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# Getting on the right track with

# GPS



Fleet managers and dispatchers spend their days trying to keep tabs on personnel and equipment in order to run an efficient business, and that's not always an easy task. But with the sophistication of today's global positioning system (GPS) tracking devices, staying on top of your company's service activities can be a lot easier than you might think.

According to Vince Arone, general manager and vice-president of business development at PinPoint GPS Solutions, a provider of real-time fleet tracking services, GPS is gaining ground in the mechanical contracting world. "That's because many in the industry are discovering that GPS systems can address a number of challenges."

Arone reports that two things have happened to bring GPS to the mainstream. For one, GPS has become a lot more affordable. "Generally the cost of tracking has come down in terms of hardware, software (most is web-hosted now) and air-time fees. It's like the cell phone. You get your phone free with a three-year contract. Now you can have GPS capabilities for as little as \$40 to \$60 a month per unit, without any capital outlay."

Another important driver that is increasing the need to keep tabs on field activities is the growing use of service level agreements (SLAs). "In order to compete today, mechanical and plumbing companies are often providing customers with clearly defined SLAs that require service within a specified time frame," Arone says. "GPS not only helps you locate the closest available driver, but you also have a means to measure their arrival times."

Given the benefits – and depending on a contractor's needs and customer base – it is rapidly becoming a technology that operators are coming to realize they can't afford to be without.

## Contractor finds value in GPS

Two years ago the folks at Lisi Mechanical Contractors Limited in Mississauga, Ont., were getting fed up with rising gas costs and technicians being "missing in action." That's when the plumbing services company decided it was time to sign up for GPS tracking services for its trucks on the road in Toronto and B.C.

According to Christina Franco, the company's accounts and office manager, until GPS came along, she simply called drivers when an emergency call came in. With five to 10 emergency calls a day, that wasn't always easy.

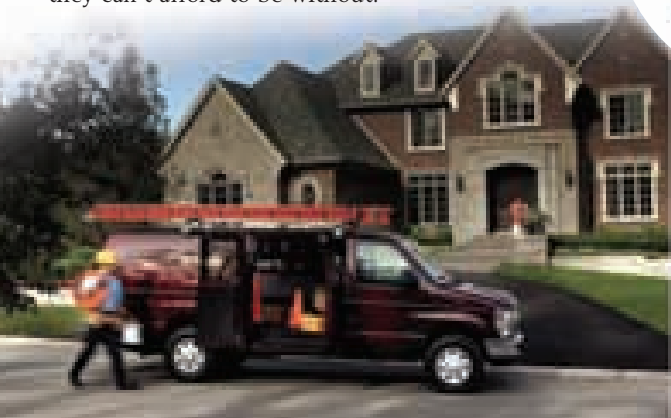
"GPS has given us the opportunity to log customer and supplier visits, monitor where our guys are, how much gas they're using, and how close they are to customer sites. Now we're not sending someone half-way across the city when someone is around the corner."

The GPS service subscription costs about \$600 a month for the tracking of all 15 of the company's vehicles from a central location, and Franco reports that the return on investment was realized within about four months. "It has paid for itself over and over again. We had astronomical gas consumption, but once the GPS was in, it was easy to monitor that, as well as what our technicians were doing during the day."

An added bonus was tracking work-related versus personal travel. "By properly monitoring personal usage, we can charge the gas and mileage back to the driver. It's also helped with customer disputes, since we have a report of when they arrived at and left a site. Payroll is more accurate as well."

All in all, it's been a good investment for the firm, she says. "It's very efficient and has saved us a lot of time."

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## Where GPS can help

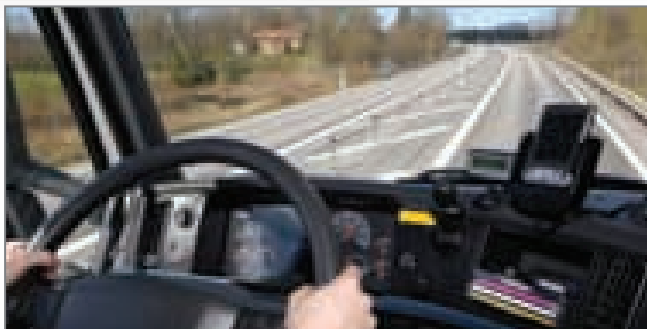
- It's 10 a.m. and your dispatcher has just received an emergency call. All your technicians are out on the road, so it takes half an hour or longer to call each and every one to find out where they are, and if they're available.
- You need to find your top HVAC specialist to handle a particularly tricky service request, but they aren't answering their phone, and you don't know their current location. So the customer is left waiting until you find them.
- Your fuel costs are rising steadily and you suspect that a driver is wasting time taking longer routes or performing unauthorized work during regular business hours.

## A two-way communications street

Depending on the GPS solution of choice, dispatchers can communicate with on-board devices to track a truck's current location (information is fed back to the dispatch centre in real-time), as well as deliver messages and provide the destination address. If the driver is available, he or she can simply click on the message to get a map showing the most efficient route.



Drivers can also use the terminals to input their status – for example, if they are on lunch or at a site – so that dispatchers immediately know if they need to find an alternative. Some systems will even provide a running tally of such statistics as speed, fuel consumption, acceleration, idling time and other data.



## Measuring the ROI

Whatever your investment, it's always good to know what your payout will be in the end. Pinpoint GPS's Vince Arone reports that, on average, users can see a return within a three-month time period if all advantages are factored for. When assessing the potential return on investment for a GPS tracking system, consider:

**Idling time** – With the ability to track vehicles on the road, Arone estimates that you can reduce idling time by 20 to 30 per cent overall, which translates into savings on fuel and vehicle wear and tear.

**Overtime** – GPS enables better scheduling and utilization of resources on the road. Through route optimization, a company can easily save up to two hours per month of each driver's time on the road.

**Vehicle maintenance** – Less time on the road translates into fewer service appointments and more effective preventative maintenance.

**Driving habits** – GPS systems can be programmed to record all sorts of bad driving practices, from sudden braking and rapid acceleration to excessive speed and distance. A driver "abstract" will pinpoint where drivers can adjust habits to drive more effectively and reduce costs.

**Theft protection** – Alerts within the system allow you to track the location of the vehicle to inform police. (Note: some systems only provide notification that it's stolen without providing location coordinates).

**Tracking work "on the side"** – It is not uncommon for technicians to squeeze in a few jobs "on the side" during the course of a day. GPS allows managers to track any unauthorized stops. If the practice is allowed, it will help operators ensure that the extra work stays within agreed upon parameters (e.g. eight hours a week maximum outside of business hours).

**Reporting** – Supervisors can check how much time is spent on sites, service recalls and other details. The information can be used to adapt contracted rates to meet service demands.