

Agency automation for improved business performance

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As a very frequent traveler I'm faced with ever increasing stress levels as I prepare for my next trip. Busier airports, tighter security checks, longer check-in times - before I can even think of the flight disruptions that persistently haunt my trips.

In addition to global unrest, strike action and natural disasters, even global warming is playing a part, with severe air turbulence impacting more and more flights and severe weather extremes leaving more flights cancelled and hotel stays disrupted.

In addition to these external factors, my busy life style and changing priorities, mean that my own plans have to frequently change, often when I'm on the move and I need to deal with these changes as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Most travel bookings required manual intervention

For travel sellers, providing services to travelers like me is a key part of their value proposition, and many are very successful at taking the friction and stress out of travel for their customers. A lot of the effort that is needed to do this goes on behind the scenes with quite a degree of manual processing by travel agencies.

Indeed, it is often overlooked that regardless of whether a booking originated through a mobile device, a website or via a telephone call, a surprisingly high share of travel bookings need to be "touched" by an agent. As the general shift in traveler sentiment towards self-service continues, with a growing desire by travelers to take control of the moment and feel empowered to self-serve their own changes, some agencies have been caught off-guard by the manual efforts still required to service these trips.

Travel products have become more complex. This means that travelers are readily prepared to experiment with more adventurous itineraries, such as multiple legs with different carriers, which can add significantly to the amount of manual handling that is needed.

With a generation that's accustomed to having information at our finger tips, we expect immediate responses to our queries. For many there is nothing worse than being forced down the somewhat "dehumanizing" experience that some call-centers can deliver.



About the author

Marcin is Vice-President of Global Product and Marketing for Agency Commerce. With this remit Marcin has accountability for supporting our Agency Commerce organization by designing the best possible products, solutions and services for Travelport's travel agency customers.

Prior to this role, Marcin was Managing Director for Eastern Europe and held overall responsibility for Travelport's operations in 25 countries across the region. Over the last five years of his management, Travelport significantly increased its presence across Eastern Europe and it has become one of Travelport's fastest growing regions.

In his professional life, he is interested in studying Leadership theories and foundations and applying them to create high performing teams achieving outstanding results. He is a passionate runner, windsurfer and a keen cyclist. He is happily married and has two daughters.

Travel agencies facing key pivot point

The business models of each and every industry are transforming rapidly. New players are entering the market, and consumer expectations for seamless experiences are growing. Are travel agencies prepared to pivot fast enough?

As travel agencies attempt to deal with the challenge of ever-more complex travel and ensure they are maintaining high service levels for their customers, margins continue to shrink. New methods are needed to maximize the return on every trip.

That means improving operational performance by increasing travel agency effectiveness when processing traveler interactions across their entire journey.

Each step of the traveler journey requires some level of intervention (manual overhead) that increases operational costs. If any steps are mishandled and create a problem for travelers, short-term trip revenues could be impacted negatively. Even worse, the agency may lose the chance to create a long-term relationship.

Manually-intensive processes hold agencies back

Even when traveler's self-service their own bookings and flight changes, the data often needs manual intervention by agents in the background to properly fulfill traveler requests and make sure everything is ticketed correctly. With some agencies experiencing up to 24% in annual attrition of their call center staff, manually processing transactions like these forces them to constantly train new staff and endure additional on-going inefficiencies – as the staff continuously learns all the complex processes relating to travel services.

A November 2016 survey conducted by Travelport indicates 72% of travel agency decision-makers realize that driving efficiency through automation is important, but most agencies have limited automation capabilities. Consider the case of business travelers, who are more likely to experience frequent changes to their itineraries. One trip may need to be changed a number of times in terms of dates, times and destinations. The manual process of changing a trip that's already been ticketed is a long-winded process.

It may take as much as 45 minutes to make and confirm the changes, and then communicate the changes to the traveler as well as the airline and the hotel. Many agencies still have not taken advantage of the automation opportunities that exist here that can reduce the effort to a couple of minutes.

One of the challenges here is that today's automation solutions are often fragmented with multiple offerings that address only parts of the workflow. Agencies often have to work with multiple solution providers to address their needs, and this lack of a holistic approach can result in a patchwork band-aid. The opportunity for the industry is to make the process of automation less complex for agencies to implement and manage.



Diversity Travel, recognized as the United Kingdom's leading travel management company in the charity and academic travel sector, previously depended on experienced staff to manually handle the complex process of ticket fulfilment. To increase efficiencies in this vital area of the business, the company turned to Travelport's automated solution—Queue Control Console. Diversity Travel decreased ticketing errors by 60% so that the ticketing department can now focus on time-sensitive tasks. In addition, the travel management company significantly reduced the number of quality check discoveries while positively enhancing the level of customer service for corporate clients.



By embracing new technologies, such as artificial intelligence and chat robots (also known as BOTs), the industry has the opportunity to bring efficiencies to omnichannel communications. And as these technologies continue to mature, the industry also has the opportunity to increase automation to support traveler self-service—both through the shopping stage and during the pre-trip, in-trip and post-trip stages ...as well as reduce overhead and improve experience for travelers by servicing them more quickly and efficiently as well as by anticipating their needs.



globetrotter

Globetrotter is the corporate travel partner of choice for a client-base that spans Australia. The travel agency wanted to improve ticket agent productivity by reducing the amount of time spent manually correcting errors on airline ticket exchanges, which occur on 15% of all tickets industry-wide. By deploying Travelport's Rapid Reprice solution, Globetrotter automated the process so that agents are now much more efficient. Globetrotter also lowered per booking handling costs and can now reissue accurate tickets in a couple of minutes while adhering to airline policies. This has increased Globetrotter's competitive advantages by creating a differentiated service offering.

Key technologies are ready to drive automation

Several technologies are already in play and ready to help agencies take on the automation challenge. While they vary in their level of development maturity, each of them is worth considering for the role they can fulfill in servicing travelers more efficiently.

Here's a quick rundown of five technologies at the forefront of automating traveler services:

- Messaging Platforms: Conversational robot agents such as Chatbot improve user interaction and engagement.
- Artificial Intelligence: Intelligent engagement increases relevancy and personalization.
- Augmented Reality: A live view of real-world environments augmented by sound and graphics to facilitate engagement and marketing opportunities.
- Rules Engines: Solutions such as IFTTT, Workflow and Zapper, for example, allow users to create chains of simple conditional statements that trigger actions based upon events. These consumer products have successfully taken the complexity out of automating tasks and brought automation benefits to a broader audience.
- Voice-Enabled Search: During the past two years, smartphones using voice assistants have doubled to more than 60% in the U.S. This has been triggered by natural language processing that offers new ways to market and communicate with travelers.

Opportunities for creating frictionless travel

Overarching all these technologies is the Internet of Things (IoT). From a productivity, efficiency and innovation perspective, experts predict that the IoT will be as transformative for society as the Industrial Revolution. By 2020, more than 25-billion embedded and intelligent systems will all be connected.¹

That's an invaluable network for the travel industry to tap into. These developments will help the industry create a more seamless travel experience for those that travel, helping remove the friction for the traveler and enabling agencies to deliver superior service at a lower cost.

Imagine the world where automation starts to become predictive in nature as the integration with real-time data analytics and machine learning enables robotics to complete tasks based upon the likelihood of an event occurring. For example, if a traveler's first flight is delayed, the BOT knows to reschedule the connecting flight and notify the hotel that the traveler will arrive later, before the traveler is even aware.



Avoiding the fear of automation

For some agencies, there is reluctance to embrace automation because their staff fears they may become less relevant to the business if processes are automated. But another way to look at this is that those same resources can be reassigned to other tasks such as selling to prospects, developing new services, or managing customer service exceptions so that the agency can handle more bookings.

It's important to embrace automation because the travel industry will only grow more complicated, and new entrants will pressure return-on-trip margins. Restrictions and changes to travel protocols across the globe keep emerging and creating more disruptions to travel, which makes things more complex when it comes to bookings and re-bookings.

Automation can thus serve as a way to steer return-on-trip in the right direction by driving revenues while also reducing costs. This is particularly critical with agency commissions beginning to dwindle. Agencies thus have to earn their revenue through services and operate more efficiently—while ensuring superior traveler experiences by offering totally-frictionless travel.

That means when a traveler has to change one part of a complex trip, agencies need to automate the process that adjusts all the other components impacted by the change—in the background and without any impact on the customer and little-to-no manual intervention. It's a big step for the industry to take, but it's a necessary step, and the technology is in place to make it happen, while ensuring service levels are maintained.

¹ Mario Morales, IDC.

To find out how Travelport helps automate traveler services to increase return-on-trip ratios, visit www.travelport.com/platform#travel-performance

