Ground handling: Learning to share

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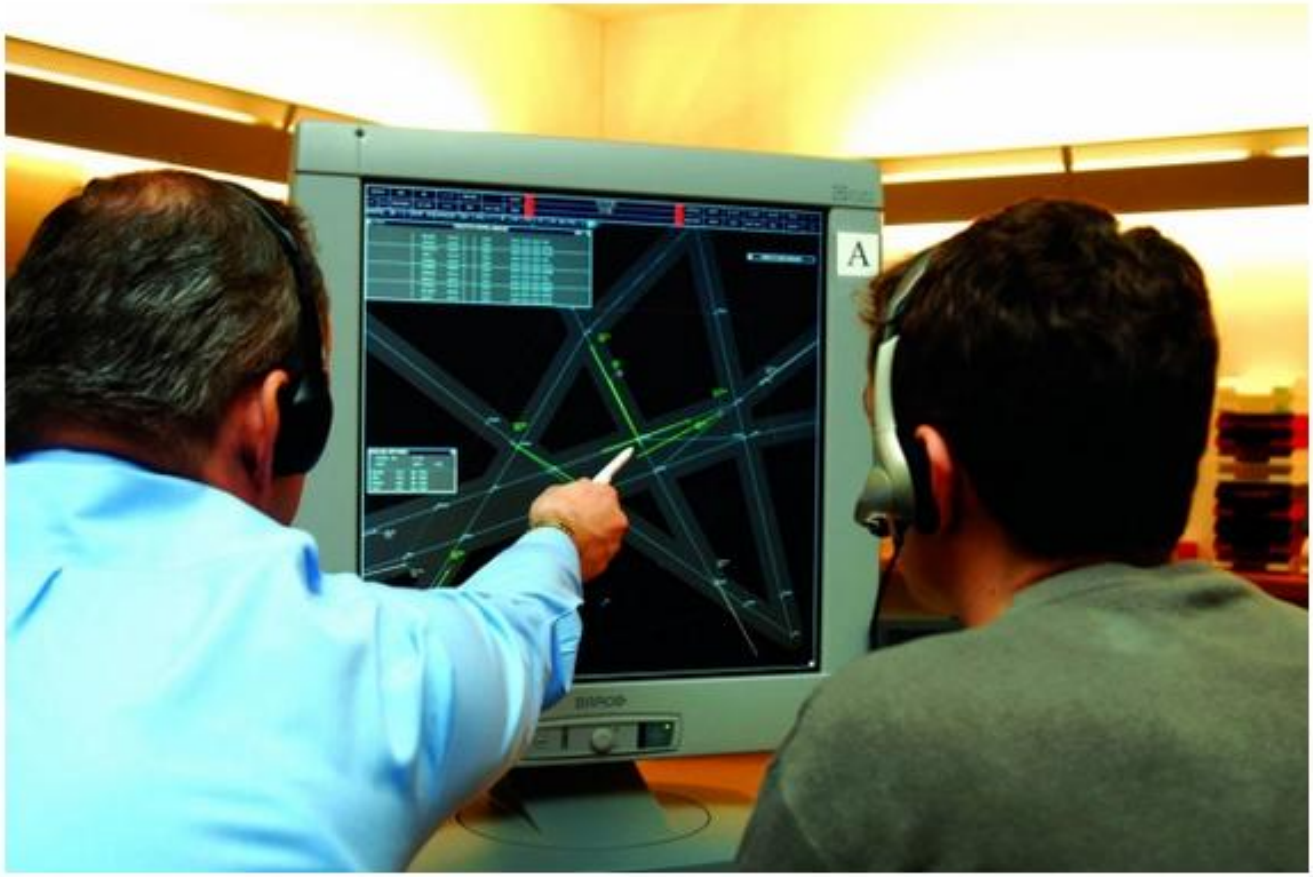

Yannick Beunardeau, head of airport IT, sales and marketing at Amadeus, examines the need for airlines and airports to share data more effectively.

Communication throughout the airport ecosystem is less than exemplary. While in terms of volume, airlines and ground handlers produce more than enough data, their IT systems are often incompatible. In other words, airlines and airports often do not speak the same language.

Linking legacy systems is often expensive, complex and time-consuming, but one link that demands improvement is the integration between airlines and ground handlers.

Ground handling is adopted in many forms; some airlines control it themselves, some contract third-parties and others use an airports´ ground handling services. This variety creates inefficiency and airlines are often unable to effectively and consistently communicate their policies to ground handlers.

To co-ordinate these complex operations, ground handlers often use the airline's individual departure control systems (DCS). This means third-parties and airport ground handlers must engage with a number of different DCS each day – sometimes one handling firm will have staff using 20 different systems. This can cause many problems, for example, training ground staff for a number of different systems is a lengthy and expensive process. Also, the nuances of an airline's IT system can be missed and airlines fail to fully differentiate themselves from one another, meaning the brands policies and promises can effectively become lost on the ground.

Planning ahead

A common misconception covering 'common-platform' models is that airlines are unable to differentiate themselves in this way. In fact, airlines are able to develop their own tailored business policies, making their customer service, rules, needs and operations specific to their company.

If airlines engaged in a common DCS platform, ground handlers would be able to use a single platform with greater efficiency and effectiveness. Airports and airlines could communicate freely in real time, passing this information on to ground handlers and customers, increasing speed and efficiency. The rules customising each airline would be stored beside (or 'parametering') the common DCS system.

Today, airlines often employ their own ground handling staff at their main hub airport, who use the airlines' own DCS system. In this circumstance, data exchange is strong and updates from handlers relating to cleaning, re-fuelling and servicing are fully visible to the airline.

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However, large network airlines might have several other hub airports, and many spoke airports where they rely on third-party handling. In this circumstance, events occurring between 'on block' and 'off block' are completely unknown to the airline. By using a common platform, airlines are able to have a complete view, as are their disparate handling partners. This enables planning and improves decision-making, which can in turn improve efficiency and reduce delays and disruption.

In many circumstances, virtually no data is exchanged between the airline and the airport operator's system from the moment the aircraft leaves the ground to the time it lands at its destination. This blindness means the airport has no foresight into future flight arrivals, an insight that is of particular importance for connecting flights.

If airports were able to engage with a common centralised system, airlines would have insight into what was occurring at the destination airport and could plan passenger-handling activities before landing; this would enhance efficiency throughout the airport.

A multi-airport view can be particularly useful during disruption as it provides passengers travelling via a hub airport with insight into their travel plans beyond their initial stopover, enabling them to adapt appropriately.

In essence, the more information that is shared, and the more precisely it happens, the more efficient airlines, ground handlers and passengers can be across the rest of the network.

A complete picture offers significant advantages in terms of disruption management at an intra- and inter-airport level. If airports are able to communicate in realtime, they can reduce the effects of delays and disruptions. For example, airport operators can manage resources and staff (such as at gates, check-in, stairs and baggage handling) and re-adjust those resources in response to unexpected or uncontrollable factors, such as bad weather.

We are pursuing this approach at Amadeus, and many European airports and their airline customers already use our Altéa airline IT suite. Today, 26 ground-handling firms have adopted the Altéa DCS, making data exchange with their airline partners seamless.

Benefits of data sharing

There are significant benefits to data sharing, which go above and beyond simply enhancing operations. For example, in line with privacy laws and airport policies, anonymous data covering passenger activity can enable airports to develop new business models, adding value to their services.

Passenger activity can be recorded every time a boarding pass is scanned: at check-in, at security, while making purchases and before boarding the aircraft.

The data can be used to enhance retail experiences, encouraging people to spend more time and money at the airport. This can increase the revenue per passenger for not only the airport but also for the retail, leisure, entertainment and dining concessions within it. The data could also enable the airport to provide passengers with real-time information regarding changes to their journey, or how to locate the check-in, security or boarding areas.

Removing stress and streamlining processes such as baggage drop-off can reassure passengers and reduce anxiety.

If airports are able to enhance the passenger experience, they will maintain an advantage over their competitors, and passengers will begin to perceive air travel as an enjoyable and stress-free endeavour.

As passenger growth increases, airports must maximise the resources available, position themselves as service providers and improve the passenger experience. Improved data sharing can help airports and airlines meet travellers' growing expectations and significantly enrich their experience.

IT for the aviation industry is evolving. However, there is still significant progress to be made. As the number of passengers increases, players must improve their customers' experience to avoid being usurped by competitors or alternative modes of travel