

AUTOMATION MEANS MORE FLEXIBILITY AT AIRPORTS

Self-service solutions for automated baggage handling speed up the check-in process at airports and make the journey much more convenient for passengers. In the following interview, Jana Eull, marketing manager at Materna IPS, explains why standing in line at airports is a thing of the past.

All around the world more and more airports are being equipped with self-service kiosks. Will we soon be seeing airports that are completely autonomous?

No, don't worry, passengers are still going to have contact with real human staff for the next few decades. But what we are experiencing right now is the automation of several important handling procedures. The self-services delivered via kiosks provide a high level of convenience at airports and reduce costs for the operators as well. There is also a limited amount of space available in airport departure lounges, and on top of that the check in process is expected to take place as quickly as possible. Long lines of passengers would lead to even more delays. This is why operators are deploying self-service solutions to speed up certain processes, such as check-in and baggage drop, by automating them.

One important factor here is that the airlines use common-use-software. A standard interface means different hardware systems in the terminals can communicate with the airlines' servers, which is why the kiosks for check-in and self bag drop processes can work anywhere in the world at airports which use this standard.

Many other processes in the context of security and boarding can also be improved so as to accelerate passenger flow. For example, airports and airlines can optimize the way they deploy staff, so they have more time to deal with more complex passenger issues. They can then react better at peak periods as well, as the systems operate independently of normal check-in desk opening times.



What do airlines and airports have to watch out for in particular when they introduce self-service solutions?

When you set up self-services, all the requirements of both the contractor and the user need to be known in detail. These requirements are much more than just considering the rules for airline baggage and size or weight limits. The type of baggage, the passengers' safety and the risk of abuse or damage by self bag drop units as well as staff requirements and compliance with other types of equipment all have to be taken into account. The general appearance of the self-service-kiosks and their user-friendliness are other important aspects. All of these factors must match up before actual installation can take place in the terminal.

The technology from Materna contributes to improving passenger flow at airports worldwide. Can you give us some examples?

One of our customers runs Toronto Airport in Canada. Our self bag drop systems for automated baggage drop have been installed there and passengers have come to really appreciate how fast and convenient it is. They can use the time they save to do some shopping while they wait for departure and the airport has also improved its passenger throughflow considerably. Another customer of ours is London Gatwick Airport. The time needed for processing baggage there has been reduced down to just a few seconds. Lines at baggage drop in the terminal are practically a thing of the past. The original time saving targets set at the beginning have been exceeded by far.

How do self bag drop systems work in detail?

Our self bag drop systems use the internationally recognized CUSS standard (Common Use Self Service). By transferring data in this standardized way means airlines can use their existing software applications to communicate with self bag drop kiosks at airports around the world.

The process is really simple for the passengers. First you have to select your airline on the display screen and then scan your boarding card. You then place your baggage within the marked out area on the conveyor belt where it is then weighed automatically. The kiosk then prints out your baggage tag including the barcode and the passenger has to attach it to the bag. The passenger then receives the baggage receipt.

That all sounds very easy but it is far from easy to implement. The luggage can only be transported when it is has been tagged correctly. The scanner has to be calibrated carefully to avoid errors and so it can recognize any kind of misuse or abuse. We are particularly proud of our system as the solution is also able to carry out scans while the baggage is on its way along the conveyor belt.

But not all passengers travel with standard-size baggage. What happens with bulky items or large backpacks?

If required, we can add functions such as baggage classification. The kiosk immediately recognizes items which cannot be transported by the baggage conveyor system. The display then informs the passenger that the item has to be checked in as an over-sized piece of luggage. This applies for example to children's push chairs and for rucksacks with shoulder straps that hang down and could block the conveyor system. The objects which are handled in this way are also photographed automatically. This means, when an item is lost or damaged, that it is easier for passengers to prove that it was in good condition when it was checked in.



What plans does Materna have to make processes at airports even more convenient?

Well, for example, we see a lot of potential for optimizing the security involved in passenger identification. Today we already support the integration of biometric data in the self service processes at airports. Face recognition can be used to identify passengers quickly and simply, which improves security even more.

All in all, we believe that the automation of more check-in processes is of advantage to everyone involved. Airports are able to cope more efficiently with growing passenger numbers and the travelers can head for their flights in a much more relaxed frame of mind as well.

