



From Guesswork to GPS: Owen Tree Service's Tech Transformation in Fleet Management



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Introduction

For years, Owen Tree Service, a diversified, employee-owned tree care and landscaping company in Michigan, managed the operational complexities and risks of its fleet without real-time visibility into vehicle location or status. This operational blind spot hindered efficiency, complicated dispatch, and limited the ability to proactively manage fleet health. Overcoming this challenge was a strategic imperative for the company to enhance productivity, ensure driver safety, and protect its bottom line in a highly competitive industry. This is the story of how a new, user-friendly telematics system helped Owen Tree transform from a traditional “mom-and-pop” operation to a more sophisticated, data-driven small business.

Company Snapshot

- **Business Model:** A year-round, multi-service tree care operation with eight revenue-generating departments, serving a mix of residential, commercial, and government contracts
- **Company Structure:** An Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP) company, where employees are part-owners and share in the financial success of the business
- **Annual Revenue:** Approximately \$10-11M
- **Workforce:** A team of about 100 employees supplemented by 20-25 seasonal workers
- **Fleet Scale:** 84 vehicles, ranging from light-duty pickups to heavy-spec semis
- **Total Annual Vehicle Miles:** 1.1 million
- **Telematics Focus:** Self-installed Verizon hardware; GPS tracking; proactive maintenance management; driver behavior monitoring



Key Drivers for a New Telematics Investment

Owen Tree employees drive the company's fleet of 84 vehicles, ranging from pick-up trucks to heavy-spec semis, about 1.1 million miles a year. Dispatching all these vehicles throughout southeastern Michigan, where the company has two offices and multiple staging areas, is no simple task. Across its eight revenue-generating divisions, Owen Tree serves residential and commercial properties, handles contracts with municipal government agencies and the Michigan Department of Transportation, and serves as a construction subcontractor. The company needed an accurate, real-time picture of vehicle locations to improve efficiency and to respond more quickly to urgent requests and emergencies.

The company had already tried several approaches to telematics, all of which had proved overly complex and impractical. Installation had been too labor-intensive and the software too difficult to use. These negative experiences had created internal skepticism and a clear mandate – the next solution had to be fundamentally simpler and offer a positive user experience. Success would depend on seamlessly integrating into daily operations a system that management, mechanics, and employee drivers could all embrace.

Owen Tree's initial goals centered on fleet tracking. But, as they began their research, leaders quickly realized how the company could benefit from additional system features. The ability to manage overall fleet health through vehicle diagnostics and proactive maintenance alerts emerged as a compelling value proposition. The ability to track vehicle status could help reduce idling time. The company began searching for a comprehensive fleet management system, not just a GPS tracking solution. Because Owen prides itself in setting the standard in the Tree Care and Landscaping industry, it also sought a system that would align with its longtime mission: providing innovative, practical, top-quality services and products. As an example of its industry leadership, Owen Tree Service was the first U.S. company to be certified under the stringent Tree Care Industry Association (TCIA) accreditation guidelines in 2004. President Randy Owen, who founded Owen Tree Service in 1985, is a widely respected industry leader with nearly 50 years of executive experience.

Owen Tree prioritizes safety, quality workmanship, and timely performance, while also striving to treat employees with dignity and be a responsible community member. In 2021, Owen Tree became employee-owned, a transition undertaken to ensure a sustainable future, provide significant retirement benefits, and empower staff by placing company ownership in the hands of those whose hard work builds the business.



Enhancing a Safety-first Organizational Culture

Owen Tree leaders recognized that the success of a new telematics initiative would depend as much on people and process as it did on the technology itself. To prepare for the changes, the company built on its respected organizational commitment to protecting worker safety and well-being. Rachel Collins, Owen's Office Manager, who is the top safety officer in the company, considered how they would use data from the new system and updated policies and training accordingly. She also devised a clear communications strategy to address drivers' initial reservations about being monitored:

- **Transparency:** Leaders openly explained and demonstrated how the technology worked, clarifying exactly what data were being collected and how Owen Tree would use it to improve operations and safety – not to micromanage employees.
- **Benefit Alignment:** The team underscored that, as an ESOP company, any cost savings achieved through efficiency gains and reduced fuel consumption would directly contribute to the company's financial performance and, by extension, the value of each employee's stock ownership.
- **Non-Confrontational Dialogue:** Rather than issuing top-down mandates, leadership focused on education and open communication. Through dialogue, leaders addressed concerns directly and helped transform initial skepticism into understanding and, eventually, acceptance.

This three-part approach was crucial in building trust and fostering adoption over time. Owen Tree leaders also revised employee orientation training to make sure everyone was aware of the system and its purpose. This deliberate, empathetic approach ensured that implementation was not just a technical success but also a cultural one, setting the stage for the transformative results that followed.

"We are an employee-owned company. At the end of the day, everybody owns the company, safety is everybody's responsibility, and everybody shares in the profits."

—Randy Owen, President



The Path to Implementation

Key Considerations for Selecting a System

To select a new telematics system provider, Owen Tree evaluated key differentiators that directly addressed the pain points of their previous experiences. In their decision to select Verizon, they prioritized:

- **Ease of Installation:** Verizon offered a standardized OBD-II (on-board diagnostics) port solution with simple plug-and-play installation that could be performed quickly in house, rather than invasive, time-consuming hardwiring.
- **Expanded Functionality:** The chosen system delivered significant value beyond basic GPS tracking. The ability to remotely read engine fault codes, receive automated maintenance alerts, and detect unauthorized unplugging via tamper alerts provided a comprehensive suite of fleet management tools.
- **Price and Provider Relationship:** While price was an important factor, an existing business relationship helped streamline the selection process. Mark Bruman, the company's Maintenance Manager in charge of the fleet, was already familiar with Verizon as their mobile phone provider, which facilitated the initial engagement and simplified the procurement process.

Rollout and Early Implementation

As expected, the system proved easy to install and use. It took Owen Tree's four in-house mechanics about 15-20 minutes on average to install the system in each vehicle. Even staff who did not consider themselves tech-savvy found the system's mobile app intuitive and user-friendly.

Installation

After providing fleet VINs to the vendor, the mechanics received all the required hardware, including wires, leads, and plug-ins. The mechanics reported that installation went smoothly, with only a few minor challenges. Older vehicles required some additional wiring, while the install was temporarily delayed in a few brand-new vehicles until the provider updated the software. However, these issues were manageable and did not significantly impact the overall timeline.

Mobile App and Data Access

The telematics mobile app serves as the system's primary gateway. Today, company staff with full system access through the app include the Operations Manager, Office Manager, all Division managers and field crew leaders, garage staff, and Owen himself. The Operations Manager has access to all the data and reports in the system. Maintenance staff, can run daily, weekly, and monthly reports to see if the fleet is being utilized efficiently. The Scheduling Department and others have limited access: they can only see where the fleet vehicles are located. The company also installed two screens on the main office floor where everyone can view real-time vehicle location for the entire fleet.

Management deliberately provides broad access to the telematics data to foster a culture of collaborative operational intelligence. As Mark Bruman puts it, "We want full visibility! We want everybody to see everything because people come up with their own creative applications for the telematics data, and the company wants to encourage that." This strategic decision moves the system beyond top-down monitoring, empowering employees at all levels to innovate and find new efficiencies.

Minor Challenges

No technology implementation is without its challenges. The company's experience provides valuable lessons by framing these hurdles not as failures, but as learning opportunities that are essential for any business looking to replicate this success. As Owen Tree leaders monitored the new system, they encountered a few minor issues that required troubleshooting and adjustment:

- **Mileage Discrepancy:** Internal testing revealed that the system's mapping software is approximately 2.5% off in its mileage calculations. While minor on a daily basis, this discrepancy can impact the accuracy of long-term, mileage-based maintenance schedules.
- **False Alerts:** The telematics system occasionally triggers false speeding alerts, which sometimes can be traced back to the hardware. The issue can occur, for example, when a unit is improperly seated or when it bounces against the hard surface of the dashboard.

Top Benefits: Using Data for Improvement

The new system has become a central nervous system for Owen Tree's fleet management. The company now benefits from a proactive management posture by leveraging real-time, leading indicators. This data-driven approach has enhanced maintenance, productivity, and safety across the board.

"We didn't understand the pain points we had until after we had the telematics... now, we can't live without it!"

—Randy Owen, President

Revolutionizing Maintenance and Diagnostics

Owen Tree's vehicle maintenance department has experienced the most dramatic transformation. The ability to access real-time diagnostic data has shifted the team from a reactive repair model to a proactive fleet health management strategy.

- **Proactive Maintenance:** Automated alerts for routine services, such as oil changes, ensure that preventative maintenance is performed on schedule, which reduces the risk of premature wear.
- **Remote Diagnostics:** Mechanics can now read engine fault codes remotely the moment a check engine light appears. This allows them to diagnose issues without the vehicle being present, order parts in advance, and perform faster, more accurate repairs.
- **Cost Savings:** Remote diagnostics have empowered mechanics to prevent unnecessary and expensive repairs. In one notable example, the system helped mechanics diagnose an issue correctly, potentially avoiding a misguided and costly \$9,000 replacement of a particulate filter that was not the root cause of the problem.
- **Optimized Scheduling:** By viewing vehicle status and location, mechanics can identify when assets are available for service without disrupting active jobs, maximizing fleet uptime.

Enhancing Productivity and Dispatch Efficiency

Real-time location data has also directly improved operational efficiency and crew productivity. Schedulers can now view the entire fleet on a digital map and, in the event of an urgent customer request, immediately identify and reroute the nearest available crew. This agility has significantly improved customer service and operational responsiveness. Crews also demonstrate stronger focus as awareness of monitoring has reduced extended breaks and unauthorized stops.

Improving Safety and Mitigating Risk

The telematics system has become a cornerstone of the company's safety and risk management program. Owen cannot yet formally quantify the reduction of incidents but leadership indicates several ways the system enhances safety:

- **Incident Verification:** Telematics allows the company to verify incident reports and helps with addressing fraudulent insurance claims by recording what actually happens to fleet vehicles on the road.
- **Improved Driver Safety:** The telematics app can be programmed to identify speeding and other unsafe driver behaviors. The Office Manager reviews all speeding events reported in the app and takes corrective action as needed. The telematics system also monitors seat belt usage to boost compliance with Michigan's primary enforcement seat belt law. Drivers' awareness they are being monitored has had a profound, positive effect on driver behavior, resulting in less speeding, inattention, and aggressive driving.
- **Emergency Response:** Should a crew member get injured or face an emergency in a remote location, the system can pinpoint the vehicle's exact location, ensuring that help can be dispatched quickly and accurately.

Financial Impact and Return on Investment

The telematics system's monthly cost is roughly \$1,800 for the 84 installed units. While the company has not yet completed a precise ROI calculation, management reports that the savings from improved productivity, safer driver behavior, and more efficient fleet utilization are "significant" and far outweigh this investment. And the potential for future savings is substantial. For example, by analyzing idling data, the company can address costly fuel waste. The Maintenance Manager points out that a single truck can burn four gallons of fuel an hour while idling, meaning a truck idling for 4 hours can waste 16 gallons of diesel – a clear opportunity for data-driven cost reduction.

Next Steps: The Future of a Data-Driven Fleet

For Owen Tree, telematics implementation was a strategic investment in operational intelligence that has already delivered tangible returns and positioned the company for future growth and continuous improvement. Their telematics system is viewed as a foundation for ongoing operational excellence.

The company intends to become more analytical and data-driven as its systems evolve. Leadership acknowledges that while the core functions of the system delivered immediate ROI, the organization is still learning its advanced features. They plan to conduct in-depth analysis of fuel consumption to systematically reduce idling costs, for example. And they have not yet explored the system's comprehensive reporting module and driver safety scorecards, which they expect will provide constructive feedback and further encourage safe driving habits.

Owen Tree also plans to explore integrating dashcam cameras, inside and outside the trucks, with its telematics units. Video footage will provide context for incident reports and protect the company against fraudulent claims. Additionally, the cameras will further reinforce driver safety, reminding staff to avoid distractions and drive defensively. As Randy Owen says, "The telematics will also reduce the major impact auto collisions have on the company through higher insurance premiums, property damage, and production losses." He is optimistic that they will see greater benefits in time, including enhanced worker safety. Owen Tree took a pragmatic, phased approach to realize value: they mastered the fundamentals first and now build toward realizing the full value of the investment as organizational capacity grows.

For this Michigan tree service and landscaping company, telematics is the key to a more efficient, safer, and profitable future, driven by data and powered by insight. Their experience offers several critical lessons for other organizations considering a new telematics investment:

- 1. Prioritize Ease-of-Use and Installation:** Owen Tree's past challenges demonstrate that overly complex systems requiring specialized, invasive hardware installation can doom a project. A modern, OBD-II-based solution is essential for rapid, successful deployment by in-house teams.
- 2. Lead with Transparency and Incentive Alignment:** Gaining employee trust is paramount. This case provides a best-in-class model for linking technology benefits to employee rewards via the company's ESOP, creating a powerful shared incentive for success.
- 3. Embrace Phased Adoption:** A gradual rollout allows an organization to learn and adjust. Companies should not expect to master every advanced feature from day one. Focusing on core functions first and expanding over time is a sustainable path to success.
- 4. Look Beyond GPS:** While location tracking is a core feature, the greatest value often lies in secondary benefits. Safety incident alerts, remote diagnostics, proactive maintenance notifications, and fuel consumption analysis can deliver additional long-term cost savings.

