How do we work as an industry to share data ... as a stakeholder to start chipping away at the ineffectiveness and inefficiencies that are created in the terminal?,” Eagle Systems CEO Dave Hensal asked. “Do we know whether the chassis is available, in good repair, when the appointment is and whether there is a driver available?”

Information is key.

“A lot of the information issues out there are really a matter of how we share information and do business without companies feeling that they are giving up strategic advantages,” he said.

Appointment systems, which ocean carriers and railroads favor because they add predictability, can cause difficulties for motor carriers because they feel too inflexible. There are subjects such as cancellations and access to information that have to be addressed, he said.

One improvement to appointment systems would be to eliminate bunching and congestion that result whenever the systems only are in place for part of a day.

Hensal noted that some appointment approaches can be effective, such as the one in the Port of Virginia which has a single system, in contrast to other places where each terminal has its own system or practice.

“It’s a matter of time before we can get this to work better,” he said. “Appointment systems won’t go away [just] because a trucker doesn’t like them.”

Hensal also underscored the importance of the driver vehicle inspection report process as a very effective method of ensuring that a good piece of equipment is available and that defects are addressed.

**Many Different Approaches**

“We could talk about the subject of improving the driver experience for hours,” Hensal said. “There are a lot of different opinions on how to do that, but we have to keep improving both efficiency and the driver experience. I’ve seen a favorable cultural change happening. We do see a lot more stakeholders recognizing the driver, and the fact that without the driver we have nothing. In order to grow [as an industry], we have to improve the experience so drivers want to do this for a living.”

Chief Operating Officer Ted Prince at Tiger Cool Express sees significant opportunity for improving the driver experience, starting with ensuring that a good order piece of equipment is provided.
"The reality is that in a lot of terminals [receiving good order equipment] can be a crapshoot, and some chassis flips have to be authorized by a higher authority. The most important thing for improving the driver experience in a terminal context is productivity – having work that happens according to plan," he said. "We need to re-engineer the supply chain. Everyone wants to reduce costs. Everyone dumps on the driver.

"Clearly, some sort of scheduling system is needed in a dynamic system that is community wide, not with an intermediary who makes money off it. Transparency, visibility and reliability, and it needs to be across the modes. Too many people are optimizing their piece instead of optimizing the network. We have to find a way to optimize the network to create capacity."

Another area of needed improvement, Prince said, is the quality of information, provided to drivers, since applications intended to make certain good order equipment is available too often are unreliable.

Terminal activity is also a concern because drivers lose productivity when operational functions are focused on cost reduction instead of service-based business relationships.

**Reliable Rail Service**

Drivers count on reliable rail service, Prince added, since they, as well as terminal operators, are penalized by delays, particularly when additional labor is needed on short notice to try and make up for late train arrivals.

"Finding people who are willing – and able – to work outdoors is a fundamental issue, according to Prince, particularly if those workers see people who are working indoors getting higher pay and benefits.

Customers can help, Prince added, by minimizing delays for drivers in an electronic logging device era when the consequences of such holdups are magnified.

"Our business remains tactical with so many of our daily driver hours spent confirming load availability – too many lost hours spent chasing chassis and waiting in line for roadworthy equipment," said IMC Companies Executive Vice President of National Sales Donna Lemm.

"If we can zero in on these daily inefficiencies at the terminal," he said, "we can create a standard for equipment availability on our inbound loads, then we have a real chance at improving the driver experience as it relates to equipment utilization and efficient use of a driver’s time," she continued.

"Drop and hook models and peel-offs (density permitting) are ideal for the driver improving supply chain velocity, eliminating time and cost for all stakeholders. Consistency is the key driver to increased productivity."

Lemm credited Federal Maritime Commissioner Rebecca Dye for encouraging the creation of "Innovation Teams," one of which was established in Memphis through Lemm’s leadership in response to difficult market conditions during portions of 2018.

Lemm said the Memphis Supply Chain Innovation Team has one goal: to create a single gray chassis pool seeking interoperability, adequate supply, quality equipment and accountability.

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**Proliferation of Pools**

"We have a multitude of captive and competing pools. This handcuff causes wasted time and cost as shippers/truckers search for the right chassis which is generally in the wrong location. The Innovation Team believes that if you allow the market fair access to chassis that are interoperable (basically gray), we will increase supply and usage on those assets. The team is insisting that there is improved accountability on both supply and quality of chassis.

"The team also believes that the market deserves choice in selecting a chassis provider if the shipper is paying for that chassis usage. We are pushing forward to a holistic solution and the team is working with all stakeholders."

Robert Loya, vice president at CMI West, stressed the importance of a favorable driver experience for a variety of reasons.

"The driver’s productivity drives retention for us," he said. "What terminal they go to determines that. Drivers prefer the moves that give them the most money and the quickest time in the terminal."

Trucker choice in chassis selection is a critical factor, and has been a goal since the transition from ocean carrier-driven equipment supply began nearly a decade ago. Loya cited a key reason: the ability to get up to one additional move per day.

He also observed that some perceived chassis shortages are actually resulting from a lack of efficiency. Appointment systems are an improvement over random moves, but can be punitive if they are too restrictive.

"We want to be predictive and plan labor better," he said, "but it can be hard to keep appointments, particularly in peak season."

He also highlighted the discrepancies in terminal turn times, which even in peak season were kept below CMI’s desired 60 minutes or less at some Southern California terminals, while others took twice that time.

**‘Happier Drivers’**

"The result of better throughput is happier drivers," Loya said. "If one can achieve that time, why can’t others?"

Increasing dual transactions continues to be a goal, moving beyond the current 30 percent to at least 75 percent.

Loya said CMI continues to prefer drop and hook moves as long as an empty is available, and that live loads are unpopular with drivers due to time constraints.

Peel piles would work better, he said, if issues of empty returns are addressed.

An important advancement would be a single information source for cargo information that would help all intermodal providers and users, Loya added.

When asked how to improve drivers’ experience, CEO Jeff Bader at Golden Carriers offered this succinct and direct answer: "efficiencies at the terminal."

Bader, who also leads the Association of Bi-State Association Motor Carriers, stressed that the gradual modernization of computer systems and operations haven’t produced the desired turn time improvements over several decades. That isn’t a negative comment, but rather is the reality, he believes.

"Nobody geared up enough or prepared for the changes," Bader said.

He believes an important advancement would be what he termed a “gray terminal,” where equipment and freight could be redirected whenever one facility is clogged and capacity is available elsewhere to reduce delays and pressure on backlogged facilities.

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