Airlines and Airports Step Closer to Near Field Communications

SITA has taken the air transport industry a step closer to introducing near field communication (NFC) technology with the unveiling of the first proof-of-concept which uses the NFC chip inside smartphones. This SIM-based proof-of-concept demonstrates how passengers' journeys through the airport can become much smoother as they use their NFC-enabled phone to simply "tap and check-in" or "tap and board" their flight.

SITA Lab, the technology research arm of IT provider SITA, working on a joint innovation program with Orange Business Services, its strategic partner for communications services, has shown that passengers could use an NFC-enabled phone as a boarding pass to open security, airline lounge and boarding gates automatically. This is the first demonstration of the approach to NFC that is favored by the GSMA and has been selected by 45 mobile operators representing more than 60% of the mobile phone market. Leading airport equipment providers DESKO and Kaba also joined SITA and Orange in the development of the pilot, providing advanced scanners, readers and security access gates.

NFC allows smartphones and similar devices to communicate with each other using radio frequencies by either tapping or bringing them within a range of a few centimetres. NFC-enabled smartphones can hold secure information such as credit card data, or passenger data including boarding passes and identities. They can be used for simple and convenient contactless transactions such as payment or airline boarding. Because NFC is short range and also supports encryption it ensures the transactions are secure. With all the major phone producers adding NFC-enabled devices to their ranges, this technology is set to become an important new way for passengers to use smartphones at the airport.

There are some key benefits of using NFC technology during the passenger journey: it is extremely secure; will work when the device is powered off; does not require the use of an app or any imagery; and is not affected by reading problems caused by dirty screens. Overall, a passenger using an NFC-enabled device can be processed faster than any of the current boarding processes available today.

Jim Peters, SITA Chief Technology Officer who heads up SITA Lab, said: "Mobile NFC is still a maturing technology with multiple implementation models. We chose to implement a solution that takes full advantage of the secure element on the SIM card and over-the-air deployment from a Trusted Service Manager (TSM) to the device.

"The project was a success and we now have a dedicated NFC demo room at our offices in Geneva where airlines and airports can experience this new type of

passenger journey and discuss the technology which makes it happen."

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