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BlackBerry's Radar H2 asset tracking product is designed to help logistics providers improve utilization of trailers, containers, and chassis, among other things. Photo credit: Shutterstock.com.

The number of asset-based tracking options available to logistics service providers (LSPs) continues to grow as the hardware becomes more durable, battery life improves, and demand for accurate location data increases, evidenced by an upgraded connected sensor product released Monday by Ontario, Canada-based technology provider BlackBerry.

The product, dubbed Radar H2, is designed to improve utilization of trailers, containers, and chassis, among other intended benefits. BlackBerry, most famous as a pioneer of smartphones in the early 2000s, in recent years has focused more on industrial hardware uses for its geolocation and battery technologies, including products for the logistics industry.

Visible value

Radar H2, like other physical sensors already on the market, is affixed to a piece of equipment to provide data around the location of the asset and certain operational characteristics such as whether a container has been opened or tampered with. BlackBerry produces three other transportation asset-related sensor products, with two aimed more specifically at tracking containers and trailers.

The goal of all the products is to diminish risk for LSPs by allowing trucking companies, chassis providers, and other asset-based businesses to know where their equipment is at all times. The product is sold to trucking and other asset-based transportation providers, but cargo owners benefit from improved asset availability and operational analytics that those LSPs can pass on to shippers.

"Visibility is really 'phase one,'" Christopher Laat, senior vice president and general manager, BlackBerry Radar, told JOC.com. "When you invest in assets, whether it's chassis, containers, trailers, or even tractors, there's a lot of value in knowing where they are, their status, and how they're being used."

Plaat said the return on investment in such technology differs depending on the asset and what intelligence the company needs from the asset. "A typical trucking company wants to know where its trailer pools are. 'Do I have 10 there now when I need 20? Or do I have 30? Maybe I need to reposition my assets if I have too many, but can still serve my customers effectively.'"

Plaat said Radar can also help LSPs optimize asset utilization by providing relevant location and usage data. "If I have containers, how many hours a day or week are they being used? How many miles am I getting out of them?' You can build a lot of intelligence out of location and utilization of assets."

Specifically related to its legacy as a smartphone maker, BlackBerry pointed to how its devices connect to the latest 4G LTE cellular networks, as well as provides a wireless gateway that can also connect to wireless sensors, such as cargo sensors, tire pressure monitoring systems, brake sensors, and weigh-in-motion devices. When mounted on a chassis, for example, Radar H2 can detect whether a container is either "on" or "off" with no additional wires or external sensors.

Plaat told JOC.com BlackBerry's Radar devices have a battery life of five to seven years with no charging and can be installed in just 10 minutes, adding that the devices are gaining the most traction in intermodal movements, where the assets being tracked are unpowered.

As LSPs aim to provide their shipper customers with more accurate estimated times of arrival, the quality of data underlying those efforts becomes even more crucial.

"We're an enabler of those predictive analytics technologies," Plaat said. "The basis of those is accurate data; that's what Radar provides. We're putting our legacy of patents in hardware in our hardware device. That feeds our own software, but also other systems."

Other providers in the general purpose sensor market include Savi Technologies and CalAmp, while other vendors have more mode- or asset-specific sensors, such as Traxens and Loginno for containers, and American Intermodal Management (AIM) for chassis.

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