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What is Going on Down There in IT?

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Does it seem that the Information Technology (IT) group is in the middle of everything that is going on at your airport? More airports are coming to appreciate that the people that run the data and phone systems are no longer some organizational backwater. What used to be a bunch of relatively harmless geeks now seems to oversee significant budgets and wield appreciable power.

There are several major shifts going on within the aviation industry and still others within the world of computers and communications that are inducing this change. These trends are evidenced in the emergence of airport chief information officers (CIO) and IT specific program management offices.

Technology Trend No. 1: The Net Works. About 15 years ago, the telecommunications industry began to converge on network standards that allowed several million computers to interconnect and share data. We have all witnessed the ensuing explosion of computers and information that has reshaped our professional and personal lives. This convergence is now occurring within airport systems.

Everybody wants to be "on the network". So airports are now consolidating multiple disparate project-deployed networks into a shared infrastructure. And IT, the owner of the network, is now part of every project with a whiff of technology.

Aviation Trend No. 1: "Tower" Power. Airports are increasingly taking on the functions which were once performed by airlines. Check-in, kiosks, flight displays, point-of-sales systems, baggage handling systems, and ramp services are now performed on an airport shared service business model basis.

After a decade of airline red ink, airports are stepping in and delivering. But caution: airlines were the earliest of adopters in computer technology and airports must offer better/faster/cheaper technology if they are to successfully assume what airlines used to do so well. It is IT that invariably delivers all or part of these solutions.

Technology trend No. 2: Share and Share Alike. As more systems come onto the airport's shared network, they all benefit if they share data. Airport databases and message brokers are increasingly allowing the airport to deliver cross-platform functionality. This is the sweet-spot of the airport CIO because he or she gains control of the airport's processes by automating the way the data moves.

Aviation Trend No. 2: Compensatory Heaven. A great many airports have arranged for their airline tenant leases to become coterminous in the next few years. Smart airports are gearing up for a major change from a residual to compensatory model.

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In the compensatory model, risk and reward belong to the airport. Offering attractive services which can generate profit are now the buzz in airport boardrooms. Operating more like businesses than cooperatives drives airports to seek attractive new and profitable technologies. Taking a lesson from business, airports are moving towards e-commerce, e-branding, and e-business. It certainly seems like IT is well positioned to move from cost center to profit center.

So if you are an airport IT director, now is the time to be on the doorstep of the airport director talking about a CIO position. If you are not IT savvy, now is the time to befriend the future CIO as a partner in your success.

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