Globe and Mail
June 12, 2000

E-biz bugs still bite occasionally



DIGITAL SURVIVOR

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I often travel by air, and for years I've managed my affairs by booking my tickets on-line. The airline industry was among the first to extend the reach of its computer systems to customers, and it has worked well for everyone.

Yet some recent travelling experiences confirm my suspicion that many e-biz advocates are not forthright in talking about the challenges in implementing the technology.

Clearly, e-business is nothing more than linking together disparate computer systems. Not only that, it means having people undertake transactions for which they've never had responsibility before.

Which is where we are today, as **Air Canada** and **Canadian Airlines International** deal with the massively complicated challenge of linking and merging two big computer systems, and as they encourage passengers to undertake their own travel bookings.

Recent experiences confirm my suspicion that many e-biz advocates are not forthright in talking about the challenges in implementing the technology.

Generally their efforts are working — for all the horror stories, most people aren't having problems with reservations. Yet when things do go wrong, they go wrong in spectacular fashion.

Consider the frustrating and sometimes strange travel situations I encountered a couple of weeks ago.

At one point I was told by a ticket counter clerk that I had "an electronic ticket, but it's not really electronic," a reality that seemed kind of fascinating to me at the time.

In another instance, I was advised when arriving for my flight that while the reservation system of one airline showed that I had a seat on the flight, the other showed that I did not — and therefore, I couldn't get on the plane.

Earlier that same morning on another flight, I found myself looking up from my seat to see a gate agent. She had just come on to the plane to have me sign a credit card slip to pay for the ticket — since she discovered just minutes before we pulled back from the gate that somehow my electronic ticket was never processed.

Each case offered further evidence that when companies put sophisticated e-business technology in place, things usually work great — except when things go wrong, they fall apart. Big time.

Here is the nub of the situation: I now realize that I was the author of my own misfortune for the problems with my air travels.

In the case of one flight, for example, I later learned that my on-line purchase of several tickets had actually failed. The credit card transactions weren't processed, yet the new e-business method hadn't advised me of the problem.

This meant that I had an electronic ticket that hadn't been paid for. I should have become aware of this at some point — and yet, more technology came into play. Upon checking in at the airport, I used one of the new self-ticketing machines — an electronic marvel that automatically prints your boarding pass so you don't have to stand in line.

Since I was rushed, I didn't notice the message that would have popped up to advise me that there was a problem with my ticket.

The two other big problems I encountered? Clearly my own fault — although the patient but harried airline people who explained the situation to my frazzled self couldn't get it through to me at the time.

I haven't even mentioned that in addition to these problems, I actually managed to cancel a return flight on yet another trip (this one from Edmonton) simply by pressing the wrong buttons.

That, in a nutshell, is why e-business will — in almost every industry — take far longer to implement than anyone suspects: humans make mistakes. No matter how well an application might work, the mistakes people make will always trigger a small number of problems — and manage to bring the potential for e-biz success almost to its knees.

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