

## Protecting night-time workers

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*Jason Petsch, CEO of [OUTCO](#) discusses how challenging work like winter gritting can be made safer through innovation*

Over winter, we all feel that sense of battling the elements. Even if we're not an outdoor worker taking on the weather, it's hard to escape an oppressive sense of darker nights creeping in and of journeys to and from work without a glimpse of sunlight.

Spare a thought then for the army of night-time workers that keep our country going. According to the 2022 census, a staggering 27% of the UK workforce describe themselves as a night-time workers whose main hours are during the evening or night. For our country to function at all, 8.7m of us are heading out to work while most are winding down. Given the antisocial hours involved, most of these roles are mission critical – crucial for maintaining complex supply chains or for guaranteeing round the clock emergency services. Yet despite this, it's the nature of these roles that the better they're done, the more invisible they are to the rest of us.

Winter gritting, snow and ice clearance exemplifies this invisible economy. We take it for granted that we can shop for last minute Christmas gifts without slipping and falling in icy car parks. Of course, the world is changing and today many of those shopping trips have been replaced by same day deliveries from Amazon. But in both cases, our convenience relies on the shopping car park or the online fulfilment centre's loading bays being made safe and accessible. In other words, even an increasingly digitised world relies on manual labour: The knowledge that we can order from the comfort of our screen relies on a gritting team being despatched automatically, even before the frost is formed by an algorithmic process fed by real-time weather data.

When mission-critical functions are automatically triggered by machine intelligence this begs a question as

to whether night-time workers are made even less visible. This is an increasingly important question as the adoption of digital technologies such as mobile apps, 'big data' and increasingly AI, remove ever more layers of manual intervention and human supervision from everyday processes. The consulting group McKinsey has noted that the pressures of Covid-19 has accelerated the pace of change to the degree that we have covered a "decade in days". Consider how casually we make video calls or order a Deliveroo from our phone and it becomes evident how norms and expectations have changed with the same being true in industries such as outdoor facilities management.

Although the automation of winter maintenance doesn't require clients to even request a gritting service, digitisation is allowing customers to immediately view in real-time when and where that service is delivered. In this context, big data's impact isn't just the increasingly accurate weather modelling that triggers services but it also comes into play in terms of providing real time monitoring of service delivery and in the ability to capture and analyse data retrospectively. As well as helping to optimise route planning and service delivery, this is critical in case of accidents on site as it provides site managers with legally defensible records. These reports demonstrate that they have fulfilled their duty of care to maintain site safety. Records can be incredibly detailed, including precise GIS data that shows a clear 'breadcrumb' trail of where and when each operator has been on site.

All this provides an unexpected answer to the question posed above - in fact, night-time workers are becoming more visible in the digital age. Just consider our gritting teams. Even though they're working in poor weather, in the dark, and at times in extreme conditions in remote locations - the ability to track their status in real time isn't so much "Big Brother is watching" so much as providing them with the confidence that their team will always be immediately aware if issues arise. Rather than digitisation making individual workers more alienated, night-time and outdoor workers are actually becoming less isolated, with technology able to make their jobs easier and safer too. For example, when working in potentially dangerous conditions, having well maintained and checked equipment is vital. Hence, before setting off for the night's work or when starting work on a site, the same mobile app that schedules work and plans for our gritting teams requires them to complete pre-commencement vehicle checks, Point of Work risk assessments and fitness for work checks.

Digital technology like GPS is something we all take for granted but for teams working outdoors in poor visibility and adverse weather conditions, it can save time and stress by getting gritting vehicles to the right locations and ensure that teams grit the specific areas required. Similarly, operators can be alerted by their mobile devices if they're gritting the wrong areas - helping save wasted materials and wasted effort.

From a personal perspective, I have a Duty of Care for the safety and welfare of our teams with the attendant responsibilities and liabilities clearly set out in legislation. As employers, digital technology provides a great deal of assurance and security to ensure we're meeting our obligations. The same big data can also help prevent other risks and legal hazards like bad driving of company vehicles. As an aside, it can also help us meet ESG commitments by reducing environmental impacts, for example by cutting unnecessary journeys or gritting when and where it isn't required. All businesses are increasingly scrutinising the supply chain impacts of their activities, e.g. Scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions. Having outdoor FM contractors able to provide this data on demand will come to matter even more. In other words, as well as protecting people, better technology can help us better protect the environment too. It's all part of being a responsible business. Outdoor FM can involve demanding and even hazardous tasks

carried out in the most unsociable and lonely hours. All too often we often see the dark side of progress, with new technology being used to wring out every last bit of productivity from employees. However, when we send people out to do the hardest tasks it's vital that we place their well-being first and this is where innovation should really count.