

Responding to Their Every Need

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Rapid Response Center at Boeing Focuses on Operators' Success

A 62-inch big-screen television flickers -- always on -- at one end of a large room. It is joined by the glow of several nearby computer monitors. Three or four animated conversations may be going on all at once, or it may be quiet. Open communication is encouraged in this room without cubicles. This describes one of The Boeing Company's Rapid Response Center sites.

Live big-screen television serves as a virtual extension of any of the three Boeing Rapid Response Center sites. Here, John Lynch, shift manager at the Seattle center, confers with Everett, Wash., site staff members on the screen: Evan Hamm, spares specialist, and Melissa Hinwood, structures engineer.

Linking Seattle and Everett, Wash., with Long Beach, Calif., the Rapid Response Center's TV is not tuned to CNN, FOX or the latest episode of "American Idol." Instead the images that appear on screen show men and women working at these three sites.

The video hookup between the locations is always at the ready -- prepared for a north-south conference, a meeting or a virtual working-together session. An emblematic tool, the television symbolizes how technology has revolutionized customer support. In fact, it is this TV, along with the Internet and a telephone hotline, which helps present a single face to Boeing's airplane customers.

"A little over three years ago, Boeing became the first commercial airplane manufacturer to provide operators with an unprecedented level of support," said Bill Staufenberg, Customer Support and Rapid Response Center senior manager. "Day and night, weekends and holidays, the Rapid Response Center is a great example of how we're always working to keep pace with growing customer expectations in an increasingly competitive market."

Indeed, the Rapid Response Center is a comprehensive source of information designed to assist airline customers when technical problems arise outside normal business hours.

Hurry Up and Wait

Boeing has always offered customers support. However, things were not always seamless. Until 1994, the only 24-hour telephone numbers Boeing had were for the Boeing operator and Spares AOG (airplane on ground) Desk. A customer or Field Service representative could call in, ask the on-duty staffer to locate an appropriate responder and then sit and wait until the call was returned. Of course, one would never know just how long the wait would be.

In 1994, Service Engineering launched a pilot program. Based in Everett and Renton, Wash., the so-called 24-Hour Desk relied on a combination of volunteers and mandatory overtime to cover evenings, weekends and holidays. This was only an interim step, however, and a concerted effort was launched to develop a permanent support solution.

The idea for today's Rapid Response Center gained momentum in the wake of the Boeing and McDonnell Douglas merger under the leadership of George Field, then Technical Services vice president for Commercial Airplanes, and Robert Nova of the Field Service organization. It turned out that the Douglas organization had been using an In-Service Coordination Center to support airlines for a number of years. This was cited as a best practice, and served as the model for the expanded Rapid Response Center concept for the newly merged companies.

One of the biggest challenges was to develop a completely new kind of extended-hour work schedule for the broad range of technical specialists who would staff the center. Then there was the question of finding dedicated office facilities, and equipping those facilities with the right kind of communication and computer equipment to allow quick response to customer requests and fast retrieval of technical information. By the summer of 1999, all was ready and the Rapid Response Center was off and running.

Keeping 'em Flying

The center plays a key role in sustaining efficient airline operations. Charged with preventing -- or at least minimizing -- AOG situations, the Rapid Response Center supports operators' routine and extraordinary maintenance requirements.

Boeing Seattle Rapid Response Center staff members Cory Rettig, structures engineer, standing, and Steve Euker, technical engineering support, discuss details of an installation drawing as Euker responds to a telephone query from an airline customer.

Whether it's tending to Air Force One, repairing the brakes on Donald Rumsfeld's airplane during a recent

mission to the Middle East or keeping a VIP's Boeing Business Jet on par, the Rapid Response Center is there to resolve mundane -- and not so mundane -- issues. Cracked windows, burst tires, landing gears that don't extend, major maintenance that takes place over a holiday -- the center has readily dispatched advice on all of these issues.

"It's the knowledge, experience and dedication both inside the Rapid Response Center and on call that make it possible to successfully solve an incredible variety of issues," said the Seattle-based Rapid Response Center shift manager, Don Morton.

A team of technical experts, including structures and systems engineers, spares personnel, specialists with flight line experience and Field Service representatives, provides around-the-clock customer support at each location. Customers dial a single number and are routed to the center most appropriate for the airplane model in question. All three sites come together to assist customers, using Boeing resources to their fullest extent. The result of this collaboration is one-stop issue resolution and broad-based customer support.

The Long Beach Rapid Response Center is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in support of the 717 and heritage Douglas products -- and sometimes even heritage Boeing products. Cris Cristadoro, Service Engineering Operations manager at the Long Beach center, recalled how the southern California site seamlessly handled forwarded calls when a major earthquake temporarily shut down the Puget Sound sites in early 2001.

"The earthquake was a demonstration of how well we can coordinate with our Puget Sound counterparts to help maintain the company's global mission of a safe and reliable commercial fleet," said Cristadoro. "That works both ways," he added, noting that there have been a number of times when the Puget Sound sites actually assisted Long Beach with stress engineering support.

At the Puget Sound sites, the teams operate from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m., along with weekends and holidays. During normal business hours, Puget Sound-area service engineers answer customer questions and provide support for in-production and out-of-production Boeing airplanes. The goal is to have all three sites report through a single structure, ultimately unifying the entire organization.

Putting Technology to Work

Interactive video, Internet and telephone systems connect the Seattle, Everett and Long Beach sites, allowing access to people and data. Relying on the latest technology and good old-fashioned resources, these linkups enable far-flung sites to remain in constant connection.

"The role of technology in the development of the Rapid Response Center is crucial," said Staufenberg. "Our plan is to keep up, and keep our customers satisfied."

In addition to the video and telephone links, the center uses digitally stored technical documentation. Immediately accessible online to the center's personnel, this information was previously available only on paper.

A completely new version of BOECOM -- a communication system used to share technical information between service engineers and worldwide field service representatives -- is scheduled to come online in early 2004, and customers later will be able to connect to this information through MyBoeingFleet.com. Additionally, solutions to previously resolved in-service problems will be quickly accessible to all Boeing fleet operators. These "reusable solutions" when combined with BOECOM and MyBoeingFleet.com will eventually provide customers with improved self-help capabilities.

Customers will be able to troubleshoot and resolve some of their own problems, Staufenberg noted.

"Customers can rely on our tools to drive them to an answer," he said. "They'll get quick access to necessary information by connecting to MyBoeingFleet.com. They may not need to call us -- although of course we're always there if they need us."

The Right People, the Right Tools

The Rapid Response Center combines the right people and the right tools to provide world-class customer support. Quickly responding to service requests, the center's personnel demonstrate a commitment to our customers' success and how Boeing is meeting their needs.

The Rapid Response Center model has been so successful that in early 2003 Airbus Industrie launched a similar concept. Only now are they providing around-the-clock support.

A recent Next-Generation 737 conference was a good indicator of the success of the Rapid Response Center concept. With Boeing personnel out of the room, airline operators held a caucus to discuss Boeing's customer support and the role of the Rapid Response Center in particular.

Caucus members complimented the support they've received from the center. Quick turnaround times as well as the quality and usefulness of solutions provided were roundly praised. Staufenberg said it was unfortunate that members of the center's team weren't present to hear these commendations.

"The team's actions each day really make a difference," he said. "The center adds value to the notion of total customer satisfaction. It's clearly recognized by each operator we touch."

Doing More with Less

In these tough economic times, the Rapid Response Center continues to serve Boeing customers and meet their needs, and airlines are forced to do more with less. As airline engineering staffs are cut back, Boeing's Service Engineering organization and the Rapid Response Center are called upon more and more to help resolve issues.

In the past 12 months alone, the center has responded to about 8,200 requests for assistance. More than 3,000 of these were AOG situations, and the center's prompt response helped reduce the impact on airline schedules. The center saves operators millions of dollars every year by minimizing schedule delays and lost work time.

"The importance of the service that the Rapid Response Center provides our customers cannot be underestimated," Staufenberg said. "The center is just one way we show how we're committed to our customers' success. It's how we demonstrate our dedication to our airplane customers, to the traveling public and to the entire aviation industry."

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