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JET STREAM

A conversation with Wolfgang Prock-Schauer, the chief executive officer of Jet Airways.



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Photo courtesy of WestJet

A STREAMLINED APPROACH TO MANAGING STAFF

THROUGH THE USE OF ADVANCED RESOURCE MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGY, WESTJET, CANADA'S SECOND-LARGEST CARRIER, HAS ACHIEVED COST SAVINGS OF MORE THAN US\$5 MILLION A YEAR.

■ By Nancy Ornelas, Brian Lema and Todd Iversen | *Ascend* Contributors



Photo courtesy of WestJet



Photo courtesy of WestJet

With its time-consuming, manual resource management processes, WestJet, Canada's leading low-fare airline, sought an automated solution that could significantly reduce the time and effort required to schedule, plan and budget staff as well as determine employee surpluses or shortages, and provide a centralized platform to store comprehensive employee information.

The airline, which serves 34 destinations in Canada, the United States and the Bahamas, has experienced vast growth during the past 10 years, which made staff scheduling at airports a challenge because employee schedules and department itineraries were still transcribed manually. To cost-effectively accommodate its growth, WestJet needed to centralize and automate its workforce management business processes to significantly increase labor efficiency, improve customer service and reduce airport workforce administration.

During its earlier days, all employee scheduling at WestJet was completed by hand using pen, paper and spreadsheets. The airline managed to get by when its largest stations had no more than 40 employees. But as the carrier's airport department — including baggage handlers, caterers, gate agents and check-in personnel — grew to 1,300 employees at 24 domestic airports, the process proved inefficient and time consuming. To complicate matters, self-serve check-in adoption via kiosks and the Web, trans-border and international operations, and multiple aircraft on the ground were also increasing. The growing scale and complexity in operations meant more time was required to manage the growing employee base and ensure adequate staff coverage for all operating scenarios. WestJet soon realized employee scheduling could no longer be effectively supported by manual processes.

"Manually planning and scheduling did not provide us with any flexibility, and we lacked the ability to optimize the workforce according to the ever-changing flight schedules," said Mike Hafichuk, director of airports planning and support for WestJet. "It became increasingly difficult to plan our advanced schedule and day-of-operation processes effectively and efficiently."

WestJet's system also struggled to accommodate aircraft acquisitions and expansion across North America. The airline was averaging 13 major schedule changes a year with more than 20 intermittent minor schedule changes. As a result, a phenomenal amount of time was spent processing each schedule change and adjusting the varied complexities of the operation.

The carrier also found it challenging to

accurately plan and evaluate employee productivity levels, utilization factors, and cost of operations as it didn't have a centralized view of all data.

"Without automated processes and centralized data, it was impossible to accurately evaluate the business, which meant we had no assurance that we were making the best business decisions," Hafichuk said.

It was clear that to support its continued growth and success, WestJet, which now has more than 6,000 employees and flies more than 57 Boeing next-generation aircraft, needed an automated solution that could solve its many resource management challenges. In particular, the airline sought an integrated end-to-end resource management solution capable of calculating optimal staff, gate and ground support equipment levels; generating solutions



Photo courtesy of WestJet

After WestJet began using the *Streamline* suite, designed to optimize and automate the staff scheduling process, it realized numerous benefits that resulted in an annual cost savings of more than US\$5 million.

for complex rostering scenarios; automating employee administration; and offering decision support on the day of operation.

After an extensive search for an automated solution that would address every aspect of its resource management issues, WestJet selected the *Sabre® Streamline® Resource Management Suite*, including the *Sabre® Streamline® StaffPlan™*, *Sabre® Streamline® RosterMaker*, *Sabre® Streamline® StaffAdmin™* and *Sabre® Streamline® StaffManager™* systems.

The *StaffPlan* system enables WestJet to import flight schedules directly from its marketing scheduling team, analyze schedules and generate optimal resource levels. The *RosterMaker* system takes the projected manpower output from the *StaffPlan* system and converts it into a choice of patterned and patternless rosters. It also enables the airline to incorporate specific work rules around weekend shifts, morning and night shifts, and the use of part-time employees. This ensures WestJet creates more efficient staff schedules that suit the needs of its employees. The *StaffAdmin* system automates administrative processes, such as schedule bidding, as well as scheduling exceptions such as vacation requests, training, overtime and sick leave. The *StaffManager* system provides day-of-operation decision support by visualizing real-time flight activity, automating task assignment and managing exceptions.

Built using the Microsoft Visual Studio® 2003 development system, the *Streamline* suite is based on the Microsoft .NET framework. Together, Visual Studio and the .NET framework are designed to help developers quickly and easily build secure, high-performance solutions on an enterprise-ready platform. In addition, the *Sabre Airline Solutions®* business recently added even more value for its customers by implementing Microsoft Visual Studio 2005 and Microsoft .NET 2.0 framework into the *Streamline* suite.

Using the .NET framework enabled WestJet to better integrate its systems because it supports applications within a legacy server environment. The framework enables old and new applications to coexist and collaborate, which enables developers to reuse existing applications wherever possible. The framework also helps smooth the flow of critical data across the organization.

Since implementing the *Streamline* suite, WestJet has optimized and automated the staff scheduling process, which has led to increased efficiency and employee satisfaction, significant time reductions and cost savings in excess of US\$5 million annually.

"Built using Microsoft technologies, the *Streamline* suite has improved efficiency dramatically," Hafichuk said. "We can now generate analytics that help us make better



Using its 57 next-generation Boeing aircraft, WestJet has the newest planes of any large commercial airline in North America with an average aircraft age of two years old. The modern jets are equipped with extra legroom, leather seats and live seatback television on most of its fleet.



WestJet utilizes varieties of advanced technology, included blended winglets that increase fuel efficiency. The airline also looks for creative marketing opportunities, such as painting its Web site address on the winglets

business decisions, contributing materially to the bottom line."

The tool enables WestJet's staff to create different scheduling scenarios and study the costs and benefits of each. The airline is now able to configure the application to evaluate all flight schedules and

develop a work plan that makes the most business sense.

"We can now create 'if-and-then' situations, allowing us to build scenarios using data such as customer contact time, customer arrival curves and self-service adoption rates — it's that comprehensive," said Hafichuk.



Photo by WestJet Airlines

With an employee base of more than 5,000, WestJet sought an end-to-end automated resource management solution that would help it staff the right people at the right place and time to boost productivity across the company.

The new system also enables the airline to generate a variety of shift solutions based on the desired levels of efficiency and employee satisfaction. Using the *Streamline* suite, analysts can produce a staff schedule that assigns the most efficient shifts according to the work demand while minimizing headcount and maximizing productivity on a particular task.

"The system can prioritize resources based on cost, and it will find the most inexpensive way to properly cover the shift," Hafichuk said. "You can also ask the system to come up with an alternative based solely on efficiency. It's amazing to have this level of flexibility and choice so we can make the best staffing decisions."

WestJet uses the solution not only to create a schedule with associated costs but also to automate the scheduling process so paper-based administrative processes and schedule exceptions, such as vacation, training, overtime and sickness, are easily accommodated and tracked.

"The automation was the biggest motivation for us, and the software helped us virtually eliminate our manual processes," Hafichuk said. "We've been able to consolidate roles, streamline and reallocate positions, and eliminate things we no longer need to do. It's making us much more efficient overall."

To promote fairness and equitability between starting times as well as accommodate days off, WestJet creates rosters in which all employees rotate through different shifts. The new solution reads the output from the *StaffPlan* system and creates individual shifts based on work rules and employee exceptions, producing a rotating roster that is assigned to employees each week.


"Canada has sophisticated work rules, and fairness, equitability of shifts and days off are of great importance to our people," Hafichuk said. "The new solution helps us ensure that all employees are treated fairly and all employees

rotate through the specific number of shifts without compromising safe and efficient operations."

Another benefit for WestJet employees is the ease of shift trading. Using the *Streamline* suite, the airline offers a secure, employee-only Web site to help them easily trade shifts, request days off or post available shifts online.

"To do something simple like trade a shift meant an employee had to come in to the airport, complete a paper form and sign off," Hafichuk said. "Then, that employee would have to wait for another employee to come in and complete the other part of the paperwork before it would be submitted to an administrator for manual approval. Now, more than 1,000 employees are empowered to find the information they need by simply logging on to the site from anywhere — giving them more control over their days off."

WestJet has utilized the *Streamline* suite to develop schedules that are cost effective and efficient yet still satisfactory to its employees. The carrier has also reduced administrative time to create staff schedules. Previously, it took more than a week to process a month of full-time work. Now, it can be completed in a matter of hours. In addition, WestJet estimates the *RosterMaker* and *StaffAdmin* systems have helped save approximately 25 percent in administrative costs by automating the creation of complex rosters and streamlining employee administration.

"With the new software in place, we have saved the equivalent of 30 full-time employees to build and manage staff schedules across our system," Hafichuk said. "We now have a group of five individuals centrally located to handle these tasks. That represents more than US\$1 million in back-end labor savings for us, just within one department." 

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+count it up

3 million

The number of passengers that will board 42,300 flights on Boeing jetliners in the next 24 hours, carrying them to nearly every country on earth.

500 million

The amount in U.S. dollars the industry lost in 2006 as a result of high oil prices, according to the International Air Transport Association.

4,650

The number of shipments of spare parts Boeing will send to airline customers worldwide in the next 24 hours.