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Boeing Commercial Airplane Group today announced several new service offerings that will greatly expand the air transport industry's access to digitized maintenance data and help end reliance on paper and microfilm-based information systems.

Richard Higgins, director of technical data products and services, said these offerings also mark the beginning of a new revenue source for Boeing.

"We have been negotiating with the major jet-engine manufacturers to provide their maintenance information over our Boeing On-Line Data (BOLD) service," said Higgins. "At this point, negotiations are well under way with two of the firms."

Under these agreements, digitized versions of the engine makers' shop manuals, illustrated parts catalogs and service bulletins for selected engine types will be accessible to airlines via BOLD, just as key Boeing maintenance data has been available through the on-line service since 1995.

The BOLD databases are accessed in real time on standard computer workstations linked to private, high-speed, wide-area-network providers.

"For an annual fee, the engine makers and other suppliers can use our existing global network to disseminate their data far more cost-effectively than by developing and managing their own on-line systems," said Higgins.

"At the same time, this becomes a new revenue source for Boeing from an area of our business -- maintenance information -- that typically doesn't generate income. Our airline customers will benefit as well, because there will be more funding available to develop and improve our service offerings."

Higgins said that a growing number of Boeing customers are realizing the advantages of real-time access to maintenance data. "It's faster, easier to use and more accurate than conventional information retrieval methods. Eventually BOLD will become a one-stop source that will provide all the information our customers need to operate and maintain their Boeing and Douglas airplanes."

Higgins commented on several other recent developments that will benefit users of Boeing maintenance information. He said Boeing has decided to standardize the formatting of its digitized documents into the easy-to-use and widely available Portable Document Format developed by Adobe Systems.

"This format is compatible with any computer platform, and will be especially useful in helping our non-digital customers make the transition to the digital world," said Higgins. "For operators of both current and out-of-production aircraft, the Portable Document Format will help eliminate the need for paper and microfilm."

Higgins also said that a new Boeing software product called the Portable Maintenance Aid is now in service with several operators of 777 and 747-400 aircraft, and is available for all in-production Boeing models.

"This software contains all the time-critical maintenance information needed by line mechanics, and is specially structured to help them troubleshoot aircraft," said Higgins. "It can be loaded into a laptop computer and taken right to the airplane. This is far more efficient than searching for information at a reference center, which is usually located a good distance from where the airplane is parked."

In the future, Higgins said, Boeing anticipates developing more of these "smart" digital tools. He said the Air Transport Association, an industry trade group, has been instrumental in establishing digital standards that form the basis for these new products, and noted that Boeing will continue to support ATA's efforts.

"We intend to take maximum advantage of leading-edge maintenance technologies and provide our customers with new tools that will enhance safety, increase airplane utilization and boost productivity," said Higgins. As an example, he cited a proposed hand-held digital information device that will help ground crews systematically manage airplane "turnarounds" -- preparing the aircraft for the next flight.

"These are premium service offerings," said Higgins, "and they'll be market priced. Our strategy is to use the marketplace to guide us in developing new maintenance products and services that have real value to our customers."

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