

The internet of things in travel – great with machines, less so with people

As things stand, the internet of things (IoT) in a travel context is all about B2B operations, with the jury still out on its application as a consumer-facing concept.

This was one of the themes which emerged at last week's [DataArt](#) Question Time event held in London, produced in conjunction with Tnooz.

The clearest example of this premise came from panellist Matthew Hall, chief operating officer for [London City Airport](#). He explained how the airport has worked on specific "IoT projects with funding from the UK government's Technology Strategy Board.

The project "joined up data from multiple providers from a passenger perspective" with a view to making their "journey" through the airport easier, quicker, safer.

"People don't travel to spend time at airports. Airports are an obstacle – the idea is to get through them as quickly as possible."

Indeed. However, some airports are quite dependent on people hanging out, buying food at the concessions, gadgets in the shops, gifts from duty free.

And Hall identified one of many disconnects in the discussions around IoT – and that is that passengers are big fans of it when it helps them get onto their flight quickly and they haven't had to opt in – less so when they get retailer-specific targeted advertising once they are airside.



Hospitality is another sector where IoT conversations are taking place, and again this is very much in a B2B context.

Paul Saggart is group director of IT for [Maybourne Hotel Group](#) (Claridge's, The Connaught and The Berkeley in London) and said the group was looking at whether giving its staff wearables would improve service levels, beyond what can already be achieved with smartphones.

As a luxury hotel with upmarket guests, Maybourne does not have thousands of daily guests to datamine in the same way that a Premier Inn might.

It can establish offline, one-on-one relationships with guests to understand their needs and personalize their stay, rather than gain access to insights through social media opt-ins buried in their terms and conditions.

But the IoT does come into play in the room itself – easier controls for heating and lighting and changeable digital art on the walls are two consumer propositions which fall under the IoT banner.

Hotels, however, could be at the leading edge of IoT adoption. Deepak Jha is head of the mobility hub at [TUI Travel](#) and said “hotel check-in propositions are getting a lot of venture capital finance”.

TUI did talk about consumer-facing applications, notably its digital assistant companion app which has been downloaded by 1.5 million customers, but this takes the definition of IoT into more generic tech disciplines.

Jha again referred to the money flows when drilling down into specific IoT areas.

“There is also money in smart cities, smart homes and health” he said, “and these are the areas which will work with travel,” although no concrete examples were forthcoming.

“Privacy and security” are now the inevitable and expected gatecrashers at most travel tech discussions.



Greg Abbott, senior vice president of DataArt’s travel and hospitality unit, made an important distinction between the two.

Security in an IoT context would be “stopping someone hacking into the heating controls in the boardroom” and he suggested that IoT could be a security threat “because innovation leaps forward, beyond what security can tighten up.”

Hackers accessing the flight controls of an aircraft using the inflight entertainment system as the access point is a theoretical example of how IoT could be a security threat.

The privacy side of IoT again falls into general discussions around privacy and convenience, cool versus creepy, the value of one’s own data.

Concerns from the panel, which also featured Jason Jefferys, founder and CEO of [iRIS Software Systems](#), ranged from what the devices driving the internet of things did with transient data to the fact that IoT is adding yet more datasets for the analysts and algorithms to work with.

The consensus was the usual travel tech party line that “if consumers feel they are getting some tangible benefit they are willing to share data” with the inevitable counter-response that “the regulatory regime is becoming more aggressive.”

Finally, getting various systems to talk to each other in order to create a frictionless shopping and travel experience is a travel tech clarion call and not necessarily an IoT issue. But for IoT as well as more generally, the challenges for adoption are not technical, they are commercial.

There is a difference between an airline sharing its data with an airport, and that same airline sharing its data with another airline which might end up poaching the customer. We'd like to think that "owning the customer" was a redundant concept in today's e-commerce world, but protectionism and small-mindedness from some suppliers is alive and kicking and could end up as the biggest headwind preventing the IoT from helping to improve travel experiences worldwide.

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