EAI in the TPF World
An observation by Bruce Taylor

The travel industry is gripped in a frenzied merry-go-round of mergers, alliances and partnerships from which only the fortunate few can remain aloof. That frenzy is not likely to subside nor to lead to completely stable and unchanging relationships. At the same time, the travel industry business is one of the most intensively IT dependent processes and becoming ever more so.

In all the current airline alliance groupings the issue of IT integration always figures prominently on the agenda. Although airlines run dozens of different kinds of systems, the systems which get singled out for initial attention within the alliance framework are inevitably those dealing with passenger reservations and departure control, since those are the systems interacting with the customer and the marketplace. This is where the money comes in and where the airlines derive the majority of their revenue. The other systems an airline has deal primarily with how money is spent. Around 80% of the reservations done in the world are done on IBM's TPF systems; the vast majority of the remainder on Unisys' USAS systems. These TPF systems have been around for a long time, most since the late 1960's or early 1970's and all come from a common ancestor, Eastern-based PARS, which went live at the now defunct Eastern Airlines early in 1968. Currently there are 43 of these TPF systems running reservations and departure control for one or many airlines spread across the world and they are present in the core members of each and every alliance.

Although the TPF systems came from a common ancestor and appear superficially much the same in terms of functional capability and structure, each one differs from every other one in detail. As a wise man said: "the devil is in the details". However, this superficial similarity misleads senior management consultants into proclaiming that reservations is a commodity product, so it is not an issue to give up the one you have and move to another one, since it makes no difference. The reality is that each individual system has been tailored by small armies of marketing people and TPF programmers working over 2 to 3 decades to serve the particular marketplace, the business policies and the operating practices of the airline owning it. It differs from its companion TPF systems in innumerable functional details, which represent a cumulative development effort for each and every system measured in man-centuries, not in man-years. Hence, to move from one system to another and retain what you had, or at least most of it, is a project which will consume man-centuries of effort.

Nevertheless, the alliance groupings are all trying to come to grips with what should happen with their diverse reservations and departure control systems. To realise the alliance promise of seamless service and a trouble-free travel experience, such systems must be both tightly integrated and functionally aligned. This can be achieved in two basic ways: merge the systems into one or inter-connect them with bridging.

In theory, merging systems is the optimal choice. It has many advantages:

• It strictly enforces common branding and common service levels

• It means the functional capabilities of one are available to the whole and applied consistently to all.

• All new capabilities and marketing programs have to be done once and only once and apply equally and consistently to all simultaneously.

• Alliance network-wide revenue management becomes achievable.

What is optimal in theory may not be possible in the practical world alliances have to deal with. Even if it is, it takes time, lots of time: time to get agreement on which system is to be the base and what has to be added to it (an activity lasting years sooner than months); and time to actually do it (at least a 2-4 year project consuming hundreds of man-years of effort and fraught with risk). In the first process of system selection, every alliance will become acutely and painfully aware of its cultural diversity, and of the phenomenal differences in detail between the operations of its members, and of the inertia and the deeply entrenched prejudices of all its IT and marketing departments. Nevertheless, CEO's, in their infinite wisdom and supported by their superior consultants, will not believe the above and will pursue the illusion that it all can be done in 1 to 2 years. Having to learn the hard way will thus add a further 2 years to the whole project elapsed time and extend the bridging requirement by the same amount.

Hence, whatever an alliance decides to do, inter-connectivity, as least for a significant interim period, is unavoidable. Even if the CEO's of every member in an alliance are in unanimous agreement on the principle of a 'single system' and have the authority, the tenacity and the commitment to drive it though, there is still a many year gap between now and completion. That gap has to be bridged. It is not possible to say everything stops for 3 to 5 years while 'single system' is being created. The competition is not sitting still and the alliance promises have to be delivered to the marketplace today.

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