Tech is saving time, money at airports

Automated screenings free TSA officers for more important security checks.

BY SHELDON J. JACOBSON

Many who shop at grocery stores have found that the number of checkout lines manned with personnel has ticked up, while the number that are well-staffed continues to fall. The same phenomena may soon become the norm at airport security checkpoints.

The Transportation Security Administration started testing facial recognition technology at airports in 2010. The COVID-19 pandemic hastened its adoption, as touchpoints between passengers and TSA agents could be avoided.

With no physical interaction, insert a photo into a device known as a Criminal Identification and Authentication System, which combines the validity of the identification card and matches it with a photo taken at the airport. Once confirmed, the user is directed to the appropriate security lane for physical screening.

Twenty-five airports are offering the service, including some of the largest airports like Atlanta, Honolulu, JFK, and Los Angeles International. Large airports that are already participating at this time include Chicago’s O’Hare and Newark Liberty.

Such an identification authentication process has multiple advantages. By matching a traveler’s 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 to direct their attention on other aspects of passenger screening that are more critical to protect the airport system, such as passengers for whom they have little information.

To implement such a program across all federalized airports will require the deployment of thousands 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 banned from preventing prohibited items from entering the airport’s side of airports. They have invested in numerous technologies to achieve this, including advanced imaging technologies for passenger screening, and now recently, computerized 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 function has been TSA Pre-Check, a biometric system by which passengers provide background information about themselves to exchange for access to expedited screening lines at airports. The practical benefit for travelers is that they can more easily get on their way—no shoes and no 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 biometric strategies to a wider reach 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.

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 Pre-Check system must be trustworthy. That is why the move to further delay REAL ID at airport security checkpoints was a misstep. It inhibits widespread use of photo-matching identification authentication. If the REAL ID requirement had been implemented, the ramp-up process across nearly 440 federalized airports could have been accelerated, making the air system more secure while saving travelers time and taxpayer 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 invented if there is a warehouse if they are no longer needed? As we pointed out in a previous article, the TSA has been reluctant to release information 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 included.

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

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