ANOTHER WORLD FIRST

Cognitive technology will deliver the ultimate guest experience and empower people. Etihad Airways is committed to implementing this and leading the way in the aviation industry.

TECHNOLOGY HAS REALLY changed the way every industry operates, as well as our personal lives. Just think how much we rely on our smartphones these days and how mobile technology has changed our lives. Think about how you can research items you want to buy before ordering online or going to a store to make a purchase. Entire industries, such as bookstores, have morphed from bricks-and-mortar chains into online shops.

Advances in technology have changed the way we work and play. At Etihad Airways, we have made a commitment to embrace advances in technology to become a "cognitive' airline, with the help of our partner, IBM. A cognitive airline is an airline that puts people at the heart of the guest experience, understands what its guests want, and makes the journey better. Cognitive technologies will help us innovate in the way we serve our guests and our employees, become an innovative leader in the industry, and, most importantly, provide the most remarkable, personalised and seamless travel experiences for guests.

But before we look to the near future, it's important that we look back a few years to see the journey that the industry has taken to arrive at this point. Not very long ago, guests bought tickets from travel agents and airline ticket offices. Through the physical interaction of buying tickets and planning a trip with an agent, airlines could intimately understand their guests. A ticketing agent in an office of a small town would naturally begin to know a family and its travel preferences when year after year they continued to buy their holiday tickets from the same place. While airlines were able to know guests at a very personal level, they were very limited in the how they could leverage their preferences on a larger scale.

Fast-forward a few years and guests began buying tickets online, often based on finding the lowest possible fares. The travel industry started to lose some of its personal connection with guests.

That's about to change – and in a big way. The challenge is to leverage technology to deliver better service and value quality and cost, while reconnecting with guests at a personal level.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Etihad Airways is on an exciting journey to implement the most advanced analytical technology in the world to transform itself into a more personalised, more efficient and resilient organisation. This technological and cultural revolution will help us, as an airline, provide our guests with the most seamless and memorable travel experiences possible based on the information they are willing to share with us. We want to know our guests better and always find ways to simplify and enhance their travel experience, while respecting their privacy.

Combining advanced technologies with information guests make available to us through their social media presence or online purchasing patterns, we can develop guest profiles that will provide us with insights into their preferences. That will then allow us to recommend activities or provide special offers that add value to their travel experience. For example, imagine you post photos of your family hiking somewhere in the world on social media. When you travel with us, we could suggest destinations or hikes that could fit your travel persona based on those photos. By understanding your culinary palette, we might even be able to recommend a specific meal or menu item at a local restaurant.

Much of this technology was recently demonstrated during the UAE's nationwide Innovation Week when Etihad Airways hosted events at its state-of-the-art Innovation Centre.

During Innovation Week event, visitors were taken on a next generation 'cognitive journey' enabled by various latest technologies including IBM's Watson – a cognitive technology that can think like a human. Visitors were automatically identified through facial recognition and check-in agents and cabin crew knew their guests' travel destination and preferences without them needing to present tickets or booking information.

Visitors answered questions using the Innovation Week mobile app so that IBM's Watson could learn about each guest and develop their detailed guest profiles. Guests were provided personalised entertainment options, such as movies and music choices, and travel snacks based on the information submitted.

Watson also powers Pepper, a humanoid robot, who understands the world the way humans do – through senses, learning and experience. In the duty free section of the Innovation Week cognitive journey, Pepper answered questions guests had about their duty free purchases. Guests also interacted with IBM's Cognitive Travel Advisor, which recommended tailored travel itineraries and services. By knowing guests better, check-in agents and cabin crew were also able to better serve guests using their own Watson-powered employee apps.

IMAGES: Pepper, a humanoid robot.

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WE USE DATA TO SERVE OUR GUESTS

Etihad Airways understands the responsibility that comes with knowing each guest so well – and we take that responsibility very seriously. In addition to cognitive technologies, we have also recently invested heavily in cyber security to ensure that your personal information is safe. We will also only capture and analyse information that you want to share, and take great care to use that data only to make your journey with us better.

IMPROVING OPERATIONS

Cognitive technologies will change the way our employees work as well. For example, we will empower employees to be proactive in managing day-to-day operations and master occasional challenges like inclement weather or a technical issue. We'll be able to alert guests to any delays, secure hotel rooms if they have to stay over, and do all we can to make any other disturbances more tolerable.

Better understanding our guests will improve Etihad Airways' culture, too. All of us, from executive management down, have to learn how to best serve guests, to be as personal as possible and continue to focus on service. Often we think of technology as something impersonal. Etihad Airways is using some of the most advanced technology to make the guest experience more human, and therefore, more personal. Each new solution will require us to evolve as we better serve you.

To do this, we've made IBM's Design Thinking strategy pervasive throughout Etihad Airways. Design Thinking is an agile, collaborative process that emphasises idea creation and constant refinement. It allows multi-disciplinary teams to work together to create products and services, from prototype to implementation, which unifies employees around common goals. Above all, it maintains a focus on the guest and guest experience – always seeing things through the eyes of guests.

The Etihad-IBM Design Studio is a collaborative space where design thinking specialists, industry thought leaders, technologists and others come together to create these new services. It also enables the people of Etihad Airways and Abu Dhabi to collaborate on new ways on how to engage with guests in the region. We are also investing in the people of Abu Dhabi and have a goal to train more than 250 team members in Design Thinking during 2017.

ON THE TARMAC

As you can see, Etihad Airways is about to take flight as the world's first cognitive airline with many advanced products and services offered. Some of the advances described were part of Innovation Week, others will take some time to deliver – and some have yet to be imagined. It's going to be a great trip. ∎