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How American CIO Manages 'Colossal' US Airways Integration

American Airlines and [US Airways Group Inc. on Tuesday agreed](#) to concessions that resolve a Justice Department antitrust suit, allowing the companies to conclude their \$16 billion merger. The combined company will operate the largest airline in the world—and is the focus of a massive technology integration. “This is just a colossally large undertaking,” American CIO Maya Leibman told CIO Journal



Airline integrations can be extremely difficult to pull off. As CIO Journal has reported, the integration of United and Continental led to technology problems [that took a long time to fix](#). Ms. Leibman, who is also a senior vice president at American Airlines owner [AMR Corp.](#), said she is well aware of the scope of her project—and its risks. She [made her comments in an interview on Nov. 7](#). Here are edited highlights of that discussion.

Can you put the scale of the American-US Airways integration in perspective?

This is just a colossally large undertaking. We haven't done anything on this scale this before. The TWA integration [in 2001] was a little bit more of an absorption of a company into our network. I think US Airways qualifies as much more of a merger. We are freely evaluating both sets of technology to see what we want to utilize going forward.

It includes everything from systems selection to how we make sure systems are scalable, how we make sure they are reliable for customers, and how we mitigate risk. If you had asked me about my top priorities six months ago, I would have talked about all the things you hear about at any technology conference—Big Data, cloud, mobility, agile development. They are all big priorities. But for us, the integration trumps all of those other efforts.

How did the Justice Department's antitrust suit affect your work when it was filed in

August?

We were marching ahead, a couple of weeks away from what we considered Day One, the closing of the merger, when the suit was filed in August. We were planning to do a lot of things behind the scenes, a lot of things that were customer-facing. For instance, we were going to do things to make it easier for customers to interact with both Web sites on Day One. If customers got confused by the merger and weren't sure which website to go to, we would have linked them [to where they needed to go]. It would have been a much more transparent experience.

We didn't get that far. We didn't have a lot of time leading up to August to do everything we wanted to put in place. But the interim period has given us time to develop more elegant solutions.

This is really behind the scenes stuff, but one thing we want to do is make sure that a top tier customer on US Airways has the same benefits on American. We had cobbled together a solution to make that work, but it wasn't that pretty, from a technological perspective. We were able to go back and develop more automated solutions. We need to be able to exchange data, so we know who their top tier customers are, and we can use that in our own systems. And US Airways needs to be able to do the same thing.

What is the timeframe for completing this work?

We are creating one future airline and we need one set of systems governing things. That integration will take many years. Frequent flyer programs and maintenance and engine systems will run two separate fleets for a while and will come together in a couple of years. We need to integrate wireless and cable networks. And those things will occur over time.

What is your approach to managing a project of this scale and complexity?

This is a huge undertaking, and like any huge undertaking, you start by breaking it down into more manageable chunks. You have to identify the system, like flight operations systems, that are the dog, and the systems that are the tail that gets wagged. You put a stake in the ground and work backward from that data, and figure out what needs to happen up and down the line, what are the dependencies. You have to identify the risks and mitigate the risks, where possible.

We have an incredible team of people. We have 800 people in my entire organization. US Airways has another 800 people. In some ways, they are all working on the integration.

We have relied on agile development. We started on our journey with agile about four or five years ago. It has been slowly maturing over time. It helps us break big chunks into smaller, more manageable pieces of work, and move on to the next work. We have seen rapid results, and rapidly derived value from it.

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