Next-gen Tech: Connecting Aviation Companies to Their Global Supply Chain

A strong supply chain depends upon many things, not the least of which is access to real-time information, communications and technology. And it's imperative that all of the stakeholders throughout the supply chain are continuously in sync. In this episode, host Chris Riback is joined by Michael McNally, Vice President of IT Product Management and Steve Wilson, Vice President of Strategic Accounts, Sterling Global Aviation Logistics, for an informative, timely discussion. The topic: the global aviation supply chain—and how to keep it on track. Their conversation focuses on one of the critical elements to do just that: technology. Michael and Steve share their insights on how technology can support the aviation industry's supply chain needs. They also provide a "coming attractions" overview of QuickOnline 2.0—the newest version of our online logistics tool designed to specifically manage AOG and aviation logistics.

This episode covers some of the key questions that keep those in the aviation industry up at night:

- With the vaccine rollout hopefully getting us on the road out of the pandemic, how can having the right technology support that journey?
- What are the industry trends and requirements that technology needs to address?
- What does it take, in terms of providing transparency of shipment status and targeted communications, to ensure you're staying connected to your supply chain stakeholders in real-time?

Michael and Steve address those questions and more, discussing how leading technology can lead the way to successfully managing your global logistics projects.

Transcript

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Introduction:

A strong supply chain depends – among other keys – on real-time information, communications, and technology – keeping all of the stakeholders throughout the supply chain continuously in sync.

Today our focus is aviation. And we're going in-depth on one of the keys to keeping the aviation global supply chain logistics on track: Technology. That's because we're launching a new QuickOnline 2.0 – customized for aviation – to meet aviation's unique supply chain needs.

We're all, we hope, on the road out of the pandemic as vaccines come down the line. So how can this tool help the aviation industry as it comes out of the pandemic? Specifically, what are the industry trends and requirements that technology needs to address? What does it take in terms of providing transparency of shipment status and targeted communications, leveraging GPS data, and much more – all seamlessly connected to all stakeholders of the supply chain in real-time?

To address those questions, we have Michael McNally, The Quick Group's Vice President of IT Product Management. Steve Wilson is Vice President of Strategic Accounts at Sterling Global Aviation Logistics. They're part of the team releasing the next generation of QuickOnline, the company's leading software for clients to manage their global logistics projects, and a key component of the technology backbone that keeps business moving.

Chris Riback: Mike, Steve, thank you both for joining. I appreciate your time.

Michael McNally: Of course. Glad to be here.

Steve Wilson: Hi. Hello. How are you?

Chris Riback: I'm good, thank you, and I'm excited to talk about QuickOnline. Let's get right to it. Mike, maybe I'll start with you. What are some of the trends on the technology side that inspired a new version, an updated version of QuickOnline?

Michael McNally: Where we've always thought of it as a customer tracking something at their computer, as we know, most of our customers aren't at a desk, aren't at a computer. Instead a mobile app is downloaded on your phone, to get that information for this specific job.

Our big focus in our new 2.0 was our responsive design where our web application will just respond to your device's screen. If you're using a mobile phone, if you're using a tablet, a laptop, our design will be structured for that device and consistently provide that user experience and that simplicity for placing that order or finding out those details as soon as possible.

Everyone has an app now. There's limited space some people have on their phones, so we can't expect every customer to download the app from an app store. We want to offer both the responsive design, as well as our mobile app.

Chris Riback: Steve, what about on the business side? Any trends that, over the last years or more recently, have come to the fore?

Steve Wilson: There's a few, one being just the trend of the move toward technology. Aviation, as an industry, in some ways lagged behind a little bit where, in these AOG situations or things like that, they still want to pick up the phone and call us and talk to us and know that they spoke to one of our customer service reps and have that comfortable feeling, knowing that they spoke to each other.

What we see now, with younger people coming into some of these positions, is that they're more used to using technology as part of their day-to-day life. It's not a change for them to go to a technology platform because it's something they already know. That's one trend.

Another trend is that, with the way that the airlines and operators are managing their business, and due to cost control, they're trying to operate with less and less inventory. Because of that, they need to rely on a service like us. More than ever, they need to have immediate, up-to-date information.

Chris Riback: With all of the data, all of the information, all of the moving parts, all of the packages, all of the shipments, how important is simplicity in terms of how the platform is presented? Mike, maybe we'll stay with you on this one.

Michael McNally: It's very important, with a focus on not only the data that is coming, either from the customer or back to the customer, but that user design and that user interface. We have focused on what our lead designer refers to as common in the design industry, above the fold. What we noticed in our experiences, when you are trying to place an order and you have this continuous scroll. You're scrolling and scrolling.

It's not as much of an issue when you're ordering something online because you already have your home address saved and the shipper is coming. It's much simpler when you're ordering online because the fields of requirements are much smaller. You're putting in your credit card information. You're putting in your home address and that's it.

With our business, we are collecting a lot of information from our customers: aircraft part numbers, tail numbers, quantities, packages, GPS information. We want to try to balance the ability to collect all this information so we can set up a proper logistics plan, but also make it user-friendly, that experience, that flow, so they can get from the beginning of the order to the end without a lot of frustration, but making sure that they're focusing on putting in the information that's required.

Steve Wilson: It really is and one reason is that the groups of people that are managing the movement of aircraft parts and materials in a time-critical manner, are a very busy group of people. They have a lot of tasks going on. They're managing large fleets of aircraft, so they need a really simple tool that they can go to and create an order or get an update and move on to the next task. It's very critical as far as support goes.

Chris Riback: Mike, what does the latest technology mean from your point of view?

Michael McNally: It's taking advantage of what's currently available to develop product, to develop software, to develop it efficiently, and continue to provide those features in a reasonable time to the customer as the customer continues to change. We want to keep up with their changes so we can continue to provide a service that equals a level that is needed.

Then as well, we have to also focus a lot of our time on having the technology available 24/7/365, because that's what our company is. We don't shut down. We don't have downtime maintenance.

How do we continue to provide those features that customers are now used to? Push notifications, driver tracking and seeing where that driver's location is, is just commonplace now. But it's also continuing to make sure that we have an infrastructure that we can build on that will allow us to maintain that 24/7/365 that we have prided ourselves on for the past 30 years.

So we're talking the MVP, so from day one, auto-complete address book for placing an order, tracking those GPS devices directly in the platform, driver's first/last mile tracking, getting flight information directly from flight stats and that aircraft location while also any delays in the departures or arrival delays that may have happened in the past few minutes.

We're collecting that data in one source and we're providing it to the customer in a very friendly interaction that they can do from their mobile device.

Chris Riback: All built with responsive design?

Michael McNally: Exactly. The days of, "Oh, that feature's not available on our app, but you can find that feature on the web," is in the past. All those features that they'll see in a demo, that we'll show them, can be just as easily used on a tablet, laptop or a mobile phone.

Chris Riback: Steve, from the client's point of view, what are some use cases?

Steve Wilson: We've talked about the airlines and how they have maintenance bases at literally every airport that they fly to and they have maintenance people on call when needed. What's a little bit different on the corporate side, or the biz jet side of the world, is that they're flying to a different airport every day. They don't know where they're going until a client tells them where they want to go. In maintenance events, they have to rely on mobile teams, maintenance experts that have to also make their way to the location to meet up with the parts that we're bringing.

With QuickOnline, working across all different types of devices and platforms, they're able to pull that data up on their phone right there at the airport as they're waiting for our delivery. It's real-time data right there in their hands. They can see, up to the minute, when their part's going to be delivered.

Chris Riback: Let's talk about the requirements for this. Where did you get your marching orders?

Michael McNally: We've always been the lead with technology. Our current platform was built 20 years ago. I think our first order was in 2000. For the past 20 years, we've been continuing to support that technology and add features as our business has changed over the years.

Over those 20 years, we have a huge domain of knowledge internally and then also just directly from our customers. Most of what they call in the project management world, collecting user stories, those were collected directly from our customers. Really, we've just been gathering over time as we work with them directly. As if we're just having lunch during a meeting and they're saying, "Oh, it would be great if we could do this" or " Oh, I use your site for this and we're also looking to track this specific piece of information. Is that possible?" That's really where we started.

Steve Wilson: The way that our clients use QuickOnline does vary, based on the part of the industry that they're a part of or serve. For example, the commercial airlines, they use a service like ours in QuickOnline to support the planes that we all fly around on day to day. When one of those planes breaks down, it's just a matter of minutes -- and how fast can we get this plane back into service? Every hour that that plane is not in service is costing that airline tens of thousands of dollars, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Within an airline, there are different groups. One of the main groups that use our services is the AOG team. They're responsible for keeping the fleet flying that's out in operation, the planes that we all fly on.

They're using it for planes that are in the maintenance cycle or on overnight stays where they do certain maintenance events. They need to rely on a service like ours to get parts to those planes for the overnight visits. Or when planes are about to come out of maintenance, if something comes up at the last minute, it's very critical that they get those planes out on time. Just like delays at the airport, delays coming out of maintenance are also very expensive to the airlines. It can cost them lots of dollars.

Just like the airplanes flying every day, those in maintenance are also very critical as far as getting out on time because every day that those don't come out of maintenance, that's costing the airline hundreds of thousands of dollars as well. They have to pull another plane out of their schedules to meet the needs of the planes that aren't leaving maintenance.

On the business jet side of things, it's a little bit different. Unlike the airlines, some of the contractional jet companies are flying many different types of aircraft, many different branded aircraft from different OEMs. You can only imagine the schedule they have every day. Flying executives around with a schedule that really changes every day. It's impossible for them to store inventory in every location for every type of aircraft they have. So it's very critical that they

rely on a service like ours because there's no way they could spend that kind of money on that kind of inventory to cover all their needs.

Chris Riback: It sounds like it's really about helping make your client's jobs easier and helping give them an actionable cost management tool.

Steve Wilson: Both points you've made there are correct. It's a tool that they use to keep their operations moving. It's also a tool that they use to control cost. Due to the high cost of aviation inventory, it's very critical that they manage that process as tightly as possible as well. Every day that parts are in that process, it's costing them more and more money.

Steve Wilson: We've actually heard that from clients, that when they use Sterling and they use QuickOnline, they can go to bed at night, knowing that things are going to get taken care of and when they wake up in the morning, the parts are going to be there, and they can look to go to the next issue they need to work with.

Michael McNally: Another trend is data and everyone has an API now, which is great. We offer ours out to our customers for integration and we love when our vendors that we work with offer us their API. We are using GPS to help assist with monitoring the location of the packages. And because of the APIs that are provided, we can integrate that with our platform to give that seamless experience for the customer.

When they come to track the package and they're seeing our milestone of this has been recovered by one of our local agents, they can also, in the same screen, see that the GPS is showing exactly where that package is located as well as some of the sensor data that's part of the GPS unit. That's an emerging area, which we are glad is going to be one of the first main features that's going to be in our QuickOnline 2.0.

Steve Wilson: I also think this is going to be really nice for the clients from the side of how we can customize each user's experience to their needs, whether it's a PO number or a tail number or however they want to track these shipments or whatever the key data points are for them. We can really make adjustments quickly to the new system and make it flow nicely for them. That's going to be a really nice feature, something that we can update literally instantly, versus in the past, it took us a little bit more time to develop some of those changes. I think that's going to be a really nice feature that our customers are going to really appreciate.

Chris Riback: Mike, you've got to be worried, as well, I would assume, and you correct me if I'm wrong, about expecting the unexpected. How do you think about that in terms of what you're building, to be able to translate that into flexibility and ease of use on the client-side?

Michael McNally: Yes, that's a constant challenge and something we work with daily, with the development team, with the sales groups, with our customers directly, is finding that balance of how do you build something to be flexible to fit these specific customer needs. As Steve

mentioned, it's not just an aviation customer. Within aviation, we have a lot of different users that are requiring maybe a different look or a different focus or feature.

Chris Riback: Will clients be able to track where their drivers are?

Michael McNally: Yes, of course. One of our new features that we're working on is first mile and last mile visibility. We developed some new features in our vendor mobile app that will give our vendors the capabilities of sharing their location when they are on the way to a collection or a delivery for our customers.

Chris Riback: Steve, we're all, we hope, on the road out of the pandemic as vaccines come down the line, for the aviation industry, how can this tool help the aviation industry as it comes out of the pandemic?

Steve Wilson: It's not a secret that the airlines have come out and all said that the future is going to look different for them. They're going to be a different kind of airline. They're going to be a much leaner organization. What that means to us is they're going to be trying to accomplish a lot more with less people and trying to define where they're going to go in the future as demand comes back. I think this tool will be really nice for them as we come out of this time and they do define where they're going to go in the future.

Chris Riback: What is the "having the technology" – If you're down on personnel power, what gap does that help address?

Steve Wilson: In a lot of ways, it just helps speed up the process. It makes it much easier to work with our company and set up a shipment and track and get the things that you need more quickly so that you can pass those on within the organization to all the people that need to have that information because they're going to plan their next event based on that information as well.

Chris Riback: Mike, Steve, thank you. I appreciate both of you spending the time.

Steve Wilson: Thank you. Thank you, Chris.

Michael McNally: Yes, thank you very much.