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Book review

Charting the aviation industry in a time of change

Rhoades, D.L. (2014) Evolution of International Aviation. Phoenix Rising, 3rd Edition, Ashgate. Surrey, UK and Burlington, USA
Taneja, N.K. (2014) Designing Future-Oriented Airline Businesses. Ashgate. Surrey, UK and Burlington, USA

These two Ashgate books represent a useful addition to the increasing number of aviation publications. Given the many changes experienced by the aviation industry in recent times, there is a need to both update existing aviation literature and develop publications in new areas. Rhoades (2014) would come under the former category, a third edition text book that has evolved following events such as 9/11 and the impacts on the industry of the Global Financial Crisis. Taneja (2014) comes under the latter category, exploring the design of future-orientated airlines businesses in response to contemporary aviation industry challenges.

Rhoades (2014) charts the historic development of international aviation. It is structured temporally, splitting the evolution of aviation into three appropriate time period sections from the beginning (1903–1950), through the industry growing up (1950–2008) and into the future (2008 onwards). These epochs are clearly defined, with an underlying analogy of the 'phoenix rising' in the sense that the aviation industry often re-emerges 'from the flames'.

The first part of the book naturally starts with the Wright brothers, the first in a series of innovative aviators, before the initial commercial airline successes associated with the DC-3 aircraft. Innovation and invention underpin the emerging aviation industry, despite the interruptions from the Two World Wars. The required legislative framework to deal with the burgeoning aviation industry at an international scale is then described, centred on the Chicago Convention. The development of the associated international bodies (ICAO, IATA) is also outlined, with underpinning economic and political tensions.

The maturing aviation industry covers the era of jet aircraft, larger aeroplanes travelling faster that offer great airline business opportunities into new markets, as well as exciting travel options for an increasing number of passengers. This phase includes the supersonic commercial flights offered by Concorde. The book also has an interesting diversion into the US and USSR space programs. Moving forwards in time, the more recent political and economic developments, such as deregulation and liberalisation, are then discussed. A range of relevant aviation business and legislative elements are covered in response, such as Open Skies and airline alliances, together with cargo developments, a useful and appropriate inclusion.

The final section on future aviation developments includes the consolidation of the major US airlines and the continued rise in low-cost airlines. The environmental dimension is summarised, with the principal challenge to reduce carbon emissions, albeit with little speculation on the ways to respond. The contemporary aircraft competition between the Boeing Dreamliner and the Airbus A380 is also rightly incorporated. The theme of airlines coming and going, searching for underlying financial stability, continues, and as with the rest of the book appropriate international examples are provided. The contemporary aviation focus is increasingly centred on aviation development in the Middle East, plus the growing importance of developing countries. Other current issues included are the security focus post 9/11, developments in logistics and the future commercial space opportunities.

The book is suited both for those who have little understanding of aviation history and would read it in one sitting, and for those with a deeper aviation knowledge who would dip into various chapters. It is very well written and a good educational read, endorsed by many leading aviation researchers. As a text book, it is generally descriptive and student-friendly with learning objectives, key terms and questions at the end. The questions are straight-forward, with both closed and open discussed-based types. The chapters are short and easy-to-read, ably evidenced from many supporting references. It is fairly text-heavy, albeit with some useful tables; it would have been useful to contain some more figures.

Taneja (2014) complements Rhoades (2014) and is a valuable follow-on read given that it considers the futuristic aspects of airline businesses. Given the author's various practitioner roles in the industry and as such insider aviation business knowledge, the book provides a useful addition to the more academic approach of Rhoades (2014). The numerous Foreword contributions, typically from senior aviation Chief Executive Officers, cover aviation industry business responses to data-driven technological changes and associated passenger uses of this data, such as through mobile devices. The book has a particular focus on airline customer relationships and linked service quality. The first chapter covers twelve contemporary business considerations for those in airline management, so that they can realign and take advantage of the rapidly changing environment. The book then outlines the need for airlines to provide differentiated and valued passenger experiences, explaining this in the context of position and personalisation within the customisation spectrum. It is refreshing to see airline customer segmentation delve into the complexities beyond the business and leisure passenger dichotomy. A good range of airlines are covered, although they are naturally more from the developed world and those leading the way in terms of innovation. Retailing to airline customers is then considered, with a particular focus on pricing and distribution. Very useful and relevant innovative business examples from outside aviation are incorporated: Lego, Netflix, Mariott, Macys and Disney. The chapter on airline branding demonstrates the importance of linking the brand to the business and discusses how brand messages can be varied across legacy and low-cost airlines, as well as subsidiaries.

Customer loyalty follows on from this, including their relationship with airline Frequent Flyer Programs. This is increasingly complex, and business strategies for 'speciality' airline segments are then outlined in response. The underlying issue of technology and the value of information are discussed, covering the potential of big data and the increasingly sophisticated analytical tools available to airline web-site

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developers. Airlines need to respond appropriately to the impacts of mobile devices on passenger behaviour. Given the underlying airline industry focus, the book then considers the links back to business models. The penultimate chapter, "Preparing for tomorrow", is about the industry moving forwards. It relates the recent associated success of the two travel-related businesses of Uber and Airbnb. Attaining market leadership requires business transformation, and the book finishes with five practical examples written by five Thought Leaders, some from the aviation industry (Qantas and Sabre Airline Solutions) and some from outside (ALDI, Hertz, and PricewaterhouseCoopers). This is an interesting and novel way of finishing the book, although they are a bit disjointed to read.

As stated on the back of the book, the primary audience is the senior-level practitioner in the aviation industry. This is also demonstrated by practical 'Takeways' at the end of each chapter. There are a lot of bullet points and numbered lists throughout the book which disrupt the flow in places. The book is very descriptive using sources from business and aviation industry articles, and as such could have been more in-depth and analytical at times. Despite a lack of academic sources though, it is still an interesting, educational read.

Both books provide a valuable and appropriate geographical perspective. Within Rhoades (2014), there is an appropriate spatial dimension covering regional, state-wide and continental blocks (e.g. Open Skies). It seamlessly moves between the spatial scales. For example, the early-on Chicago based discussions are then scaled up to international air travel growth. Case studies are included from the different regions of the world. The newer and emerging aviation markets, such as Asia, South America and Africa, are discussed towards the end of book, a good inclusion. The space dimension is even covered, both the desire to travel there in the middle of the book, and the future opportunities towards the end. Taneja (2014), although principally focused on the business aspects of the industry, does touch upon geographical implications. The initial chapter considers the changing geography emphasis from the Atlantic routes to those crossing the Pacific Ocean. Some examples, such as the fare search, from Tampa in the US to London in an early chapter, appropriately consider the international dimensions of air travel.

In summary, both text books offer an interesting read in the ever-changing aviation industry, complementing each other on their temporal focus and their insights into the airline business. Given the contrasting academic and business approaches, they also provide a very useful joint contribution to aviation knowledge and understanding.

Tim Ryley
Griffith Aviation, School of Natural Sciences, Griffith University, Australia
E-mail address: t.ryley@griffith.edu.au.