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Under one Roof

By Craig Parfitt | Ascend Contributor



Personnel at China Eastern's new airport operations center at Hongqiao International Airport play a vital role in making sure customers arrive at their destinations on schedule. During times of disruption, the airline's AOC manages a variety of tasks, such as swapping aircraft types, to ensure customers are re-accommodated in a timely fashion.



*China Eastern's new
airline operations center
enables it to rapidly
respond to costly
disruptions such as
mechanical problems or
weather-related delays.*



As the ticket agent looks over a departure lounge filled with passengers scheduled to take a flight from Shanghai to Beijing, China, his phone suddenly rings with the dreaded news from the maintenance supervisor that the aircraft is out of service. After consulting with the airline's operations office, it is quickly determined that a spare aircraft is not available, and the part needed to repair the original aircraft is hours away.

Faced with the unpleasant duty of informing 121 passengers eagerly waiting to board the aircraft that the flight must be cancelled, a call is placed to China Eastern Airlines' reservations center to inquire about space on one of its flights. Once the call is received and transferred to the new airline operations center, a group of professionals quickly assess the situation.

Utilizing advanced technology, China Eastern operations coordinators determine that an Airbus A320 has just been released from a series of maintenance checks and will be available to transport all the stranded passengers from Shanghai to Beijing. The manager on duty alerts all departments that are represented in the AOC by generating a message and, in a matter of minutes, the passengers are re-accommodated on the new flight.

Airlines throughout the world are faced with this dilemma on an hourly basis, and only those that possess the best hardware and software, coupled with highly trained operations professionals, succeed in today's constantly changing airline environment. Although major carriers all utilize some type of automation, some small or regional carriers still rely on manual methods to track aircraft utilization and maintenance checks. Airlines with a small number of aircraft can manage these routine tasks; however, as their fleet grows, this process becomes unmanageable.

As the economy in Asia continues to surge, airlines operating in the region struggle to utilize their fleet in the most efficient manner, sometimes extending maintenance and flight crew times to the maximum allowed duty limits. During off-schedule operations, airlines are challenged to deviate from their published schedules and optimize a scheduled recovery as quickly and effectively as possible. Multiple cancellations and delays are usually associated with these

events, sometimes leaving passengers stranded for days at a time.

Personnel working in AOCs are inundated with critical decisions that will determine when and how passengers will ultimately arrive at their destinations. By substituting or "juggling" different aircraft types on selected flights, passengers can be re-accommodated in a timely manner. It is during these events that airlines possessing skilled operations personnel and automation capable of monitoring their schedules routinely generate additional revenue.

Realizing the potential of advanced automation and a highly trained work force, China Eastern Airlines' senior management had the vision to take the necessary steps to create a new operations center. On the outskirts of Hongqiao Airport located in Shanghai, the airline has constructed a state-of-the-art AOC that encompasses the latest technology, including the *Sabre® Movement Manager*, the *Sabre® Dispatch Manager* and the *Sabre® Load Manager*.

Bringing together its operations functions helps China Eastern better respond to unexpected delays, which helps improve customer service and, therefore, retain valuable customers. Centralizing its operations helps the airline minimize delays caused by unexpected disruptions, ensuring passengers are re-accommodated as quickly as possible, which helps lead to repeat business and continued loyalty.

The genesis for this project began when China Eastern management contacted Sabre Airline Solutions Consulting to conduct a scoping study to assist with the integration of its operations. It had become clear that if the airline sought to combine its operations into a single entity and continue to grow, some drastic steps had to be taken. A scoping study was conducted in August 2003 focusing on an in-depth review of the airline's nine branch offices and two subsidiary operations. After a thorough review of the consulting team's findings and recommendations, China Eastern decided to build an AOC. Sabre Airline Solutions assisted the airline with the development of its new operations facility and provided training and onsite representatives to help the airline bring the AOC to life. Additionally, a consultant from Sabre Airline Solutions will remain onsite for two years to assist with

the development of business processes that utilize the industry's best practices.

"We are confident we will see excellent results by implementing the recommendations made by our valued Sabre Airline Solutions partners," said Yu-Lin Wu, vice president for China Eastern Airlines. "We expect that the new efficiencies we will achieve through the operations control consolidation will heighten our performance in this highly competitive marketplace."

A major part of the AOC success comes from centralizing key departments under one roof and making unified decisions.

"Having the ability to integrate our total operation and bring together our most talented individuals in one location will ultimately lead to increased productivity and add to the efficiency of the airline," said China Eastern Director Andy Yang. "Most delays in airline operations occur simply because decision makers within the airline are in different locations, making it almost impossible to deliver timely decisions. The 'ripple effect' then takes place, and the customer is the one who suffers."

Another major step China Eastern has undertaken is the development of a crisis center and the updating of its emergency response procedures. The types of emergency situations the AOC must contend with include sabotage threats, hijacking, aircraft accidents, natural disasters, military operations assistance and severe weather situations. Without clear emergency operating procedures, these types of incidents become extremely difficult to manage. Additionally, the training aspect of key decision makers is a never-ending challenge that strains even the most sophisticated airlines. China Eastern has taken the approach of selecting the right individuals to fill these positions while incorporating the latest techniques and strategies to train them.

With its new AOC and emergency operating procedures in place, China Eastern is well on its way to becoming one of the most profitable carriers serving the region. **E**

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