



Owner-Operator's Business
Association of Canada
Association professionnelle des
routiers autonomes du Canada

...from the
director's chair

Technology: Scourge or saviour?

We don't need to look too hard to find someone whose ability to earn a living has been temporarily suspended by a faulty sensor. Trucks, it seems, are regularly humbled by even the most innocuous parts, sometimes not even directly related to the operation of the vehicle. It's the price we pay for near-zero emissions engines.

But is it a fair price? Is all that technology really helping, or is it driving some truckers underground in search of solutions?

We know there's a thriving business in removing emissions hardware from recent-model trucks because of the cost and poor reliability of that technology. The constant breakdowns, missed earning opportunities, and poor fuel economy have hit some especially hard. More than a few have been driven right out of the industry by repeated failures and the lack of a proper repair solution. Putting the same bedeviled parts back on is begging for a repeat of the previous problem.

While I don't condone the "thwart the emissions system" approach, I'm entirely sympathetic to drivers desperately seeking solutions to very real problems. The problems affect fleets too. They have trucks regularly sidelined by failed bits of hardware, but having more than one truck at their disposal puts them in a better position than the lowly owner/operator. It works the same way when it comes to getting dealers to address the problem. Fearful of losing a fleet sale, the dealers are apt to get big fleet customers up and running long before a single truck buyer. It doesn't seem fair, but that's just the way it is.

As trucks become ever more complex, their reliability seems to be suffering. We're told that today's newest trucks are in fact more reliable than those of just a few years ago, but I'd like to know what dealers and truck makers plan to do about those older ones, especially those with now-obsolete emissions systems.

Those things are now just about worthless on trade-in.

When I hear regulators and truck manufacturers talking about mandating even more technology for trucks like electronic logs, or collision avoidance and stability control systems, I, like many others, get a bit nervous. For Heaven's sake, we still have issues with ABS warning lights that result in tickets and citations! How excited should we be about the prospect of some new sensor throwing an obscure fault code that the engine perceives as a threat, thus leaving the truck de-rated and stranded at roadside?

Along with the reliability issues comes the cost of this technology. It has contributed to a dramatic increase in the price of new trucks. One of our members recently bought a nice new on-highway truck and paid more than \$165,000 for it. When you're toting a note like that, you can't afford downtime.

From 2004 and onward, every new model-year has been more expensive than the previous version, largely because of the 'advances' in technology and mandates of one sort or another – from the Environmental Protection Agency's particulate matter and NOx reduction requirements in 2004, 2007 and 2010, to the on-board diagnostic (OBD) mandate in 2013, the fuel efficiency regulations in 2014 – and so on. But we're not done yet. There are more rules coming from the EPA and the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which Canadian regulators will adopt too, pretty well at face value.

Have these mandates made our jobs any easier or safer, or our companies more profitable? That's a dubious proposition, but some will argue that they have. Unfortunately, I think this piling-on of one mandate after another, technology upon technology, has made more than a few of us leery of anything associated with the T-word.



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And that may be an unfortunate and unintended consequence. The word technology, when used as a noun to describe a product or device, has become pervasive. For example, when we are talking about fuel-saving technologies, is an APU a technology? How about a trailer side skirt? Tire pressure monitoring systems? Automated transmissions or downspeeding?

Technology of that sort can help improve fuel economy and cut costs. Then there's time-saving technology and a ton of other productivity software available for smartphones that drivers are embracing wholeheartedly. Those technologies are supposed to work for us, but when an app fails to deliver, we simply delete it and eat the 99 cents. Too bad we can't do the same with engine technology.

To be fair to the truck and engine people, advancing technology has improved fuel economy and that in itself saves money. I'm also led to believe reliability is improving as well, but not fast enough for some.

Personally, I'd be prepared to give up half a mile per gallon for some assurance that a bad sensor or bogus fault code wouldn't leave me stranded.

Looking ahead to vehicle-to-vehicle communication that's supposed to prevent collisions, and driverless trucks, I'm afraid that the current success rates with various forms of on-board technology do not inspire a lot of confidence in such advanced systems.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to the sensors and connectors. Until they come up with the technology to build a bullet-proof sensor, I'm staying on the sidelines. I'm not yet prepared to trust my life to a 39-cent part fabricated by the lowest bidder.