

Kaz tames trucking technology

TranData founder helps a diversified niche communicate with the world.

By JIM DOW

Imagine you're on a business trip, hailing a cab at a busy airport.

You get into the cab, tell the driver where you're headed, and as the driver pulls away from the curb, he radios in to the taxi company dispatcher: he identifies his cab, says he's at the airport, and is headed to the Hotel Metropolis with a fare.

Now imagine there are people from several companies with a keen interest in your exact location. Some wonder, have you arrived at the airport? Did you get through Customs all right? When exactly will you arrive at the hotel?

For a container loaded with thousands of dollars of time-sensitive product, there are more questions and concerns, but the situation is similar. And while FedEx and UPS have convinced us it's easy to track a package, and international shipping lines make similar claims, for most of the interested parties a cargo container has entered into a virtual black hole during the time it is moving between the port and the warehouse or distribution center.

That's where Kaz Chary comes in.

Chary is the founder and president of TranData Corp., a Miami-based technology company that specializes in software and Internet tracking capabilities designed around the activities of drayage trucking operations. He has figured out a way for drivers to call into dispatchers, then have the pertinent information fed into a system where all the concerned parties can follow the action.

Never mind that the Department of Homeland Security should find this subject interesting. For now, customs brokers, freight forwarders, steamship lines, shippers' supply chain managers, and most certainly local trucking companies in South Florida have found a near technological miracle in the form of TranData.

For a variety of reasons, there has never been a major effort to apply Information Technology to drayage trucking. Not as customs brokers have gone through generations of data exchange technology with U.S. Customs, not as steamship lines learned to book freight, exchange documentation, and track their vessels between the ports of the world online.

The primary problem with applying technology to drayage trucking is that unlike FedEx, for example, with its wholly integrated operations featuring in-

house sorting centers, transportation fleets, and employee drivers all on a single computer system, drayage trucking is dominated by a mish-mash of small and independent business units.

Each port city has scores of independent local trucking companies that contract with hundreds of independent owner-operator drivers to move containers between the port, shipper receiving stations or intermodal rail yards.

Small trucking companies have been slow to invest in technology. It is a blue collar business in which competition is fierce and profit margins are thin.

In addition, the customer base is anything but homogenous. A trucking company could be hired by a broker/forwarder, a steamship line, or the actual shipper importing or exporting cargo. With completely different types of customers using trucking services, finding a common technological solution becomes extremely complicated.

With an industry that disjointed, trade-oriented technology companies have simply shied away and taken their resources into other areas of international shipping.

"The nature of the business (trucking) is such that many people looked into it, and it was not attractive," he explained about the reluctance of technology companies to take on drayage trucking.

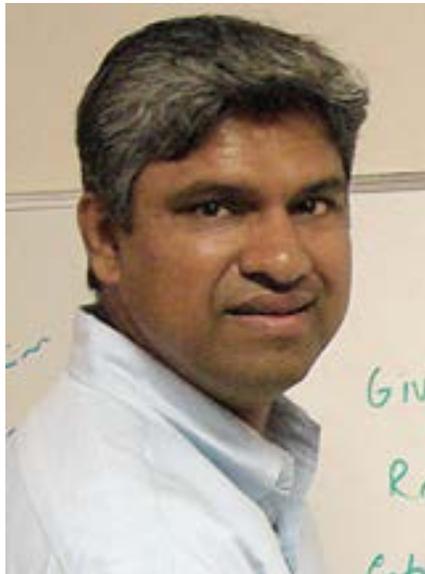
But to Chary, the situation looked more like an opportunity than a problem.

A freelance software developer before starting TranData in 1999, he said he first worked with a client involved in intermodal shipping in the mid-'90s.

"When I asked how they communicated with the truckers, they said there was no data or information available," Chary said. "I was shocked to hear that; it's such a critical element in the supply chain. That's what made it attractive to me; it's such a critical link in the supply chain."

Chary worked in the New York metropolitan area the first years after graduating from college. He moved to Florida on his 30th birthday in May 1996. When he started looking into the intermodal industry and drayage trucking in particular, Chary had found his niche.

A native of Chennai, India (formerly known as Madras), his family moved to Stamford, Conn. when he was 17. He has hearing deficiencies, with a 70 percent hearing loss. Growing up, he wore the large, older-style hearing aids, then abandoned the hearing aids partly because he didn't like the look as a teenager and also because he felt



he could read lips well enough to get by on his own.

The decision had ramifications, at least for part of his life. He had an aptitude for computers, graduating from the University of Connecticut in 1989 with a major in management information systems with an accompanying emphasis on accounting. With limited communication abilities, he buried himself in the world of software development, referring to the computer as a type of best friend.

That might surprise people at the companies where Chary has installed systems, and where he returns on a regular basis. He is a high-energy, enthusiastic chatterbox who constantly jokes around with the staff wherever he goes.

The hearing issue reversed course after Chary got married and started a family.

"You get so used to living a certain way that you don't really realize what you're missing. I was fine with my hearing until I realized I wanted to hear all the sounds when the baby was born," he recalled. His son will turn three in November, and life is different in many ways.

Now sporting small, modern hearing aids, he can hear all the sounds.

Not only is he more communicative, he is noticing the little things.

"I never realized my car engine made sounds," he jokes. "I always wondered what people meant by that."

Meanwhile, Chary was already well on his way on his other new road: finding a way to bring truckers into the computer era.

The process went slowly at first. He faced the twin challenges of figuring out a way to harness the information from the multifaceted trucking industry onto a common platform and selling the Miami locals on his idea.

"They said it was impossible to automate dispatching," he recalls. "There's a lot more to this than following a taxi cab. Accessorial charges are a challenge, and tracking all the different trucks gets complex."

Chary said the first solution was creating a good "back end" system to sell to the trucking companies. In other words, the trucking companies had to have good in-house information before they could begin interfacing with customers via an online "front end" application.

He points to the dot-com boom and bust experienced by many e-commerce pioneers as a lesson in what not to do.

"The players who controlled their back-end distribution information were able to deliver on time," he said. "The ones who just took online orders couldn't deliver customer service."

He refers to the older, ineffective systems as "click and mortar."

What you need to know, he said, is "How do you connect everything together?"

That is what TranData has accomplished.

"I can make the two systems talk electronically," he says.

Evidently, he has convinced the locals.

About 50 of the estimated 70 to 80 drayage trucking companies operating in the Miami area — around 70 percent — have purchased the TranData system and

are communicating with both drivers and customers.

Simply put, truck drivers call dispatchers every time they pick up or deliver a container.

The dispatcher updates the information in the TranData Dispatch System (TDT). The dispatch system then instantaneously updates the information in the "front end" TranData Central Exchange. In the exchange system, tracking information is made available to brokers, forwarders, or shippers who access the information with a valid user name and password.

TranData is also working with steamship lines to coordinate drayage information. A handful of carriers are working closely with the company. The first carrier that developed 100 percent electronic data interchange (EDI) capabilities with TranData was a significant one: Maersk Line, the world's largest container carrier. Since then, Crowley Liner Service is up to 100 percent EDI, with some other major carriers in the works.

Companies besides steamship lines can also use EDI connections through TranData to track drayage. For example, the mass market home supplies retailer Lowe's uses TranData to track containers at the drayage level in Florida. It can track via a number of different trucking companies.

While the various parties that hire trucking companies can now track the status of drayage moves, Chary said the next step will be to successfully transmit the documentation for drayage between the different parties.

"That's our vision," he said.

Just getting to the point where drayage moves can be tracked through a dispatch system has been a major accomplishment.

"We will be the first company to show the world that electronic connections with truckers are possible," he said proudly.

One aspect of this pioneering effort is that it is local, with a great deal of hands-on work with individual customers. Chary realizes there is a need for communications between trucking companies and the various other related parties in port cities everywhere. He plans to expand to other areas as demand eventually merits.

The virtual black hole in the supply chain that results from the lack of automation among drayage truckers will also lead to future demands for better technology for security purposes, Chary believes.

"9-11 woke a lot of people up," he commented.

"There's been talk about tracking truckers, but people don't know how to accomplish it."

So Chary knows there is a lot of information that has yet to be distributed.

"Right now, almost everything is done with phone calls," he said about the larger market. "There are dispatchers with notes all over, and it's not automated."

"There are multiple parties that want to know where that truck is, from the dispatchers to the steamship lines' customers to forwarders, brokers, NVOs, and even chassis pool operators. I want to disseminate that information." ■