Jonathan Wahba, vice president, sales and marketing, intermodal and automotive at Canadian Pacific Railway, described for Intermodal Insights how apps can benefit all intermodal users, including the railway, drivers and terminal operators.

“All the feedback we get from our driver advisory group is that they love the app, and not having to carry all that paperwork,” he said. “From our workforce planning perspective, we know where the drivers are. That helps us to know what is coming at us at any time of the day and day of the week.”

Wahba outlined how intermodal gate operations have evolved.

Automated systems, beginning about 15 years ago, were an important advancement because of time and cost savings for both railroads and truckers compared with clerks who before then collected paperwork manually. Soon after the adoption of automated gates began, some carriers chose to use biometric identification for drivers’ terminal entry, reflecting concerns about security throughout society.

BNSF Railway’s mobile app, RailPASS, “is designed to make it safer, easier and faster for BNSF trucking partners to move freight in and out of our facilities — from an average of 3-5 minutes to as little as 30 seconds per visit,” said Brant Ring, vice president of business unit operations. “The app has been downloaded more than 50,000 times and is used by about half of drivers entering BNSF facilities.”

Multiple Features

The BNSF app has features including QR technology for fast entrance and exit, the ability to input and view shipment details Drayage Service, Communications Are Enhanced by Apps
from home and a tool to update parking location. Drivers can also receive J1 digital receipts to a mobile device, and access the intermodal facility help menu to reduce driver assistance building visits.

“We will continue to add new features to the RailPASS app,” said Ring.

CP chose to bypass biometrics and focus on its app, known as FastPass.

“What we are really trying to encourage is for people to check in ahead of time,” Wahba said. “If a driver has checked in ahead of time, he is at the gate for less than 30 seconds.”

Because drivers who access CP’s terminals can check in and receive information on cargo and its in-terminal location prior to arrival, they can better manage their time and even check-in before they begin on-duty hours of service status. Additional enhancements are expected later this year, when estimated wait times for entry to and within a terminal are added to CP’s app, which has been downloaded by more than 55,000 drivers.

“That new iteration will help drivers to better plan their day,” Wahba said.

Norfolk Southern has an app known as Express NS, which has features such as early check-in, parking and pickup locations, electronic gate receipts and the ability to submit information on bad order chassis, according to a statement on the railroad’s website.

Drayage apps extend well beyond the railroads’ offerings. Jason Hilsenbeck, president of LoadMatch, explained that three types of drayage apps have emerged: railroad-issued, apps focused on freight providers such as intermodal marketing companies and beneficial cargo owners, and third-party technology aimed at drayage drivers.

**Drayage Apps Proliferate**

Mike Albert, CEO of DrayNow, developed an app that targets intermodal marketing companies to provide freight, offering them both capacity provided by a dependable supply of drivers and data generated by real-time tracking. These capabilities enhance the IMCs’ customer service and speed payments.

“IMCs provide a lot of value,” Albert said. “DrayNow’s customers are seeing the value beyond the capacity piece — the value they didn’t have before.”

In the past, he explained, an IMC’s customer would ask about freight status and too often find out there was no way to determine that.

DrayNow provides real-time pickup and delivery information, accelerating cash flow by closing the one-time gap of four to seven days before an IMC could bill the load, Albert said.

DrayNow blends pre-scheduled, contracted freight lanes and a spot market approach, operating in the Southern California, New York/New Jersey, Chicago, Atlanta and Dallas areas.

From the driver standpoint, Albert’s company has 1,400 independent carriers who have the ability to work when and where they want, either on contracted or spot freight business, and payment is received in as little as 48 hours.

“Market acceptance has been great,” Albert said, with load counts that topped 10,000 last year, and the expectation that business levels will be four or five times that level in the years ahead.

Jeffrey Brashares, senior vice president of sales and national accounts at Sunteck TTS, told Intermodal Insights, that his company used DrayNow when capacity was needed.

“This app allowed us to access some capacity we didn’t have with current carriers,” he said.

**Driver Perspective**

Moe Kiswani, a 16-year veteran drayman who now is a dispatcher at Kiswani Freight, shared a view of intermodal apps from the driver’s perspective.

“I really like the apps,” he told Insights. “They really help with the ingating and outgating. Once a load is billed, an ingate is created, and you the driver will get a code. All you have to do at the gate is scan the barcode. They make life easier as a driver. They are a really good step.

“They are definitely becoming more popular,” he added. “Each app is different, and each app is different. Some have more useful features, such as whether a chassis is good or bad order.”

Unfortunately, he said, not every railroad has an app in place at every terminal, which can slow drivers.

The apps also make a difference from a dispatcher’s standpoint, said Kiswani, who keeps the apps handy and loaded on his phone to help drivers.

“If a driver calls and says, ‘I’ve been at the railyard for two or three hours,’ the first thing I ask is, ‘Do you have the app?’ If he says, ‘No, I don’t,’ I tell them if you don’t download it, you won’t know whether you can use it. I tell them it might be hard for a while [to use the app], but I am sure you are going to get the hang of it.”

**Generations’ Impact**

Kiswani also said apps have a generational aspect.

“For the older generation, the apps may be hard to understand. It’s much easier for the younger ones,” Kiswani said. “It’s kind of a punishment for the older generation that has to sit in line and do an ingate manually, but that could get them to learn how to use the app.”

Hilsenbeck believes that the use of apps, emails, text messages and other mobile-based technology has had a positive effect on the drayage market by making it easier for new entrants to better navigate their introduction to the business.

One data point reflecting new market entrants is the increasing number of motor carrier participants in the Uniform Intermodal Interchange & Facilities Access Agreement. In the past year, the UIIA rolls have increased by more than 400 motor carriers to a total that now tops 7,800.

**Staying Power**

In the future, Hilsenbeck believes there is a potential danger of too many apps that compete for drivers’ time and attention. The result could be consolidation of some providers, while others fall by the wayside.

Rail-developed apps are most likely to last, Hilsenbeck added, because they eventually could become a requirement for drivers to enter a rail terminal, an outcome that would benefit truckers and railroads alike by boosting their efficiency and productivity.

“I would like to see every intermodal driver using the railroads’ apps, because there will be so many benefits from that communication for the drayman and the railroad alike,” Hilsenbeck told Intermodal Insights.

Hilsenbeck believes there hasn’t been as much driver adoption of railroad-developed apps as some carriers hoped,
possibly because experienced drivers are set in their ways. The rail-developed apps definitely have the potential to aid drivers, particularly newer operators who might have more difficulty entering terminals and locating boxes there.

CP also uses another alternative to smooth out demand, which includes a $50 premium paid by, or a $50 discount given to, BCOs on domestic moves in North America, based on the time the drayage driver enters the terminal. There also is a daily period when those charges or discounts don’t apply.

“If we can smooth out that peak hour rush, we can process more freight without extra capital,” Wahba noted.

The app has one other advantage, the CP executive said. “Finding drivers is so difficult. If we have an app that they like and use, that is an advantage for us compared with our competitors.”