Deputy Administrator's Listening Post
May 28, 2008
Minutes

GOV TRIP

Question:

The flights available online are only a portion of the flights SATO has available, and if you work on the flights for the same authorization more than once (such as closing the authorization and logging back into it), several different flight options will appear. There doesn't seem to be much continuity. Also, the 'blue' government contract flights only seem to show up for the Washington, DC area. At this time, I have not found them (online) for any other location.

Answer:

Flight availability is a moving target. Before FedTraveler and GovTrip, most of our travelers and travel arrangers were not aware of this issue. Now that we have online flight search capability, we are finding out what travel agents always knew. Seat availability on airlines is continually changing. When we perform a flight search, we are just one of millions of people who are looking at seats available through the GDS (Global Distribution System) used by airlines worldwide to market their seat stock. You may see a flight available on one search that is not available on future searches, because the seats were booked by others in the time between your searches. You may see a flight available on a search and then when you go to price the flight, someone else may have booked the last remaining seat in that short period between actions in GovTrip. This is the open market for flights working.

The number of available seats on airline flights is declining. We are losing airlines to bankruptcy, and not all the flights of the bankrupt airline are being picked up by other airlines. Domestically, airlines are switching to smaller regional jets that are more effective to operate. So while the number of flights remains the same, the number of seats available continues to decline.

Question:

We have recently had a situation where a rental car was reserved online, the authorization was approved, but when the traveler arrived at his destination, no rental car was held in his name. Between GovTrip approval and the time he left for travel, his 'approved' rental car disappeared. No one knows why, it's just another mystery of GovTrip.

Answer:

We are aware of several dropped reservations. GovTrip is working with Sato to correct any reservations connectivity issues. We understand the frustrations that you are experiencing. No system is perfect, and in the past when reservations were made through call-in, these situations also occurred. We become much more aware of system failures when we experience them first hand.

Question:

When SATO makes a change to a reservation, the authorization appears to need approval again. According to GovTrip, once the ticket has been booked, the GovTrip authorization doesn't need to be approved again (if SATO makes changes) until it is time to complete the voucher. However, we have had travelers arrive at the airport with invalid tickets because their GovTrip authorization is not showing 'approved.'

Answer:

It depends on the type of change being made. If Sato makes a change that changes a price, then yes, the authorization must be re-approved because this is an obligating system. Users of the system also need to be aware that if they go in to view a document, they need to ensure that they do not change the option for view only. If the system is switched from view only, then it reads the entry as an amendment to the document and that does require new approval.

Question:

Another somewhat related issue involving GovTrip and Bank of America is payment of non-refundable tickets. Travelers request non-refundable tickets in order to save money for their units. CRIS money is tight right now, so everyone is trying to cut expenses. However, if they request a non-refundable, it tickets early, and the traveler is then required to pay their Bank of America bill. Then, the traveler is not allowed to get an interim voucher to pay for those expenses, but instead has to wait for the trip to be completed, and the regular voucher to be done, then has to request a refund from the Bank of American (because airline tickets are reimbursed directly to the travel card). Some travelers have out-of-pocket expenses of thousands of dollars for several months while waiting for their trip to take place and their refund to come back to them. I realize paying the Bank of America bill is their responsibility, but the amount of time it takes to recoup their money causes an unnecessary hardship. An easy fix for this would be to allow interim vouchers for non-refundable airline tickets. Interim vouchers are already allowed for hotel deposits, adding one more advance expense would be minor for the Agency, but could be major for travelers.

Answer:

Non-refundable tickets are not a new issue and certainly not new with GovTrip. We have a new twist with the reimbursement of tickets being paid directly to Bank of America. The Travel and Relocation Services Branch is working on this issue and will be issuing new procedures on booking and paying for non-refundable tickets within the next few weeks.

Question:

An authorization that previously took 30 minutes to complete, start to finish, now takes over an hour, and still has problems.

Answer:

We realize that there is a learning curve with this system, but no authorization should take over an hour. The first few authorizations may take additional time as travel arrangers get used to the system. If Area travel arrangers are consistently taking over an hour for an authorization, then we need to investigate the problem.

The first step should be to consult with your Area FATA (Federal Agency Travel Administrator) and all Area Transportation Assistants are FATAs and can assist with user problems. We need to know what the specific problems are and then we can address the issues. Please start by talking to your FATA and as needed, we can assist.

We realize that the first wave of training was an introduction to GovTrip. We have learned a lot from the system in the past 10 weeks. The Travel Branch at FMD is planning refresher training over the next two months to help our arrangers with lessons-learned through use of the GovTrip system. Look for future notices on this training.

Question:

We really won't release this to the traveler will we?

Answer:

The REE implementation strategy is to keep this system at the travel arranger level until we feel that we are comfortable with the system. For some offices, travelers may never use the system directly and in some offices, where employees travel frequently, we may allow employee access. But our goal is to ensure that we have identified all the issues, resolved them and get each office comfortable with the system so that they can make decisions on employee access locally.

Question:

Is there a way to see what kind of ticket (i.e., fully-refundable/non-refundable) was issued? If we weren't the one making the reservation, we don't know what they booked.

Answer:

Yes, the pre-audit page will indicate whether tickets are government fare or not. For any ticket not under government contract, you will see a pre-audit flag and the traveler/travel arranger will have to provide a justification.

CATS

Question:

Someone in MWA has been testing the new CATS. She doesn't think its user friendly either. My big concern is that none of our cardholders are familiar w/the ARIS platform. Whoever in their infinite wisdom decided to "revamp" CATS, I don't think took into consideration the fact that 90% of folks have to be retrained in the new CATS system. That's my issue. And what if entering AD-700s and reconciling takes longer. Are we going to, as an Agency, be satisfied that the new system is less efficient.

Answer:

The CATS migration team was established 18 months ago to 'move' the current system to the ARIS platform and to ensure the new system has the same functionality that the current CATS has. The CATS team is comprised of a diverse group of CATS users from all over the Agency. Included are representatives from the MWA (the original members who designed current CATS), credit card users, Financial Technicians, ABFO's, and Budget Analysts.

The team has taken in to account that the majority of the credit card users have not used ARIS before. They are taking every opportunity to try to ensure the new system is as clear and easy to use as possible and that the appropriate training is developed for all users. The 'look' of the system will be different; however, the user fields and the process will be the same if not easier.

Right now, each module is being tested, feedback is being received, and as a result, the program is being revised and cleaned up when needed. The team has received very positive and constructive feedback from the testers so far.

The programming should be completed by the end of June and there will be a more extensive test group established at that time. There will be a 'train the trainer' session provided in August that will present specific training materials for each type of user (financial technicians, fund holders, etc), including specific materials for credit card users who have never used ARIS.

Right now, CATS is on target and will be available October 1, 2008. Implementation will vary by Area and should be completed by mid-December.

Question:

Why is everything going on the ARIS platform?

Answer:

It's more efficient to support one platform and enables exchange of common data between systems on the ARIS platform.

DELAY IN PAYMENT TO FARMER RELATED TO CENTRAL CONTRACTOR REGISTRATION (CCR)

Question:

We had a farmer who registered through CCR for a lease of some of their land. They changed banks and updated CCR. NFC issued a check to the old bank and after 6 weeks the check was returned. What can we do in the future to prevent the delay in payment to the farmer?

Answer:

The reason this happened is there is no link between CCR and FFIS. When a vendor changes CCR information Angelia Fleming Loggie, APD, needs to be notified so she can contact NFC to make the bank account changes in FFIS. Many of the Agencies in the Government have a link, but USDA doesn't. We have been told the new system replacing FFIS will have the link. Within the next several weeks, APD will be issuing an "Alert" covering this and some other related information.

IAS

Question:

The Agency needs to "rethink" using IAS for credit card orders over $3,000. This system is cumbersome and inefficient. Is the Agency looking to replace it any time soon. If not, they need too. We should have never accepted a "canned" system. It is not user friendly.

Answer:

Per the Department, purchase card buys will not be part of IAS regardless of the dollar value. IAS is a mandatory Departmental system and there are no plans to replace it.

Mandatory Use of SF-182s in AgLearn

Question:

Is it mandatory to enter SF-182s in AgLearn or can we use hard copies and have our Coordinator's enter the training into employee's Learning History once they have completed the training? Fund holders do not like the fact that they have to sign off twice or more, typically as supervisor and then they get it back again as Fundholder, etc.

Answer:

The SF-182 is the only way to get cost data into the system for reporting purposes. When training history is entered into AgLearn by the training designee, it only captures the employee name, course title, and completion date and is stored in individual learning history files. Cost is not captured. In contrast, the SF-182 form is directly linked to the Enterprise Human Resources Integration system and all fields are captured which include direct and indirect cost. Through EHRI, employee data is streamlined, providing a one-stop-shop of employee data and records, training being one of them.

An administrator can approve the step 1 or step 5 approval for a supervisor who has responsibility to approve an SF-182 more than once in AgLearn. A note will be added to Page 5, after item #16 in the "Quick Start Guides" regarding this that will read:

Note: In instances where the supervisor is also the fund holder, he/she will be required to approve steps 1 and 5 approvals. To avoid having this individual enter the system twice, the training designee can be selected as the step 5 approver or can approve step 5 for the fund holder.

The "Quick Start Guides" can be found on the HR website: http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/hrd/empdev/QuickStart/Training%20Designee-SF-182%20Preparer.pdf.

Also, the following message was sent out last October regarding the mandatory use of the SF-182:

From: Wells, Roy
Sent: Monday, October 22, 2007 11:28 PM
To: ARS-ALL,
Subject: Mandatory use of SF-182 in AgLearn

On September 27, we received from the Department a memo mandating the use of the online Standard Form (SF)-182 in AgLearn, effective October 1, 2007. All training, except online courses taken in AgLearn, must be requested and approved using the SF-182 in AgLearn.

The SF-182 in AgLearn provides an electronic means of requesting and approving training, and provides documentation for the employee's learning file without having to re-key the information. In addition, it enables easier reporting by the Department of Agriculture to the Office of Personnel Management and the Office of Management and Budget to meet the mandatory reporting on department-wide training.

If you have ever completed an SF-182 paper form, the online process is really not that different. After completing the form, the electronic process moves you through the approval process similar to the approvals on the paper form. Although 6 approval/review levels are available for use, ARS only uses 3; the supervisor, the 2nd level approver (usually the fund holder – can be the same as the supervisor in some cases) and a final approver (usually the person who has the purchase card and actually will order the training).

Please note that the required fields are marked by a red asterisk.

To assist with the implementation of this initiative, several quick reference guides have been prepared and can be accessed from the ARS HR Applications website http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/hrd/applications/aglearn.htm.

Profile Updates – If you have not already done so, you MUST update your profile with your e-mail address, and select your Supervisor. This facilitates notification and appropriate routing for the approval process. We have published instructions for updating you profile at http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/hrd/applications/aglearn.htm.

Questions regarding this process can be directed to arsaglearn@ars.usda.gov.

UPDATED SCHEDULE FOR NEW PROGRAMS

Question:
Does AFM have an updated schedule for new program implementation?

Answer:
The following is a tentative schedule for implementation of new systems or programs:

Projected Date	**System or Program**
8/08	CATS Train the Trainer session in Ft Collins (2 slots per area) to prepare for a fall CATS implementation
4th Quarter FY 2008	Paperless SF 52-System using eForms
9/30/08	CPAIS-Personal Property
Late FY-08 or Early FY-09	New Agreement Close Out Module in ARIS/AIMS
Begin late in FY 08; Completed in 09	WebTA
11/30/08	New Travel, Purchase & Fleet Cards (Note: Contract with new vendor not awarded yet, so implementation and training plan to be determined.)
8/09	FMMI training (if REE is in the 1st wave of implementation)
Late FY 09	e-Performance