ARTICLE

MINIMIZING DRIVER DWELL TIMES BY IMPROVING VISIBILITY

C3 Solutions

Industry Leaders in Yard and Dock Management

Driver dwell time averages in the US have been historically high this year, thanks to bottlenecks choking supply chain operations today. Record high retail consumption in the absence of tangible ways to spend on services led to a spike in US imports in 2021. FRED data shows that US imports grew by 14.4% year-over-year this October — and a full 53% growth in imports from the pandemic depth of May '20.

The West Coast ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which handle roughly 40% of all imports making their way into the country, ended up being the proverbial chicken's neck to America's supply chains. The port terminals cannot handle the incoming import tsunami, with docks overflowing with containers that linger in the terminal.

Land-side port operations, including drayage, witnessed the chaos firsthand. Port truck chassis capacity, which is under control by container lines, created an acute chassis shortage across Southern California, as overflowing warehouses forced drivers to drop the chassis along with the container outside warehouses.

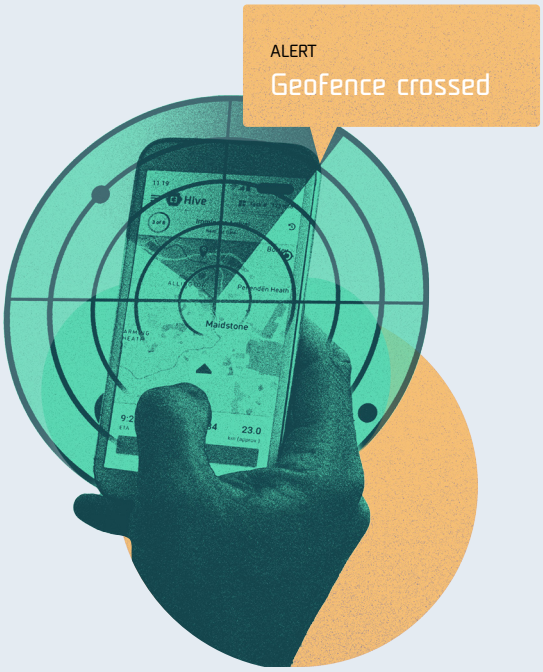
The common denominator to these operations is drivers idling — outside chassis sheds, port terminals, transloading docks, and warehousing hubs.

Truckers idling in the cab is nothing new to the industry. Drivers and loading schedules are seldom in sync, much to the ire of drivers, as some face penalties for arriving earlier or later than scheduled. The recently constituted ELD mandate also means drivers are bound to their hours of service, with such schedule mismatches costing drivers literal money. COVID-19 added salt to the injury, exacerbating driver dwell times by several multiples of what it was pre-pandemic.

From the perspective of warehouses and container yards, the challenge starts with building the ideal schedule. Solving this challenge begins by calculating the correct number of loads to be accepted to be loaded or unloaded for the day, as load optimization is critical to ensuring operations stick to the schedule. Loads that could potentially delay existing schedules — like labour-intensive loads — need to be restricted to specific time windows during the day.

Traditionally, warehouses have next to zero visibility on when drivers arrive. Appointment scheduling and global visibility technologies like C3 Hive can help here, significantly streamlining schedules and driver arrivals. Considering drivers usually come either in advance or late to their scheduled slot on any given day, providing a way for warehouses to know when a driver would tentatively arrive helps smoothen operations and reduce driver dwell times.

Visibility can be brought by geofencing technology, helping warehouses detect when drivers are close and allowing them to prepare for loading or unloading by the time the truck arrives at the location. Proactively knowing truck arrival times would help dynamically modify yard schedules, assisting workers in engaging with trucks that come early and accommodating them in the slots of trucks running late. This way, warehouses can avoid bottlenecks due to trucks crowding in across a specific time window, which often results in a free-for-all dash for loading preference.



By ensuring smoother loading and unloading at warehouses, operations can become more efficient and increase overall productivity levels. Today, the pandemic has caused warehouses to overflow, with erratic schedules forcing drivers to queue outside warehouses waiting to unload.

But live unloads taking several hours on top of idling in the warehousing premises have led drivers to increasingly drop their trailers off with containers strapped to them and leaving without hooking onto trailers — thanks to a severe shortage of free chassis at warehouses. Warehouse inefficiency in unloading containers off truck chassis is one of the primary reasons for the chassis shortage in the market today.

The driver shortage is not without rationale. Aside from being a difficult job, drivers are also not treated well across a concerning number of shipper and receiver locations, with reports highlighting drivers refused restroom access while being stuck in a queue for hauling loads. Though COVID-19 transmission fears get cited as reasons for such refusals, drivers need to be treated as frontline workers and be allowed to work with dignity.

An MIT study estimated that trucking capacity shortage is a problem not due to an actual shortage in capacity but instead to driver inefficiency in the way they spend available hours of service. The study found that drivers spend only about seven hours a day driving within the allowed 11 hours a day. Every driver in the US increasing their driving time by a mere 12 minutes every day would help end the industry-wide capacity shortage.

The demanding nature of waiting outside warehouses and intermodal hubs has resulted in the long-haul trucking industry to struggle to find enough drivers as overall volumes keep growing. For the drivers, all the minutes they spend off the road and not driving are wasted minutes they are losing pay, naturally making them resent extended dwell times. In essence, ensuring drivers can engage with the warehouse remotely and streamline yard operations would help kill two birds with one stone — drastically cutting down driver dwell times while elevating warehouse efficiency.

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