MORSE WATCHMANS

Best Practices for Fleet Utilization Guide

When you control the keys, you control the fleet.

Today's fleets can take a lot of different forms. Yours may include cars, snowplows, dump trucks, limousines, mowers, buses, ambulances, segways, motorcycles, golf carts or forklifts.

No matter what kind of vehicles you have in your fleet, their management is a complex job. You have to control costs, balance need with availability and keep your vehicles running safely while keeping all your drivers rolling. You have to work with drivers, service technicians and your own executive management, providing each with the tools, wheels and information they need in a timely manner.

Done right, fleet management can be a smooth and seamless operation that contributes to the overall organizational objectives. The purpose of this guide is to provide best practices and recommendations for optimizing the management of your fleet. The best way to begin is to look at the most important factor: utilization.

How vehicles are utilized and how often, who drives them and where they get driven – all of these elements can be grouped under the category of utilization, and all of them can greatly influence how well your fleet performs and how much it costs your organization.

Fleet managers use a number of different kinds of methods for managing utilization. You may have lists, spreadsheets or even specialized software providing insights that help you determine which vehicle to give each driver each time they request a vehicle. Perhaps the software also helps you account for scheduled service, driver issues, conflicts over who gets the newest set of wheels etc. But does it truly help optimize utilization?

And, of course, all of this can be rendered moot if a driver takes the key for a vehicle they are not authorized to use. Controlling the keys to your fleet is a vital step to controlling the fleet itself.

Optimizing Utilization of Your Fleet: Best Practices

This list of best practices will provide some guidance about which issues to take into consideration when setting up your system for managing your fleet of vehicles. Naturally, just as every organization's fleet is different, every management system should be as well.

Use this list as a basis to create your own, and configure it to take your own business priorities and objectives into account.

1. Create "pools" or groups of vehicles

You can create pools of vehicles which share characteristics, or which will be used by specific groups of individuals. For example, a limo company can group larger limos which will be driven only by those drivers who have the proper driver's license credentials. A touring business can group SUVs so that their use can be limited to tours in more rugged locations. Grouping vehicles in pools makes it easier to control usage, including which vehicle is assigned to each driver, which vehicle gets used for each trip etc.

2. Decide how you will assign vehicles

Every organization is different. Consider your own mission or objectives and then you can better determine how to prioritize how vehicles are assigned to users. Your criteria could include:

Lowest mileage: Vehicles with the lowest mileage are issued first to balance the overall use of a fleet.

First in, first out: Vehicles are issued in the order by which they were returned. In this way, each vehicle will get used the same number of times. This evenly distributes use across the fleet and ensures that newer vehicles are not being overused.

Most fuel/charge: Vehicles are issued based on the amount of fuel or charge they have. This is particularly helpful when you have a fleet of electric cars, since it ensures vehicles with low charge levels spend more time charging before they are issued. Systems with APIs make it possible to integrate the key management and charging systems.

Priority: Administrators determine the order that vehicles are issued based on any priority you want. If some of your vehicles have recently been repainted, you can send those out first. You can keep an older vehicle in service, but reserve it so that it's only issued when all other vehicles are on the road already. Or a limo company can choose their newest/nicest limos to be issued first, regardless of mileage.

Pool selection: Each driver gets to choose the vehicle they want to use based on their own preferences. Municipality workers and drivers may need access to different vehicles at varying times throughout the day, or on different days of the week. If you have no other priority needs, this will help keep your drivers more satisfied on the job.

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3. Take vehicles offline efficiently

There are many reasons why a vehicle may need to be taken temporarily out of rotation. As the fleet manager, it is your responsibility to keep your fleet running smoothly and safely. To make sure you are getting the best ROI from your fleet, not only is it your responsibility to take it out of service when needed, it is also up to you to get it back on the road as quickly as possible and with minimal disruption to overall operations. Here are three reasons vehicles might be taken offline.
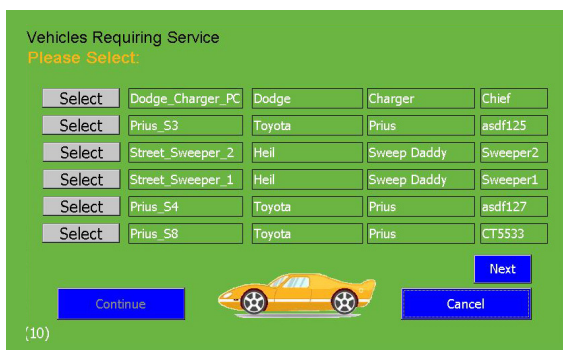
Scheduled service

You can decide that every vehicle in your fleet needs to be deep-cleaned inside and out every three months, no matter how much they are used. Or maybe you've purchased new GPS technology that needs to be installed in each vehicle. These are services which you need to schedule in order to ensure they take place.
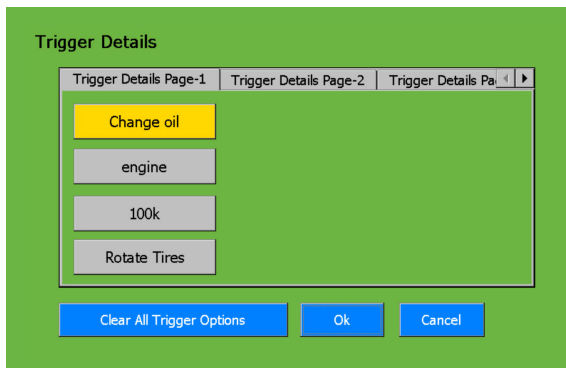
Service triggers

Certain conditions can trigger a service call for individual vehicles. For example, you can change the oil in each vehicle every 5,000 miles, or rotate the tires when they've reached 15,000 miles.

While you could request that your drivers report when these milestones have been reached, service triggers guarantee that the vehicle is removed from service when the time comes. Once the vehicle is taken offline, service techs can be notified that a vehicle requires attention.

Triggers should be configurable within the system software based on a wide range of conditions including total mileage, recurring mileage, usage time, or simply regular time intervals.

Returned with problems

Sometimes a problem will arise while a driver is using a vehicle. When this happens, it's imperative that the problem be reported upon return. Making this process easy and convenient for drivers will help ensure that problems never linger or worsen. You never want a situation where a driver finds a vehicle unusable or problematic due to a service issue going unreported.

Unexpected problems might include a low tire, check engine light or broken windshield wiper.

Your fleet management system software should provide for easy entry of service issues. It should automatically take that vehicle offline so that it is not available to users. Information about the service issue should be sent to the appropriate technician or other individuals so that the problem can be promptly addressed.

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4. Manage booking requests

Good fleet management includes the balancing of many different kinds of requests, each with its own reasoning. Some may be well-founded and others less-so. While it is the job of the fleet manager to determine how to allocate all the vehicles in the fleet, technology can provide the support and control to make this job more efficient and practical. Noting that every fleet of vehicles is unique – and every team of drivers is, as well – here are some suggestions to help you make sure your fleet usage is optimal. Your fleet management system should enable all of these policies with easy-to-use automation.

Keep certain users limited to specific vehicles

Your six-foot-three driver needs the one limo without a sunroof, since that's the only one he fits in. Make sure it's going to be available when he's on shift. Or make sure your driver with the heavy accelerator foot is always given the bus with the third-party speed-tracking technology installed.

Make sure the newest vehicle isn't taken out every time

Every single driver is going to want that brand new van, but that's not the most efficient way to balance your fleet.

Limit usage of specific vehicles to certain times of day

If you have reasons to prefer that a certain bus, truck or other vehicle be used primarily during the day, your scheduling should reflect that.

Make sure your top driver always gets the most desirable vehicle

Reward your best employees by giving them the newest, sportiest, most comfortable or other desirable vehicle.

Deny requests from personnel for specific vehicles

While it can be sensitive to personally deny a request, good scheduling software will simply not make certain vehicles available to specific users.

On-demand bookings

Walk-up bookings allow drivers to use vehicles specifically designated for on-demand requests.

Keep vehicles available for on-the-fly requests

When an unscheduled or unexpected need for a vehicle arises – and they will – there should always be a vehicle available. You'll want to be sure that the driver has the permissions needed to drive that specific vehicle before it is allocated to them.

Benefits of Key Control: Challenges and Opportunities for Fleet Management

Challenge: Controlling vehicle pool rules

Drivers may want to use their favorite vehicle every time. Managers often prefer not to have to deal directly with personnel for this issue.

Solution: Lowest mile pool feature

A lowest mile pool distribution configuration ensures that vehicles with the lowest mileage are issued first to balance the wear and tear on a fleet. This will prevent preferred or more expensive vehicles from being overused, while others sit idle – effectively extending the life of your fleet.

Challenge: Marking a vehicle offline

Fleets often have vehicles that need repair, maintenance, or need to be removed from service for one reason or another. A manager would need to get involved and remove the physical key from circulation.

Solution: Intelligent technology

Vehicles that are marked in need of maintenance, either by users or via triggers in the system, are removed from service immediately and automatically. With a key management system, access to the vehicle key can then be limited to the service crew.

Challenge: Backup for drivers' primary vehicles

If a driver is assigned the same vehicle each time, what happens when that vehicle goes offline unexpectedly for a service issue?

Solution: Priority vehicle with pool backup

Your fleet management system should enable a contingency plan that directs this driver to another vehicle or vehicle pool when their vehicle is not available.

Command Your Fleet: Choosing a Fleet Management System

The best fleet management systems and software will manage and automate all of the best practices above, and more.

Perhaps the best – and most practical – way to control your fleet is to control the keys to the vehicles. A key management system that is purpose-built and designed for fleet management will give your drivers an easy way to request and return keys while also delivering all of the functionality discussed above to optimize fleet utilization. Keys are locked in a secure cabinet, and drivers are permitted to remove the keys only for the vehicles you have authorized them to drive at any given time. You can see in an instant who has removed a key, when and for how long.

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Another advantage of a fleet management system that controls keys is that you can use it to secure and protect additional keys such as offices, supply rooms etc.

In choosing your fleet management system, be sure it also provides you with a dashboard that shows a quick snapshot of the overall state of your fleet at any time. Of course, it should have an
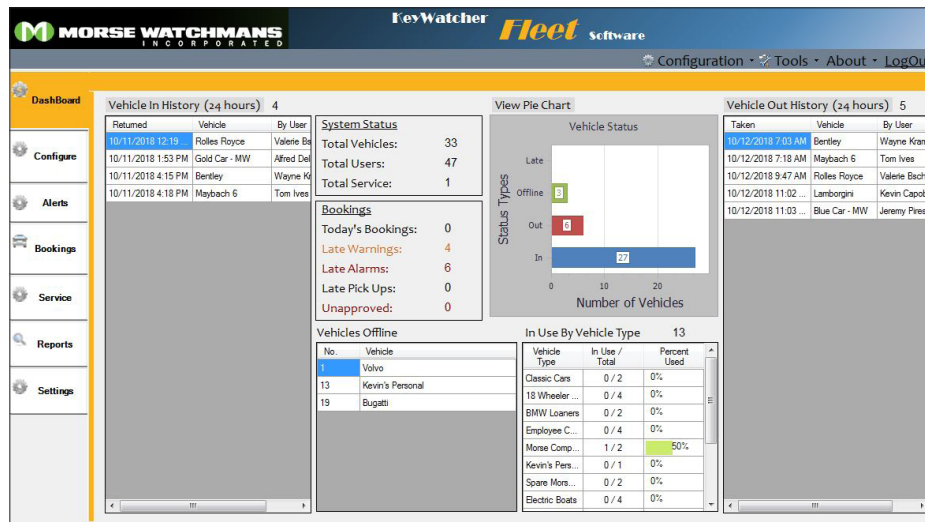
extremely intuitive and easy-to-use interface for both management and for drivers. Features like one-touch key return add this type of convenience.

As mentioned above, the system should be able to integrate with third-party APIs. This gives you a wide range of possibilities such as adding advanced vehicle telematics to provide a wealth of data about how and where vehicles have been driven. You can get information including speed,

braking, hard turns, fuel level, mileage and more, with additional insights on specific drivers that will further help you manage personnel as well as utilization of vehicles.

You will want to choose a system that enables you to generate different types of reports profiling drivers, vehicles and, most important, utilization. Your utilization report should include information on usage with the ability to sort by pool, by fleet, or by individual vehicle. The criteria should be configurable, so that you can view the information that gives you the greatest insights on your own fleet.

Your system should be designed specifically for fleet management. While many key control systems are being offered to the fleet industry, most have simply adapted their existing software with a few features rather than designed and engineered a new system to specifically address the needs of fleet managers.

By reading the best practices outlined in this guide, and choosing a system that meets all of the criteria listed above, you can ensure that your system will maximize the potential of your fleet and optimize utilization – saving money for your organization and helping you to meet your goals and objectives.