

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,

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SPECIAL SECTION

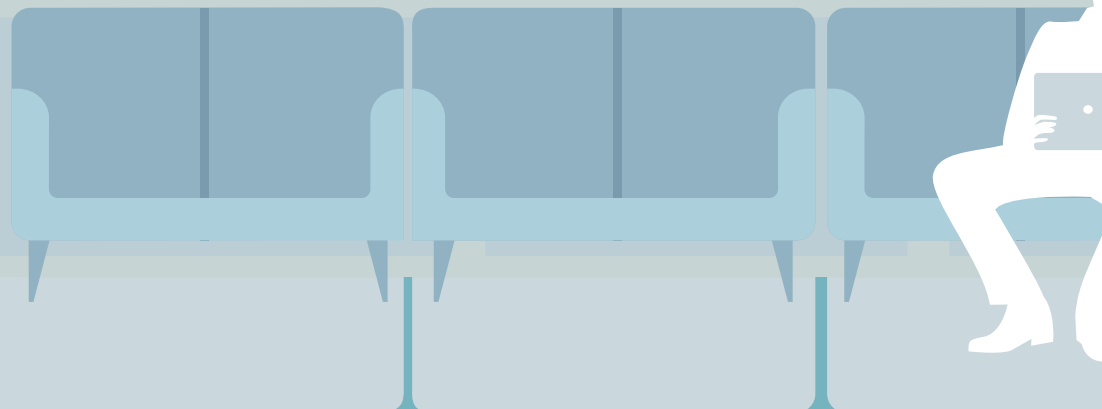


THE CONNECTED AIRLINE

DEPARTURES

FLIGHT NO. GATE

ON	LHR	BD	152	15
N	MXP	AZ	155	8
INKI		AY	814	
OW	SWO	VG	147	



By Lauren Lovelady | *Ascend* Staff

THE CONNECTED AIRPORT

Forward-thinking airports that support end-to-end communications play a significant role in supporting airlines' efforts to connect all facets of their operations.



Airports accommodate an incredible number of visitors each day. During the first three months of this year alone, the world's three busiest airports in terms of passenger traffic (Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International, Beijing Capital International and Chicago O'Hare International) handled a combined total of 53,554,883 travelers. As the complexity and volume of airline and airport operations increases, so does traveler anxiety.

Many travelers approach airports with a fair amount of trepidation, finding them cumbersome, confusing and overwhelming. The J.D. Power and Associates 2010 North America Airport Satisfaction Survey found while traveler satisfaction with U.S. airports improved for the first time in three years, it still ranks considerably lower than satisfaction with other travel-related industries, including hotels and rental car establishments.

Interestingly, the survey credited much of the improvement to the implementation of new technology at U.S. airports during the past decade. Online check-in, digital parking lot management systems and high-speed wireless Internet access are commonplace at nearly every airport.

What appears to be lacking is the seamless flow of information across these elements to produce an efficient, satisfactory customer experience.

Survey respondents noted basic expectations, such as prompt baggage delivery, ease of check-in and baggage check, the comfort of and ability to navigate the airport, and the amount of time required for security checks, are not being met consistently.

Some airlines view airports with apprehension as well, and for reasons similar to those of passengers. They can be a financial strain on the carriers serving them. Fees are required for landing, gate rental, office space, security services, hangar rental, as well as city, state and country tariffs. Some have tedious slot management practices; others impose strict noise regulations.

Airports pose other challenges for airlines as well. The integration of IT systems and the processes surrounding them continues to be a major hurdle. At one terminal, a carrier's domestic baggage system may function one way, while at the international terminal nearby, the same carrier's international baggage process is handled entirely differently. If the IT infrastructure lacks consistency at a single airport, imagine how carriers must adapt and adjust their operations to airports they serve in cities and countries a world apart.

Even though airlines may have efficient airport operations that generally run like clockwork, they are still sometimes at the mercy of third-party contractors, including security agents and ground handlers, as well as increasingly outdated, cramped airport facilities.

The irony is, no matter what kind of experience a passenger has while at an airport or during a flight, the blame, or credit for that matter, is

given to the carrier, which actually may not be the responsible party.

Airlines, and increasingly airports, are keenly aware of the challenges. Working together, they have made significant strides within the last decade to improve airport operations. Numerous airports worldwide are undergoing renovations to upgrade their facilities — some now closely resemble shopping malls — and the technology supporting the various operational functions. As well, a number of greenfield airports are being constructed globally in response to growing consumer demand for air service in once underdeveloped air travel markets.

For their part, carriers are enlarging their vision to include airports as an integral component of their operations. Partnering with airports, carriers can utilize emerging technologies — even in incremental steps — to improve operational efficiency, enhance the end-to-end traveler experience and realize a return on their investments.

Airport Evolution

As the central, dynamic hub of airline activity, the airport is where a carrier's main product — the schedule — is executed after months of planning and preparation. It is designed to attract consumers in the most cost-effective manner and generate incremental revenues whenever possible. As such, an airport provides the greatest possible number of passenger touch points for carriers, including ticket counters, baggage check areas, security stations, gate areas, frequent flyer lounges and everywhere in between.

The fact is the vast majority of activities that make an airline successful operationally, financially and in the eyes of consumers happen at the airport in the final hours, minutes and seconds before a flight's departure and after its arrival.

Until recently, a carrier's airport operations and the data supporting each were generally compartmentalized. Often standalone, unconnected systems handled baggage, departure control, passenger check-in and the list goes on. Manual inputs were required to transfer data from one system to the other. As a result, "word-of-mouth" played an important role in the communication of critical operations and passenger information. Once a work shift ended, the verbal information gathering process began again. Inevitably, valuable data was lost with each shift change.

Rising costs, operational inefficiencies and passenger dissatisfaction motivated airlines to seek better ways to conduct business and optimize airport resources. Technology, as the J.D. Power and Associates survey noted, has been and is a primary change agent for the aviation industry. Not just technology itself, but rather the ability to successfully deploy technology in a way that focuses on a seamless customer experience while improving operational efficiencies.

The key is connectivity — the integration of an airline's airport, ground and aircraft systems to create a network where information can flow freely to the right person at the right time. Mobility



Photos: Shutterstock

Real-Time Updates Nearly 40 percent of travelers prefer to receive real-time updates about flight status and baggage delivery on their mobile devices.

enhances connectivity and provides airline and airport employees and passengers alike with instant access to information anywhere at anytime from multiple types of devices.

Enhancing The Passenger Experience

With the latest in personal technology in their hands, including mobile phones, smart phones and tablet computers, consumers have access to infinite amounts of information daily and can “opt in” or “opt out” at any time. They feel empowered to explore options and make decisions.

Because frequent travelers tend to be early adopters of the latest technology innovations, this sense of empowerment has understandably extended into the air travel arena. Passengers have grown accustomed to feeling in control of every aspect of their daily lives, including their travel itineraries.

They want information on flight status, aircraft type, standby and oversell situations, and the availability of meal and beverage services at their fingertips. If airlines and airports will not or cannot provide such information, passengers will readily turn to third-party applications to obtain it.

Another survey by J.D. Power and Associates, 2010 Global Airline Traveler Survey, reveals nearly 40 percent of travelers desire to receive real-time updates on flight status and baggage delivery on their mobile devices. Clearly, passengers value timely and transparent communication with airlines and airports, especially in the event of delays, cancellations, missed connections and lost luggage.

With WiFi service now reaching the cockpit via electronic flight bags and extending into the cabin, travelers can conduct business as they would on the ground. By tracking consumer preferences in flight, carriers can better tailor their entertainment options, merchandising efforts and ancillary services.

With this data in hand, airlines could empower passengers to further customize their travel experience while also identifying new revenue sources and differentiating their products from the competition. Purchases made inflight via credit card can be authorized in a matter of minutes during a flight, instead of seven to eight hours afterward, thereby reducing the likelihood of fraud.

The airport staff, whether airline employees or contract workers, play a critical role in the connected airport. Equipping airline employees with mobile devices that are loaded with data on individual passenger activities and preferences allows them to assist customers quickly and knowledgeably and eliminates long lines at ticket counters and gate areas. As a result, passengers with complex check-in issues, special needs or simply an aversion to technology have easier access to traditional check-in methods.

Creating Operational Efficiencies

A sequence of approximately 120 activities must unfold in a designated order before a flight can depart, and after its arrival. Because all activities are interrelated, one that is delayed or unable to continue due to missing data can result in a late flight departure and subsequently late arrival. Therefore, the ability to track the status of each activity and the resources needed to accomplish it is vital to the safety and efficiency of airline operations. It is a daunting challenge at best and one that requires seamless data flow across an airline’s entire airport operation.

Whether they are airline employees or third-party handlers, ground personnel can utilize mobile devices to access this seamless flow of data.



Airport Connectivity An airport achieves true connectivity only when its airport, ground and aircraft systems are fully integrated to create a network where information can flow freely to all the right resources at the right times.

They can access real-time updates on the status of flights as well as the location and condition of ground support equipment, including who has proper authorization to operate each piece.

By communicating passenger-booking data in real time, airline personnel can determine how many resources are needed to handle each flight, where they should be at a given time and what they need to be doing, knowing it could change at any time. Without the availability of this information, productivity losses, underutilization of and damage to equipment, and confusion regarding tasks and assignments are inevitable.

Unfortunately, service disruptions — delays, cancellations and last-minute changes — have become a routine part of air travel. However, they are no less painful for the airlines, airports and travelers impacted by them. On the up side, the ability of airlines and airports to manage disruptions has improved significantly due, in large part, to the availability of real-time data and mobile solutions. With immediate access to updated information, employees can move quickly to avoid further disruptions and even avert delayed departures, if possible.

If a flight departure is delayed by an hour, for example, there is little value in positioning an airline agent at the gate an hour early while another agent

two gates down is struggling to board a full load and accommodate a long list of standbys single-handedly. By reassigning the first agent to help with the full passenger load, the flight has a better chance of an on-time departure, and the agent can then return to the initial gate assignment.

Today, SMS messaging is the most common method for notifying passengers of service disruptions. In the near future, new innovations in mobile technology will enable airlines to offer alternative flights, personalize compensation packages and provide electronic vouchers for meals and hotels in response to flight cancellations.

Connectivity also permits airlines to proactively manage operations. Employees with special skill sets, such as those fluent in multiple languages, can be identified and notified of assignments in advance, optimizing precious pre-departure time. Positioning the right personnel with the right skills in the right place at the right time helps airlines more efficiently utilize their workforce.

Last-minute customer service requests can be handled effortlessly utilizing real-time data to track the status of seemingly mundane aspects of a carrier's airport operations. For instance, if the passenger list for a flight indicates four wheelchairs have been requested, but in actuality seven are needed, the information can be quickly

communicated to the appropriate personnel via connected mobile solutions.

Employees can pinpoint the current location of the wheelchairs and deliver them where needed in a timely manner, avoiding a possible delay. While providing this type of customer service may not generate additional revenues, it does strengthen customer loyalty and satisfaction.

The Future Now

The connected airport, empowered by mobile resources, is no longer a futuristic concept. While various elements of this mobile technology have been in use for a number of years, only now have they evolved and integrated to a level where they can support every aspect of an airline's operations, optimize its resources and deliver an end-to-end, customized passenger experience.

As airlines continue to connect all aspects of their operations, forward-thinking airports will reap the greatest benefits if they work in tandem with carriers to reduce costs and inefficiencies and enhance the traveler experience. ■

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+count it up

3 liters

According to enviro.aero, the new Airbus A380, Boeing 787 and Bombardier CSeries aircraft use less than 3 liters of jet fuel per 100 passenger kilometers. This matches the efficiency of most modern compact cars.

3.5 trillion

The amount in U.S. dollars by which aviation's global economic impact is estimated. According to enviro.aero, this is equivalent to 8 percent of world gross domestic product.

12,000

The number of new aircraft (at a cost of US\$1.3 trillion) the world's airlines must purchase in order for the aviation industry to reach its target of 1.5 percent average fleet fuel efficiency per annum from now until 2020, according to enviro.aero."

40+ billion

The amount in U.S. dollars, according to enviro.aero, that air transport pays annually to use its infrastructure (airport and air navigation services) through specific landing, passenger and air traffic control fees.

3,754

The approximate number of airports served by airlines through a route network of several million kilometers managed by approximately 160 air navigation service providers, according to enviro.aero.

20 decibels

The amount by which aircraft entering today's fleet are quieter compared to aircraft 40 years ago, according to enviro.aero. A further 50 percent reduction in noise during takeoff and landing is expected by 2020.