

Airport IT as managed services – Now is the time



Modernize IT for lower costs and agile operations

For many airports, a recovery from the current downturn will be a stress test that reveals the resiliency and strength of their underlying IT infrastructure and business processes. The revealed stresses may come in differing forms and could result in passenger frustration at a time when regaining confidence is essential to restoring the industry.

Airport IT teams, often understaffed and overtaxed, will do their best to maintain standards. A heavy reliance on ad hoc approaches and lack of industry-standard disciplines – such as service management or project and program management – will be challenging amid staff shortages and significant changes to airport operations.

In addition, responses to the current environment have caused confusion and burdens for IT departments. For example, there is yet to be a consistent use of technologies to address important issues such as crowd management (social distancing) and health and safety. Airports are pressed into experimenting with solutions even though there is limited industry guidance. The result is an inconsistent passenger experience, further lowering passengers' confidence that airports have taken the necessary precautions to ensure their safety.


Historically, airport IT teams already spend much of their time fighting day-to-day challenges such as network outages, system crashes and other issues. That leaves little time for much-needed innovation. In many cases, innovation is coming from outside the IT organization, which leads to the rise of shadow IT projects.

For example, some airports have built passenger-facing systems such as flight-information displays and parking-revenue controls without participation from their IT groups, yet IT is called upon when there is an outage. That's why a growing number of airports are exploring new ways to deliver IT services more efficiently and reliably, such as airport IT as a managed service, which provides full support for both IT systems and ongoing service management.

Ad hoc isn't enough

To be sure, airports have faced these problems for years, and to date, most have muddled through. But with the pandemic likely to affect travel for the foreseeable future, muddling through has become an especially poor option.

One big issue is that many airports add technology on an ad hoc basis – that is, without a roadmap or a list of priorities. This may result in a mismatch of technology solutions to actual airport priorities. For example, many airports now have 10 or more different vendors doing things 10 or more different ways, meaning that there is no common way to manage work. A harmonized approach includes a complete services bundle, including a service catalog, change management and service management program.



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The services solution

One solution to the airport IT challenge is to adopt managed services. Airports frequently contract with third parties to handle activities such as fuel services, janitorial, flight information displays, cameras and parking. Similarly, an airport could work with a third-party service provider to handle some or even all of its IT services. One benefit to this approach is that service providers bring valuable service management techniques and practices that many airports now lack, yet which are essential to choreograph an airport's extensive IT services bundle. Service management aligns the delivery of IT services with the organization's needs. These practices include change management, the establishment of a defined Project Management Office (PMO), and the use of standards — all within an IT architecture and investment framework.

By leveraging managed services, airports also can smooth their IT operations and align to business priorities, allowing them to offer IT as a service. For example, managing social distancing could become an IT service. An airport would first create a framework for the social distancing service's requirements; this framework could include objectives, project management, change management and management over time. Another candidate for managed services is handling data analytics for airport camera systems. And the list goes on.


Airports should emphasize recovery by controlling costs, incorporating new technology, optimizing vendor-management programs, and identifying service owners. With comparatively fewer people traveling, now is a good time for airports to make changes. As the recovery progresses, most airports will be too busy keeping up with mandates for crowd management to rethink their IT priorities. Recovery should also present airports with a unique opportunity to both achieve greater efficiencies and make better use of IT.

Airports using managed services

Some airports are doing this already. For example, Minneapolis-Saint Paul International operates a robust PMO. The office even functions as a strategic partner of the airport's owner/operator, the Metropolitan Airports Commission, providing reports directly to the commission's board.

Similarly, Orlando International has developed a clearly defined investment program for IT innovation. This has also transformed the airport's IT into a full-service department that offers not only traditional computing services, but also video walls, asset management, telecom services, geographic information systems (GIS) and more.

Houston's George Bush Intercontinental also has adopted modern approaches, leveraging IT managed services in a way that's truly comprehensive. It includes application development, application hosting, project portfolio management (PPM), and security.



Copenhagen Airport now operates on a service model, extending even to functions such as ordering a wheelchair or purchasing jet fuel.

Other airports adopting modern approaches include Tampa International, where the IT team has a disciplined approach to launching innovative pilot projects and prototypes. Yet another is Charlotte Douglas International Airport, which operates a dedicated IT PMO office and has drawn up a well-defined roadmap for future IT investments.

One of the most advanced service models can be found at Copenhagen Airport. This airport, Denmark's main international hub, has implemented a service model that extends far beyond IT. In fact, the entire airport now operates on a service model, extending even to functions such as ordering a wheelchair or purchasing jet fuel.

Benefits of a managed services approach

Airports that have adopted IT as a managed service enjoy a long list of impressive benefits, including:

Reduced costs: Contracting outside labor may be less expensive than full-time employees with benefits. Also, cost-reduction targets can be stipulated in a service provider's contract. Savings can often be delivered, at least in part, by moving to the cloud.

Improved service levels: By moving to standardized service levels, an airport can move beyond "unique." Instead of using custom systems that are difficult to operate, prone to failure and generally expensive, an airport can move to standard setups, service levels and contracts.

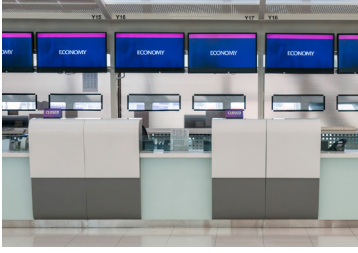
More robust disaster recovery and business continuity: With a defined operational services model, recovery becomes easier and faster. Moving to an outsourced arrangement has an additional benefit of driving an airport to clearly define its lines of IT responsibility and paths for escalation.

Better access to highly skilled professionals: Large IT outsourcing firms can attract highly skilled professionals, and they can provide these services at a lower cost than most airports. This can also help airports suffering from high turnover — a common result of their IT teams being pulled in many competing directions. Outsourcing providers aim to deliver long-term results, so they recognize the value of structured training.

Accelerated innovation, faster adoption of new technology: There's a difference between innovation and invention. Where invention can be chaotic, innovation is orderly. But that requires an orchestrated platform, one that's architected to deliver results and evolve new technologies based on improving the customer experience.

Harmonized technology: Airports need to implement new technology without disrupting legacy systems. Outsourcing companies can help provide project managers trained to properly scope and deliver new technologies that integrate with older systems.

Cognitive benchmarking: Aided by advanced machine learning methodologies and a global footprint, a managed service team can conduct a comparative analysis against more than 100 peer airport organizations and then prioritize improvements that will deliver the greatest impact on operational efficiency and passenger satisfaction.



Airports urgently need to restore the confidence of travelers, and to do so will require implementing new technology and upskilling staff.

Making it happen

Given these powerful benefits, why haven't more airports adopted IT as a managed service? One objection comes from the belief that because every airport is unique, a standard service model can't work. There's an element of truth here: Every airport is unique, but their IT program is not. From airport to airport, IT operations are quite similar. For this reason, nearly every airport IT group stands to benefit from adopting industry best practices, and nearly all are good candidates for more standardization and governance.

Another common objection centers on up-front spending for an external partner. This objection may be quite forceful since, with air traffic currently so low, many airports want to rein in their costs. One workaround is to have current IT staff, many of whom are less busy than normal, do at least some of the preliminary work that would otherwise be done by an external partner. These tasks can include identifying services and their owners and completing asset registries. In addition, now is a good time for IT staff to receive training in the service-management practices that will be so important during recovery.

A third objection arises from inertia: "We've always done it this way. Why should we change now?" The simple answer: Because airports urgently need to restore the confidence of travelers, and to do so will require implementing new technology and upskilling staff. The overall airport operations landscape has changed significantly and will need a more robust IT support model. Now is the time.

Get started today

Are IT managed services right for your airport? To answer that question, you'll need to first define the general business case, options, risk and benefits. Assess and prioritize your business needs. And assess your current technology environment. For help with this, take the following self-assessment.

Fortunately you don't need to do this alone. Find out today how DXC can help you get underway.

About the author

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Self-assessment

Should you move to airport IT as a managed service? To find out, answer these 15 questions. For each question you answer with a Yes, give yourself 1 point.

1 – 5 points: You're already using airport IT managed services, right?

6 – 10 points: Your airport's IT operations aren't bad, but airport IT managed services could help.

11 – 15 points: Your organization is an excellent candidate for airport IT managed services. Seriously consider making this important transformation.

Costs:

1. Do you need a multiyear technology replacement and investment plan to help understand your costs?
2. When it comes to mapping your infrastructure assets — HVAC handlers, vent controls, key network switches, power panels, etc. — do you face a constant stream of surprises?
3. Are you unsure of your IT risks and mitigation strategies?

Yes No

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Service:

4. Do you have prolonged outages and issues that never seem to get resolved?
5. Does your IT support staff need to deliver a more positive experience and resolve problems in a timelier manner?
6. Are IT changes made without your knowledge?
7. Is your organization missing common IT service options such as supporting remote work?

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Staffing:

8. Are you experiencing or expecting hiring freezes or staffing challenges?
9. Have you identified technical staff you'd like to hire, only to realize you can't afford them?
10. Does much of your IT knowledge reside only in the heads of your staff, due to limited documentation?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Innovation:

11. When implementing innovations, does your organization regularly go outside the IT department?
12. Does your IT team struggle to communicate effectively and work well together to complete projects and roll out new innovations?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Harmonized and scalable tech:

13. Is your staff arguing over IT issues instead of getting things done?
14. Does your parent organization require you to use its IT services, even if those services fail to meet your needs?
15. Do you lack the ability to rapidly scale up and scale down due to fluctuating demand or growth?

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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