Pooliing ground service equipment could transform the ramp.

At London Luton, Ground Support Equipment (GSE) assets doubled following a change of contract at one of the airport’s main airlines. Airport management responded to the ensuing ramp congestion by doing a GSE pooling trial at five of the gateway’s busiest stands. The success of that trial eventually led to a contract for GSE being awarded by the airport, with the price of the equipment determined by the ground handlers involved. Once the decision to use pooled equipment was made, the airport’s main role was determining the scope of the contract in terms of GSE numbers and adding the mandatory use of shared equipment to the ground handling license.

The first piece of pooled equipment arrived at London Luton in January 2017, with the fleet completed nine months later. A second phase is now being discussed with baggage trailers likely to be an early addition, followed by pushback tugs.

Liam Bolger, Head of Airside at London Luton Airport Operations said at yesterday’s GSE Pooling session that it is important that “the airport authority should drive pooling. It is their airfield.”

And the drive for the airport is efficiency. London Luton has seen a 40% reduction in ramp congestion and a 95% reduction in equipment damage. Moreover, the airport now boasts modern equipment with the latest safety features while standardization ensures greater efficiency and understanding among all stakeholders.

One of London Luton’s principal clients, easyJet, reports a 100% decrease in aircraft damage and a 7% improvement in on-time performance following the move to pooled equipment.

“The airport authority should drive pooling. It is their airfield”

Liam Bolger, Head of Airside at London Luton Airport Operations
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The platform for growth

In his keynote speech at the 31st IGHC, His Excellency, Akbar Al-Baker, Qatar Airways Group Chief Executive, highlighted the role of ground handling in driving sustainable growth in aviation.

Qatar Airways is expanding rapidly, backed by Hamad International Airport and Qatar Aviation Services (QAS). In 2017, the airline opened 11 new routes and in the 2018–2019 financial year will add a further 16 destinations to the network.

While Hamad International Airport is known in the international arena, having won numerous awards, QAS, the ground handling arm of Qatar Airways, is yet to achieve global renown. Such innovations as the ramp clearance module and the dedication of some 7,500 staff from 54 countries have allowed QAS to post enviable numbers, however, including a 99.5% on-time performance.

“The importance of QAS to our continued growth cannot be overstated,” said Al-Baker. Though it enjoys a monopoly at Hamad International Airport, QAS will expand internationally, Al-Baker informed at the following press conference.

He cited Milan Malpensa and London Heathrow as possible start locations for the roll-out of QAS, although no firm decisions or timelines have been announced. Airports where there is the potential to establish a competitive business and introduce quality services are likely targets, however.
Busy day at IGHC
Standardizing ground ops is vital

Ground operations is an area ripe for improvement. Continuous incremental steps have seen corresponding increases in efficiency and productivity. But the major trends in aviation dynamics—from new aircraft to congested airports to different and increasing passenger requirements—necessitate similarly significant developments on the ground.

In 2018 alone, IATA forecasts that airlines will boost their capacity 5.7% with load factors reaching a new record of 81.4%.

“The long-term future for ground operations must lie in increased use of technology to coordinate activity, improve safety, and optimize resources,” said Steve Allen, DSVP UAE Airport Operations, dnata, on a panel discussing ground operation opportunities. “This can only be achieved by standardizing processes, collaboration, and data sharing between everyone who operates at the airport.”

Allen believes that to achieve this ideal of harmonious cooperation, the collective will of all stakeholders must be aligned to a common vision for the future. And that is easier said than done.

“The ground operations business is fragmented with many airports and airlines still running their own ground operations, and airports with multiple ground handlers all competing for contracts and space,” he warned. “This, along with low margins and the need to collaborate with airport authorities and air traffic control, makes it a complex landscape for stakeholders.”

David Anderson, Head of Operational Safety, Risk and Compliance, British Airways, insisted that “standardization is the key word” for the future. “That leads to automation and the dark ramp, with no humans working,” he said.

The autonomous turnaround is on the drawing boards of many stakeholders, but the panel estimated it is at least 10-15 years away from going live operationally.

The panel were also in unison in noting that the most expensive airline asset is an aircraft—and therefore utilizing it to the full was essential. This, in turn, will drive ground handling improvements.

Jon Conway, Director General, ASA, summed up the challenges and opportunities ahead: “I share concerns about the time it takes to get things done,” he said. “The forecast for passenger growth is quite scary. But the benefits of having aircraft turnaround on type, not airline, are clear. And I served on the innovations panel and all submissions were excellent. I am encouraged by that.”

Autonomous vehicles and drones are likely to be used for the many airfield inspections performed regularly. Aircraft, runways, airport perimeters and airfields are continually inspected for damage or for security reasons.

Special lenses would make the equipment more effective than the human eye and offer greater visual range as well as different angles. Data collection would be an important feature of the inspection and foster greater insights.

Air France-KLM, through its engineering and maintenance division, is trialing an automated aircraft inspection system. Aircraft structure inspections can be lengthy, require aircraft to be grounded, and tie up qualified personnel. To alleviate such complications, laser positioning and integrated sensors allow a drone to fly around the aircraft looking for damage. Information, including exact location, is sent to an operator in real time.

Fifty test inspections were performed on an A320 and there are now two inspections per week using this methodology as part of a five-month trial.

Yann Bruner, CEO of Donecle—which is partnering with the airline on the project—estimates that 90%–95% of inspections do not lead to maintenance action, and just one hour of an unscheduled inspection can cost $10,000.
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