

The T5 Debacle

Airports don't have to wait for a global system to benefit from RFID baggage tagging at individual terminals.

July 21, 2008—In the United Kingdom, one story recently dominated all others. And it's no wonder. It had all the elements of good U.K. newspaper drama: corporate hubris and personal misery, combined with the smoldering sentiments that shiny new things don't work and the British are becoming increasingly inept.

The opening of Terminal 5 (T5) at London Heathrow Airport was always going to be a big news story. Five years in the making, it was the new home for all British Airways flights in and out of Heathrow, one of the world's busiest airports. After it was officially opened by Queen Elizabeth a few days before the first passengers arrived, the story turned dark and grim, marred by more than 200 canceled flights during the first four days of operation, thousands of stranded passengers and 20,000-plus items of undelivered baggage.

Much of the problem centered on technical and staffing issues with the new—and inefficient—baggage system. The British Airports Authority (BAA), which operates and manages the baggage systems at all Heathrow terminals, decided to use bar-code technology to manage baggage at T5. Among its reasons for not deploying RFID baggage tagging was that to date, "RFID is still only used by a handful of airports around the world, [and] the real benefits of the technology only come into play when RFID is being used by a network of airports and airlines. Currently, no such global network exists."

That's true; the majority of airports aren't tracking baggage with RFID tags. But there are benefits to be gained from single-airport use, and that's why the International Air Transport Association and individual airports such as McCarran in Las Vegas and Hong Kong International are already committed to RFID baggage tagging.

After all, once thousands of luggage items were piled around T5, it became a single-airport problem, and I'm sure a few people at BAA were thinking that RFID could have helped sort those bags more quickly. At the very least, RFID could have kept customers in the loop regarding the exact location of their belongings.

It's unclear why BAA dismissed RFID baggage tracking out of hand. While T5 was still in its infancy, successful trials were already being reported in Hong Kong, Las Vegas, Singapore and South Korea. (Ironically, AMEC, an international engineering and services company, used RFID to manage and track tools on the T5 construction site.)

For its part, BAA does point to an ongoing RFID baggage trial taking place in another Heathrow terminal as evidence that it is now looking at the potential of the technology in its operations. Perhaps the lessons from T5 can be combined with firsthand RFID experience to create a system that hits the headlines for the right reasons.

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