Evolving support in air navigation

Serco Middle East already has a strong presence in the region’s air navigation market. But Peter Mohring, managing director for transport, explains that the company is now aligning itself to support a wider portfolio of industry operators across a broader range of fields.

Air navigation service providers (ANSPs) in the Middle East face many challenges and have to be among the best in the world in order ensure the safe, orderly and efficient flow of traffic for all aircraft ascending and departing regional hubs and international overflying aircraft. Geo-political events, military airspace restrictions and the confluence of air routes linking the East and West are just a few complex challenges stakeholders have to face. ANSPs, airports and airlines must work closely together to maintain the integrity of the aviation system in an industry packed with ambitious and expanding airlines.

Serco sees itself as a crucial player on the Middle Eastern stage and has...
Where we excel most is in helping an organisation transition to better ways of working and transform in terms of leadership development. A good outcome for us is when an organisation no longer needs us.

Mohring draws on the example of Iraq, where Serco has assisted in redesigning the entire airspace to allow international overflights and coalition forces to coexist, advising the government on every facet of operations and training to enable the ANSP to mature and eventually be self-sufficient. He adds that Serco’s evolution has been in correlation with the development of clients as the firm increases knowledge and capabilities. “In some instances, we have gone from being a one-stop-shop ANSP to a support partner to our clients, relying on long-term relationships to develop better ways of working,” comments Mohring. “It is immensely satisfying to ask our clients how we can assist them to stand on their own and be their own entity. Where we excel most is in helping an organisation transition to better ways of working and transform in terms of leadership.
TRAINS FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Serco Middle East’s current stance on training air traffic controllers is to help solve local challenges. The organisation is supporting the industry in creating a training platform that addresses leadership development as well as the fundamental operational skills controllers require. The idea is to attract GCC nationals to get their operational training but also acquire ‘softer’ skills that can be linked to a university degree programme.

Serco Middle East’s transport managing director, Peter Mohring, explains that part of the group’s strategy is to attract people from the Asia-Pacific market, for example, to come to the local region to train. He comments: “Our strategy is to develop a training platform based on new technology and virtual and online training that covers things like English language proficiency but can also be used for a young national to get a degree programme out of it.”

Mohring continues: “The idea is that we would offer a comprehensive programme that takes you from street to seat and then have ongoing training. Serco would see a commercial opportunity in that. We run the aviation academy in Baghdad, we train a lot of people in Iraq, but few people want to be trained in Iraq. So our plan is to consolidate our training capability and have it in an attractive area. Just like airlines, the ANSPs in the Middle East tend to be very protective of their own space. Emirates have launched their academy at DWC, but you could argue if Emirates and Etihad got together they could create something even better.”

development. A good outcome for us is when an organisation no longer needs us.”

Serco sits relatively uniquely in the Middle East market as it is one of just a handful of non-governmental organisations. This means it has no official political association and can operate effectively across international borders, which, as Mohring explains, is a natural benefit in the air navigation service’s sector.

“One of the biggest challenges the Middle East has is that it is not yet like Europe where the principles of flexible use of airspace, managing airport and airspace constrains have been tried and tested over many years. In the region, there’s a great degree of protectionism with geo-political events having the ability to significantly impact air traffic management operations, often to ATC on a short notice.

“The nature of the environment means every ANSP must be familiar with the military restrictions that must be observed across large portions of airspace. I think where Serco plays a role is that we can consult and ask where customers need the most help and how can we support facilitate discussions between adjacent ANSPs.”

Mohring says this was evidenced when Serco played a role in facilitating cross-border discussions and agreements which resulted in the return of international over-flights to Iraq in 2017.

Of course, the highly sensitive political nature of airspace in the Middle East ultimately means Serco and its competitors have their limitations. Another challenge impacting the local aviation system is the shortage of air traffic controllers. As a result, Middle East ANSPs rely on a degree of expatriate workforce, a recruitment strategy which some observers have argued is unsustainable. As Mohring puts it: “Everyone is fishing from exactly the same pond for skilled expatriate ATC specialists at a time when there is a worldwide shortage of ATCOs.”

But Mohring and his team spy an opportunity in the challenge presented by the skills shortage. “I think a new way, using virtual platforms and different training methodologies, is where we can make significant gains in providing ATCO training smarter, cheaper without compromising quality,” he explains.

“That shortage of controllers is going to be a five-to-seven-year challenge. I think in the Middle East specifically there is a growing need for leadership vacancies because the workforce is ageing, generally, so there’s a management void there. And regionally, Expo 2020 and the FIFA World Cup and the resultant increase in traffic will create a challenge.”

Congestion in the Middle East and the UAE in particular will increase substantially over the next five to 10 years. Both Abu Dhabi and Dubai are at different stages of capacity constraint. But both will come under more pressure as the A380 is phased out and airspace becomes more crowded by twin-engine jets. And with DWC unlikely to become fully operational until 2030, local providers face a challenge and will need to work alongside all relevant stakeholders.

Mohring says that Serco is far from being able to influence government decision-making. Where the organisation can help he says, is in
Serco Middle East was last month awarded a five-year contract to deliver hospitality services at both Dubai International (DXB) and Dubai World Central (DWC). The contract will see Serco deliver ‘frontline hospitality services’ until 31 December 2024. Using research conducted by the company’s customer experience agency, ExperienceLab, the contract will see over 1,000 employees deliver hospitality and passenger processing services across Dubai Airports’ facilities. Serco has also been supporting Dubai Airports with the maintenance of its large buildings and infrastructure portfolio, as well as providing a engineering and estates services for Terminal 1 and 2 and to other cargo and ancillary buildings at DXB.

CEO of Serco Middle East, Phil Malem, says: “Our team has developed a solution that will enhance the standards of customer service through the deployment of an expertly trained workforce, with staff set to be supported by some exciting and effective technology.”

Paul Griffiths, CEO of Dubai Airports, comments: “Our ultimate objective is to be recognised as the operator of the world’s best airports for customer service. This contract is part of a series of moves we have taken in recent years to enhance airport experience at DXB and DWC and wow our customers by delivering an amazing airport experience.”

Here, you have a greater degree of protectionism and you have huge military airspaces. I think where Serco plays a role in that is that we can consult and ask where customers need the most help and how we can help facilitate discussions between adjoining ANSPs”

Serco, for example, on customer hospitality services focusing on improving the user experience at busy airports. Serco’s strategy in aviation is continuously evolving and drawing on the resources and expertise within the wider group, the organisation is making large-scale asset management, data management and workforce management the key pillars of its offering. In the immediate short-term however, there is no doubt that Serco’s air navigation services will remain a keystone in its business offering. If countries in the Middle East are to allow their airlines and airports to grow at the rate they want to, then the services of Serco and its competitors will be crucial and subject to significant investment.