# Many changes to come ahead of return to air travel

The second installment of the Passenger Experience Conference virtual webinar series discussed how the industry can reassure potential passengers that the cabin is safe and how this will transfer to requests for maintenance and modification, cleaning and retrofit requirements.

Hosted by Reed Exhibitions' Industry Consultant Vern Alg, the panelists included Nicole Noack, Managing Director, Independent Aircraft Modifier Alliance, Cristian Sutter, Vice President Commercial Aviation Strategy, GDC Technics and David Doherty, Head of Sales, Etihad Engineering. The panelists tackled ideas about how passenger perception, engineering, MRO and more will play a role in the return to air travel.

**Passenger experience and engineering**

The panelists discussed how a passenger's perception of risk will be key to the return to air travel. While engineers may be able to effectively redirect cabin airflow to reduce the possibility of contamination between passengers without the need to leave the middle seat empty, as Doherty explained, if passengers cannot physically see the preventative measures put in place, it will be more difficult to convince them that flying is safe.

Doherty said that while there are many seat modifications out there, such as protective barriers between passengers, these modifications have to be practical and commercially viable. If they aren't, the airline will still have to pay for it – a cost that ends up being passed on to the consumer. "It doesn't matter how you seat them if they can't afford it fly," Doherty said.

"If the passenger can't see it, then they can't relate to it," agreed Sutter. "That's why we're seeing examples of things that are far-fetched." Better communication about the safety and cleanliness of air travel is an avenue that hasn't been used yet, he said, adding that passengers need to be told about the safety modifications even if they cannot see them.

At Independent Aircraft Modifier Alliance, this communication between the associations, passengers, airlines, OEMs and MROs suppliers is crucial. Some solutions might never leave the sketch pad and might not be certifiable, Noack said, but it will create communication within the community and this will lead to the development of ideas and innovation. And while visible virus protection for passengers may be at the forefront of most industry discussions, she said the global economic crisis as a whole – and all of its affects, such as feeling safe on public transport on the way to the airport – must be taken into account.

**Future tech affecting MROs**

Doherty predicted long-haul markets will take the longest time to. Passengers will likely feel more comfortable on short-haul flights first. While this will affect airlines differently based on location, it has a knock-on effect for MROs as fewer aircraft will require maintenance. He said there may be drive toward newer aircraft, such as 737s and A350s, which will be easier to retrofit with the touchless options and other modifications that passengers will likely choose because they'll perceive it as safer than older aircraft that are not as easily retrofitted.

The industry should also keep in mind how to introduce the modifications as well as the exit strategy if the solution is no longer needed in a couple years, Noack said. "Ensuring health, safety and wellbeing within the journey may affect how we deal with retrofits in the near future," she said.

“I think the MRO market will start booming in a few years again with a long list of queues of airlines wanting to reconfig their cabins once the industry settles and there’s a revenue influx coming back again into the airline business,” Sutter said. Once the industry works out the kinks – such as which design and modifications will keep passengers safe, the aircraft that will have a future, how this will be communicated to travelers – then innovation will start right after and be transferred to the MROs.