

CEO interview: A new chapter for gategroup

This is a special feature from the [April 2026 WTCE Hamburg issue](#) of *PAX International* on [page 32](#).



Christoph Schmitz, CEO, gategroup

This month, [gategroup](#) returns to the [World Travel Catering & Onboard Services Expo](#) with a presence that reflects both the scale of its operations and the ambitions of its leadership. WTCE 2026 features an expanded show floor, including the addition of a third hall at Hamburg Messe—Hall A2—which will be exclusively dedicated to gategroup and its brands.

For CEO Christoph Schmitz, the expanded footprint signals more than industry growth. It reflects the company's evolving role in the aviation ecosystem. *PAX International* spoke with Schmitz ahead of the event to discuss leadership, technology and the strategic priorities guiding the world's largest airline caterer through its next phase of development.



Empowering teams to act as intrapreneurs—while staying connected to the operational heartbeat of the kitchen—is central to gategroup’s leadership approach under CEO Christoph Schmitz

When we spoke [with *PAX International*] in Amsterdam last year, the focus was on moving the business from recovery into transformation,” Schmitz says. “Today, that transformation is firmly underway and increasingly visible in how we operate.”

Over the past several years, the company has focused on strengthening its organizational fundamentals—simplifying structures, investing in digital capabilities and aligning culinary, operational and commercial teams more closely with airline partners. The result, Schmitz says, is a more agile organization capable of delivering consistent service across a global network.

“We have sharpened our portfolio across catering, onboard retail and hospitality solutions, ensuring each area has a clear strategic direction and stronger collaboration with airline partners,” he says.



gategroup chefs are supported by a global structure designed to deliver quality, consistency and agility

Leadership at scale

Leading a company with hundreds of kitchens and operations across dozens of countries requires a shift in mindset.

“For me, leadership this year is not about top-down commands; it is about stewardship,” he says. “It is my job to cultivate an environment where ethical integrity and high performance are not just goals, but our natural state of being.”

A central theme of Schmitz’s leadership philosophy for this year is empowering teams throughout the organization to act as innovators within their own operations.

“In 2026, I define leadership as the ability to empower our people to be intrapreneurs,” Schmitz explains. “We have built a best-in-class executive team that does not just manage scale—they understand the operational heartbeat of a galley and the complexity of global logistics.”

The approach allows local teams to remain agile while operating within global standards designed to ensure consistency.

“At our scale, my decisions for 2026 really come down to a single promise: that we will deliver the same world-class excellence whether a meal is served in Zurich or Sydney,” he says.

Schmitz sees this shift as part of a broader transformation in how airline caterers position themselves within the aviation value chain.

“I am moving us away from the old-school ‘caterer’ mindset to become a true strategic partner that is woven into the very fabric of our airlines’ operations.”

Schmitz's leadership role recently expanded beyond gategroup with his appointment as president of the Airline Catering Association. He views the position as an opportunity to drive broader industry progress.

"Taking on the presidency of the ACA does not change my mission at gategroup; it simply amplifies it," he says. "I see this role as a natural extension of our commitment to move beyond being a provider and becoming a true strategic partner to the entire aviation ecosystem."

Many of the challenges facing airline catering today—particularly those related to sustainability, infrastructure and regulatory complexity—require collective action, he notes.

"We are at a critical inflection point where urgent, industry-wide collaboration is the only way forward," Schmitz says. "We must work together to build a transparent ESG framework that actually supports a circular economy."



Operating at global scale, gategroup sees its kitchens and teams as central to delivering resilience, advancing sustainability commitments and driving innovation across the airline catering industry

Setting the pace for the industry

The scale of gategroup's global network places it in a unique position within the industry—one Schmitz believes carries significant responsibility which extends across operational resilience, sustainability commitments and technological innovation.

“Our scale gives us a unique duty to provide through-the-cycle resilience,” he explains.

At the strategic level, the company’s long-term roadmap is guided by its 2030 vision, which includes investments in artificial intelligence, automation and digital infrastructure designed to improve efficiency across the global network.

Schmitz adds that maintaining financial stability remains critical as the company scales these capabilities.

“By focusing on steady, de-risked growth and smart, inflation-linked pricing, I am making sure gategroup is not just the biggest player in the game, but the most resilient and reliable one for the long haul.”

Technology meets culinary craft

At the operational level, technology—particularly artificial intelligence—is becoming an increasingly important driver of efficiency and consistency across gategroup’s network. Applications range from forecasting and production planning to inventory management and disruption recovery. In onboard retail, AI can also help predict demand, optimize product assortments and connect sales data directly to loading decisions.

“Done well, AI improves accuracy, reduces substitutions and cuts waste while making choice feel more personal,” Schmitz says.

Yet he emphasizes that technology will never replace the human expertise at the heart of inflight dining. Instead, data systems are designed to support the culinary process—ensuring that dishes developed in test kitchens can be executed consistently across hundreds of global hubs.

“Data does not replace the chef’s craft—it protects it,” Schmitz explains. “It provides the global framework that ensures a chef’s creative vision is delivered with absolute consistency.”

Increasingly, data science is also shaping menu development. Rather than relying on broad averages, the company can analyze patterns by route, cabin, seasonality and passenger demographics

“That allows airlines to balance choice with operational discipline,” Schmitz says. “By predicting uptake with greater precision, we can design menus that perform better while reducing waste.”

Engineering the next decade

Looking ahead, Schmitz says airline catering is entering a period of rapid evolution. Over the next decade, technology will connect passenger demand more directly to production through systems such as pre-order platforms, predictive forecasting and real-time operational visibility.

“That will allow the industry to move away from broad estimates toward much smarter planning,” he says.

He also expects supply chains to evolve as airlines and caterers place greater emphasis on resilience, responsible sourcing and transparency around environmental impact.

“Travelers will expect meals that feel lighter, more thoughtful and more aligned with their preferences, without sacrificing reliability,” Schmitz says.

He sees gategroup as a central part of this changing landscape.

“Our role is to help engineer that system,” he explains. “By combining culinary expertise, operational

scale and digital capabilities, we aim to make inflight dining more personalized, more efficient and more responsible

It is a turning point for both the group and the industry.

“Ten years from now, I would like my leadership to be remembered for the moment we transitioned gategroup from a service provider into an indispensable strategic partner,” he says.

For Schmitz, that vision is rooted as much in culture as it is in technology.

“We have used the recent years to reset our DNA, ensuring gategroup is not just the biggest player, but the most ethical and resilient employer-of-choice in the industry.”

As the company steps into the next decade, the focus is clear.

“We are not simply chasing growth; we are working to be the kind of partner our airline customers can truly lean on,” Schmitz says. “We feel a genuine duty to help guide this industry through its next great inflection point—and we are approaching that challenge with a lot of energy and a lot of heart.”