A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...
A SECTION MANAGER

Shawn Smithson,
Section Manager, Fleet Info & Fuel Systems,
City of Ottawa
MEET SHAWN SMITHSON, SECTION MANAGER, FLEET INFORMATION & FUEL SYSTEMS FOR THE FLEET DEPARTMENT FOR THE CITY OF OTTAWA.

Smithson has been working for the City of Ottawa in his current role for three years, but has served for 12 years total between different positions within the Transit and Fleet departments. His primary responsibilities include “everything fleet technology and supporting the 150 mechanics, 20+ stores personnel and 50 admin staff and any one of the 23,000 City employees who use our 23 fuel sites.” In addition, Smithson spends the rest of his time meeting with his staff and researching new technology and initiatives that could benefit the fleet.

Would you like to take a peek into a typical day in the office for Smithson to see how he organizes and supports his fleet and fuel management technology for the City of Ottawa? You’re in luck. Welcome to a day in the life of a section manager.

BEGINNING OF THE DAY

As section manager, Smithson is responsible for supervising the new pilot programs that he and his team research and come up with. To start such an ambitious day, he swings by the break room to see what’s in stock. Typically, he’ll grab his water and coffee, but “occasionally, there is a donut involved until the Admin Assistant starts making fun of me again for having a donut every day...” but hey, fleet management can be tough work!

After Smithson gets some energy for the day, he’ll usually meet with the Admin Assistant or a member of his staff to discuss the plan for the day and what meetings they will likely have. Since Ottawa uses both FleetFocus and FuelFocus, Smithson is constantly in the software and finding new ways to optimize it for their fleet. “It [the software] is basically my entire day!” notes Smithson, “I need to support anyone who uses the software.”

How many phone calls and emails do you get in a typical day?

“I get wayyy too many emails,” said Smithson, “To estimate, I probably get 10-15 phone calls and 60-70 emails.” Those numbers aren’t even including his in-person communications!
FLEET AND FUEL MANAGEMENT INTEGRATION FOR AN EFFECTIVE FLEET

Smithson and the Transit and Fleet departments at the City of Ottawa utilize two critical elements of effective fleet management: fleet management software and fuel management software. AssetWorks FleetFocus and FuelFocus provide both of those critical elements of management, all while remaining fully integrated with each other, which optimizes their fleet by verifying that the drivers and vehicles at the pump are accurate in order to ensure correct fueling, providing real-time information from the pump to the software and cost savings through increased security and precise data for billing.

During the City’s implementation and upgrade to newer, more secure versions of the software, “we were really pushed to create manuals, policies and procedures” that would be effective tools for explaining the City’s unique utilization of the highly customizable software.

OTTAWA’S WORK ATMOSPHERE

Smithson feels truly gifted with the environment he works in and the people he works with.

“Honestly, they’re like family,” beamed Smithson, “I work with amazing people and we all support each other very well and with a sense of humor. Fleet is run by an amazing director and the upper management really take good care of all their staff.”

Having such an incredible staff that works so hard for the betterment of the city and its workflows helps to make the work they do feel meaningful, and encourages everyone to want to do their best at all times.

A SURPRISING ASPECT OF THE JOB

It might not be immediately clear what the challenges could be for a section manager of a fleet department who researches new technology initiatives. Smithson was happy to elaborate on what elements end up adding a little bit of excitement to his day.

“We develop our own Oracle scripts and Crystal Reports,” started Smithson, “We also manage the laptops the staff use and right now there are only three of us! The Fleet Management Information System (FMIS) group is really a specialized IT group.”

Crystal Reporting requires an extensive amount of work, expertise and foresight into the metrics that the fleet needs to know. With only three people, it is impressive that so much is accomplished so consistently!
INDUSTRY PUBLICATIONS

In order to keep up with the fluctuating, dynamic fleet industry, Smithson likes to read the following publications:

• Fleet Digest
• Fleet Business Canada

"I try to keep up to date, especially with fleet technology," said Smithson, "the Fleet Business Canada website has Canadian specific articles and new technologies."

Since his job revolves around researching, discovering, piloting and implementing revolutionary initiatives, it’s no wonder that Smithson spends a good deal of time ensuring his knowledge and education of the industry is up to date.

END OF THE DAY

Just as Smithson’s day starts off with some good-natured humor in the break room, so it also ends. Smithson said, "I usually walk by the Section Manager, Fleet Safety office to see who stayed late and make fun of him if he’s still there... if not, I hang my head and turn out the lights."

While Smithson’s job may be incredibly important for the success of the operations of the City of Ottawa, it’s important to be light-hearted and to enjoy the work and camaraderie.

That being said, some days are harder than others. Sometimes, you just have to head out of the office at the end of the day and cut back and relax. Smithson is “a huge music junkie and record/vinyl owner” and has over 675 records and vinyl.

Smithson explained that after a rough day, he’ll “put on a record which can be hard rock, punk, pop, 80’s new wave, jazz, blues or classical.” He’s noticed over time that the different genres can have very different effects on his mood and that depending on how the day went will decide which genre he listens to.

“No matter how tough the day, music helps me unwind,” Smithson continued, “The glass of wine or whisky that usually accompanies it doesn’t hurt either.”
SMITHSON’S PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENT

Over his tenure at the City of Ottawa, Smithson could have a lot of proud moments to choose from. Notably, he chose the implementation of AssetWorks FuelFocus and the time and cost-savings that stemmed from it.

With FuelFocus, the City of Ottawa noticed significant benefits, especially with it being so integrated with FleetFocus. Speaking of, Smithson is also proud of how he started a “Steering Committee which ensures any major changes are agreed upon and rolled out successfully” within FleetFocus for the sub-group. During the course of these implementations, upgrades and initiatives, Smithson has been involved in the creation of unique user manuals and procedures which they didn’t previously have.

SMITHSON’S FLEET AND FUEL MANAGEMENT EVOLUTION

Smithson admits that he may have overstepped at times in his promotions over the years.

“When I first became manager, I think I had a false sense of power and was really ambitious,” he recalled, “But I have learned that listening and rolling projects out slowly and efficiently is a better approach.”

Instead of being the sole driving force for decision-making, Smithson has come to value the input of his team and staff – with their experience and wisdom, great ideas come forward. “In the listening area, I think it’s important to hear what others think and if they don’t agree with your direction, then it’s not that they or you are wrong, they just have a different opinion and it should be heard and understood before moving in any direction,” explains Smithson. Just like a fleet can’t exist with just one vehicle, a fleet management team can’t exist with just one person. Smithson brings his team together to work cohesively as a unit for the good of the City.

As effective as his team is, they cannot do everything.

“If there was one thing I wish more people knew about my job,” continued Smithson, “the FMIS group may be technical and seen as “fleet IT,” we have limited ability to assist in computer, network or hardware issues… we often have to refer staff to the corporate IT service desk.” Despite being fleet and FMIS wizards, solving all sorts of IT problems isn’t exactly in their wheelhouse.

Smithson has a lot to love about his job, between his energetic staff, his enthusiastic work environment and the fulfilling mission of his job for the City. Ultimately, his favorite aspect is actually the main task of his job: innovation and implementation. He loves “the ability to play with and implement cool new technology. I am lucky where I have flexibility to start mini pilot projects and test out things before making decisions. I think staff have enjoyed my techy mad scientist approach.”

Maybe a “techy mad scientist approach” is exactly what the fleet industry needs to grow and revolutionize its technology!
THE FUTURE OF FLEET

Since Smithson spends so much time involved with the latest and greatest in fleet technology and experimental initiatives, he has unique, advanced insight into the future of the fleet industry. “Vehicles will become more efficient and universal,” explains Smithson, “Autonomous vehicles will be huge - I think to the point where people won’t own a vehicle anymore.”

His aspirations for a clean, simpler fleet future don’t just stop with the “tame” dream of autonomous vehicles. Instead, Smithson takes his hopes a bit further with solar- and biology-powered vehicles. “I want vehicles with living organisms with the ability to turn sunlight into energy and also clean the air, which is very reversed to what vehicles currently are,” said Smithson.

While such an efficient technology may still be a few years down the road, we certainly need developers and innovators like Smithson to drive the technological development and creative aspiration of future fleet needs so that our organizations, communities and planet can love fleet too.

So what does Smithson think current fleet professionals should do to make it in this ever-changing and forward-moving industry?

“Stick with it. There aren’t a lot of movement possibilities often I find, but the positions tend to be really diverse when they open up. Try to get involved with committees like NAFA, CAMFM, FleetFocus User Groups, etc. You never know where they will lead – such as opportunities to develop industry standards like APWA category codes.”

With his knowledge of fleet technology and passion for improving operations, Shawn Smithson is utilizing the most effective solutions, initiatives and ideas to bring about the best fleet and fuel management practices for the City of Ottawa.

Want to learn more about the forward-thinking, integrated fleet management solutions that Smithson uses? Visit assetworks.com/fleet.