Technology: Let's think smarter

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The 'Internet of Things' has moved on from fridges warning when beers are running low and could make an impact on travel - if there were greater collaboration. Matthew Parsons reports from DataArt's recent Question Time event

In today's jargonised world, there couldn't be a more vaguesounding term than the "internet of things" - or IoT for short.

Despite its ambiguity, the premise is simple: everyday objects in our lives are getting smarter; embedded with microchips and sensors, they are able to exchange data over the internet with the manufacturer, operator and/or other connected devices.

You could argue IoT hit the headlines a couple of years ago, when Google bought smart thermostat maker Nest for $3.2 billion.

More recently, Amazon unveiled "Dash"- a small branded button that can be stuck to cupboards, or walls, and which is connected to an Amazon shopping smartphone app. Press it, and you can order new coffee, or kitchen rolls, or moisturiser... depending on the brand of the button. And, of course, Apple's launch earlier this year of Watch may herald a sea change in the acceptance of wearable technology, and be a possible precursor to greater acceptance of IoT.

Probing the issues

But what are the implications for the travel industry? DataArt's third Question Time - titled "Staying ahead - travel and the internet of things" - brought 100 people at The Soho Hotel in London in front of a panel of experts to address issues such as practical uses, behaviour and privacy.

First, Deepak Jha, head of mobility hub, Tui Travel, talked about the "Tui Digital Assistant" app. Launched in 2013, it has so far been downloaded
1.5 million times, he claimed.
"The app will be a conduit for things to come," Jha said. "We have various stretch points; from the stores, to the airline, the value channel is so fragmented. So how do you manage big data into small data, so the customer feels like you know them, rather than bombarding them with data?"

The app allows users to book their holiday, plan it, check baggage allowances, flight times and more. Jha added that the Holy Grail would be to have a destination expert on call, who speaks different languages, and is available 24 hours a day. "For business, that would be productive on all fronts. On an app, that's possible."

Also seeking to marry the digital world with the physical world was Matthew Hall, chief operating officer, London City airport. He said the airport was testing IoT so that staff can track aircraft types and quickly identify the right equipment to receive that aircraft.

The airport also integrates data from Transport for London into its website, and can warn passengers of any train problems that could affect their trip.

Meanwhile, in the hotel sector, Paul Saggar, group director of IT, Maybourne Hotel Group, said wearable technology, such as smart watches, would work well for his staff. A simple buzz, and the concierge looks down at his watch to see that a guest, with their name displayed, is about to arrive.

And Jason Jefferys, founder of iRiS Software System, believes there is a huge opportunity if more passenger and customer information were
shared. For example, a hotel being able to access the dietary requirements of a guest; their

minibar preference; and if their flight is delayed, the chance to offer them a late check-out (assuming they know the next guest's time of arrival).

Sharing is essential

However, arriving at this utopia of frictionless travel requires a greater willingness for the travel industry to share, the panel argued. Saggar said in a previous role, at HRG, he looked at establishing a "universal PNR". "We brought together various suppliers, but everyone wanted to own the company, and push the communication. It's not a technical challenge - I can log into 25 different websites with my Google or Facebook ID, for example. An airline doesn't want to share details with a rival."

London City airport's Hall agreed: "From an airport point of view, the problem is compartmentalisation - everyone worries about their own thing. I have an airline background, where they knock seven shades out of each other! But at our airport, with the passenger in mind, you can collectively grow. IoT allows you, operationally, to join up multiple providers."

Tui's Jha also said there was a need for more collaboration: "It's missing an API, an open API. Travel data should be OK to share - it's not regulated like the health industry."

He cited a potential scenario in the agricultural sector: "A farmer plants a seed. While doing that, they would share the details of the temperature
with the seed company, urban planners, climate change organisations and so on."
"[But in travel] it's like BluRay fighting DVD. Customers are happy to share data, but it's just not happening."

Jefferys added: "It's down to the consumer, they have to share more - and they're happy with sharing: look at social media."

Gregg Abbott, senior vice-president, travel and hospitality, at DataArt, said while "airlines are tight on passenger data" a new wave of companies were "playing arbitrage, brokering details between OTAs and hotels".

Privacy issues

Even if customers are happy to share, DataArt's Abbott asked: "When does it go from cool to creepy? Millennials don't get creeped out as much as I do. It's about the trade of data, and it's down to choice of personalisation."

Whatever the level of personalisation, customers must not feel they are being abused. Symantec's State of Privacy Report 2015 stated: "Connected devices and the internet of things all generate large quantities of data. There are significant benefits to business in being able to correlate and analyse large amounts of this data, but this data must be kept secure, and there must be trust among customers that their data, anonymised or identifiable, is secure."

For Tui's Jha, the main problem could be convincing the customers: "It's hard to articulate to the consumer how the personalisation is beneficial to them. For example, you can analyse data to bring down their insurance premium."

As for the future, Sagaar predicts that by the year 2020, guests will be able to walk into a hotel room and experience personalised temperature settings and even personalised art.

Yet Hall believes that at that point, the industry will "still be spinning its wheels - airlines are the problem".

Abbott, too, said that despite the massive amounts of data being collected "we'll still be off in terms of frictionless travel - as a result, data as a service will grow".

For IoT to flourish and truly the benefit the traveller, it seems that it isn't the technology that needs to get smarter - it's the people.

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