

**The intersection of Digitalization and Sustainability in
Air freight logistics:
an analysis of synergistic pathways**



Alexey Zotov (WMBA 17, Luxembourg School of Business)

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Alexey Zotov, Email:
alexey.zotoff86@gmail.com

Content:

0. **Abstract. Focus question: to what extent can digitalization act as a catalyst for sustainability in air freight logistics?**
1. **Introduction of intersection of Digitalization and Sustainability in Air freight logistics**
2. **Literature Review**
3. **Methodology**
4. **Analysis & Findings: Digitalization as a Sustainability Catalyst in Air Freight**
5. **Case Studies: Digitalization and Sustainability in Practice**
6. **Discussion**
7. **Conclusion**
8. **Bibliography**
9. **Appendix**
10. **Professional Biography**

Abstract

Nowdays (November'2025) the air freight industry (bieng important part of global supply chain) faces mounting pressure to balance operational efficiency with environmental responsibility. This paper examines the research question:

To what extent can digitalization act as a catalyst for sustainability in air freight logistics?

Through systematic analysis of industry reports, case studies, and frameworks, this research identifies three primary synergistic pathways:

- optimization of operations through digital tools,
- integration of Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF) via digital platforms,
- enhanced visibility through data-sharing technologies.

Findings indicate that digitalization enables substantial emissions reductions while improving operational efficiency, with examples from leading cargo airlines, airports, ground handling companies and freight forwarders demonstrating practical applications. However, challenges related to implementation costs, standardization, and collaborative barriers persist. The study concludes that digitalization serves as a critical enabler for sustainability objectives, with its effectiveness contingent upon strategic implementation and industry-wide cooperation on levels of global institutes (IATA, ICAO), cargo airlines, airports and other participants of global air freight supply chain (**including small and medium industrial companies**).

Keywords:

air freight,
digitalization,
digital transformation,
international trade,
logistics,
sustainability,
sustainable aviation fuel (SAF),
supply chain

1.Introduction

International air freight represents a crucial component of global commerce, enabling the rapid movement of goods across vast distances and serving as the backbone for time-sensitive supply chains. However, this convenience carries significant environmental consequences, with the sector generating approximately 2.5% of global energy-related CO₂ emissions and accounting for 35% of global trade by value. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) forecasts increasing demand for air cargo services (3-5% every year to 2035), further amplifying its environmental footprint without strategic intervention (EY. Future of supply chain in 2035).

Simultaneously, the industry faces a digital transformation accelerated by supply chain disruptions and evolving customer expectations. The convergence of these challenges presents a critical research opportunity: examining **how digitalization can facilitate sustainability in air freight logistics**. While often treated as separate priorities, evidence suggests these domains intersect in meaningful ways. As IATA Progress report notes 2024 (p1), "The biggest opportunity for the air cargo industry is digitalization", while simultaneously emphasizing the industry's **commitment to net zero carbon emissions by 2050**. This dual focus underscores the potential for synergistic approaches.

This paper argues that digitalization serves as a critical enabler for sustainability objectives in international air freight logistics, with the relationship manifesting through three primary mechanisms:

- 1) operational optimizations that reduce fuel consumption,
- 2) enhanced capabilities for integrating Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF),
- 3) improved visibility driving efficiency across supply chains.

The analysis draws on contemporary industry examples and emerging research to substantiate these connections while acknowledging implementation challenges.

The following sections present a literature review of relevant research, a methodology outlining the analytical approach, a detailed examination of the digitalization-sustainability nexus, case studies illustrating practical applications, and a conclusion discussing implications and future research directions.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between digitalization and sustainability in logistics has emerged as a significant area of academic and industry inquiry. Previous researches have established foundational knowledge in both domains, though their intersection remains underexplored.

2.1 Sustainability in Air Freight industry

Environmental impact research has extensively documented air freight's carbon footprint, with studies indicating air transport generates substantial CO₂ emissions at high altitudes where they have "a more detrimental effect on atmospheric chemistry compared to ground-level emissions". Comparative analyses consistently rank air freight as the most carbon-intensive mode per ton-kilometer, creating urgency around mitigation strategies. Research has particularly focused on Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF) that can "reduce lifecycle CO₂ emissions by up to 80% compared to traditional jet fuels" and are expected to account for approximately 65% of the mitigation needed to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050 (International Air Transport Association (IATA). (2024). Progress Report: Sustainability, Digitalization and Safety in Air Cargo).

Beyond alternative fuels, studies have examined operational improvements including fleet modernization, optimized flight paths, and weight reduction through packaging innovations. The literature consistently emphasizes the multi-faceted approach required for meaningful emissions reduction, though technical and economic barriers remain significant challenges. Research also highlights the importance of circular economy practices, including "recycling aircraft components during fleet upgrades and implementing sustainable air freight packaging solutions, such as reusable or biodegradable materials" (Lang, M., et al. (2025). Digitalization of Air Cargo Supply Chains: A Case Study of Latvia. *Systems*, 13(6), 468).

2.2 Digitalization in Freight Forwarding's business

Digital transformation research describes how technologies are reshaping logistics operations. IATA identifies digitalization as enabling "greater visibility, connectivity and agility" in freight forwarding, with specific technologies showing transformative potential. Studies of specific technologies highlight their transformative potential, with particular

emphasis on standards like ONE Record that enable "seamless sharing of digital information" throughout the supply chain (WeFreight. (2025). Sustainable Air Freight Strategies for 2025).

Research on implementation challenges identifies standardization barriers, with the International Federation of Freight Forwarders Associations (FIATA) noting that current agency programs "do not reflect the true nature of the commercial relationship between airlines and forwarders" , necessitating new frameworks like the Global Air Cargo Programme (GCAP). The literature also documents the rise of digital documentation, with Brazil's implementation of IATA's digital standards cutting "cargo release times from 5 days to just 5 hours" (Inbound Logistics. (2024). 9 Types of Air Cargo: A Guide To Transporting Goods by Plane.).

2.3 The Research Gap

While substantial literature exists on air freight sustainability and digitalization separately, their intersection remains inadequately explored. Most studies treat these as independent domains rather than investigating synergistic potential. This paper addresses this gap by systematically analyzing how digital capabilities enable environmental objectives, drawing on contemporary industry examples and emerging frameworks to substantiate the connections.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the relationship between digitalization and sustainability in air freight logistics. The methodology centers on systematic analysis of industry practices, technologies, and outcomes through multiple data sources.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The study examines published materials from industry associations, logistics providers, and technology firms, including:

- IATA publications and press releases on air cargo initiatives

- Sustainability reports and white papers from freight forwarders
- Technology assessments from logistics platforms
- Case examples from cargo airlines and ground handling operators
- Industry leaders interviews and their subjective personal opinions

Analysis followed a systematic coding process to identify recurring themes, relationships, and implementation challenges. The coding framework categorized observations into digital technologies, sustainability outcomes, mediating factors, and barriers to implementation.

3.2 Analytical Framework

The study employs a pathways analysis to trace how specific digital capabilities enable sustainability outcomes. This approach examines both direct relationships (e.g., route optimization reducing fuel consumption) and indirect pathways (e.g., data transparency facilitating SAF integration). The analysis specifically investigates the role of contextual factors including regulatory environment, industry collaboration, and technological infrastructure.

3.3 Limitations

The reliance on published industry sources presents potential bias toward success stories and established players. The rapidly evolving nature of both digital and sustainable technologies means findings represent a snapshot in time. Future research would benefit from empirical data collection and quantitative analysis of digitalization's environmental impact.

4. Analysis & Findings: Digitalization as a Sustainability Catalyst in Air Freight

The analysis reveals three primary pathways through which digitalization advances sustainability in air freight: operational optimization, SAF integration, and enhanced visibility. For each pathway, specific digital technologies enable measurable environmental benefits.

4.1 Operational Efficiency Through Digital Optimization

Digital technologies enable substantial emissions reductions through optimized operations across the air freight lifecycle. These efficiencies manifest through several applications:

AI-Driven Route and Load Optimization: Advanced algorithms analyze multiple variables including weather patterns, air traffic, and aircraft performance to identify optimal routes and altitudes, reducing fuel consumption. IATA's CO₂ Connect for cargo provides "accurate CO₂ emissions data based on real fuel use", enabling more informed decision-making. These systems facilitate dynamic adjustments based on real-time conditions, minimizing holding patterns and inefficient flight paths (Intek Logistics. (2025). The Top Air Cargo Carriers of 2025).

Digital Twin Technology: Airlines create virtual models of aircraft and operations to "simulate various scenarios and test fuel-saving measures without incurring real-world costs or emissions". This technology also enhances "load planning and maximizing space utilization", ensuring optimal weight distribution and reduced fuel consumption per unit transported (KPMG. (2024). Supply chain trends 2024: The digital shake-up).

Automated Documentation and Processes: Digital solutions streamline traditionally paper-intensive processes, reducing both processing time and errors. The adoption of the ONE Record standard is "enabling efficient data exchange throughout the supply chain", with all IATA members expected to achieve ONE Record capability by January 2026. This efficiency minimizes aircraft idle time and associated emissions. (International Air Transport Association (IATA). (2024). Progress Report: Sustainability, Digitalization and Safety in Air Cargo).

Table 1: Digital Optimization Technologies and Sustainability Benefits

Digital technology	Sustainability Application	Potencial Impact
AI Route Optimization	Fuel-efficient flight paths	Reduced fuel consumption 1-5%
Digital Twins	Operational simulation and load planning	Optimal space utilization and weight distribution (2-3%)
ONE Record Standard	Automated documentation and data exchange	Reduced processing time from days to hours (10-50%)
IoT Sensors	Real-time monitoring of cargo conditions	Reduced product loss and waste (5-20%)

4.2 Sustainable Aviation Fuel Integration Through Digital Platforms

Sustainable Aviation Fuels represent the most promising decarbonization lever for aviation. Digitalization plays a crucial role in scaling SAF adoption through several mechanisms:

Supply Chain Transparency: Blockchain technology offers "a reliable solution for tracking the use of SAF and verifying carbon offset claims" . This capability addresses critical challenges in SAF certification and attribution, ensuring environmental benefits are accurately measured and assigned to specific shipments or customers (International Air Transport Association (IATA). (2022). What to Know About Air Cargo Handling).

Demand Aggregation and Financing: Digital platforms enable innovative business models that overcome SAF's cost premium. IATA has identified strong demand signals from airlines and shippers but notes that "the problem remains a shortage of supply" , necessitating production incentives similar to those implemented by Japan, Singapore, and the United States.

Emission Calculation and Reporting: Digital tools provide precise emissions accounting, essential for validating SAF's environmental benefits. IATA's CO₂ Connect for cargo represents an industry-standard approach to "calculating emissions from operations" , creating trusted data for sustainability reporting and Scope 3 emissions management.

4.3 Supply Chain Visibility and Circular Economy Practices

Enhanced visibility through digital technologies enables sustainability improvements across the extended supply chain:

Real-Time Tracking and Condition Monitoring: IATA's Interactive Cargo initiatives provide frameworks for tracking devices to "ensure the quality and accuracy of conditions for time and temperature-sensitive goods" . This capability reduces product loss through real-time intervention, particularly valuable for pharmaceutical and perishable shipments where spoilage represents both economic and environmental waste (Aviation Business News. (2024). Air cargo logistics in a digital and sustainable world).

Circular Economy Implementation: Digital platforms facilitate circular practices including "recycling aircraft components during fleet upgrades and implementing sustainable air freight packaging solutions, such as reusable or biodegradable materials" . These practices "not only minimise environmental impact but also help optimise air freight costs by lowering packaging expenses and improving cargo efficiency" , demonstrating the business case for sustainable operations (eGlobe Cargo. (2024). Sustainability and Digitization in International Freight Forwarding).

Data-Driven Resource Allocation: Advanced analytics enable more efficient utilization of assets, reducing empty capacity and optimizing equipment flows. As FIATA notes, digitalization allows for improved coordination between freight forwarders, handlers, and airlines , enabling resource efficiency that directly translates to environmental benefits.

5 Case Studies: Digitalization and Sustainability in Practice

5.1 Cargo Airlines: Leading Digital and Sustainable Transformation

Major cargo airlines demonstrate the practical integration of digitalization and sustainability through targeted initiatives:

Lufthansa Cargo has emerged as a digitalization leader, achieving IATA's ONE Record standard ahead of the 2026 deadline . The carrier has simultaneously expanded its sustainability efforts, incorporating more fuel-efficient aircraft and pioneering carbon-neutral shipping solutions.

FedEx Express, the industry's largest player, maintains its competitive position through technological innovation, including "AI-driven route optimization and drone delivery systems" . These digital capabilities support simultaneous efficiency gains and emissions reduction, complemented by investments in more fuel-efficient aircraft (Connect Forwarding. (2025). Sustainability and technology in logistics – key trends for 2025).

Qatar Airways exemplifies the integration of digital and sustainable technologies through its extensive cargo network . The airline concurrently invests in eco-friendly aviation fuels

(SAF), demonstrating parallel commitment to both digital and environmental advancement.

Table 2: Airline Digitalization and Sustainability Initiatives

Airlines	Digital initiatives	Sustainability Programs
<i>Lufthansa Cargo</i>	ONE Record implementation, digital booking platforms	Fuel-efficient fleet, SAF investment
<i>FedEx Express</i>	AI route optimization, drone delivery systems	Fleet modernization, SAF investment
<i>Qatar Airways</i>	Digital cargo platforms, e-bookings	SAF adoption, eco-friendly ground operations
<i>Cathay Cargo</i>	ONE Record implementation, digital tracking	Carbon offset program, electric ground equipment

5.2 Ground Handling Agents at airports terminals: Digital Efficiency in Operations

Ground handling represents a critical segment where digitalization can drive significant sustainability improvements:

Frankfurt Airport Ground Handling implements digital technologies to optimize ground operations, including automated baggage handling systems and advanced turnaround management . These technologies reduce aircraft ground time, enabling more efficient flight operations with associated fuel savings.

The IATA Cargo Handling Manual (ICHM) provides standardized procedures for ground handlers, creating "a unified digital standard for shipment data sharing, improving transparency and collaboration across the supply chain" (SKYbrary. (n.d.). Ground Handling).. By streamlining these processes, handlers contribute to reduced aircraft turnaround times, minimizing auxiliary power unit usage and associated emissions.

5.3 Freight Forwarders: Orchestrating Digital Sustainable Logistics

Freight forwarders play a crucial role in connecting shippers with sustainable transportation options through digital platforms:

eGlobe Cargo has developed sophisticated digital systems for operational efficiency and sustainability tracking, including paperless shipping solutions that "provide more accurate and integrated traceability and visibility systems along the entire supply chain" . The company highlights how digitization brings "important improvements" including easy access to documents, eliminated storage needs, and improved reliability (Connect Forwarding. (2025). Sustainability and technology in logistics – key trends for 2025).

M9 Logistics utilizes digital platforms to coordinate complex air freight operations at major hubs like Frankfurt Airport, emphasizing that "air cargo logistics in Germany is driven by strict time windows" where digital tools prevent delays and optimize resource utilization.

FIATA members are leveraging digitalization to advance sustainability, with the organization providing "a repository of recommended carbon emission calculators" and working on

"designing a carbon offsetting tool for our members" (Aviation Business News. (2024). Air cargo logistics in a digital and sustainable world

6. Discussion

This research demonstrates that **digitalization serves as a critical enabler for sustainability in international air freight logistics**, with effectiveness contingent upon strategic implementation and collaborative approaches. The analysis identifies three primary synergistic pathways: operational optimization through digital tools, SAF integration via digital platforms, and enhanced visibility driving circular economy practices. Evidence from industry leaders confirms these relationships manifest in practical applications with measurable environmental benefits.

6.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings challenge conceptual frameworks that treat digitalization and sustainability as separate domains, suggesting instead their fundamental interconnection in modern logistics. For researchers, this indicates the need for integrated models that account for their synergistic potential. Practitioners can leverage these insights to prioritize digital investments with dual productivity and environmental benefits, particularly in operational optimization, SAF integration, and supply chain visibility.

The case studies reveal that industry leaders simultaneously advance both digital and sustainable capabilities, rather than treating them as competing priorities. This parallel approach suggests strategic advantage accrues to organizations that effectively integrate these domains rather than optimizing one at the expense of the other.

6.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study faces several limitations that suggest productive avenues for future research. The reliance on published industry sources introduces potential bias toward success stories; independent empirical investigation would strengthen validity. The rapidly evolving technological landscape means new digital solutions may emerge that further enhance sustainability. Additionally, regional variations in digital infrastructure and regulatory environment warrant comparative analysis.

Future research should quantitatively measure digitalization's environmental impact, particularly through empirical studies of specific technology implementations. Longitudinal analysis could reveal how the relationship evolves as technologies mature and adoption increases. Further investigation of implementation barriers, including organizational resistance and capability gaps, would complement this technology-focused analysis.

7. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that digitalization serves as a critical enabler for sustainability objectives in international air freight logistics. The analysis of three key pathways—operational optimization, SAF integration, and enhanced visibility—reveals substantial potential for emissions reduction while maintaining operational efficiency. Evidence from cargo airlines, ground handling agents, and freight forwarders confirms these relationships manifest in practical applications across the air cargo ecosystem.

The effectiveness of digitalization as a sustainability catalyst, however, remains contingent upon strategic implementation and industry-wide cooperation. Challenges related to standardization costs, data sharing barriers, and collaborative frameworks must be addressed to fully realize the synergistic potential. As the industry faces increasing regulatory pressure and stakeholder expectations regarding environmental performance, digital transformation offers a promising pathway toward sustainable logistics.

Future progress will require coordinated action across airlines, freight forwarders, ground handlers, shippers, and regulators to overcome implementation barriers and accelerate adoption. Through strategic digital transformation, the air freight industry can progress toward its environmental objectives while strengthening its crucial role in global commerce. The relationship between digitalization and sustainability represents not merely a tactical consideration but a strategic imperative for the industry's future.

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9. Appendix: Suggested Directions for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, the following research directions are suggested for deeper exploration of supply chain elements:

1. Multi-tier supply chain visibility: Investigate digital solutions for tracking sustainability metrics beyond Tier 1 suppliers, particularly focusing on Scope 3 emissions accounting through blockchain and IoT technologies.

2. Human-technology interface: Examine the workforce development requirements for successful implementation of digital sustainability initiatives, including skills gaps and training needs across air freight organizations.

3. Circular economy integration: Research business models that leverage digital platforms to facilitate circular economy practices in air freight, including reusable packaging systems and component lifecycle management.

4. Regulatory technology (RegTech): Explore automated compliance systems for evolving sustainability regulations in international air freight, focusing on data standardization and reporting efficiency.

5. Economic modeling of digital sustainability investments: Develop cost-benefit analysis frameworks for digital technologies that enable sustainability, quantifying both direct and indirect returns on investment.

This appendix provides a supplementary table expanding on the digital technologies discussed in the paper, offering more specific examples and quantified potential impacts on sustainability metrics.

Table 3: Expanded Analysis of Digital Technologies in Air Freight Logistics

Digital technology	Specific application example	Primary sustainability benefit	Quantified potential impact / Key mechanism
AI & Machine Learning	Dynamic route optimization software that integrates real-time weather, air traffic, and aircraft performance data.	Fuel Consumption Reduction	1-5% reduction in block fuel consumption per flight by optimizing flight paths and altitudes.
Digital Twin	Virtual replica of an airport's cargo handling operations to simulate workflows and identify bottlenecks.	Emissions & Resource Efficiency	Can reduce ground vehicle idle times by up to 15%, lowering local GHG emissions and energy use.
IoT Sensors & Interactive Cargo	Smart ULDs (Unit Load Devices) with sensors for temperature, humidity, shock, and location tracking.	Waste Reduction & Resource Efficiency	Drastic reduction in spoilage of pharmaceuticals and perishables, minimizing economic and environmental waste from lost shipments.

Blockchain	Creating an immutable ledger for Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) certificates and carbon credits.	Supply Chain Transparency & Accountability	Enables precise book-and-claim systems, ensuring the environmental attributes of SAF are accurately assigned to a specific shipment, overcoming physical blending limitations.
API Integration & ONE Record Standard	Seamless, automated data exchange between airline operating systems, freight forwarder platforms, and customs authorities.	Operational Efficiency & Paper Reduction	Reduces cargo processing times from days to hours, minimizing aircraft idle times and eliminating tons of paper-based documentation annually.
Electric & Smart GSE	Integration of Electric Ground Support Equipment (e-GSE) with smart charging systems managed by AI.	Local Emission Elimination	Eliminates direct CO2 and NOx emissions at the tarmac level. Smart charging reduces strain on the local energy grid.

10. Professional biography:

With almost 20 years in the air cargo industry, Alexey Zotov is a seasoned professional whose expertise spans global management, strategy, operations, procurement, marketing, and sales. Alexey's father, an aircraft engineer with 50 years of experience, inspired his career in aviation. Over the years, Alexey has developed a deep passion for the Boeing 747 Freighter, known as the «Queen of the Sky.»

Throughout his career, Alexey has held various roles, including Managing Director and Chief Commercial Officer. He has successfully led major projects and handled complex logistics challenges, such as arranging thousands of charter flights during the COVID-19 pandemic. His leadership has been instrumental in the successful execution of numerous high-stakes air freight operations. Alexey's passion for sharing knowledge and supporting newcomers in the industry stems from his own experiences.

Alexey's educational background includes a Master's degree in World Economics from Ulyanovsk State University, a certification in Supply Chain Management from Kuehne Logistic University, and an ongoing MBA in Luxembourg School of Business.

In addition to his professional accomplishments, Alexey is a dedicated family man and a big fan of Ayn Rand's books. His personal interests include tennis, football, swimming, and spending time with his family..

For more about Alexey's professional journey, connect with him on LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexey-zotov-1b6128239/>

