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Time to Write Off The Traditional Whiteboard

with a modern, innovative, web-based approach to depot train maintenance planning

The UK's rail networks are getting busier. This is reflected in increasing activity levels within depots, in turn placing increasing burdens on depot staff and existing infrastructure. Improving productivity and efficiency are obviously therefore key to reducing these pressures and to the continued successful operation of rail depots across the country.

Good planning, organisation and communication are essential factors in the effectiveness of almost any team-based work. In depots, this co-ordination has historically been based around a whiteboard, usually located in a control room or supervisor office somewhere on-site. Information is handwritten upon this whiteboard, detailing train expected arrivals and departures, together with the rolling stock maintenance tasks that need to be carried out.

This of course presents the challenge of dissemination of relevant information to staff working around the depot who cannot directly see the whiteboard itself. It also allows for both loss and corruption of information which can simply be wiped off the whiteboard, unclearly written and misread etc. Simple, easy-to-make mistakes are inevitable, and could have a significant effect on the depot's output.

The traditional whiteboard system's laborious nature absorbs valuable staff time in its administration, which could be more productively utilised if released from the tedious manual updating requirements involved.

As the depot gets busier, so does the whiteboard, with new information being produced more frequently and the amount of information being displayed growing. This places increasing strain on the whiteboard system and those operating it – who have to juggle updating the whiteboard with the multitude of other tasks they need to carry out. This obviously increases the likelihood of errors being made.

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A modern, I.T.-based solution would therefore seem a natural development, in the same way that computer-based applications have been created for so many other information processing and control activities. UK-based rail technology company Zonegreen has stepped up to this challenge with its Operator Planning Suite (O.P.S.). This has been developed with the above issues in mind, and Zonegreen have produced this product specifically designed purely for use in rail depots.

New technologies: adding benefits, removing problems

Zonegreen's Operator Planning Suite (O.P.S.), a multi-user, web-based graphical task planning application, is a cost-effective replacement of the traditional manual whiteboard. It has a graphical map layout representing the depot on which users can position trains and create and assign maintenance tasks, together with schedules for train arrivals and departures.

Instead of being physically handwritten on a board, all information is inputted to the system electronically. Changes and progress can be entered straightforwardly and easily, and are automatically and immediately recorded and updated on the system, improving system reliability and reducing the likelihood of any communication failures and breakdowns.

O.P.S. instantly transmits all information to anywhere in the depot - or elsewhere. It provides up-to-the-minute information on any train in the depot including train ID, train location within the depot, expected arrival and departure times and types of maintenance required. This real-time operation allows maintenance information to be updated and displayed in an accurate and synchronised manner.

This leads to another feature of the system, which is that more than one copy of the whiteboard can function at the same time. Zonegreen's O.P.S. is web-based system using cloud technology – allowing anyone with suitable login credentials and an internet connection to access the system anytime, anywhere. The system has various user levels allowing for differing levels of user rights of operation and access.

It can also be beneficial to other areas of an organisation located outside of the depot, especially in large maintenance organisations or TOCs who can benefit from having up-to-the-minute information easily available to its various departments. All information handled by O.P.S. is securely hosted online, instead of via any additional hardware, so any equipment that has an internet connection is able (with the relevant user login details) to access the most up-to-date information in real-time – excellent for transmitting information quickly and efficiently within an organisation.

As well as management and planning personnel, the system is useful to other staff working in the depot. Tasks can be shown in easy-to-read lists, making planning daily workloads simple, and graphical depot map layouts allow easy identification of rolling stock as well as forming an intuitive platform for the operation of the system.

O.P.S. also has the ability to produce reports at the click of a button. All maintenance histories and logs are fully recorded, visible and traceable, allowing a user to produce complete activity reports for any specific vehicle or time period. This simple method of report generation has the potential to save hours filling in maintenance forms and rifling through paperwork - the O.P.S. system can do all the searching.

The traceability the system offers by recording actions and its facility for report generation removes the afore-mentioned risks of loss or distortion of information inherently associated with the operation of a traditional manual wipe-clear whiteboard.

With the Operator Planning Suite, Zonegreen – already widely known in the rail industry for their market-leading Depot Personnel Protection System (DPPS™) - now provide an affordable and dedicated solution, designed especially for rail depots, to augment depot planning, co-ordination and communication with the very latest in modern, web-based technologies.