How the pandemic accelerated digital transformation in the airline industry

The Covid 19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on the travel industry, with South Africa being one of the hardest-hit countries after further travel bans were recently imposed on the country due to the Omicron variant.

Source: Free-Photos via Pixabay

The way people travel will never be the same, with new regulations issued by the South African Government that now require passengers to present a negative Covid-19 test result certificate 72 hours prior to their departure, airlines disposing of its inflight magazines, and increased safety measures at the airport taking up more time, forcing passengers to be at check-in earlier than usual.

These are a few examples of how Covid-19 has changed air travel – but it's had a much bigger impact than just changing the basics. It has accelerated digital transformation across the industry, creating more opportunities for airlines to enhance their offerings, streamline operations and redefine its customer experience.

A safer airport experience

Even though the airport sector has always been a leader in safety, particularly post 9/11, Covid-19 has stimulated even greater innovation as airports strive to improve passenger safety and security using digital tools, automation, and efficiency aids in the past year.

More airports are using air cleaning and filtration systems that were previously only found in hospitals and other healthcare environments, to reduce the spread of disease. For instance, airports such as Hong Kong International Airport (HKIA) have stepped up their safety measures to protect the health of those who work at and use the airport. HKIA has deployed 13 autonomous cleaning robots for floor and carpet cleaning, sterilisation of toilets and key operating areas in the terminal.

Additionally Singapore' Changi Airport installed new air purifiers fitted with hospital-grade High-Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters to enhance the indoor air quality for passengers in its terminal buildings

The sector has also seen a growing number of temperature screening devices at airport entrances to minimise potential exposure. Cape Town International Airport has been using this thermal technology for over a year to instantly read passengers' temperature as they pass in front of a camera. An alarm goes off if a person's temperature is higher than normal, potentially indicating infection.

Digitised airline operations

Digitisation has become a non-negotiable in the airline industry because of the growing need for healthier and safer travel. Airlines and airports have responded to this need by reimagining the passenger processing flow and enhancing the passenger experience using biometric technologies to create a contactless, self-service passenger journey.

For example, Cathay Pacific recently introduced contactless boarding at Hong Kong International Airport to minimise contact during check-in and boarding, and safeguard passenger wellbeing. The airline's e-Boarding system uses biometric technology to scan passengers' faces, making the entire boarding process completely contactless, touch-free, fast, and straightforward.

In some instances, the journey begins before passengers even arrive at the airport – some airlines allow passengers to upload their Covid-19 test results for verification and even pre-order meals before boarding, like Cathay Pacific's Choose My Meal programme.

The future of air travel

The airline industry has been on a digitisation journey for some time now; however, it's now accelerating its efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19 and promote safer air travel.

As these digital innovations progress, we can expect the future of air travel to offer passengers a more enhanced travel experience and access to even more travel information. Airlines are introducing twenty-four-hour live chat features and dedicated WhatsApp chat features that can seamlessly offer customer support, and also share information that passengers need to know about their destinations – in particular the latest insights into Covid-19 incidence and related restrictions.

Passengers stand to benefit significantly from airlines embracing digital innovation at an accelerated pace – helping them feel safer and more supported every step of their journey.