Flights' flow gets innovative fix

Evergreen man's software helps manage arrivals, saving fuel and avoiding delays.
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The Denver Post
Article Last Updated: 05/26/2008 12:00:44 AM MDT

Oil at about $130 a barrel has airlines choking on the soaring price of jet fuel and looking for new ways to pass higher costs on to passengers.

Evergreen's Michael Baiada can't do much about global energy prices or whether carriers make passengers pay for the first checked bag.

But he does have a proven way to save airlines money on fuel, cut emissions and reduce aircraft delays: Baiada's firm, ATH Group Inc., produces a complex computerized arrival-management system that helps large carriers efficiently and optimally control the flow of planes into major airports.

"If the core production process of an airline — the movement of its aircraft — is unstable, nothing can be stable," said Baiada, 58, referring to such support tasks as ticketing passengers, fueling and cleaning planes, and staffing gates.

ATH stands for Attila the Hub, a play off "the Hun" and a reference to the need for a disciplined, "just in time" effort by airlines to control the arrival of planes into hub airports.

While aircraft still are about 1 1/2 hours out from their destination, Attila software analyzes flight paths and other data to determine which planes should speed up or slow down so they arrive in sequence for an optimal arrival flow.

The aim is to avoid the often chaotic condition of too many aircraft converging at a hub about the same time.

That often leads to fuel-wasting delay maneuvers until the planes can be lined up by air-traffic controllers for landing, said Baiada, who also is veteran United Airlines pilot now flying as captain on the Boeing 747.

Delta Air Lines has saved about $8 million in the past 20 months using Attila technology to help order the flow of as many as 500 mainline flights a day into Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, said Lisa Duval, general manager for fuel and air-traffic management at Delta's operations control center in Atlanta.

Attila "gives us some amount of control for prioritizing our flights, especially in Atlanta where we have a lot of connections," Duval said.

Delta plans to extend Attila's functions to the planes of a key regional airline that serves Delta at Hartsfield.

Delta acquired Attila technology nearly two years ago, but financially strapped airlines aren't in a position now to pay about $1 million to install the system.

So the technology has been picked up by ARINC Inc., the Annapolis, Md.-based provider of communications services to airlines worldwide. ARINC is rebranding Attila as its AirPlan enRoute Service and expects to successfully market the technology to many more airlines by peddling it with a money-saving guarantee.

ARINC is not asking for payment upfront from carriers but rather is offering the arrival-management system to airlines as a "subscription service," said Pete Wright, the company's program manager for AirPlan enRoute.

"They will not pay until they experience fuel savings," Wright said.

ARINC expects American Airlines, the nation's largest carrier, to be the next airline to try the Attila technology and the first to use it under ARINC's terms.

American plans to use the technology to control the flow of aircraft into its hub at Dallas-Fort Worth.

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