

TRAVEL

Lessons from airport biometrics

Air travel was one of the first sectors to deploy biometric tech across the entire customer journey. What, then, can airports teach other travel, retail and payment businesses?

Paul Sillers

For some time, airports have been using biometrics to identify passengers as they pass through the terminal checkpoints, from check-in kiosks to boarding gates. The idea is to speed people through the bottlenecks and get passengers into the retail and restaurant areas, where airports make a third of their revenue.

Now, though, airports are working to make the customer journey even more seamless.

The Star Alliance biometrics platform enables members of Lufthansa's Miles & More frequent flyers programme to pass through designated checkpoints at Hamburg, Vienna, Frankfurt and Munich airports without producing their travel documents. The passenger's face is captured by cameras installed at gates and fast lanes, which automatically open once matched with the passenger's stored image. Star Alliance aims to have half of its 26 airline members using biometrics by 2025.

"With the roll-out of Star Alliance Biometrics, the benefits of biometric identification will be extended from a single airline or journey to a vast network of airlines," says a spokesperson for the Société Internationale de Télécommunications Aéronautiques, which supplied the underlying technology.

Of course, a fundamental aspect of airports' uptake of biometrics is the fact that 75% of passengers are reportedly willing to use this technology in place of physical passports and boarding passes. More than a third have already experienced the use of biometric identification in their travels, with an 88% satisfaction rate, according to a recent Iata study.

"Passengers want improved convenience throughout their trip," says Nick Careen, Iata's senior vice-president for operations, safety and security. "Digitalisation and the use of biometrics to speed up the travel journey is the key."

Robin Tombs, co-founder and CEO of digital identity and biometrics company Yoti, has a similar message: "After Covid struck, we worked with Heathrow and Virgin Atlantic to introduce pre-flight Covid tests for crews. Since then, there has been a

lot of movement towards digital services. Above all, customers want privacy and convenience – and biometrics ticks both boxes."

But data protection remains a concern. As many as 56% of passengers worry about data breaches and want clarity on who their data is being shared with. Corporations are already factoring in the potential cost of remedying identity breaches; global business consultancy Gartner predicts that lawsuit costs linked to biometric information and cyber-physical systems will have exceeded \$8bn (£6.7bn) by 2025.

So, what comes next? Can other sectors emulate the roll-out of biometric tech at airports? And can they get consumers on side with the offer of greater convenience and effective data security?

Joe Palmer is chief product and innovation officer at iProov, a global player in biometric authentication. According to him, it is already happening. "Biometric tech is not unique to the airline industry. It can be applied to eliminate check-in bottlenecks for other forms of travel, including trains, cruise ships, car hires and more," he says.

Last winter, iProov partnered with Eurostar to trial SmartCheck, a fast-track service that uses iProov's technology to biometrically scan travellers while guarding against identity theft and cybercrime. Business Premier and Carte Blanche passengers were invited to scan their identity documents using their smartphones before arriving at the station, then completed a biometric face scan to verify that they were the holder of the identity document. Biometric verification was then linked to their e-ticket.

"The trial showed that there is demand for convenient, secure travel, and conversations are ongoing about the next iteration of this programme," Palmer says.

Elsewhere, domestic rail networks are also embracing the advantages of biometrics. Vodafone recently worked with Spanish rail administrator Adif at the Maria Zambrano station in Malaga to implement a pilot for an intelligent railway station. Various scenarios for customer and employee access through the



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station were explored to evaluate the benefits of combining biometrics with Vodafone's 5G coverage.

Equally, with consumers venturing into the real world following lockdowns, retailers are looking to improve journeys of a different sort – through stores on the high street.

Amazon's Fresh stores use a range of optical technologies to biometrically track customers as they take groceries from the shelves. To check out, customers simply leave the store with their chosen goods. Alternatively, they can scan a QR code with their Amazon app or use Amazon One to biometrically scan their palm. Tesco offers a similar set-up with its checkout-free GetGo stores in London and Welwyn Garden City. Realistically, though, few retailers

have the budget or technological prowess to retrofit such systems in existing shops.

This barrier to widespread adoption could be an opportunity for payment providers such as Mastercard, which has recently launched the Biometric Checkout Program. The firm says it's aiming to create a "technology framework to help establish standards for new ways to pay at stores of all sizes, from major retailers to small family businesses".

Mastercard's first biometric installation was installed across five St Marche supermarkets in São Paulo in May. Once consumers had registered their face and payment information through the Payface app, they simply had to smile to pay at the checkout. Further implementations are now planned across the Middle East and Asia, and the system can also be integrated with loyalty programmes so that personalised deal alerts are sent to customers.

The impetus behind the roll-out of this technology comes from changing consumer behaviour, especially among generation Z. These savvy customers are demanding a smarter approach to embedding biometrics.

"Rabobank is a great example," says iProov's Palmer. "They were losing

younger customers by asking them to go into a branch to upgrade from a junior account to an adult one. But now, by using biometric scans in their mobile app instead, Rabobank is retaining those customers and encouraging young digital users."

While biometrics has strong roots in air travel, its next steps may be where industries intersect. Since September, passengers boarding domestic flights at 14 Korean airports can confirm their identity with palm vein-based biometrics, thanks to an initiative between the Korea Airports Corporation (KAC), nine financial institutions, and the Korea Financial Telecommunications & Clearings Institute. Under the scheme, passengers who have registered their palm vein data and smartphones at participating banks can complete the identification process at designated boarding gates in a faster, more efficient way. One airport has reported that the journey from check-in to baggage drop-off and identification now takes just five minutes.

With KAC president Yoon Hyeon-jung saying there are plans to "expand the service to duty-free shops, unstaffed vending machines, and for check-in procedures", it looks like the future is very much on its way. ●

AIRPORTS ARE INVESTING HEAVILY IN BIOMETRICS

Société Internationale de Télécommunications Aéronautiques, 2021

Percentage of airports with implemented or planned biometric ID systems

● 2021 ● 2024

