Digital documents in airfreight processes

Flying without papers

The digitalisation of the air cargo industry remains on everyone's agenda. An e-AWB that shippers and forwarders are now testing is set to be introduced in Switzerland in 2016. Christian Doepgen spoke to its developers, Rainer Stawarz and Nico Pereira da Silva of K&S Informatik.

K&S Informatik's **Pereira da Silva** and **Stawarz** (r).

Mr Stawarz, Mr Pereira da Silva, the digitalisation of the airfreight sector has been an important issue for a long time now. Where do developments currently stand?
There has long been a call to digitalise airfreight documents. But enterprises encounter differing conditions in various countries, and have to define their standards.

Is there a digital race?
In the meantime more than 30% of all AWBs are exchanged digitally in the USA, and the rate is still rising rapidly. In Europe Germany and Switzerland, for example, still lag a bit behind this.

So will that suffice?
The requirement is for the exchange of AWBs, amongst other things, to be completely digitalised in the USA's air space by 1 November 2015. That's an ambitious target, but a change is perceptible. In some places, such as in Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea, they've attained 61%, 58% and 37% e-AWB levels.

«After trial phases at the turn of the year the industry will experience a changeover in 2016.»

In October the worldwide figure for the use of e-AWBs stood at 34.1%. Iata has set a global target of 45% for usage by the end of this year. What do you think of this aim?
The dynamism of the process has been tremendous since 2014. In our assessment, the airfreight industry will follow trial phases at the turn of the year with a broad changeover in 2016 – at least on the core routes.

What are the remaining issues, in detail?
In the airfreight process we're looking at as many as 20 different documents that are needed, from a shipper's plant to the recipient. But we've prioritised the e-AWB as a central element, in cooperation with 39 freight forwarders and 11 airlines in Switzerland.

What does the project consist of?
The aim was to develop an independent technical solution in direct exchange with those that carry operational responsibility for airfreight processes, and to set up interfaces between the parties involved. The practical reference to the transport chain is our trump. A mere drawing-board solution wouldn't have got us anywhere.
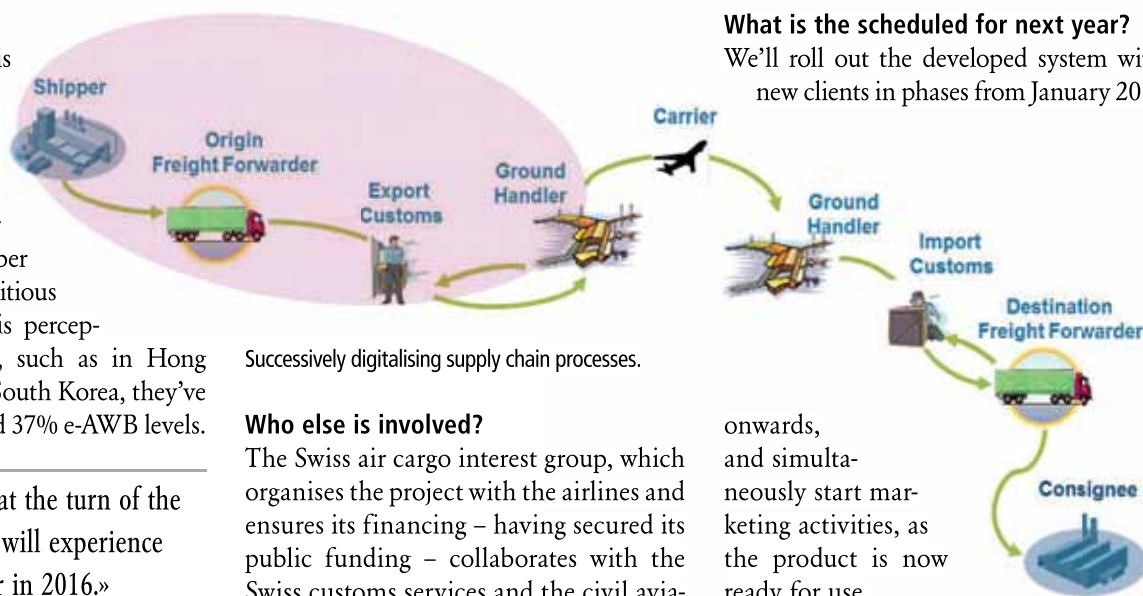
Successively digitalising supply chain processes.

Who else is involved?
The Swiss air cargo interest group, which organises the project with the airlines and ensures its financing – having secured its public funding – collaborates with the Swiss customs services and the civil aviation authorities for this process. The industry body Spedlogswiss runs the data centre, which functions as the project's data hub, or transaction platform, where documents arriving in various formats are converted into the required form.

What are your experiences of airlines' polices?
The solution applied by LH Cargo is one possible approach. They charge a fee for every undigitalised AWB; and provide an input form with which to digitalise AWBs. But Swiss WorldCargo, amongst others, is aiming for a faster solution, which is set to be introduced in the course of 2016.

It should enable up to 80% of all documents to be exchanged digitally.

«We'll roll out the developed system in phases from January 2016 onwards.»

What project phases are there?
Shippers and logistics service providers agreed to undergo a beta phase (October to December 2015), once the technical issues were resolved and the programming completed. Thus electronic air cargo documents are currently being used and tested in six e-lanes.

What is the scheduled for next year?
We'll roll out the developed system with new clients in phases from January 2016 onwards, and simultaneously start marketing activities, as the product is now ready for use.

Anybody requiring information can gather the necessary knowledge at our workshop, amongst other possibilities. The event is scheduled to take place at the Swiss Shippers' Council's 17th Seafreight Symposium, which is being held in Interlaken on 21 January 2016.

Will the project be complete by then?
In cooperation with Spedlogswiss the e-freight process should definitely be operational from April of next year onwards. The next document we're planning to digitalise, by the way, is the shipper's declaration for dangerous goods.