The New World Order

Goodbye Boarding Pass, Hello Fingerprints

Imagine this: You arrive at the airport with your expertly packed carry-on, stroll past security without showing your ID, and head straight to your gate. Once there, you get on the plane without ever pulling out a boarding pass or interacting with a gate agent.

This experience may sound far-fetched, or like a scene out of "The Minority Report," but it might be closer than you think thanks to the growing use of biometrics — technology that uses unique physical
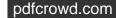
characteristics, like your fingerprints, voice, or face for identification — at airports.

Vision-Box, a provider of biometric-based solutions, recently introduced Seamless Gateway technology at the Passenger Terminal Expo. The system uses facial recognition to enable contactless and seamless movement through airport checkpoints. The state-of-the-art eGates capture facial images on the fly, matching them against an existing database. The verification happens almost instantly, allowing passengers to breeze through checkpoints without stopping to engage with airline or airport officials to show them your driver's license or boarding pass. The Seamless Gateway would work in conjunction with agencies like the TSA, so passengers would still have to remove items like their shoes, and walk through the body scanner.

"[This] heralds a revolution in the dynamic between passenger, airport, airlines and border authorities, " said Vision-Box CEO Miguel Leitmann.

The plan is to test the Seamless Gateway at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, which is currently doing a three-month trial using facial recognition biometrics at a boarding gate for KLM airlines. The trial is very preliminary and requires volunteers to register by scanning their passport, boarding pass, and face in the boarding area. When it comes time to board, they simply walk through the facial scan and get on the plane.

For security purposes, all of the information KLM gathers during the trial is erased after 10 hours.

Vision-Box already has some form of its technology in more than 70 airports around the world. Elke Oberg is the marketing manager at Cognitec Systems, a company that works with Vision-Box by providing facial recognition software for automated passport control. She says one of the company's current focal points is to streamline immigration procedures with self-service eGates designed to move passengers through the traditionally slow process within 14 seconds.

"The eGate technology compares the facial image that is saved on the chip inside the passport to the live image of the person, and if the verification is made, then the gate will open and travelers are able to proceed on their own," she told Yahoo Finance. That means citizens of that country would not require customs agents to manually check their passports.

Airports in Europe, Australia and New Zealand are already using this technology, but the US has been slower to experiment, for several reasons, including cost and concerns over privacy.

That said, facial recognition technology has been slowly inching its way into American airports. In January 2016, John F. Kennedy Airport (JFK) in New York deployed Vision-Box biometric passport authentication technology that uses facial recognition technology to match travelers' faces to the photo on their passport. Last May, NEC Corporation of America (NEC) started working with the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to provide facial comparison technology at JFK with the goal of enhancing border security and accurately verifying US arrivals from international countries.

Fingerprints vs. facial recognition

While facial recognition tech is growing fast, fingerprint identification technology also continues to develop at lightning speed.

Since 2010, CLEAR has been providing customers with the option to use their fingerprints to bypass long security lines at airports. It's the only company using fingerprint identification in the US, and is certified by the Department of Homeland Security. To enroll, applicants simply visit the airport to provide a photo, fingerprints and an iris image at one of the CLEAR pods. If approved, they pay $179 annually to use the CLEAR lane at the airport, bypassing the long security queue and heading straight to the screening area. CLEAR is being used in 21 US airports (including in New York, San Francisco and Denver), and is expanding fast, with plans to open operations in LAX this year.

In 2015, CLEAR partnered with Alaska Airlines (ALK) to reach beyond just the security line, testing the use of fingerprints in place of traditional boarding and/or government-issued IDs to check bags, speed passengers through the security checkpoint and allow them to board their flight.

"We're always looking for ways to streamline the day of travel for our guests," said Sandy Stelling, Alaska's managing director of customer research and development. "In the trial we learned a lot about the need for new products to be seen as adding value for our guests (in this case, it saved time and hassle) and the importance of opt-in on these programs."

The Alaska Airlines trial has ended, but the use of biometrics has not. The airline still uses

fingerprint identification for admittance to its airport lounges.

While both fingerprints and facial scans are high-tech solutions to improve security, they aren't created equal. Science and technology are still developing, and both forms of biometrics have their setbacks.

"With facial recognition you get to be passive, and you don't have to actively participate in the collection of your biometrics," said Ben Ball, government market director forCrossmatch, a leading producer of biometric equipment. "But accuracy is a concern because there are so many variables at play, like if the person's face is turned the wrong way or if the passport photo is low resolution."

When it comes to fingerprints, the level of accuracy is slightly better, but the practice isn't used as widely. "Fingerprints are not required in all passports," said Oberg of Vision-Box. "Some countries are adding them, but the facial recognition is the only biometric that is required in all the passports."

Alas, neither technology is foolproof, but trials at airports around the world are quickly working out the kinks. The biggest potential hurdle with biometrics may have less to do with the technology and more to do with who will pay for it.

The cost of technology

In January, President Donald Trump's controversial travel ban called for the "biometric exit tracking system" to be completed. An exit system would require foreign travelers to provide biometrics as they leave the country, allowing officials to better track visitors and pinpoint people who have overstayed their visas.

This isn't the first time an exit tracking system has been proposed.

"Congress put forward a bill for immigration reform in 1996 saying that we needed a biometrics exit system to match our entry system, and that mandate went unfulfilled," said Ball.

After 9/11, the mandate was reintroduced, and the deadline pushed back to 2006. Then it was pushed back to 2009, a deadline that has come and gone. However, in June 2016, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) tested a biometric exit system on one daily flight to Japan from Hartsfield-Jackson International airport in Atlanta. The test ended in September 2016. CBP has set a goal for initial implementation of a biometric exit capability in at least one airport by 2018.

Why the biometric exit system mandate has gone unfulfilled might have something to do with the cost. According to a 2013 report from Homeland Security, implementing a biometric exit system would "require more than $3 billion in investments," due to limitations in technology and a lack of infrastructure. The airlines, airports and government all are doing their best to avoid picking up the bill.

Additionally, the report says that the implementation would cause a "significant disruption to passengers." Experts agree that making such a massive transition would result in a rocky period for air travel.

"There are a lot of issues and questions with legislation, accuracy, privacy, and cost. It's not cheap technology, and you need computing resources, software, hardware…it's not something you can install overnight. It's complicated," said Oberg.

The future of biometrics

In addition to testing the "Seamless Gateway experience," Vision-Box has also implemented the first facial recognition technology for border control at St. Pancras International rail station in France. Beyond planes and trains, the company has extended its biometric security product to include concert halls, festivals, stadiums and other large venues.

Cruise ships are also looking at ways to implement biometrics. Cognitec currently works with several major cruise lines like Carnival to make popular features and amenities more seamless.

"We use biometrics to index the photos that the cruise ship photographer takes of guests," says Oberg. "When guests depart, the kiosk looks at their face and brings up all the photos they are in."

Cruise lines are also starting to use biometrics for payments, allowing passengers to leave their cash and credit cards in their cabins.

For CLEAR, the future of biometrics is full of opportunities. Currently, members can use their fingerprints or an iris scan when going through security, but the company will consider using facial recognition once a standard is approved by the DHS. The company is also branching out of travel.

"We're in baseball stadiums, we're in our first NBA arena, and our sports business continues to expand," says David Cohen, CLEAR's chief administrative officer.

"There are opportunities to use a secure biometric platform wherever people are having to access a venue, location, or service."

Where technology is concerned, advancements in biometrics are moving faster than ever. If the issues of cost and and privacy are appropriately addressed, we could see a future where our finger becomes our boarding pass and our eyes double as passports.

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