

Tech is saving time, money at airports

Automated screenings free TSA officers for more important security checks

By SHELDON H. JACOBSON

Many who shop at grocery stores have found that the number of checkout lines manned with a person has shrunk, while the number that are self-service has grown. The same phenomena may soon become the norm at airport security checkpoints.

The Transportation Security Administration began testing photo-matching identification authentication in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic hastened its development, as touchpoints between passengers and TSA officers could be reduced.

With such systems, a traveler inserts a form of identification (like a driver's license, Global Entry card, or passport) into a device known as a Credential Authentication Technology, which confirms the validity of the identification card and matches its photo with a picture taken at the checkpoint. Once confirmed, the traveler is directed to the appropriate security lane for physical screening.

Twenty-five airports are offering this service, including some of the largest airports like Atlanta Hartsfield, DFW International, and Los Angeles International. Large airports that are conspicuously not participating at this time include Chicago O'Hare and Newark Liberty.

Such an identification authentication process has multiple advantages. By matching a traveler ID to a photo taken at the airport, they are confirmed to be who they claim to be. It also reduces the workload for TSA officers, creating the opportunity for a leaner TSA workforce at airports in the future. It also provides the opportunity for TSA officers

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to direct their attention on other aspects of passenger screening that are more critical to protect the air system, such as passengers for whom they have little information.

To implement such a program across all federalized airports will require the deployment of lots of devices. Moving in this direction is an important indicator for the future of airport security.

For the past 22 years, the TSA has been fixated on preventing prohibited items from entering the sterile side of airports. They have invested in numerous technologies to achieve this, including advanced imaging technologies for passenger screening and, most recently, computed tomography screening devices for carry-on bags. (This technology has been used for checked baggage for more than two decades.)

The one exception to this fixation has been TSA Pre-Check, a risk-based system by which passengers provide background information about themselves in exchange for access to expedited screening lanes at airports. The practical benefit for travelers is that they can leave more items in their carry-on bag, keep their shoes and a light jacket on, and pass through a metal detector rather than an advanced imaging technology unit.

By matching photo IDs to a real-time photo taken at airport checkpoints, the TSA is moving some of the risk-based strategies to a wider swath of travelers.

Identity authentication and validation is a critical layer of airport security. Bad actors with nefarious intent will do anything to hide or misrepresent their identity. By hardening this layer using biometrics, the TSA is reducing risk across passengers whom they may not have much information about.

For this photo-matching identification authentication to work most efficiently and effectively, the IDs themselves must be trustworthy. That is why the move to further delay REAL IDs at airport security checkpoints was a mistake. It inhibits widespread use of photo-matching identification authentication. If the REAL ID requirement had been implemented, the ramping up process across nearly 440 federalized airports could be accelerated, making the air system more secure while saving travelers time and taxpayers money.

Every screening procedure takes time and costs the TSA (and taxpayers) money. The TSA awarded over \$2 billion for CT screening devices for carry-on bags over the past two years. How many such devices will end up being inventoried in warehouses if they are no longer needed? At what point can some of the physical screening procedures currently in use be relaxed as more is learned about passengers?

The events of Sept. 11 demanded a rethinking of what airport security means and how it should be delivered. Recall that several of the people who hijacked the four airplanes that crashed were known to be security threats. That information alone should have been sufficient to prevent them from entering the sterile side of the air system. Given the nature of how the hijacking was executed, preventing two or three of the hijackers on any flight from flying may have been sufficient to cause them to abandon their plans. The devices that they used, namely box cutters, were incidental.

The TSA should be applauded for initiating photo-matching identification authentication. If it is to be most effective, this should be the beginning of a new era in how airport security can be implemented and executed.

Sheldon H. Jacobson is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has studied aviation security for over 25 years, providing the technical foundations for risk-based security that informed the design of TSA PreCheck. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.