

Toll systems

Level of difficulty: ●●○

Before you read

What are the arguments in favour of paying tolls on roads?

Reading

Read this article from the FT.com website and answer the questions.

An Italian job takes its toll on Austrian roads

by Adrian Michaels

- Sometimes a marriage of technology and government policy pays off very quickly. Just ask the Austrian government. In 2002, its revenues from drivers on Austrian roads in tolls and taxes were €642m. In 2004, the figure rose by 79 per cent to €1.14bn. The change is down to the introduction of Europass, a tolling system for heavy commercial vehicles on Austria's 2,000km of motorways that were designed and built by Autostrade of Italy. The government has told Autostrade that it will take up an option to buy the whole system, and the two sides are negotiating on the worth of the project.
- Europass's advantage is that, compared with other toll systems, it is simple, works smoothly and is cheap to install. It is 'free-flow', meaning that truck drivers do not have to pull over, queue for toll booths or look for loose change or wallets. The tolls are paid automatically as vehicles pass under 800 gantries across carriageways on motorways. The gantries read data from small, microwave-emitting boxes that are installed in the trucks. The boxes can be installed in seconds and cost just €5. Autostrade says an equivalent system in Germany, based on satellite technology and costing €300 per truck, suffered start-up problems and the units take four hours to install.
- The gantries detect trucks in the time it takes for a vehicle to pass underneath. The system is enforced by 30 roving inspectors and a central office that receives reports on vehicles without data

boxes or those that have opted for pre-payment but have not paid sufficient funds. The toll system cost €300m and was fully financed by Autostrade. The Italian company carried the risk because, at the time of installation, the system was untried. For now, it receives a share of tolls paid.

- But, while other governments might be tempted by the success of the scheme, Austria is a special case because of its position as a transit country. Only one-quarter of the signal boxes have been fitted in Austrian trucks, the rest have gone to vehicles merely passing through the country. It is also mountainous terrain, offering few options for those who want to use other roads to evade fees. Nonetheless, Autostrade says it is in talks with authorities in the Czech Republic and Slovakia on similar schemes. Furthermore, Antonio Marano, Autostrade's corporate development executive, says the company has suddenly attracted competition. 'As it seems to be a very attractive business, there has been a new set of players.'
- Back in Italy, where tolls have operated on motorways since the early 1960s, the technology is less advanced. However, there is a clear trend away from cash towards easier means of payment such as credit cards or passes. Five years ago, says Autostrade, more than half of Italian drivers paid tolls in cash. Now 65 per cent pay with credit cards or Telepass, a system that makes vehicles stop temporarily while data is transferred and a gate opens.

- The company, which is controlled by the Benetton family,

sees technology as crucial to increased efficiency and lower costs. Some 1 per cent of revenues – about €30m – goes on research and development. Of its almost €3bn revenues in 2004, 85 per cent came from tolls. Part of the remainder comes from royalties from motorway service areas, many of which are run by Autogrill, a company that is also controlled by the Benettons.

- Autostrade directly controls 60 per cent of the Italian tolled network and acts as a clearing house for the non-cash revenue received on another 20 per cent of the toll roads. Autostrade has installed about 1,000 cameras on motorways, and the accompanying sensors can relay information on traffic and weather to units such as media outlets or screens in service stations. The next step is to send information to mobile telephones. Autostrade is discussing a venture with 3, the telecommunications company, that will see free and paid-for services available on mobiles.

- Piero Bergamini, an employee in the company's technology division, says drivers' phones can be located by readings taken from the mobile phone network. But there are still problems to overcome. Mr Bergamini says tracking the exact location of vehicles, and speed and direction of travel are not yet precise enough. 'If you want personal information, you want information that is tailored for you, not for someone who is near you.'

FINANCIAL TIMES

- Read the whole article and chose the correct options in this summary.

Autostrade has developed a new toll system called Europass for **a) Austrian /Italian** motorways, making motorway driving easier for commercial drivers. The tolls are paid automatically as vehicles pass under toll **b) booths /gantries** on the motorway. Drivers therefore do not need to stop when crossing tolls or waste time looking for **c) cash /driving licences** or credit cards. The system, which is cheap **d) but difficult /and easy** to install, is monitored by **e) inspectors /roving attendants** and a central office that can pick up information regarding pre-payment and non-payment of tolls. The project cost **f) the Austrian government /Autostrade €300m**; they also carried the risk of the partnership because **g) the system was untried /of its position as a transit country**. There are plans for a similar project both abroad and in Italy, where 65% of drivers pay by Telepass or **h) credit card /cash** and where Autostrade controls **i) 20% /60%** of the Italian tolled network. The company is currently looking into using telecommunication technology to locate drivers so that driving becomes even more convenient for **j) mobile-phone users /truck drivers**.

- Choose the best definition for these multiword expressions in *italics* as they are used in paragraphs 1 and 2.

- ... government policy *pays off* very quickly (paragraph 1)
 - pay all the money you owe a company or person
 - pay someone in order to stop them from making trouble
 - when a particular plan or project gets a good result or is successful
- ... it will *take up* an option (paragraph 1)
 - decide to go ahead with an idea or suggestion
 - start a new job or position
 - use a particular amount of time or space
- ... truck drivers do not have to *pull over* (paragraph 2)
 - overtake other vehicles
 - wear warm winter clothing
 - drive to the side of the road and stop
- ... *pass under* 800 gantries (paragraph 2)
 - go through without stopping
 - go below or underneath something
 - drive past a landmark

- Match these words to form partnerships that occur in paragraphs 1 and 2.

- | | |
|--------------|---------------|
| 1 government | a) technology |
| 2 loose | b) problems |
| 3 truck | c) booths |
| 4 start-up | d) vehicles |
| 5 satellite | e) drivers |
| 6 toll | f) change |
| 7 commercial | g) policy |

- Complete these sentences with a suitable expression from Exercise 3 in the correct form. Two are not used.

- can save a lot of time if they don't have to pull up or queue at on motorways.
- It's really annoying when you stop at a motorway toll and discover you don't have enough to pay.
- Europass, the Italian toll system, was introduced for the purposes of easing the journeys of on Austria's extensive motorway network.
- Although similar gantries in Germany use, they are more expensive than their Austrian counterparts and take longer to install.

- What or who do these figures refer to in paragraphs 5, 6 and 7?

- a) 1960s b) 5 c) 65 d) 30m e) 85 f) 60
g) 20 h) 1,000 i) 3

- Read paragraphs 7 and 8 and say whether these statements are true or false.

- Information about traffic and weather conditions can be communicated to the media and petrol stations via sensors on Autostrade's cameras.
- A joint venture between Autostrade and a telecommunications company will mean toll systems will be free for mobile users.
- As a result of Autostrade's new technology, vehicles can be located using their drivers' mobiles.
- However, this new technology for locating drivers needs to be developed further.
- Mr Bergamini says this high-tech tracking information needs to be tailored to meet Autostrade's specific requirements.

Over to you 1

- What are the arguments in favour of paying tolls on roads? What measures would you take to improve your national roads, motorways and service stations? What can be done to reduce traffic jams during peak periods on busy roads?
- What percentage of roads and motorways in your country are controlled by the government and by public companies? Do you know of any existing or future projects for improving your country's roads or motorways by way of private-public partnerships?

Over to you 2

Find out about existing tolls or future plans for motorway tolls in your country using the Internet. How much do drivers have to pay and how do they pay? What kind of technology is/will be used? What are the installation costs compared to other countries like Austria or Italy?