

case study



Racing Against Time: DGS Stays Ahead of Schedule for Passenger Processing Thanks to the Intermec by Honeywell CS40 Mobile Computer

It's "rush hour" at Memphis International Airport (MEM). Soon after a plane touches down, passengers are jostling through the gates, carry-on luggage in tow and cell phones pressed to ears, rushing off to their connecting flights. As travellers brush past, airport personnel strive to help passengers who need information or have special needs. The scene is being repeated throughout Memphis International Airport, which is unusual in that approximately one third of all daily flights take off or land within a 70- to 90-minute period.

Honeywell



DGS Elevates Selecting the RightTools

Delta Global Services (DGS) brings some order amid this chaos. DGS, a wholly owned subsidiary of Delta Airlines and the industry leader in disability passenger handling and aviation services, is responsible for providing wheelchair assistance for all three terminals and 98 gates at MEM. If a passenger isn't picked up within minutes of requesting a wheelchair, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) can issue a minimum fine of several thousand dollars per occurrence. If the passenger is picked up late, and as a result is late arriving for a connecting flight, the airline can be fined for two occurrences. Industry-wide fines were estimated at more than \$3 million in 2010.

To protect themselves against fines, airlines must ensure DGS processes passenger pickups as soon as the flight arrives. If a passenger didn't make arrangements ahead of time but requests a wheelchair from an agent, DGS will honor the request. If that makes an agent late for the next passenger pickup, or there is a delay that prevents an agent from getting a passenger to the next flight on time, the DOT can issue a fine for each and every occurrence. A single fine is enough to ruin profitability for the day; multiple fines could result in DGS losing its airline contracts.

"Seconds count in our business," said DGS Vice President of Marketing & Business Development Tom Farmakis. "We typically have 70 minutes to turn 100 planes with 100 to 150 passengers in wheelchairs, but sometimes the numbers increase to 200 or even 250. If it takes about 15 minutes for passengers to deplane, and we need to have wheelchair passengers with connecting flights at their gate 30 minutes before the flight, that leaves us about 25 minutes to transfer all the people."

Adding more agents is a decision that has to be made with great care. In the high-volume, low-margin passenger transport business, it is cost prohibitive to have hourly workers that will

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**-Tom Farmakis,
Vice President of Marketing & Business Development, Delta Global Services**

be idle for a large portion of a shift. Profitability depends on having exactly enough agents to meet demand.

How to Beat the Rush

Automation is the answer for DGS to meet its extreme efficiency requirements. After trying handheld radios, PDAs and cell phones over the years, DGS stays ahead of schedule for passenger processing by using mobile computers with advanced 2D bar code readers and wireless communication capabilities that save time and money.

Dispatchers wirelessly send passenger pickup assignments to DGS agents, who carry Intermec by Honeywell CS40 handheld mobile computers. Upon meeting the passenger, the agent immediately scans the passenger's bar-coded boarding pass to record the pickup, and scans a bar code at the gate to record the location (location codes are entered manually if the pickup isn't at a gate).



Selecting the Right Tools

"The CS40 scans the boarding pass instantly, every time," said Farmakis. "One of the reasons that scanning is so important is because it saves time. That one element alone increases productivity by 10 to 20 percent – just the scanning alone. Typically each agent has to handle about five passengers in a 45-minute period, but sometimes they can handle up to 10 passengers. Knowing the Intermec by Honeywell device will scan the boarding pass on the first try is what helps me sleep at night."

Once the boarding pass and location information is entered, the pickup transaction is time stamped and reported in real-time to the system over AT&T's 3.75G network. Agents scan another location code when the passenger is delivered, which closes out the job and instantly updates the dispatch system to make the agent available for another pickup.

"Scanning provides 99 percent of the efficiency in our transaction," said Farmakis. "If agents don't have confidence in the scanner, they'll find a workaround."

Workarounds were used fairly frequently when agents carried PDAs or consumer-grade smartphones with general-purpose digital cameras.

"With the older PDA units, it might take you a minute, it might take you two minutes; sometimes it would not even scan," DGS Memphis General Manager Charlie Kimbell said. "With the new CS40 units, within 10 to 15 seconds max, you're on your way with the customer."

The typical workaround with the previous PDA was to key-enter information from the boarding pass, which is not always accurate and does not provide an automatic, indisputable time stamp. Besides losing time, DGS lost valuable documentation whenever the scanning procedure was bypassed because handwritten notes do not always provide the documentation needed to prevent fines.

"When we put the Intermec by Honeywell devices into the field those problems went away," said Farmakis. "Until now, there was no way to reliably and objectively verify service times."

Seconds Count

Eliminating scanning and entry delays has also produced significant productivity and customer satisfaction benefits.



“Thirty seconds to a minute doesn’t seem like a long time, but it can mean the difference between, one, making the flight; two, stressing the passenger; and three, providing excellent customer service,” said Farmakis. “Passengers look at the attendant and think, ‘Why is this person putting information into a device instead of pushing me to my flight?’”

The CS40 mobile computer has an Intermec by Honeywell EA11 2D imager built in – enabling DGS to read both 1D and 2D bar codes in any orientation – so there is no need to turn the boarding pass or use the handheld at an awkward angle to get a good read. The EA11 makes up to 200 scans per second and is more than five times faster than traditional 2D imagers.

“Our engineers tested the CS40 against another handheld with an integrated scanner in the lab. Intermec by Honeywell won hands down. It was also the clear winner in our field testing,” said Farmakis.

“We’ve been able to improve the customer experience purely because of the Intermec by Honeywell device.”

The CS40’s integrated 3.75G WAN radio provides always-on connectivity between agents and dispatch, which enables DGS to dynamically assign resources as unscheduled pickups and other situations develop. In turn, customer complaints have decreased since DGS began using the devices.

“We had problems with our 2.5G devices,” said Farmakis. “When a plane lands, everyone pulls out their cell phones, and all the voice calls can knock the data traffic off the network. We’d be right in the middle of our busiest time, with dispatchers telling agents which gates to pick up passengers, and we’d lose all our devices at once. With a 3G device, all those data flow problems go away.”

More Mileage

Delta Global Services first automated wheelchair dispatch operations in 2004. Since then, one thing has become clear: the device makes a difference. When the program began, state-of-the-art mobile computers were effective but expensive. Later, the 2.5G devices that shared voice

and data traffic on the same bandwidth produced communications outages that led to costly delays. DGS turned to smartphones to solve that problem, but the integrated digital cameras were inefficient for bar code scanning.

“At times over the years, we had to trade technical capabilities for price. We don’t have to do that with the CS40,” said Farmakis. “In all the years we’ve been using handhelds, this is the first time the system is performing as we designed it.... When you have the right device, the ROI is immediate; [with the CS40] it began within 30 days.”

The efficiency gains from the upgrade, coupled with Delta Global Services’ outstanding record for delivering passengers on time, have helped DGS win in the marketplace. The CS40 handheld computers will be deployed to more airports to support growing operations.

“In this environment, the reliability of the scanning is what enables us to provide excellent customer service,” said Farmakis. “Wheelchair service is a very personal service. The agent is standing right there with the passenger. There is a huge difference between pushing the scan button and hearing that beep right away, compared to having to try to take a picture of a bar code with the device like we used to. Now the passengers are happier, and the agents are more efficient.”

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