Future of travel: British Airways looks to AI to improve air travel experiences

British Airways is using AI to improve the airline's operational efficiency, maintenance and to predict onboard food uptake. During the recent AI Summit at London Tech Week, British Airways chairman and CEO, Alex Cruz laid down the challenge to artificial intelligence experts to help him transform the customer journey, to make travel more frictionless.

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Cruz encouraged entrepreneurs and start-ups to help his team of 80 data scientists offer customers new, intuitive services, change the way tickets are sold, guarantee no bags are ever misplaced and replace airport queues with virtual ones.

He asked experts to submit proposals to its parent company International Airlines Group's (IAG) accelerator programme, Hangar 51, which sees successful applicants embedded in the heart of the business working side by side with an international team of mentors and experts from across IAG.

The 10-week accelerator nurtures start-ups with a broad range of technologies, enabling them to develop and test their products on a global scale.

Cruz also outlined some of the advancements the airline is making using AI to improve the service it offers its customers.

Via Hangar 51, British Airways is currently working with technology start-up Assaia. Its intelligent software captures on

video every moment from when an aircraft arrives at the airport to its departure, helping airline workers to see the numerous tasks going on around the aircraft (fuelling, cleaning, baggage and catering loading and unloading) and alerting them to issues that could delay the flight's departure.

British Airways is also trialling driverless vehicles at Heathrow. The luggage of customers travelling on certain flights from Terminal 5 is now being driven from baggage belts to aircraft on driverless baggage trucks, speeding up the delivery of bags.

British Airways is currently trialling a computer system which looks at flight plans, pulls up to the minute data from the Global Air Traffic Control database, and suggests quicker routes – reducing delays for customers. The airline's team of AI specialists has also designed and created machine learning algorithms to adjust the volume of fresh food being loaded onto individual flights to help meet customer demand and minimise waste.

Cruz adds: "It is important that we deliver the best service to our customers and that's why we are looking for the best people to help us. We have a big team of specialists but British Airways and IAG Digital are open to new ideas about how we can use AI to try to reduce flight delays, eliminate airport queues or create a more personalised service for our customers - providing them with relevant in-the-moment travel updates or a unique service, like reserving their favourite seat or serving their favourite meal."