Future airport terminals: New technologies promise capacity gains

Sofia Kalakou a, *, Voula Psaraki-Kalouptsidi b, Filipe Moura a

a CESUR – DeCIVIL, Instituto Superior Técnico, Universidade de Lisboa, Av. Rovisco Pais, 1, 1049-001 Lisbon, Portugal
b Department of Transportation Planning and Engineering, National Technical University of Athens, 5, Iroon Polytechniou, Zografou 15773, Athens, Greece

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A B S T R A C T

The changing dynamics of passenger processes in future airport terminals resulting from pressures from both the demand and supply side are analyzed in this paper. Short and long term (beyond 2020) developments are studied following technology advances and business plans of airlines and airports. Key technologies affecting the central passenger processing functions include identity management and biometrics, Near Field Communications, Big Data analytics and smartphone applications. A simulation model is developed and used to assess the impact of forthcoming changes on the airport’s departure hall. Lisbon Portela airport is used as case study. It is shown that passenger process times at the check-in and security checkpoints are significantly reduced, due to the introduction of passenger facilitation processes, under a range of behavioral, technological and policy uncertainties. The most salient implication of these reductions is the quantified capacity gains in the building which question the need for terminal expansion.

1. Introduction

Transport planners are called upon to manage the present and plan for future transport systems under prevailing conditions, large-scale complexities and considerable future uncertainties on the demand and supply side. This is especially relevant in the aviation sector where significant technological developments and travelers’ behavioral changes force airlines, airports and other stakeholders to continuously adapt their business plans. In this context, serious barriers have to be overcome due to the international dimension of air travel: slow application of worldwide regulations, different development levels and distinct cultural practices. It seems though that nowadays, almost 100 years after the birth of modern aviation, technology is invading more than ever in air transport and is urgently calling for rethinking airport planning. Airports are increasingly announcing plans for creating a radically new environment for conducting business. Novel concepts related to facility management and operations are being introduced, aiming to provide a faster, less stressful, more secure and efficient travel experience.

Airport terminals serve a wide variety of users and functions. They process passenger and baggage check-in, board passengers and baggage to aircraft, transfer passengers between flights, accommodate aircraft movements and provide space for commercial areas that help finance the airport. This multifaceted operation demands them to operate effectively so as to ensure benefits for all the stakeholders involved: passengers, airlines, airport owners and operators of airport services such as the security and border control agencies. However, current practice in many airports worldwide indicates that terminal services fall short in meeting the expectations of stakeholders.

Passengers often find air travel time-consuming, uncomfortable (Greghi et al., 2013), stressful and expensive. Considering the estimated 5.8% annual increase of worldwide traffic and the projected 7.2 billion passengers in 2015 (IATA, 2012a), conditions will only get worse. Changes in the perception and expectations for service offerings resulting from the wide penetration of smartphone applications also require the attention of airlines and airports. 76% of travelers are already carrying a smartphone (SITA, 2013) and this generates opportunities for personalized choices. A growing number of passengers expect travel services that would integrate all the transportation steps from origin to destination, fast and secure experience at check-in, security and immigration checkpoints, continuous information regarding closest services and special offers at restaurants, bars and hotels (Amadeus, 2012).

Rapid consumer adoption of smartphones can transform travel habits all the way from trip planning, getting to the airport, shopping and navigating at the airport, in flight and upon arrival at the destination airport.
Low profit margins remain a characteristic of the airline industry (Tretheway and Markhvida, 2014). This persisting trend, in conjunction with the increase of fuel prices, more passenger taxes and the EU emissions trading scheme, may lead to higher fares. Airlines are, hence, forced to further reduce costs. At the airport environment, as traffic increases, the quality of service is expected to deteriorate due to capacity and expansion limitations (Eurocontrol, 2013). Security check-in often creates passenger discomfort and long waiting lines. Industry costs exceeded $7.3 billion in 2012, while 1% of baggage worldwide was mishandled costing the airlines $2.58 billion (IATA, 2013a). In addition, especially for medium-distance trips, air transport faces increased costs due to environmental concerns (IATA, 2013b). Other factors include the ticket prices. In 2012, the average ticket price increased by 18% (International Air Transport Association (IATA), 2013a). Industry wide, the increase in ticket prices and the associated costs are expected to reach $7.3 billion in 2014.

### 2. Travel processes in the current passenger building

The functions served by passenger buildings are physically or logically separated into three main categories: departure, transfer and arrival, each placing different constraints on passenger flows. Some are under the direct control of the airlines while others are conducted by government agencies. The processes studied in this paper are briefly described below.

#### 2.1. Check-in

Traditionally, check-in was handled by airline employees who checked the air ticket, passenger and travel documents and then issued the boarding pass and the baggage tag. Following the introduction of the electronic ticket by United Airlines in 1994, several self-service options nowadays are offered through one of the following channels: dedicated or common-use automated machines at the airport (commonly referred to as kiosk) or online (personal computer, portable or mobile device). The common-use kiosk is a notable example of the recently developed “Common Use Passenger Processing System” (CUPPS). Online check-in was launched in mid 00s and since then it has greatly alleviated passenger queues at the airport check-in desks. Today almost 70% of passengers check-in using a self-service channel (SITA, 2012).

Passengers carrying baggage deliver it to check-in counters where passenger and baggage identification takes place. Self-service options for baggage check-in are also available and are continuously being offered by the majority of airlines. The passengers may scan their passport, store or print baggage tags, apply their bags fast (20–30 s) (Future Travel Experience, 2013) at automated drop-off areas. Passenger and baggage check-in can also be offered at offsite facilities (Goswami et al., 2011). As a consequence of the above developments, large spaces previously dedicated to check-in functions are currently underutilized in many airports.

#### 2.2. Security control

The increasing risks from terrorist threats after 9/11/2001 have led to extensive security screening whose primary focus is the identification of prohibited items. Passengers are screened by metal detectors at a rate of 149 pax/hour/ lane (IATA, 2012b). If an alarm occurs, they are further subject to a physical search, or body scanning. Separate X-ray screening is applied to passengers’ personal belongings. Items rejected by the x-rays operator are physically searched.

Information sharing between airports and airlines enables risk-based screening which has already been introduced at some
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