

# A movable feast

**Craig Foster, senior consultant and co-founder of Valour Consultancy, sees a surge in W-IFE as portable boxes gain traction.**

**Despite** a wealth of research into the emergence of wireless in-flight entertainment (W-IFE) there's not a great deal of information out there on the rate of adoption of different types of content streaming systems (think fixed installation versus portable), how smaller airframes like turboprops are now becoming equipped in greater numbers, and of course, which companies are leading the way when it comes to market share.

I would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to pen an update on how the market has progressed since 'The Future of In-Flight Entertainment – 2017', was published in late 2017. I'll pick up where I left off in the second section of said blog and talk in a little more depth about the portable W-IFE market and how it has grown, quite quickly, throughout 2018. Portable W-IFE, for those not familiar with the term, refers to those all-in-one server-cum-WAP units that do not require an STC as they're stored either in overhead bins or in catering trays.

At the back end of 2017, portable W-IFE could be found on 225 aircraft – a slight increase on the 198 equipped aircraft one year prior. By looking at this minimal year-on-year rise, one could be forgiven for concluding that portable boxes would not, despite massive promise, make much of a dent in the overall W-IFE installed base. However, fast-forward to 30 June, 2018 and

the prospects for portable W-IFE suddenly look a lot more promising with our stats showing the number of aircraft with portable W-IFE had shot up to 383 – a 70% increase in just six months.

Of course, we need to be mindful of the fact that the inherent portability of these boxes means that they can be installed much faster than can other categories of IFE. For this reason, airlines also move boxes on and off aircraft throughout the year and the summer travel season naturally results in a marked uptick in the use of portable W-IFE. Thomas Cook Airlines, for example, operates its AirFi boxes during the summer months and keeps them stored during winter. As such, keeping track of those aircraft operating with portable W-IFE is fast becoming a painstaking task for the diligent researchers among us. Nevertheless, through constant dialogue with key vendors and the airline community, we've been able to build and maintain an extremely granular database of those carriers that have adopted, or plan to

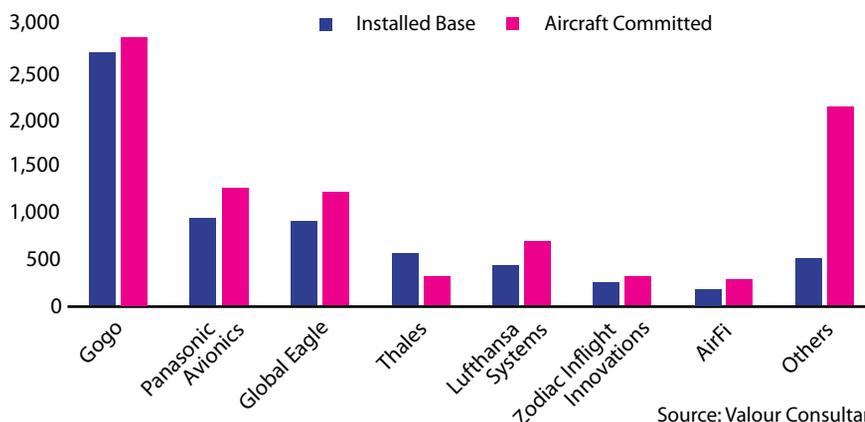
adopt, W-IFE solutions of various kinds.

As of Q2 2018, the installed base of W-IFE stood at 6,627. That's an increase of 344 aircraft quarter-on-quarter and the biggest three-month jump we've ever recorded. Over the same timeframe, the number of aircraft with portable W-IFE grew by 151, which is equivalent to 44% of all net new installations during the quarter. Some of the larger deployments that have taken place in recent months include Aegean Airlines and Aurora Airlines, which, together activated AirFi boxes on more than 50 aircraft; Virgin Australia Regional Airlines, which has gone live with Lufthansa Systems' BoardConnect Portable product; and Air Nostrum, which commenced a fleetwide rollout of Immfly's plug-in portable box, SkyCube.

## PORTABLE POTENTIAL

And there's plenty more to come. At the end of Q2 2018, the known portable W-IFE backlog (inclusive of instances where aircraft will be upgraded to "full" fixed installation

Service Provider of W-IFE equipped aircraft vs total commitment (fixed and portable solutions)  
Installed base and total commitment – Q2 2018



Source: Valour Consultancy

**Up with the Times:** French airline Corsair has selected UGO, the BYOD wireless IFE solution from Display Interactive, to keep passengers informed with the latest news output.



W-IFE) was 364. In truth, this backlog is most probably even higher. Our figures are an aggregation of deals that have been publicly announced, or deals that we know about but cannot yet disclose. Clearly, competition in an increasingly crowded portable W-IFE space means secrecy abounds and vendors are rightfully keeping their cards close to their chests. Even so, we already know that Caribbean Airlines and Vistara are about to begin flying with Bluebox Wow, flynas has signed on to use Inflight Dublin's Everhub product, and Binter Canarias has joined the long list of airlines working with AirFi.

#### HYBRID FUTURE

A new class of product that could result in an even greater number of aircraft with IFE is hybrid/portable W-IFE. In 2017, several vendors announced portable W-IFE boxes that can be connected to the aircraft power supply. This type of solution is likely to prove popular among operators not keen on the logistics of portable W-IFE that sees boxes removed from the aircraft at the end of the day for recharging and content refreshes. An added benefit is that there is no need for battery exchanges, which some airlines may consider a safety concern. Such solutions combine the benefits of both a portable and an installed IFE solution and could prove popular in the low-cost sector and on short- and medium-haul routes.

In addition to Air Nostrum, which, as mentioned, is deploying Immfly's SkyCube offering, new Lufthansa Systems' customer, Air Europa, will, in Q3 2018, roll out a version of BoardConnect Portable that sees the box stored in the overhead storage compartments of aircraft and further secured with Lufthansa Technik's Power & Safe solution, a locked safe that is connected to a power supply to prevent unwanted access. Viasat and Tigerair Australia are about to launch something similar, while Sun Country Airlines has become the launch customer for AirFi's aircraft-powered boxes.

Interestingly, the portable W-IFE surge has shown that there is a role for unconnected W-IFE (i.e. W-IFE with no off-board internet

connectivity) to play, despite protestations to the contrary. I, and others in the industry, have pointed out for some time that W-IFE is heavily tied to the in-flight connectivity (IFC) market. Indeed, at the end of 2017, about 80% of W-IFE-equipped aircraft also offered full off-board connectivity. However, as portable W-IFE systems tend to be comprised of one, sometimes two, self-contained units and with no satellite antennas in sight, there is a distinct lack of internet connectivity on aircraft with such solutions. That being said, several companies are working on integrating low-bandwidth connectivity into their offerings. Lufthansa Systems, for example, plans to pair a battery-powered Iridium modem with BoardConnect Portable boxes to enable in-flight messaging and live e-commerce via the soon-to-be-complete Iridium NEXT constellation.

#### PROP-UP

The emergence of portable W-IFE has also opened up an entirely new segment of the market to IFE. It's common to assume that narrowbodies and regional jets remain the main area of focus for vendors in this space. And when we think about single-aisle aircraft, we tend to imagine Boeing 737s, Airbus A320s and the CRJs and E-Jets from Bombardier and Embraer, respectively. But turboprops comprise a not-insignificant proportion of the global fleet and despite tending to fly much shorter routes, are ripe for lightweight, inexpensive and easy-to-install solutions that can, potentially, generate additional ancillary revenues. Just last month, SpiceJet became the latest Lufthansa Systems customer to go live. The BoardConnect Portable solution (branded "SpicEngage") is now up and running on 21

Bombardier Dash 8s. Likewise, Bluebox's Wow solution recently started active service on five Dash 8s operated by Air Inuit.

At the end of Q2 2018, a total of 26 W-IFE vendors had installed their solutions on more than one aircraft. The new HAVELSAN/Turkish Technic joint venture became the latest to join the party when it finally activated its W-IFE system on 44 Turkish Airlines' aircraft in June 2018. Though not a portable solution, its entrance just goes to show how fragmented the market has become. And there's no sign of any let-up.

Global Eagle, already counted as one of the 26, expects to announce the first customers for its new portable product, AirConnect Go, by the end of the year. Amphenol Phitek, lest we forget, has signed a strategic agreement with Franco-Italian aircraft manufacturer, ATR, and plans to launch its new CabinStream portable product on Gabon-based carrier, Afrijet, in the next few months. And might we expect a new name to come from nowhere and have a crack? GoMedia, which continues to gain traction in the rail and coach markets and has just announced its first US launch on Greyhound Buses, could conceivably decide to enter the fray at any moment.

As it stands, the big IFC service providers continue to lead the way when it comes to overall share of the installed base. Gogo, Panasonic Avionics and the aforementioned Global Eagle, all occupy lofty rankings mainly because they have been able to easily add their respective solutions to existing IFC deployments that utilise the same in-cabin architecture. But the portable space is dominated by three different vendors. Together, AirFi, Lufthansa Systems and Bluebox Aviation Systems account for almost 90% of all aircraft with portable W-IFE. ■