Baggage-handling sector embraces change

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Trends such as self-service, automation, and digitalisation are making their mark. *Ben Vogel* and *Ramon Lopez* report

The check-in process at airports has gone mobile, with passengers now preferring to do so remotely or by kiosk to avoid queues in the terminal. The IATA 2018 Global Passenger Survey, published last October, showed that 70% of passengers said they want self-service baggage check-in. Only one in three travellers said they prefer an agent to tag their bag.

It is therefore hardly surprising that self-bag-drop (SBD) solutions are gaining ground worldwide, including in the United States where one major airport is deploying the technology and several others are conducting pilot projects to see if it can help accelerate passenger processing.

Scan&Fly SBD machine. (Ramon Lopez)

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Denver International Airport ordered 176 Air.Go units from Materna ips in September 2018. These devices combine a traditional agent counter with an SBD unit and scanner portal, positioned over the conveyor for scanning bag tags.

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The Air.Go machines are part of the reconfiguration and renovation of the Great Hall in the Jeppesen Terminal. Scanners on the Air.Go measure and weigh the bag before feeding it automatically into the baggage-handling system (BHS). The scanner unit only accepts baggage of the correct size and weight.

According to Materna, this is the largest SBD order in the world to date. Eight of the SBD devices will be in service by May 2019, with the remainder going operational in 2020. At that point, every bag-drop location in Denver International will feature a self-service capability.

Airport officials decided to order hybrid bag-drop machines to accommodate the existing US Transportation Security Administration (TSA) regulatory regime, and they also wanted Denver International to prepare for a future in which fully automated and unassisted self-bag drop, with or without facial recognition, is common.

About 70 airports worldwide already use automation software and hardware from Materna for automated passenger check-in and baggage handling. The Germany-headquartered technology company has developed a presence in the North American market in recent years, having opened a US subsidiary in 2015 and a Canadian office in 2016. It has successfully conducted proof of concepts and full installations at various airports in the US and Canada, including John Wayne Airport, Minneapolis-St. Paul International, Miami International, Toronto Pearson International, Montréal Pierre Elliott Trudeau International, and Québec City Jean Lesage International.

Each installation is different. For example, the airport in Montreal uses a two-step process, with passengers printing a bag tag at a check-in kiosk and then moving directly to a SBD. Materna offers Air.Go as either a single- or two-stage SBD method, aligned with international common-use self-service (CUSS) standards.

Passenger flow management, self-service at every step, and biometrics are some of the technologies being used to effectively manage the rising numbers of passengers at airports, according to the 'SITA 2018 Air Transport IT Insights' paper.

SBD machine vendor and aviation IT solutions developer SITA recently conducted a study that showed 45% of airlines globally already offer unassisted bag drop.

SBD technology saves time: Gary McDonald, Materna president for North America, said the average bag-drop time for Air.Go is about 51 seconds. According to SITA, the introduction of its Scan&Fly SBD machine at Kuala Lumpur International Airport Terminal 2 has cut baggage-processing time for AirAsia passengers from 75 seconds to 30–40 seconds on average.

Scan&Fly features a document scanner and a held-held infrared barcode reader. It takes only three simple steps for passengers to check in a bag: the boarding pass barcode (printed or digital) is scanned, a bag tag is printed, and the passenger attaches the tag to their bag before depositing it for processing.

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For airlines, SBD offers other benefits. For example, one agent can monitor multiple machines, enabling substantial cost savings in comparison with traditional agent-aided processes.

TSA still requires an agent to verify that the person physically dropping off a bag is the same person named on the ticket. However, this rule could change as the agency actively facilitates widespread deployment of biometric identification solutions. The TSA Biometric Roadmap includes a pledge to accelerate implementation of this technology. In particular, the TSA believes facial recognition can reduce reliance on travel documents and manual inspections, extending across the entire passenger experience from reservation to boarding.

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