

Who are you going to call?

Your coach has broken down, and you urgently need someone to help, or you're very busy and need to plan a hire. In the old days, you picked up the phone. Now, reports Mel Holley, you can get a swift response, thanks to clever – and free – technology from Distinctive Systems

Your chance to win: At the launch (l-r) Paul McJannett, Andrew Fraser and Chris Whitehead



Today marks the launch by Distinctive Systems of Coach Hire Exchange (CHX).

It is an entirely free-of-charge cloud-based passenger recovery and job exchange service for coach and minibus operators. And, better still, by using it you could win a Hudl2 tablet, thanks to a weekly prize draw.

There are no catches, no snags, no hidden detail. Quite simply, the system is specifically designed to help coach operators to get urgent help when they need it, or for pre-planned work. It is intuitive, easy to use, and doesn't require any booking management system. All you need is a device – such as a smartphone, tablet or desktop.

The all-new passenger recovery and job exchange service is the latest development from York-based software specialists Distinctive Systems, which also means it works exceptionally well and, above all, is safe, and your data is secure.

What it is

CHX is designed to help operators find immediate assistance in the event of a breakdown, or any other situation where passengers need to be

picked up and transported as soon as possible.

It is also designed to make it easy for operators to find another operator to cover a planned job they need to contract out.

CHX can be used by any coach, minibus or associated operator handling their own private hire work, regular contract work, day excursions, extended tours or express services. Booking agents and brokers are not permitted to use it.

Any operator can post their own jobs and offer to cover jobs posted by other operators.

Standalone

CHX is a standalone service and is not dependent on any other systems.

It is quick and easy to use and is of equal benefit to operators both with and without a booking management system.

The CHX website can be used on a browser running on a desktop or laptop computer, a tablet or a smartphone. The website's responsive design adapts automatically to any size of display.

This means that the same version is used on both types of device, without

the need for a separate 'mobile-friendly' site, making it easy for you to switch between desktop and mobile without having a different layout or design.

CHX is also available as an app for Apple's iPhone and iPad, and as a separate app for Android phones and tablets.

Simply effective

CHX works by giving operators who have jobs they would like assistance with, a really simple but effective means of sharing the details of those jobs with a large number of other operators.

Jobs can be quickly and easily posted to a central database of jobs. Other operators can then see those jobs and offer to help.

To make posting an urgent job as quick as possible, the only input details required are the pick-up point, destination, number of passengers and any further requirements.

For non-urgent jobs the details required are the pick-up date and time, pick-up point, destination, back date and time and the number of vehicles with a type and seating capacity. The instant a new job

is posted, CHX sends out emails and app notifications to all other operators.

This process is fully automated to ensure that operators are able to respond literally within just a few seconds of a job being posted.

A list of all available jobs can be viewed by any operator at any time on the CHX website or app. Jobs are listed in date order and clicking on a job will drill down to its full details.

Along with the details of the job itself, other operators can see the contact details of the operator who posted it.

CHX provides an easy-to-use built-in mechanism for operators to make and accept job offers. Emails and app notifications are sent out automatically for all offers and acceptances.

Prize draw

As part of the Coach Hire Exchange launch campaign, Distinctive Systems will be giving away six Hudl2 8.3in 16Gb Wi-Fi tablets in a weekly prize draw for the first three weeks, then monthly prize draws afterwards.

To be entered into the draw, operators just need to post a job

to CHX, or cover a job posted by another operator. The first draw is on 22 May.

Solid underpinnings

In a demonstration of the system to route-one, it quickly became very clear what it enables you to do, thanks to its intuitive design, supported by the use of pictograms. Even if you've never used any computer-based system, if you can use a smartphone, tablet or the internet, you'll have no trouble finding your way around CHX.

So why is it free? Explains Development Director Paul McJannett: "The solution is so good, we felt it needed a wide audience, and the best way to achieve that is to make it free and promote it – which is why we've launched with a prize draw."

Adds Sales Director Andrew Fraser: "We're also committed to keeping it free. There's no charge, either for the app, registering or using the system. And, we've no plans to change that position either."

Also, emphasises Paul: "As it's cloud-based nobody has to download any software – all you need is an internet connection. It's also on a very secure server so there's no danger

of anything untoward happening to the information on CHX. We take security very seriously.

"We're driven by what operators want and excellence in innovation. Our hope is that operators sign up and see how good it is."

Distinctive Systems has been in business since 1982, and as a software specialist it has a real insight into the coach industry. Now, with access to cloud-based servers, and with the ability to make apps and internet-based systems all work seamlessly together, it is able to unlock the power that these can provide.

This means that you can look at CHX on your laptop, then on your phone, or tablet, and see exactly the same information, displayed the same way.

As it's all updated in real time, the information flow is instant – as the demonstration we experienced shows – with messages appearing just seconds after being sent. As it's a fully automated system, no external intervention is required, meaning that it's a true 24/7 service.

Into action

We tested the system and discovered that it's incredibly easy to use. The first step is to sign up. All that's required is basic information, such as name, firm's details and an email address, which is checked to ensure it's valid – otherwise you would miss out on notifications.

Sign-up is automatic, without the need for approval, although CHX is monitored to ensure that brokers and other 're-sellers' are not accepted.

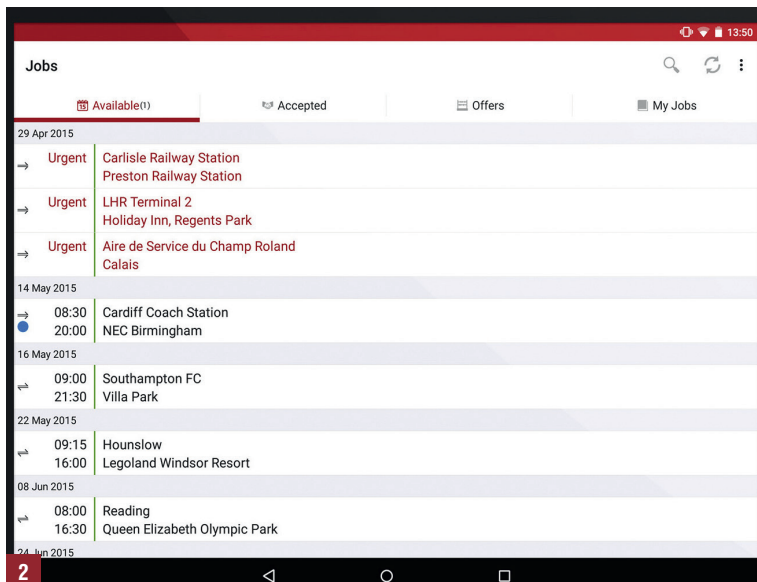
Once you log in, you can see all the current jobs on a single screen, with the basic details. Urgent jobs – such as breakdowns needing passenger recovery – are shown in red. Jobs you've not looked at are shown in blue. The basic job details are shown – which can be in the UK or Europe as there are no geographical limits – and to get more details you simply click on a job.

To post a job is just as simple, especially for the most urgent, which is a recovery. To create this, you simply click on 'my jobs', then 'new recovery'. Type in the pick-up point, destination and number of passengers. It's basic, for those three key pieces of information are all that's needed at this stage, and the aim is speed.

The contact details are linked to your account and are automatically completed, although you can change these if required. Then you press 'submit' and CHX instantly sends



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1. Coach Hire Exchange is available on many devices – from smartphones, to tablets and desktops

2. The overview screen, with urgent jobs in red, and new jobs in blue

destination, number and type of vehicles required. All the information is clearly displayed, both at the input and posting stage.

All you do then, is to wait for the replies. As the offers come in, they are listed in date and time order that they are made, and it's up to you to decide which to choose. Once you've accepted an offer, the job no longer displays on the 'jobs available' screen that all operators can see.

If you are looking for work and think 'I can do this job' then you click on the appropriate button and make your offer. It's as simple as that.

Keeping track

To ensure you can keep track, the main jobs screen has four tabs. They show:

- Available: The number of new jobs is next to the icon. Clicking on it shows all the jobs currently on offer
- Accepted: Details of all the offers you have made that have been accepted by the other operator
- Offers: All the offers that you have made that have yet to be accepted
- My Jobs: Details of all jobs you have posted, including those outstanding offers, accepted or available.

Key benefits

Sign up today – there's plenty to gain and no risk. That's the key message. Our test found CHX is intuitive and very easy to use. You don't need any training, but there is a tutorial.

It's very clear that a great deal of thought has gone into the system, not only to make it simple and easy to use, but especially for the way it looks and feels.

This isn't a clunky or fussy design, but one that is clean, fresh and crisp. This makes it easy to pick out important information swiftly, but also navigate your way around.

With instant notifications through the app and email, it could also be the saviour you need if you break down, or suffer an accident requiring a replacement coach.

As it can be used by any coach or minibus operator, giving direct operator-to-operator communication, it opens up a whole new world. With easy posting of urgent and non-urgent jobs, immediate 24/7 email notifications plus an intuitive desktop and mobile-friendly website, it's a complete package.

In short, we think that CHX could be your new best friend. ^{R1}

● For details visit www.coachhireexchange.com

» notifications to everyone in CHX. It took under a minute to complete and send our test recovery job – which is vital when every minute counts. Now, at least you can tell your passengers that you've called for assistance.

The system sends an email to everyone who is registered on CHX, and 'pings' a 'notification' for app users. To accept an urgent recovery, simply click on 'I can recover passengers now'. This opens a free-form text box in which you can make your offer, and sends it direct to the coach operator.

Importantly, only the coach operator who created the job – i.e. the one who asked for help – can see the offers that have come in. If you've got a number of offers you can then choose which one to accept – perhaps the nearest – and once you've clicked 'accept', CHX will show that the

job as accepted on the originator's screen, and remove it from the list of outstanding jobs that all operators can see, as this is a real-time display, to avoid cluttering it.

"It's very simple – deliberately so – as we want to get a lot of people to see urgent jobs as quickly as possible," says Development Director Chris Whitehead. "And that's one of the benefits of having it mobile-based – both with an app and on the internet, so we can reach plenty of operators."

Planning time

Not all jobs are urgent. You may have overbooked, had extra requests for work, or got a coach off the road for major repairs, and need to 'sub' the job out. Posting a planned job is similar to an urgent passenger recovery, but with a few more details.

To create a job, you enter the basic information, such as date, time,