Computer can tell transport company everything from weather to proper routes

By ALAN PARKER
Staff Reporter

Art Dearman doesn't even have to look out his window to know how many transport trailers he has sitting on the lot at Maislin Transport Ltd.'s Belleville terminal. He just asks his computer.

"Our fabulous machine," Dearman calls the on-line computer system which provides almost instantaneous information on every aspect of Maislin's transport operation at 40 terminals throughout central Canada and the northeastern United States.

Developed in stages over the past three years, the computer system has transformed the complex task of keeping tabs on the continuous flow of goods and materials handled by the company, said Dearman, manager of the Belleville terminal.

"We can trace virtually any shipment in our system while we're still talking to the customer on the phone," added Bob Peel, Maislin's regional manager for Ontario. "It takes about five seconds to call up a complete print-out on the location and status of any shipment or piece of equipment."

Although computers are increasingly becoming tools of the trade in the trucking industry, Maislin has carried the state of the art further in its operations than any other transport company in Canada, Peel said.

Across town, Canada Transport Ltd. and Lafferty-Smith Express Lines Ltd. also are moving into the computer field, with a scaled-down counterpart to the Maislin network expected to begin first-stage operation by September.

The Maislin system, which ties in keyboard and print-out machines at the company's 40 terminals with central computer facilities in Toronto, has been at its present level of capability for about eight months, but that capability is being continually upgraded, he said.

At any time, Dearman can find out how many shipments are on their way to the Belleville terminal, what goods are coming and when they're expected to arrive. He can also tell Belleville customers exactly what is happening with shipments they are sending out of the city.

"Before we went to computers, I'd have to be constantly sending telex messages and making long-distance phone calls to get just a fraction of the information I have at my fingertips now," Dearman said. "And it's eliminated so much of the paperwork that used to get in the way."

With 2,766 transport trailers, 869 power tractors and 1,480 drivers to keep track of, the computer system has been an organizational godsend to the Canadian-owned company, Peel said.

But the computer system does far more than monitor trucks and their loads.

It provides continually updated weather reports for any area through which a Maislin driver will be passing.

Dearman was able to tell, for example, that road conditions were poor in southern Virginia one Wednesday morning this winter as freezing rain fell after a one-inch snowfall overnight. He just asked the computer for a weather report from the company's terminal in Norfolk, Va.

"We're having better weather than they are for a change," Dearman said with a hint of satisfaction.

If a driver is uncertain of the best way to get from one company terminal to another, the computer can even give him an exact street-by-street routing -- complete with the number of stoplights he'll encounter in a downtown core -- to his destination.

"The possibilities are almost endless," said Peel.

"But it takes a lot of discipline on the part of everyone involved to make sure that the computer is updated as soon as anything happens. It doesn't do us any good to know what happened yesterday if we're in the dark about today."

With about 100 million pounds of freight moving in and out of the company's Belleville terminal at 222 University Ave. each year, Art Dearman figures that's a small price to pay to have a computer for a friend.

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