

ascend

Taking your airline to new heights

A portrait of Muhammad Ali Albakri, Chief Information Officer of Saudi Arabian Airlines, wearing a dark suit and glasses, looking directly at the camera. The background is a bright, modern office space with large windows.

THE JEWEL

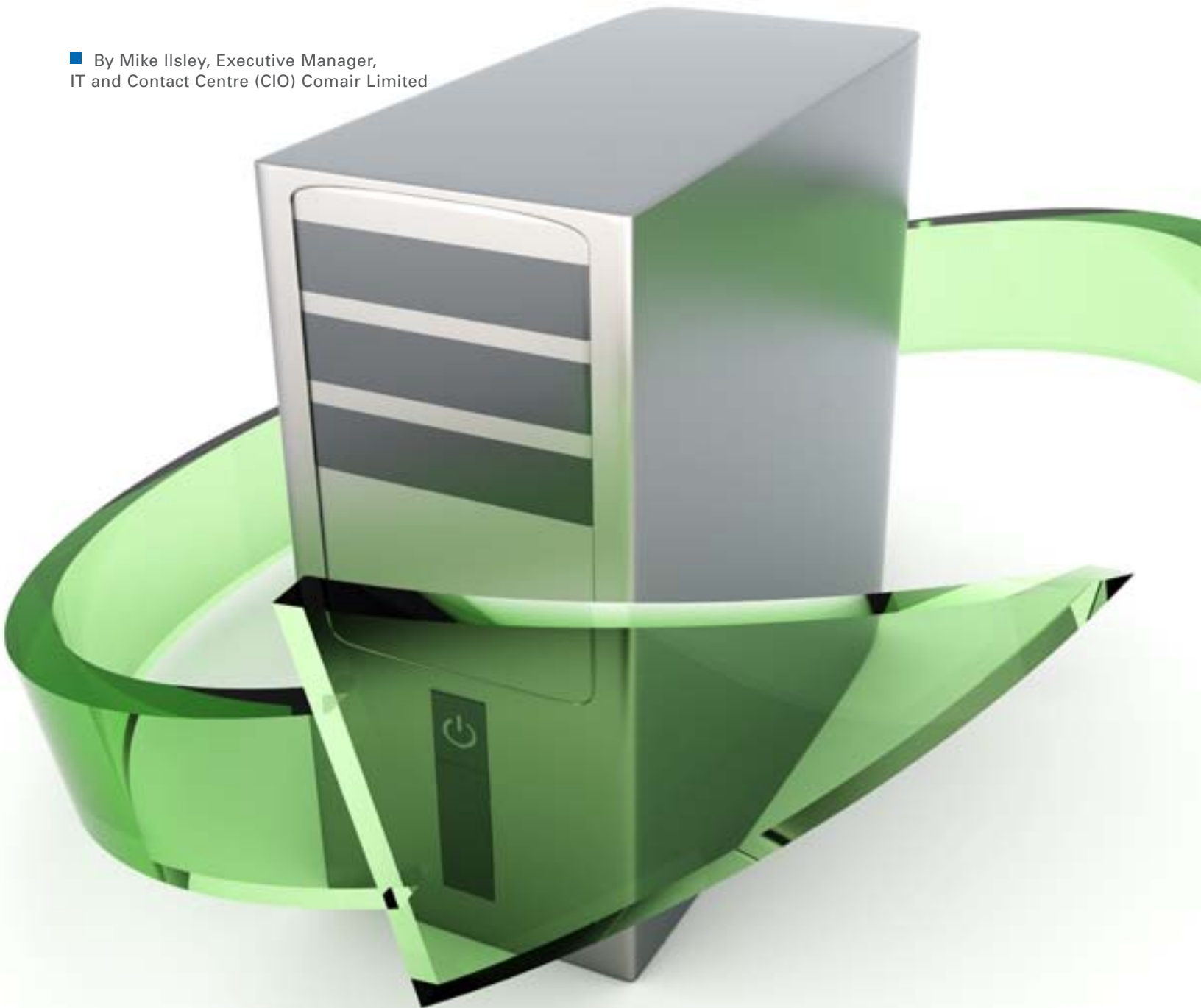
A Conversation With ...
Muhammad Ali Albakri,
Chief Information Officer,
Saudi Arabian Airlines,

Pg. 24

SYSTEMS REFRESH

Comair Limited trades in-house technology for a more solid solution

■ By Mike Ilsley, Executive Manager,
IT and Contact Centre (CIO) Comair Limited



Comair Limited, a South Africa-based aviation company founded in 1946, has set an industry record with 65 years of operating profit. But recently, the carrier found itself in a predicament involving its in-house IT systems. They had become out of date and inadequate to handle its product suite and projected growth.

So the carrier proceeded to evaluate its options, always mindful of its legacy of success.

That legacy continues. Among its other highlights and characteristics, Comair today operates the local and regional southern African British Airways franchise, a full-service airline covering the South African domestic as well as regional southern African markets.

Additionally, Comair operates kulula.com, Africa's first low-fare airline. Since its inception 10 years ago, kulula.com has been renowned as a somewhat quirky brand, revolutionizing air travel in South Africa by making flying much easier and more affordable to a broader range of customers.

And the business activity of the Comair organization extends much deeper, kulula.com has become South Africa's largest online retailer, generating more than R2.5 billion (US\$364 million) annually in online sales through its offerings including kulula.com, kulula Travel, MT Beds, Gotravel 24 and African Dream Holidays.

The primary IT systems upon which the kulula business runs — the kulula.com (K3) booking system and the Comair Check In System (CCIS) — were developed and written in house by Comair Limited. But the systems were designed when the carrier's product was relatively simple and straightforward.

Lack of integration between and among systems has resulted in data inaccuracies from system to system. To try to keep systems synchronized often also requires number of manual actions. As a result of the various inefficiencies, Comair's ability to react in a timely manner to changes in the market, launch new products or address complex issues such as operational disruptions has been severely hampered.

Furthermore, as is quite evident throughout the industry, the air-travel business has evolved and continues to develop quickly, with decoupling into numerous trip-option charges for items including baggage and ancillary products and services.

So the critical necessity for a system and process refresh became obvious to Comair's senior management because changing and tweaking the design of existing systems



Technology Facelift As part of an on-going initiative to provide exceptional service to its customers, Comair will upgrade its technology and institute more intuitive processes and procedures.

to accommodate more and more complex requirements has resulted in highly labor-intensive procedures that really don't fit with the carrier's future needs.

Those needs, of course, start with efficiency and integration of systems, and to develop more intuitive procedures for Comair personnel who work tirelessly to provide outstanding quality service to the carrier's many loyal customers.

Comair's passenger numbers continue to expand, and the carrier must upgrade its systems to handle travel requirements and necessities far into the 21st century.

Among future needs, kulula seeks to upgrade its customer experience with new products for travelers. And always looking

forward, Comair has made substantial investments in new aircraft as well as new routes, and it wants to offer customers greater service and product options.

The Resolution

In surveying numerous competitors and their airline IT offerings, Comair singled out technology from *Sabre Airline Solutions*® as best suited for its needs. The technology partner offers vast experience working with many airlines of various sizes and shapes around the globe, and Comair has selected several major systems from:

- *SabreSonic*® Customer Sales & Service — A suite of tools designed for flexibility and efficiency in reservations, inventory and



Photos: Comair Limited

Africa's First LCC Comair's low-fare airline, kulula.com, has revolutionized air travel in South Africa by making flying much easier and more affordable.



Replacing Outdated Technology Comair will replace its current technology with numerous systems from *Sabre Airline Solutions* that will drive greater value by working together.

passenger check-in, plus merchandising, e-commerce and revenue recognition through multiple points of sale and service.

- **Sabre® AirVision™ Marketing & Planning** — Strategic decision-making tools to help establish the optimum mix of schedule, price and service; development of unique branding characteristics; and profit improvement.
- **Sabre® AirCentre™ Enterprise Operations** — A portfolio of solutions that enables the carrier to conduct everyday operations with confidence and restore operations as quickly as possible when circumstances such as major weather events disrupt the daily flow. Time out of service means major revenue loss, and minimizing the

disruption is critical to the carrier's economic viability.

Key criteria considered during Comair's investigation phase included the scope and features of the solutions, the global business reputation of the supplier, the size and degree of satisfaction of the supplier's current client base, and the stability of the supplier and its solutions — in combination with the overall cost.

Quite significantly, the level of integration of the various modules among the solutions also comprised a considerable decision factor for the Comair board and executive management committee — all of this combined with the supplier's readiness and willingness to be a true partner to Comair in implementing world-class business processes.

In addition, it's critical that the supplier invest major effort and resources in the extension and further evolution of the systems. Top-notch research and development have been applied in bringing the solutions to the marketplace, but it's extremely important that research and development never stop — that the systems are capable of evolving to meet and even get ahead of future issues.

All of these critical considerations pointed to *Sabre Airline Solutions* as Comair's technology partner of choice.

Transition Time

During a 12- to 18-month transition time-frame, plans are to replace most of the systems upon which Comair's airline operations are currently based with those from *Sabre Airline Solutions*. These solutions have been designed to drive greater value by working together and will not only improve Comair's current operations but also take the carrier into a promising future.

The first phase of the system implementation is total documentation of Comair's business processes, followed by training and testing in the second phase. The third and final phase is the actual cutover to the new systems in day-to-day operation.

After these phases, Comair envisions a "stabilization" phase and eventually a "support" phase, with *Sabre Airline Solutions* as a full partner in all aspects of the extreme makeover of Comair systems.

Change management is already under way, preparing Comair staff for the considerable impact of project implementation. In alliance with its new technology partner, Comair has approached its voluminous changeover requirements and responsibilities with a steady confidence.

And because of management's forthright commitment to proceed with system implementation, the prospect of a future for Comair as a leadership organization, in Africa as well as globally, is being substantially enhanced. ■



R2.5 Billion In Online Sales kulula.com represents South Africa's largest online retailer, generating more than R2.5 billion (US\$364 million) a year in online sales.

Mike Illesley can be contacted at cio@comair.co.za.