BOLD PREDICTIONS AND SEEDS OF OPTIMISM FROM AVIATION LEADERS

News / Airlines, Events / Festivals

The global aviation industry came together yesterday for a unique all-day broadcast event to encourage collaboration during the most challenging and unpredictable time in its history. FlightPlan: Charting a Course into the Future, hosted by Inmarsat Aviation and the Airline Passenger Experience Association (APEX), saw more than 50 leading voices exchange views on the present and future of aviation. Over 3,000 viewers tuned in from almost 100 countries worldwide for a series of live debates, interviews and news analysis.

Experts voice confidence in eventual bounce-back for aviation industry

Nick Careen, Senior Vice President of Airport Passenger Cargo and Security at the International Air Transport Association (IATA), observed that although the COVID-19 pandemic has “no parallel to draw upon in recent memory… the airline industry has illustrated time and time again that if there’s any industry in the world that knows how to deal with a crisis, it’s this one”.

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Careen predicted that changes to airline passenger journeys as a result of COVID-19 may include staggered boarding processes, alongside faster adoption of biometrics and self-service technologies in the airport. Christoph Mueller, who has previously served as CEO of Malaysia Airlines and Chief Digital and Innovation Officer at Emirates Group, gave some reassuring words of encouragement to airlines: “I have a lot of confidence that at least a lot of airlines will come out of this crisis with a new and regained strength.”

In an interactive poll, FlightPlan viewers were invited to share their own predictions on the COVID-19 recovery phase throughout the day. Highlights from the results included:

- Four in ten (43%) predicted that recovery will take from 18 months to three years
- Four in ten (44%) said the industry was poorly prepared for COVID-19
- Nearly two fifths (36%) stated that governments have helped the industry to navigate the pandemic, but could have done more
- 9 in 10 (87%) expect to see more deep cleaning and slower turnarounds
- 86% believe that personal protective equipment (PPE) will become standard for cabin crews in the coming months
- 8 in 10 (80%) expect thermal scanners to become part of the passenger journey
- Only 9% see blood tests for airline passengers becoming the norm

Unified effort essential to tackling aviation’s environmental impact

Discussing some of the ambitious sustainability targets the industry has previously set itself, such as net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, the experts agreed that collaboration was fundamental. Anko Van Der Werff, CEO of Avianca, argued that “the whole ecosystem needs to work together on this.” Paul Stein, Chief Technical Officer at Rolls Royce, added that the impact of single-nation initiatives has been limited and a “coalition of the willing” with industry bodies, airlines, manufacturers and fuel providers is needed.

Encouragingly, industry leaders expressed confidence that COVID-19 will not interrupt progress on sustainable aviation and may even push the topic higher on the agenda. Stein reflected that “the post-COVID-19 world is going to be one that will recognise the fragility of the planet…sustainability isn’t just going to come back to the point it was before COVID - it’s going to be an even stronger issue.” The FlightPlan poll results reflected this view, with 40% of respondents agreeing that COVID-19 will accelerate the drive to reduce emissions.

Digitisation will catalyse industry recovery and future growth

Rupert Pearce, CEO of Inmarsat, spoke about the power of connectivity to drive global development and industry recovery. Although “2019 already feels as though it belongs to a different era”, Pearce remarked that the pandemic has not slowed the fourth industrial revolution. “I believe that digitalisation lies at the heart of our ability to first survive this crisis, and then to drive our ability to rebound from it and start to thrive in whatever new reality lies in front of us.”

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The next generation of passengers were at the centre of a discussion around the need for airlines to continue preparing for the future. Behavioural scientist Rory Sutherland spoke of Generation Z's "incredible need to travel", observing that his own children "don't see it as a privilege – they kind of see it as a right". Aviation analyst Alex Macheras delved deeper into their digital expectations, adding that "if airlines are going to better satisfy Gen Z, inflight connectivity will continue to be a driving force." Other experts agreed that these attributes, paired with growing spending power, will put young passengers in the driving seat when it comes to digital transformation in the cabin.

Philip Balaam, President of Inmarsat Aviation, said: "As we look towards recovery and ensuring long-term resilience, there will be no one-size-fits all approach. However, it will remain important that airlines can differentiate for customers. It's clear that the safety of consumers will continue to be at the forefront in this new world, and that digitisation and innovation will be crucial to driving much-needed efficiencies, reducing environmental impact and improving passenger experience."

Reflecting on the event, Dominic Walters, Vice President at Inmarsat Aviation, commented: "In times of crisis, it's imperative that industries collaborate to find the best way forward. With so many of this year's leading aviation events cancelled, we wanted to connect the industry in a unique and helpful way, and the response has been phenomenal. Together, more than 50 leading voices shared a clear shared message - that while the aviation industry contends with a period of extreme uncertainty, these clouds will eventually clear. Now is the time to focus on accelerating our recovery and rebuilding an industry that is stronger, more agile and fit for the future."

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