Meet AeroCloud, data-driven solutions for the complex challenges of airport operations

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to George Richardson, cofounder and CEO of AeroCloud about challenging the legacy players in the aviation industry, data-driven decision making and raising capital in a competitive market.

Temps de lecture : minute

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I was drawn into the aviation industry after being introduced to my cofounder Ian Forde-Smith, who'd had a long and successful career working with airports. After retiring from a thrilling career in motor racing, I was on the lookout for a new challenge, where I felt I could make a real impact and create positive change.

The aviation industry, and airport technology particularly, presented itself as an exciting opportunity. It is heavily dominated by a few legacy players and crying out for innovation. I saw tremendous growth potential for a company that could create better digital solutions to the operational challenges that airports are facing. After a couple of years of devising potential business ideas, Ian and I launched _AeroCloud_, an intelligent, cloud-native airport management platform that allows executives and operational teams to make data-driven decisions to solve the complex challenges they face every day.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what

aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

AeroCloud's mission is to be the largest provider of operation automation software for small to medium-sized airports globally. We want to solve problems the aviation industry has struggled with due to the reliance on on-premise legacy technology, which isn't fit for purpose. This includes hardware that can only be updated by a vendor engineer with a USB stick; software which is accessible from just certain desktops; operational data periodically analysed in Excel reports; and security wait times monitored with a stopwatch and a clipboard.

AeroCloud is the only 100% cloud-native answer to the complex operational challenges experienced by airports across the globe. Our cutting-edge platform leverages AI and machine learning to provide real-time analytics to plan, monitor and improve operations and the passenger experience. Combined with our passenger processing solutions, flexible common-use systems that give airports more flexibility in their departure areas, we're now a one-stop shop for airports' operational technology needs.

We also go one step further than our competitors by launching innovative solutions that take advantage of emerging technologies to solve longstanding challenges in airport operations. We recently launched _AeroCloud Optic_, a pioneering, industry-first computer vision technology that enables airports to gain kerb to gate passenger insights for the first time. It was trialled by Liverpool John Lennon Airport, who described it as the 'holy grail' of commercial activity.

In less than three years, we have partnered with over 47 airports across the UK, Europe, and the US, such as Manchester Airport and Tampa International Airport. And our software now collectively processes more than 190+ million passengers annually.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

AeroCloud has seen massive growth and change since our launch in 2019, including the expansion of our team, _the acquisition of Flight Solutions_, and pioneering sector-first innovation.

Since launching in Macclesfield in 2019. We have grown to a team of 46 members, which includes several senior hires - such as COO, Damian Fairbrother Jones, and Global Head of Passenger Processing, Paul Secker - to bolster the company's leadership team and support the strategic direction needed to grow and overcome challenges.

In addition to our in-house R&D, we acquired passenger processing specialist, Flight Solutions, in June 2022. This has enabled us to offer a one-stop solution for efficient airport operations. And we are one of the few VC-backed startups of our size to have made such a ground-breaking merger to expand our product suite.

Finally, as pioneers in the sector, our cloud-based airport operations platform is undoubtedly transformational for an industry that is still largely dependent on the on-premise solutions of the main legacy players. But now it is exciting to also be delivering genuinely revolutionary solutions using emerging technologies, like AI and computer vision, to solve longstanding challenges for airport operations leaders, such as the aforementioned AeroCloud Optic.

Tell us about the working culture at AeroCloud

There are three qualities which underpin the culture at AeroCloud. The first is accountability. It is important in a startup to not get paralysed by

the fear of making a mistake. It is about getting the job done, then if you do make a mistake, having the gumption to say so and producing a way to mitigate the risk.

The second is solution-based thinking. In a rapidly scaling startup, it is important not to linger on challenges but move past them by thinking about the solution.

Finally, having a positive outlook. We're growing fast, but that will only continue if we all stay aligned on our mission of wanting to create better solutions for our clients in a culture that we all wanted to participate in.

How are you funded?

We have secured three rounds of funding, most recently raising a _$12.6M series A_ in February 2023. Not only were we able to raise capital in a particularly competitive market, but the reliance on legacy incumbents means we are one of the few airport technology startups that have secured funding, which is a testament to how we are transforming the aviation industry. This has helped us to more than double in size since the start of 2022, including headcount, revenue, customers and ARR per customer through upselling.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

One of the biggest challenges so far has been displacing the legacy incumbents that are deeply embedded, albeit not particularly well-liked, in our industry. While airports are delighted to move forward, the challenge and sheer complexity of replacing a legacy incumbent is an incredible task that we did not foresee as being as difficult as it is. I am happy to report that we have overcome this, and we now have five teams for post-sales that are committed to implementing, installing, training,

and converting airports to a new way of thinking.

How does AeroCloud answer an unmet need?

Many airports are reliant on legacy technology and manual processes to manage their operations. This means when there is an issue, airport operations leaders will only find out after the fact, and after passengers have been negatively impacted. For example, if there are not enough team members at security to accommodate a new wave of passengers, and stakeholders are unaware in real-time it is impossible for them to intervene before a bottleneck occurs. This delay not only impacts the passenger experience as they wait in security, but also reduces the time spent in duty free and concessions where they may make purchases that generate revenue for the airport.

For European and UK airports that are heavily reliant on passengers making purchases to drive revenue, the ability to act in the moment will help promote a more seamless flow to increase the dwell time in duty free, cafés, shops, and bars. This requires tracking how long it takes passengers to move through an airport in real-time, and for that information to be readily accessible to operations leaders and other relevant stakeholders, from security to concessions. AeroCloud Optic is the first solution to monitor the journey of passengers accurately and anonymously from kerb to gate. When this data is fed into our SaaS airport management platform, it can offer proactive alerts to the relevant stakeholders across the airport, allowing them to prompt a response and resolution.

What's in store for the future?

AeroCloud is attacking a $20B annual spend market for airports' IT infrastructure and technology. We want as many small to medium-sized airports as possible using our end-to-end operating system. This will help

them increase data-sharing, network connectivity, and give them the ability to increase the use of real-time data. We are making headway in this area, in less than three years, AeroCloud has partnered with 47 customers and is processing more than 190+ million passengers annually. It is our goal to build on these achievements by continuing to invest in our product and team year-on-year.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

If someone is looking to become a founder and CEO, my advice would be to maintain an open attitude and keep looking for solutions, persist through challenges, trust in oneself, and seek feedback and diverse opinions and never lose your passion. These qualities have led me to my current position, and I believe they are essential for anyone seeking to become a successful founder and CEO.

Finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

I'm up early, most of the time by around 6.30am. I try to get at least one hour of walking with my dog, then either work out or eat depending on which day of the week it is. I aim to get to the office around 9am, where I usually take my meetings in batches and try to schedule in as much thinking time as possible throughout the day.

I tend to work until 9.30-10pm, sometimes a little later because of the US-centric parts of our business. I grab food in between everything, then sleep and repeat! I have little time for anything else outside of work, but I do try to take fantastic notes and be on time. I follow up and try to be realistic about the number of days it's going to take for me to complete

something, and live by a strict calendar - even at the weekend where I factor in meals with friends and time spent with family. Of course, none of this would be possible without the fantastic team I've built around me, for which I am incredibly grateful.

George Richardson is the cofounder and CEO of _AeroCloud._

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