

Howard Lock

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By the time Lock joined the Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG), his insatiable curiosity and passion for learning had carried him around the world into a career focused on a deep understanding of global transportation systems.

Lock's first foray into transportation was with the U.S. Navy, where as a pilot, he experienced first-hand the critical role of transportation, logistics, and supply chain in maintaining a successful and effective organization. The early days of flying the newest and largest helicopter in the Navy's inventory, refining new procedures for safe flight, and establishing new operating models for supporting broadly deployed forces shaped a career championing innovation and pioneering new models.

"I was thrilled to be flying [what was then] the newest aircraft in the inventory, creating flight and operational procedures for the new aircraft, resolving airframe problems, and establishing a brand-new squadron in the Mediterranean. There were no off-the-shelf templates for doing this, so we defined new processes and architected new operating models from the ground up," Lock says. His early successes with out-of-the-box thinking, inductive reasoning, and willingness to embrace the unknown have served him well in a career devoted to business transformation.

Not long after his arrival at IBSG and its transportation vertical team, Howard and his colleagues embarked on a broad-based thought leadership effort to define the role of IBSG in transportation, and to explore critical challenges to transportation enterprises far into the future. In doing so, Howard helped to architect technology and business strategies for the transportation industry.



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These ideas were incorporated in a seminal book, “Connected Transportation,” published by Cisco IBSG.

Most recently, in collaboration with one of the largest international airports in the world, Howard sought solutions to one of aviation’s persistent problems. Working with the airport’s executives and the world’s largest technology firms, Lock and his IBSG colleagues examined the economics of RFID (radio frequency identification) baggage tags. In this highly analytical work, published as “RFID’s Time Has Come,” Howard and colleagues debunk a long-held but flawed belief about the value proposition of RFID baggage tags. Howard and his team demonstrate that a viable business model does exist for RFID-based baggage-handling solutions; in fact, it can drive hundreds of millions of dollars of cost out of airport and airline operations.

“There are enormous challenges to the aviation industry today—low-cost carriers, new operating models, volatile fuel prices, high labor costs, and falling demand, to name a few—that shape passenger experience and impact the industry’s bottom line,” notes Howard. But Lock envisions a transformation of the industry that encompasses the passenger’s entire journey, integration of a broad value chain that is currently fragmented, and collaboration between non-traditional partners that could unlock value and harness higher levels of passenger satisfaction.

Airlines have responded to challenges in the market and plummeting profits by instituting charges for things like checked baggage, meals, blankets, and pillows—amenities that passengers have always regarded as included in the ticket price. This service unbundling, while producing short term profits, diminishes the airline-passenger relationship to a series of transactions that erode passenger satisfaction. This is especially true when the unbundling is compounded by the discomfort and inconvenience of today’s air travel experience. “Today’s strategies are just not sustainable for the industry’s long-term viability,” says Lock.

In recent times, Lock’s work with airports and airlines has centered on passenger experience and the industry’s ability to improve it. He contends that by providing context-relevant, value-added services and information throughout the passenger’s entire journey—from home to hotel and back again—airlines can improve passenger satisfaction, compete more effectively, and expand the market, enhancing profitability. This is a bigger job than just convincing an airline or two.

“Air travel is facilitated by a complex, interdependent community of airlines, airports, ground transportation, hospitality providers, retailers, restaurants, and a raft of other service providers. Until these partners can be more tightly-coupled operationally, using interoperable data and systems, air travel will continue to be a disjointed and unsatisfactory experience for the customer,” he maintains. “These disparate elements of the same value chain have a shared interest in making air travel an end-to-end, seamless, and positive experience for travelers. To do this, these companies need to collaborate, using shared data.”

With IBSG, Lock had yet another opportunity to break new ground, helping to

build the IBSG Hospitality Practice. “Hospitality and transportation go hand-in-hand, and are part of the overall travel ecosystem,” he notes. “You can’t deliver an end-to-end travel experience without taking hospitality into account.” Harrah’s, the largest gaming company in the world, had a vision of creating a unique, Times Square-like venue in Las Vegas. The idea was to create a personalized, immersive experience within a 300-plus-acre property along the Las Vegas Strip that would attract and keep customers inside the Harrah’s venue. In a town full of amazing venues, all investing fortunes to assure they will outperform their neighbors, this was no insignificant ambition. Achieving this feat would require out-of-the box thinking and innovative business models, new guest experiences, and supporting technologies. Lock’s ability to quickly grasp Harrah’s vision and translate this vision into practical and effective solutions not only won Cisco Harrah’s business, but unseated an entrenched competitor.

“At the end of the day, it’s really not the sum total of my experience that’s critical in delivering value to the customer,” Lock says. “Focusing on the customer’s needs, being creative about the solutions, and thinking about the broader picture brings value to the customer. Harnessing the power of weak connections, we can intersect the intellectual capital and experiences of multiple industries for the customer’s benefit. When we deliver value to the customer, we earn the opportunity to develop a relationship and a certain intimacy that allows a customer to share what’s really top of mind for them.”

When he’s not working, Lock likes to “play anything that involves chasing balls around a court, like tennis, squash, and racket ball.” He also loves to play with his kids, and enjoys working with them on math and science. “One of the things I want to instill in my children,” he says, “is the need to understand issues deeply, so that the knowledge becomes absolutely instinctive, intrinsic, and reflexive.”

The same could be said for Lock himself.