Scaling a Travel Business in a Tech-Driven World:

Key Takeaways from the Panel Discussion

Lemax

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Executive Summary

In a travel industry reshaped by automation, AI, and rising customer expectations, the imperative to modernize has never been more urgent.

At the 2025 Travel Tech Show in London, Lemax hosted a panel of seasoned executives from Hotelplan Group, TourAxis, and TourRadar to unpack what it truly takes to scale a travel business in today's digital-first environment.

This whitepaper distills their firsthand experiences and hard-won lessons across seven themes:

1. Transformation Is Fueled by Pain, Not Ambition

Digital change rarely starts with vision decks; it starts when legacy systems break under pressure. For TourAxis and Hotelplan, rapid growth exposed the limits of spreadsheets and disconnected systems, forcing urgent action.

2. Technology Alone Doesn't Drive Change - People Do

Organizational transformation is messy. Panelists emphasized that tech is predictable; people are not. Overcoming resistance, managing emotions, and aligning teams on purpose are critical to success.

3. Short-Term Pain Yields Long-Term Clarity

The initial phases of transformation had real costs - dips in productivity, internal resistance, and even temporary revenue loss. But the payoff was transformative: visibility, operational efficiency, and sustainable scale.

4. Integrated Marketplaces Multiply Growth

Operators who embrace digital distribution (like through TourRadar) experience four times higher conversions. Success requires quality content, instant book ability, and trust-building, backed by the right systems.

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5. AI Is a Mindset Shift, Not a Shortcut

AI isn't a plugin; it's a platform shift. It demands clean data, cross-team literacy, and a cultural shift toward experimentation. Companies that treat AI as a strategic capability, and not just a tool, gain an edge.

6. Belief Must Scale Before Technology

From creating internal AI champions to aligning leadership on purpose, the panelists stressed that human buy-in is the greatest multiplier. "Scale the belief, not just the tech," as one panelist said.

7. The Most Successful Travel Brands Lead with Purpose

Ultimately, transformation isn't about systems but enabling better decisions, unlocking team potential, and delivering exceptional customer experiences. The tools are only as powerful as the mindset that drives them.

About Lemax

Lemax is a global SaaS company transforming the travel industry through digital innovation.

Lemax offers a powerful end-to-end platform tailored for Tour Operators and Destination Management Companies (DMCs), enabling them to create, sell, and operate multi-day tours with unmatched efficiency.

With more than 20 years of experience, Lemax has evolved from a software vendor into a trusted digital transformation partner. Today, it serves a worldwide client base across 6 continents, including renowned brands like Asian Trails, Singita, Inntravel, and Expat Explore. Lemax helps its clients automate manual processes, centralize operations, and scale sustainably, ultimately supporting them in delivering unforgettable experiences to travelers.

At its core, Lemax provides a comprehensive web-based platform that streamlines the entire travel workflow: from inventory and supplier management, packaging, and sales, to operations, finance, and reporting.

What sets Lemax apart is its deep industry expertise: nearly one-third of our 100+ employees are travel industry professionals, and 48% are product and engineering specialists. This unique blend ensures that the platform is continuously co-developed with and for its users, prioritizing usability, automation, and tangible business impact.

Lemax is more than just a technology provider. It is a strategic enabler of growth, committed to helping travel companies embrace change, streamline operations, and expand market reach through a thoughtful, long-term approach to digital transformation.

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Introduction

The travel industry is experiencing a profound shift. From legacy systems and fragmented operations to instant bookings and AI-assisted workflows, the pace of change is not only accelerating but becoming non-negotiable.

At this year's Travel Tech Show in London, Lemax brought together three seasoned leaders who have experienced this transformation firsthand:
- Craig Randell (Group IT Director, Hotelplan Group),
- Niel Koekemoer (CTO, TourAxis), and
- Nicholas Trieb (COO, TourRadar).

Moderated by James Crisp from Lemax, the panel focused on a timely and essential theme: how to scale a travel business in a tech-driven world.

Below are the most valuable takeaways for tour operators, DMCs, and travel leaders seeking to modernize and scale with clarity and confidence.
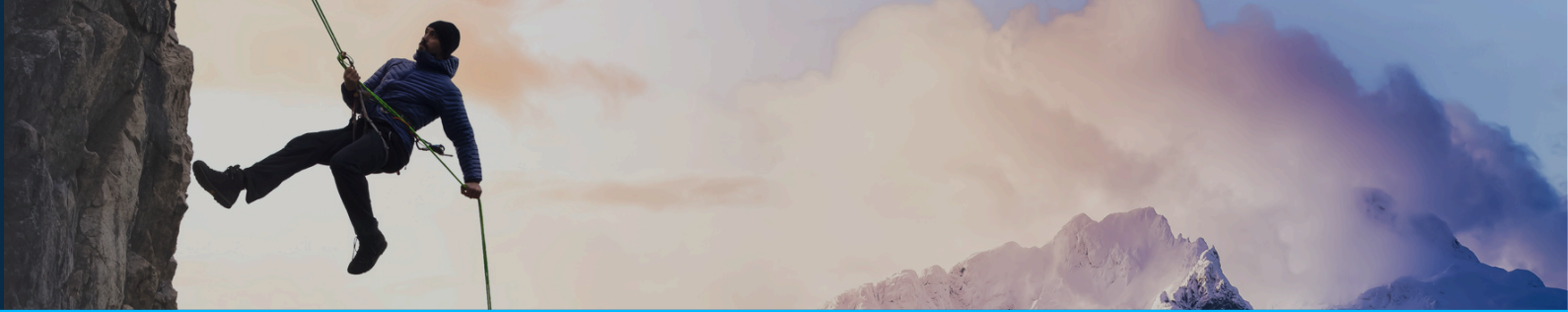
Why It Became Urgent to Embrace Digital Transformation

For TourAxis and Hotel Plan, the push toward digital transformation wasn't driven by strategy decks but by necessity.

TourAxis, for example, hit technical and organizational limits as growth accelerated. And even though they were always fast followers when it came to a lot of technology, there came a point when they realized it was time for a big change.

"You reach that point. For example, when we started breaking the limits of Google Sheets, we knew something needed to change. We were also lucky with phenomenal year-on-year growth. So that scalability was inevitable. But that definitely accelerated the digitization process", explained Niel Koekemoer.

Another thing that Niel noticed is that this strategy always happens in the middle of chaos, not outside of it. At times, it feels like trying to fix the wheels of a car while it is running. And the truth is, for TourAxis and its leading brand Expat Explore, this digital transformation process wasn't pulled out of ambition, but it mainly came from pain. Most of the time, they had data duplication, disparate systems, and endless spreadsheets in the business. As they started dealing with complex brands and complex projects, these inefficiencies started leading to liabilities.

It started hitting home for the C-suite when they realized that they were growing a lot, but unevenly. Their marketing was in front of their operations, their sales were in front of their product, and they also didn't have real-time financial data. And that definitely affected not only the decision-making process, but also their ability to scale at all. And they realized they didn't need better tools; they needed a connected business.

> *And as a C-suite, when you go on this journey, you should stop seeing this as project implementations, but more as business enablers. And that would give you the ability to really start scaling with confidence, where you can also ask yourself: "What is holding me back?" And then the advancements, time, money, and overall investment really start making sense*, concluded Niel.

Similarly, Hotelplan experienced deep fragmentation across brands and teams. Years of underinvestment left teams relying on disjointed systems, unable to deliver the kind of customer experience their brand stood for. The pain was tangible: data silos, duplicated work, and inefficiency at scale.

> *"The way we drove that is through shared vision. It wasn't really about the tech; it was about the shared vision. We wanted it to be a more agile, more scalable, more customer-centric organization. So we built our aligned vision around that, not just the technology,"* explained Craig, who was recruited to drive the digital transformation project for Hotelplan.

As a tech provider, TourRadar's mission from day one was to modernize the entire multi-day tour segment, one of the last in travel to move online. Trieb recalled a time when operators sent in brochures, and bookings were confirmed manually, often with a phone call or even a fax. Confirmation delays stretched up to seven days. That's not sustainable in a world where travelers expect instant results.

"We worked very hard with the operators to get some kind of information and the content structured, the itinerary structured, the dates and availabilities live in that feed. And then also utilize and work with booking APIs to actually get instant confirmation. So that communication, streamlining, and efficiency could be brought in with the operators and for ourselves, but also provide the end consumer with an excellent customer experience so that they actually want to book online."

Out of the two and a half thousand operators TourRadar now works with, only about 15-20% actually provide an integration of data feeds or bookable APIs. So, 80% are still doing everything manually. It's still a very fragmented environment.

The Human Side of Transformation: Culture, Not Just Code

Technology projects fail not because the tech is flawed, but because people aren't brought along for the ride. All panelists agreed: change management is the hardest part of transformation.

>> Koekemoer described the emotional journey teams go through as resembling the Kubler-Ross model of grief: anger, bargaining, depression, and eventually acceptance. Employees with years (or decades) of tenure often feel a loss of identity when their expertise is tied to outdated systems.

"I do find the tech easy. Tech tends to be predictable. It's repeatable. You can scale it, you can scope it, you can test it. When you start dealing with the organizational transformation, that's when it becomes super messy. People don't tend to resist the tech; they tend to resist the disruption they experience," Niel highlighted.

If a company focuses too much on tech, it'll start losing its people. The sad thing is that's what almost always happens. When you kick off the projects, you have your change management ideas, but things turn out differently in practice. And the people always keep asking, "Why are we doing it? What are the expected results?"

"One thing that works is to make sure to celebrate the small wins obsessively. And also make sure that this is a personal message. People don't tend to buy into these high-level KPIs. So for the C-suite, the first thing that you will do is to create revenue or more operational efficiency, but try to bring it home for the people and make it personal," advises Niel.

Another huge thing is ensuring relentless clarity in your team. Educate everybody across the business that the initial discomfort is normal and a part of the process. Many companies haven't even completed basic digitization steps (like implementing an ERP system) let alone undergone a full-scale digital transformation. For these organizations, the entire process can feel unfamiliar and overwhelming, which must be acknowledged in any change strategy.

That's why it's essential to identify and empower structured, influential team members who can act as internal champions and help drive the transformation forward.

Craig has had a very similar experience with Hotelplan.

> *You're asking your business to change the fundamental way they've been working for 20 years. And you'll always overestimate their digital knowledge. And while tech is challenging, it comes with a reset button. You can turn it on and off. People, on the other hand, are not built with reset buttons. You have to take them on the journey with you and build trust,* emphasises Craig.

He points out that change takes time and patience. He also emphasises the idea of building champions and celebrating every milestone, even the smallest ones (like a new report or a faster process). Each milestone benefits the company.

> And as Craig rightfully pointed out, it's important to bear in mind that, in the end, this is not a tech project, it's a business transformation project. The technology is just the enabler. It's definitely a business project.

What Winning Travel Companies Are Doing Differently

In discussing what sets successful digital adopters apart, Nico Trieb, COO at TourRadar, emphasized that the greatest hurdle for many tour operators is simply believing that selling online is worth the effort. Despite the growing importance of digital distribution, many tour operators still question whether the investment will pay off.

>> TourRadar's experience tells a clear story: among the 15-20% of their partners who go through the effort to integrate digitally, a staggering 99% stick with the platform post-integration.

Nico explained that the key is not just technical enablement but guiding operators through the "why" behind it, proving the value early.

TourRadar developed a "Rule of Five" to do just that: integrate five tours with strong content, secure five bookings to demonstrate traction, and gather three positive reviews to build trust.

Once tour operators see the system working for them, they not only commit but also begin to embrace broader digital distribution as a powerful growth channel.

Measuring Success: From Lost Productivity to Lasting ROI

The path to value is rarely linear. It might look very tidy on a slide deck, but in reality, it becomes very messy.

In both Hotelplan's and TourAxis' journeys, the early stages involved real sacrifices: dips in productivity, friction with teams, and even revenue loss due to broken edge cases. But the payoff was transformative.

TourAxis experienced real pain with productivity loss, specifically for teams that were working on all legacy systems and needed to change. When you start implementing new tech in a division, adoption tends to be much easier. In their journey, TourAxis also experienced some revenue loss where processes weren't properly defined. So, a lot of times, people didn't understand why this change was even necessary in the first place.

Politics also comes into play, especially if it threatens the control and expertise of certain people who then stop being the Excel wizard or the work-around guru in the team. That loss is definitely very felt. People are not resisting the tools; they are resisting the loss that they experience in the company. And that emotional layer, although crucial, is almost always overlooked.

Was it all worth it in the end?

I would say yes. We were able to grow without breaking. We were also able to gain visibility across our different departments, our ops, our sales, our finance, and also to make that visible to the people. That helped them make faster and better decisions. And it gave us the confidence to innovate, and also to scale sustainably and not just put a plaster on a big problem, concludes Niel, adding that now they are ready for anything that might be coming next.

When Hotelplan started its digital transformation process, the people also had natural resistance to change. A lot of them who've been working there for 20 years were wondering how this technology would help them. These weren't just process improvements. These were cultural shifts in how teams think, collaborate, and make decisions. But in the end, it was all worth it, and the benefits are now clear and appreciated.

> *If I look at the operations team of one of our brands, by putting Lemax in, we've taken out 42 operational tasks that were done every day. They're all automated. We don't do any of that anymore. And the teams love that! And we've got TourRadar running for Explore and the TourRadar and Lemax integration. We don't touch a booking that comes from TourRadar into Lemax. It gets booked, it comes through, and it goes out to the customer. It's all automated, and it's those stories that keep people engaged in the chaotic journey that we're on as a business,* highlights Craig.

What "Getting It Right" Looks Like With a Marketplace Like TourRadar

Success in a marketplace is built on three pillars:

1. **High-quality content**
   - How detailed are the itineraries? How correct is the pricing? How correct is the availability?
2. **Instant bookability**
   - Does a travel company offer instant bookability via reservation systems like Lemax? Do they have their own APIs? How fast is the response rate?
3. **Verified trust**
   - The trust element of reviews is to make sure that the customer actually has that trust element covered.

If tour operators invest in all three, 50-90% of their business flows to TourRadar.

>> Trieb explained that tour operators who integrate their booking process - seamlessly connecting TourRadar with systems like Lemax - achieve conversion rates up to 4x higher than those still handling bookings manually.

The impact is not just on TourRadar's platform but across the operator's ecosystem - including direct websites, OTAs, and other distribution channels. Integration begets scalability.

From Buzzword to Baseline - The Real Role of AI in Travel Transformation

Artificial intelligence has firmly shifted from hype to necessity in the travel industry. We see travelers using it more frequently - for trip inspirations, to plan their itineraries, for price comparisons, etc.

For travel businesses, the question is no longer if they should adopt AI, but how they'll do so in a way that drives lasting value.

> **»** What's clear from the discussion is that AI shouldn't be treated as a one-off tool for automating emails or summarizing data. It's a strategic capability that has the potential to reshape entire operations, from procurement and contract loading to customer acquisition and personalization.

At Tour Axis, Niel shared how they started applying agentic AI to streamline their contract loading process. The technical implementation was surprisingly fast.

The real challenge? Helping the team adapt. What emerged was not just resistance to new tech, but a very human fear of replacement. Change management is just as essential to AI success as technical deployment.

> **"** *AI is not a replacement. But the wins are not what process or what system you can really automate. It's much more about how you can start reimagining what is possible when human creativity and machine learning start to emerge. And that is where you start needing to really invest in your time and your energy, but more importantly, in your data strategy, because AI, at the end of the day, is only as good as the context that you are feeding it. And for us, that was an eye-opener.,* states Niel.

That's why Niel urges companies to reframe AI from being a "productivity hack" to a "competitive advantage." The shift requires investment in the right areas, especially in data maturity.

"AI is only as good as the context you feed it," he warned. Tour Axis had strong use cases, but quickly realized their internal data wasn't yet structured enough to fully leverage AI's capabilities. It's a common trap - many organizations want AI to leapfrog them ahead, but overlook the foundational work still needed in data quality and infrastructure.

Craig Randall, Group IT Director at Hotelplan Group, underscored this point with a sharp reminder: "Technology hasn't changed in the 30 years I've been in it - garbage in, garbage out. AI doesn't fix that." To drive the point home, he ran a mock AI test for his board. By intentionally corrupting the input data - telling the model that Father Christmas delivers Easter eggs - he demonstrated how misleading outputs can be. "Do you trust AI now?" he asked. The answer was a clear no.

The lesson?

>> Before asking how to use AI, leadership must understand what AI is, what it requires, and what risks come with it. *"Eighty percent of C-suites still don't,"* Craig noted bluntly. His advice: upskill your leaders, create space for experimentation, and build a digital culture before introducing AI as a core capability.

At TourRadar, COO Nico Trieb echoed these challenges but also shared how a proactive approach to adoption made a real difference.

Recognizing that their teams weren't jumping into AI organically, they formed a dedicated task force to evangelize use cases internally. They launched a Slack channel to share daily examples, ran AI showcases in all-hands meetings, and encouraged every team, regardless of department, to explore and integrate AI in their workflows.

The result? A measurable culture shift. One of their early wins came from implementing an AI-powered chatbot that handled 80% of customer support inquiries, maintaining the same conversion rate as human agents while freeing up valuable team capacity.

Nico also shared TourRadar's broader philosophy: they now expect every new hire to have some level of AI fluency. Regardless of department, AI literacy is a prerequisite. It's a bold move, but one that reflects how central AI has become to the company's operations and long-term strategy.

As Nico described it, LLMs (large language models) are *"the "new electricity" - a platform shift as transformative as the operating system itself. And the new programming language? It's English. Understanding that opens up AI access across roles and technical backgrounds."*

So what's the real takeaway for travel businesses?

Don't chase AI for its buzz or shortcuts. Rather, start by fixing your data. Align leadership on what AI actually is and what problems it's suited to solve. Build cultural readiness before technological readiness. Then, focus your AI efforts not just on task automation, but on unlocking new, scalable ways to serve your customers, support your teams, and grow your business. When used thoughtfully, AI isn't just a faster way to do what you've always done - it's a smarter way to reimagine what's possible.

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Final Advice for Those Starting or Scaling Their Tech Journey

> *Don't start with the tech. Start with the pain and opportunity. Focus on outcomes. Identify what will break as you scale, and also what business value you can unlock and build your strategy around that. If you focus on the tools and not the outcomes, you're going to spend a lot of money and change very little in your company.*

Niel Koekemoer (TourAxis)

> *Don't scale the tech. Scale the belief in the people. When people understand the why and the where, they'll come on the journey with you, and the tech will just go with it. The tech's the easy bit. Bring the people on the journey. That's the most important thing in the whole transformation.*

Craig Randell (Hotelplan)

> *Cheaper isn't always better. And don't pursue all use cases within one system, as this can lead to an endless project.*

Nicholas Trieb (TourRadar)

Conclusion: Transform Intelligently, Scale Sustainably

The panel at the Travel Tech Show made one thing abundantly clear: technology may be the catalyst, but transformation is a deeply human journey.

>> Scaling a travel business in today's tech-driven world isn't just about adopting the latest platform or automating one more process. It's about rethinking how your business operates, how your teams collaborate, and how your customers experience travel.

Whether it's overcoming fragmentation, building trust in data, empowering teams to embrace change, or unlocking new capabilities through AI, the most successful companies aren't simply reacting to disruption - they're using it as a springboard for reinvention.

Tour operators, DMCs, and travel leaders now face a choice: continue patching legacy systems and outdated mindsets, or invest in a connected, scalable future.

The journey is messy, emotional, and sometimes costly. But, as the panelists unanimously highlighted, the rewards - greater agility, empowered teams, operational clarity, and the ability to scale without breaking - are worth every step.

In a world where customer expectations are evolving faster than ever, the path forward isn't just digital - it's deliberate. The question isn't if you'll transform, but how well you'll prepare your people, your processes, and your purpose for the road ahead.

In the end, this process isn't about systems. It's about creating a connected business that can grow confidently.

Meet The Panelists

Craig Randell
Group Director of IT
Hotelplan

Craig is currently serving as the Group Director of IT at Hotelplan Group, overseeing technology strategy and operations for some of the UK's most respected travel brands. His leadership has been pivotal in enhancing operational efficiency and delivering exceptional customer experiences.

Recognized for his strategic vision and ability to lead global cross-functional teams, Craig has been instrumental in implementing agile methodologies, enhancing cybersecurity measures, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. His expertise encompasses IT governance, project management, and delivering technology solutions with evolving business needs across a multitude of business sectors.

Niel Koekemoer
CTO
TourAxis

Niel Koekemoer is a seasoned travel technology leader and current CTO at TourAxis, a multi-brand travel company reshaping the group touring landscape. With a strong background in building scalable platforms across both the airline and tour operator sectors, Niel has collaborated with global brands including British Airways, Wizz Air, EasyJet, Iberia, Panasonic, and Sony. His expertise spans travel eCommerce, inflight applications, offline commerce, and distributed communication systems.

At TourAxis, Niel leads the technology and digital strategy across several travel brands, focusing on streamlining operations, enhancing customer journeys, and delivering high-performance digital experiences. He is currently driving a strategic pivot toward a personalization-first technology approach, placing customer insight, journey design, and relevance at the heart of all digital touchpoints.

Known for his pragmatic yet visionary approach, Niel understands the real-world challenges of scaling digital infrastructure in a fast-evolving, resource-constrained industry. He brings a practical mindset to solving these challenges with innovative yet achievable solutions.

Nicholas Trieb
COO
TourRadar

Nicholas Trieb is Chief Operating Officer for TourRadar and is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations, with a special focus on product and technology. Nicholas joined TourRadar in 2014 and has over 10 years of experience in the e-commerce sector.

Nicholas was born in Vienna, Austria, and grew up in Costa Rica and the United States. He holds a Master's (with distinction) in Computer Science from the Technical University of Vienna and spent the year between his Bachelor's and his Master's in India working for the 4th-largest Indian IT consulting firm (Satyam Computer Services). After his studies, he spent a year at Capgemini before co-founding Tripwolf. At Tripwolf he spent 2 years in Budapest building up the development team before successfully selling the company to a renowned German publishing house.

(moderator)

James Crisp
Senior BDM
Lemax

James Crisp is a commercially driven technology leader with over 15 years' experience driving growth across disruptive tech sectors, from SaaS and AI to travel technology and enterprise platforms. With a career spanning startups to global tech providers, James has built a reputation as a trusted voice at the intersection of sales, innovation, and digital transformation.

He's helped companies like Telligent, Verint, Turtl, OpenDialog.AI, Fifth Dimension AI, and Lemax bring cutting-edge solutions to market - often in industries deeply resistant to change. From conversational AI in insurance to workflow automation in real estate and now end-to-end booking platforms for global tour operators, James has consistently been at the frontlines of adoption, enablement, and customer impact. His strength lies in translating complex tech into real-world outcomes.
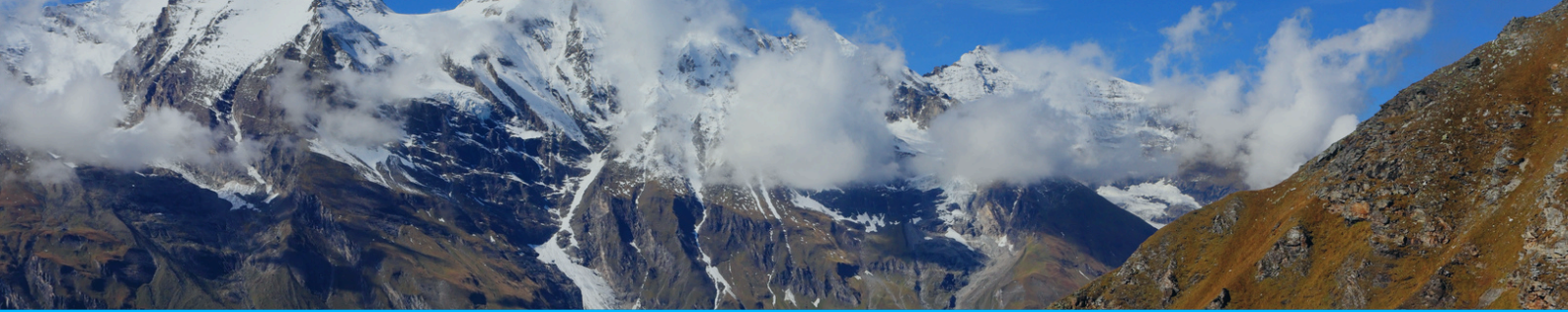
When he's not leading sales strategy or championing change, he's likely pounding out 100km ultra-marathons - because comfort zones are where dreams go to die.

Watch the full panel recording [here](#)!

Ready to Scale with Confidence?

Whether you're just beginning your digital transformation journey or looking to take the next leap, Lemax helps travel businesses move faster, scale smarter, and deliver exceptional customer experiences.

Here's how we can support your journey:

- Automate repetitive operational tasks
- Integrate instantly with marketplaces like TourRadar
- Unify your systems into one scalable platform
- Use data, not gut instinct, to make better decisions
- Prepare your business for AI-powered growth

And this is just scratching the surface!

Let's talk about how Lemax can help you scale with clarity!

👉 Schedule a Discovery Call
👉 Learn More About Our Platform
👉 Explore Customer Stories