAT DOES IT PREVENT

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You are the most important person in your company. You are the one reading information and articles that you take lessons from, take issue with, and discuss with your colleagues. If you are the owner, fleet manager, financial officer or workshop manager, then this message is for you.

We often read about preventative maintenance, how it should be done, who should be doing it and the benefits it offers to transport operators. But it really is easy to talk about the savings in monetary terms and how to engineer those savings within a PMS system in order to generate those savings, but we seldom talk about the things that the system actually prevents. I hope that in this short article we can cast a light on this hidden but obvious benefit.

Prevention is better than cure, is the age-old adage. Make sure you take care of something before any negative consequences occur. Take steps to avoid accidents, plan for unforeseen circumstances, be prepared for bad things that may come your way. These are all the buzzwords when we think and talk about how we should engineer our management systems to ensure that we remain profitable, that the wheels keep on rolling, and that we minimize the possibility of negative and damaging events.

But are these things actually preventing anything, when seen in the context of managing a fleet of vehicles at the optimum level where downtime is minimized and up time maximized? Let's try and drill deeper into all the things that a well-designed Preventative Maintenance System actually prevents.

Firstly, it prevents driver complacency where the responsibility of the vehicle is purely seen as a fleet manager's problem, or that of the workshop staff. The drop-and-go principle applies here, where a vehicle is often dropped outside the

workshop doors with a serious defect that has come to the attention of the driver, but due to his late arrival at the depot there is nobody to report it to. It then becomes a problem with workshop staff who has to identify the problem, and often the driver is not immediately available to assist since he may be on another trip or resting. This is time lost, and time is money.

There is also risk in this scenario, in that the wrong diagnosis of a problem due to insufficient information may be made, resulting once again in loss of money due to wrong parts being purchased, hours being wasted in diagnosing the fault, and a general waste of time for everyone involved.

A well-designed Preventative Maintenance System takes care of this in that it places specific processes in place to prevent miscommunication and misunderstandings. An easy reference is the airline industry, where post-crash investigators look at the maintenance records of aircraft. The systems and procedures that generate the data they investigate are logical and have been well thought out, tested and implemented. This is an indication of how maintenance systems should be designed, where accountability is only as good as traceability. It is impossible to make people accountable for problems if you cannot clearly detect what they did wrong or neglected to do. The fact is clear. Most accidents and defects occur because people did not follow a procedure.

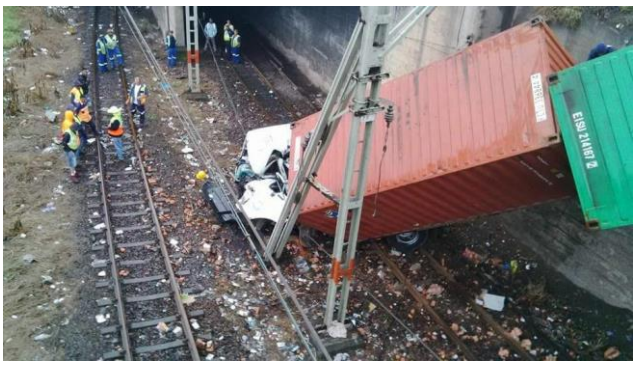
This does not mean that truck maintenance should be at the same level as aircraft maintenance, but when you think rationally about it, you arrive at the point where you ask this question:

Why not? Truck maintenance should be the subject of a system, a procedure, very much along the lines of aircraft maintenance systems. Trucks are not as complicated as aircraft, and the inspection routines does not have to be as lengthy and as thorough, but this does not imply that they are not important and should not be done. Airplanes not carrying freight or passengers lose money where they stand, and this is the same with commercial transport vehicles. They only earn money when they move, and your maintenance system should be designed to ensure maximum road time.

I digress.

The next thing that a Preventative Maintenance System does is to prevent unplanned repairs, particularly when defects result in roadside breakdowns. Trucks are mechanical things, and these have a habit of breaking down, but with proper PMS in place the risk of unplanned breakdowns are substantially reduced. PMS forces inspectors, mechanics and drivers to critically look at the various components of the vehicle and allows them to produce a proper report of the vehicle's overall condition.

PMS also prevents abuse, in that drivers form part of the program, and then starts to see the maintenance of their vehicles as an investment into their own peace of mind, and not purely the responsibility of workshop staff. Understanding that vehicle abuse will inevitably result in a defect, producing downtime and loss of income, may spur drivers on towards investing time into the vehicle and being part of the system that ensures his safety and well-being on the road.



PMS prevents accidents, in that critical components are regularly inspected and attended to, and problems noted and repaired before they result in an accident. In particular, the effective grading of defects into different levels of priority results in flagging those defects that pose a critical risk to driver safety and his ability to operate the vehicle safely. PMS focuses attention on these issues and ensures that they are repaired and rectified before the vehicle is allowed back on the road.

PMS prevents driver fatigue, in that among all of the risks that drivers has to face on South African roads, the one thing he does not have to be concerned about is the condition of his equipment. The fact that proper PMS involves the driver in the maintenance of the vehicle, results in him obtaining a better level of knowledge on the operating principles of the various components of the vehicle he is using. This inspires a higher degree of professionalism and expertise on his part, resulting in peace of mind that he will be able to deal with emergencies more efficiently.

The effects of a well-designed PMS system is far reaching and goes beyond these few items we have considered in this article. We will soon discuss the financial impacts of a PMS system since there is no point in spending money on a system that does not show any positive results at the bottom line. PMS does not have to be expensive, and one should measure the financial benefits that the system provides against increased productivity, fuel efficiency, driver safety and morale, and finally the positive impact of having safe and well-managed vehicles on our roads.

Everybody wins. For too long has Preventative Maintenance been something that operators and owners see as a pit into which money is thrown for little reward. The rewards are there to be enjoyed, and a small investment in time and money will make those rewards available to all transport operators.