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Op-Ed: Maturing Mid-Office Enables True Pre-Trip OKs

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MARCH 08, 2010 -- While still not perfect, mid-office technology available today allows much more granular control over pre-trip approval workflow.

For more than 20 years, I've seen avoiding pre-trip approval policies as a best practice. By the time a traveler finds their manager, who's almost always in a meeting or on a plane when it matters most, the low fare booked originally is gone, leaving only more costly alternatives available. Typically, the executive eventually agrees that notifications of planned trips after ticketing are sufficient. This approach—which I like to call pre-trip disapproval—notifies an approver that a trip has been booked and ticketed, and whether it was in policy. This is good—it gives managers visibility and a chance to kill the most egregious and unauthorized trips.



Mid-office automation emerged in the 1980s with systems that verified agent compliance with traveler preferences and company policies, and ensured that data was in all the right places in a PNR. As it matured, mid-office technology was extended to drive touchless fulfillment. Bottom line: Mid-office systems are as responsible for the success of online bookings as the tools themselves are. The latest generation of mid-office technology has expanded capabilities by another order of magnitude. Routines can be created that parse incoming reservations by any, or any combination of, fields in the PNR. Systems can sort reservations based on the identity, location or position of the traveler in the corporate hierarchy. In fact, any element in a PNR can be analyzed and a different workflow can be applied to every trip based on any criteria.

Even cooler, the mid-office can be configured to access or transfer information even completely outside the travel system and e-mail reservations to different people or destinations based on almost any factor your company wants to define. Going to a destination your employer regards as dangerous? Not until your security team approves it. Booking a trip with a company charge card that's expired or over the limit? Not until the company card administrator has a word. Booking a hotel that exceeds the per diem authorized by your company for that city—one of hundreds with different per diem rates? Not without an approval or an automated response advising that you will be financially responsible for the difference.

Companies will need to allocate resources to configure these tool, maintain the tables behind them and integrate them into different systems, but with that investment, pre-trip approval becomes a lot more possible. Executives can limit the kinds of reservations they need to approve and, even better, can create alternative workflows that will keep the process moving when they don't respond.