American Airlines tech leader talks about outages, hackers

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In this undated photo provided by American Airlines company CIO Maya Leibman poses for a photo. Leibman, senior vice president and chief information officer, is responsible for the information technology systems at American, the world's biggest airline. She talked recently with The Associated Press. (American Airlines via AP)

A government report this month highlighted the frequency of computer outages at airlines, which can stop passengers from checking in for flights, and even prevent planes from taking off.

American Airlines canceled about 3,000 flights last June when a hardware breakdown prevented one of its regional affiliates, PSA Airlines, from using crew-scheduling software.

Maya Leibman, senior vice president and chief information officer, is responsible for the information technology systems at American, the world's biggest airline. Her greatest achievement was likely the smooth integration of reservations systems at American and US Airways after their merger—a process that has tripped up other carriers.

American has increased IT investment after the PSA meltdown—although Leibman won't provide figures. She talked recently with The Associated Press. Her answers were edited for length.

Q. The Government Accountability Office just reported on IT outages at airlines. How good is IT at airlines?

A. No industry is immune to IT outages. The (GAO) report mentioned that less than 1% of customer complaints filed with the (Department of Transportation) during those years were related to IT outages, and internally at American, less than half a percent of all of our delays are attributed to IT issues.

Q. But GAO counted 34 major outages from 2015 through 2017.

A. That was across 12 airlines, so if you think about it that way, each airline had between two or three outages over a three-year time period that that led to customer delays. I would say that's pretty akin to any other industry, but airline outages are higher-profile.

Q. What is American doing?

A. We have a comprehensive program around prevention of issues, modernization of our systems, the way we respond to incidents—incident response and recovery. We're continually refining and testing these processes. But I'll just add that any (chief information officer) who tells you that their company is completely immune to any outages is being unrealistic in this age.

Q. What about hackers? What is American doing to prevent security breaches?

A. We have a comprehensive program around prevention, detection, remediation, modernization, and you just get into this cycle of continually refining and testing these tools and these processes to ensure that you are protected as well as you possibly can be.

Q. Are you seeing more intrusions or phishing attempts?

A. I would say that cyberattacks are definitely on the rise, but I would also say that the tools that we are utilizing to combat them are getting progressively more sophisticated.

Q. Has American had any damaging intrusions or breaches?

A. Nothing that you haven't read about.

Q. After American and US Airways combined, you merged the reservations systems, the loyalty programs and many others. Is there any merger-related IT work still to do?

A. The one big domino left is integrating the systems associated with our tech-ops organization, so maintenance and engineering. Airlines

generally save that for last, one, because it's really complex, and, two, because there are regulatory and safety issues that we want to ensure we get perfectly correct. We will have the bulk of that completed next year.

Q. What else is on your plate?

A. Now that a big portion of the integration work is behind us, we can really turn our attention to innovative new technology for our customers and for our team members ... providing technology that better re-accommodates customers on other flights when we experience a flight cancellation, ensuring that customers know where their bags are and ensuring that the bags are staying with the customers and make it to their final destination, volunteering for an oversold flight before the customer even gets to the airport.

Q. And you're rolling out compensation offers for passengers on oversold flights?

A. We have rolled that out completely domestically and in many international locations as well. So you may get a notification on your phone via the mobile app that says, 'Would you be willing to take another flight? Here's the compensation. Would you like to volunteer?'

Q. How important is IT to the financial health of an airline?

A. IT can have a huge impact on the airline's financial success. We can lower costs by automating previously manual processes. We can improve revenue by providing easy access to products and services that people want to buy. American has publicly stated that we're expecting $1.3 billion in annual revenue generation and cost savings, of which IT is a portion—not all of that—but certainly a really important factor.

Q. I guess I think of IT as preventing a disaster that shuts down the

airline for a week. But it's more nuanced?

A. If you asked 100 people at the company to think of one thing that we could do to improve the company overall, whether it's increased revenue, reduce costs, improve the customer experience, protect our company, ensure that it thrives, I would bet that 99 of those ideas involve technology in one way or another.

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