At 5:30 p.m. on February 15, 1995, 200 feet off the ground, Professor Roger McPherson gazed anxiously through the fog as his airplane moved to touch down at Hartsfield Airport in Atlanta, more than 1 hour and 15 minutes late. He had 30 minutes to catch his 6:00 p.m. flight to London, where he would be meeting with the executive leadership of a major British power company on their information strategy issues.

He felt fortunate, however, to be flying this carrier, which had a reputation for outstanding service and was even more comfortable because he had a full-fare first-class ticket and was a Gold Card member. Professor McPherson was always uneasy about the large premium charged for full, first-class tickets, but knew in a crunch that it often meant the difference between a made connection and a missed one. He well remembered a decade ago, flying this airline from Milan to London to connect to a flight to New York. Bad weather then had also reduced his 1-hour and 30-minute connection time to 10 minutes. A discussion of the problem with the first-class cabin attendant had resulted in a phone call from the pilot to London (the airline’s hub city), a car to whisk him and one other passenger to the New York flight which took off only one minute late. That extraordinary service had made Professor McPherson a 10-year devotee of the airline.

In the information age, he knew it would be different and he was secure. The airline flying to London would have identified him off their computer as a close-connecting passenger. It would have noted he checked no bags through, and they would be anxious to capture his $2,500 fare, about 10 times that of the average passenger, on an only moderately loaded flight.

As his plane pulled into the gate at 5:40 p.m., he knew it would be tight but probably doable, particularly given the fact that all planes were coming in late. Moving his 57-year-old frame into a dim recollection of a high school 400-meter specialist, he set off. Two escalator rides and one train ride later, the gate hove into sight and he braked to a halt at 5:53 p.m. It was close but he had done it.

Looking through the airport window, however, he was stunned to see the air bridge detached from the plane with splendid teutonic efficiency 7 minutes early. The door to the bridge was closed, no agent in sight, and he was reduced to waving his bags through the window to the pilot, 20 yards away (it had, after all, worked once in a similar situation on Continental Airlines).

Alas, by 5:58 p.m. the plane was pushed back, the agents emerged and quite cheer-
fully (and unregretfully; they had no clue who he was) endorsed him onto another airline that would leave 1 hour and 45 minutes later. He would be 30 minutes late for his meeting in London, but that was doable. Distinctly irritated as he struggled off to the new airline’s (Atlanta-based) first class lounge to begin a frantic series of phone calls and faxes to the United Kingdom, McPherson began to see the beginning of a lecture on service in the information economy and that technology is only a small enabling piece of a total service concept.

At 7:50 PM, comfortably seated in the first-class cabin of his new carrier, McPherson jerked to attention as the captain came on to announce that because of a leak in the hydraulic system, there would be an aircraft change and a 2½-hour delay. Sprinting off the plane, McPherson realized that the 3-month planned meeting with the power company executives would be over before he got there. The following day he was due in Frankfurt to give the keynote address at a major information systems conference. Flying to the United Kingdom to connect to Frankfurt would be a hassle and tiring since the purpose of stopping in the United Kingdom was now totally negated. Glancing up on the departure board, McPherson was surprised to see his new airline flashing a 7:55 PM boarding departure for a plane to Frankfurt, nine gates away. Pulling into the gate at 8:02 PM, he discovered several things:

1. The plane was at the gate and with commendable dispatch, the gate agent relieved him of his London boarding pass and his London-to-Frankfurt ticket and hustled him onto the plane minutes before the door closed.

2. The cabin attendant, giving him his favorite drink, explained that because of favorable tail winds across the Atlantic and the fact that eight passengers (plus now McPherson and one other) had very tight connections, they had decided to hold the plane for 15 minutes to get the extra passengers and still arrive on schedule. The note of pride in the cabin attendant’s voice was evident.

Approximately one-and-a-half hours later, wired and dined, McPherson drifted off to sleep, reflecting on what a remarkable case study in administration had played out in front of him in the previous two hours. Information technology, operations strategy, management control, an empowered (also unempowered) work force and service management had all intertwined themselves into a tableau. A revised format for his speech in Frankfurt began to emerge. Best of all, he would not have to go through a case release process because it had all happened to him.