

REMOTE CONTROL FOR LIFE

Historically the skies have been a safe haven, one of the few places where we are quite literally out of reach. Not any more. As we become increasingly dependent on devices like the iPhone, how long will it be before onboard connectivity becomes the norm?

One of the “mega-themes” emerging from this year’s SITA/Airline Business Air Transport IT Summit in Cannes was mobile technology; hardly surprising given our fast-forward lifestyle, crammed with quick decisions, a never-ending deluge of information and ever-tightening deadlines, creating a need to be connected and contactable 24/7.

Hand-held devices are transforming from simple mobile phones into “a remote control for life”, said Orange Business Services chief executive Barbara Dalibard in Cannes. Smart mobiles, such as the iPhone, BlackBerry and Google Android, are becoming as ubiquitous as the wrist watch.

Tapping the potential of mobile technology is clearly a key priority for the airline industry. Participants in the 2009 Airline IT Trends Survey, conducted by Airline Business and SITA, predict that mobile phone-based check-in alone will increase fivefold by 2012. The potential applications throughout the passenger journey are rife: booking and checking-in on a mobile-optimised website, getting flight status updates by text, using a barcode to pass through security, access the lounge and board the flight.

Once onboard, passengers can remain connected via services like OnAir, using their smart phones for entertainment, to stay in the loop with work and tweak their arrival plans.

It is crystal clear that passengers want to remain connected using their own devices, and airlines want to cut costs, increase ancillary revenues and improve customer service. Mobile technology ticks all these boxes. It’s win-win. So what’s the hitch? The answer is, as ever in the world of aviation, nothing is that simple.

Everyone has one or two mobile phones these days. Lufthansa Systems chief executive Wolfgang Gohde says there are an estimated four billion



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mobile devices worldwide. The array of handsets is vast, making the lack of commonality a huge challenge.

Another biggie is service continuity. It’s all very well removing traditional check-in desks, but what happens when it all goes wrong? Several high-profile industry figures, including British Airways chief executive Willie Walsh and SITA chief executive Francesco Violante, flagged this as a key consideration with the roll-out of new technology. “Zero downtime” is the phrase Violante uses.

Then there’s the sheer pace of tech-

nology. By the time you’ve developed a solution, it’s old hat. Delta Air Lines chief information officer Theresa Wise says airlines need to be “architecture-centric and technology agnostic”.

She stresses: “As we plan our programmes and projects, those plans need to build in robustness to change.” When onboard mobile phone use was first mooted, it was for voice calls. Now it’s all about data. This demonstrates how rapidly things can change.

Given the huge and sudden popularity of devices like the iPhone, it is staggering that only about a third of survey respondents plan to offer GSM/GPRS connectivity by 2012. The remainder say they have no plans to roll out such technology. What’s more, onboard Wi-Fi follows a similar pattern.

The demand is there. The technology is coming online, but it seems like many airlines are sitting back and waiting for the industry’s most innovative players to show the way. Surely once the change agents across the various regions, such as AirAsia, Emirates, Delta or Ryanair, roll out these services, the default standard will have arrived. When was the last time you stayed in a hotel without in-room Internet access? It is now a basic expectation.

The age of aircraft being a connectivity black spot has passed. Passengers will expect to use their laptops and mobiles in the air – before 2012. If smart phones really are the remote control for life, players that don’t adapt will be noticeably 20th century. ■

SINGAPORE APPOINTMENT

The Airline Business and Flightglobal editorial team in Singapore has been strengthened with the promotion of Siva Govindasamy to the role of Asia Managing Editor, succeeding Nicholas Ionides. Siva is a former Straits Times editor who has been with Flight and its parent company Reed Business in Asia for five years.



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