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Have app, will travel: how vaccination passports work

The race is on to create a digital credential that will allow quarantine-free travel.



Qantas is trialling two apps as airlines consider how to add vaccination checks to boarding procedures. **Peter Braig**

Emma Connors *South-east Asia correspondent*

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It's a seductive idea. An app that transforms your smartphone into a passport on steroids, one that not only proves identity and nationality but also COVID-19 vaccination status.

On March 17 a passenger on a Singapore Airlines Flight from Singapore to London gave hope to travellers everywhere with the successful trial of the front-runner in the race to develop a vaccination passport that will enable travel without quarantine.

The International Air Transport Association's Travel Pass allows travellers to create a digital form of their passport, key in their flight details to learn about the travel requirements and restrictions in place at their destination and – crucially – receive and store COVID-19 test results and vaccination records via a network of registered labs to make sure they meet those requirements. The Apple version of the app is due to be launched in a few weeks' time.

Sounds great right? We've all got used to electronic boarding passes so it shouldn't be too hard to simply flash another screen as you head out of the departure lounge and into arrivals at the other end. The problem is, there isn't just one proposal out there. As it stands, you might have to get an extra phone just to carry all the new apps being developed as the travel industry and tourist-dependent nations try to get people moving again.

While 18 airlines are trialling the IATA app, it's not on an exclusive basis. Qantas has signed on but is also trialling Commonpass, another health app developed by a Swiss-based not for profit, The Commons Project. It got a trial run back in October when passengers on a United Airlines flight from London to Newark did a COVID-19 test prior to boarding and had the results beamed to their phone on arrival in the US. Like Travel Pass, the idea is test results now, vaccination records soon.



Proof of the job

The European Union also has a plan. Right now much of the continent is reeling from a third wave but, with an eye to the European summer, tourist-dependent nations led by Greece have been agitating for a scheme that will make people feel secure enough to get on a plane. The solution, announced earlier this month, is a digital green certificate to be bestowed on those who are either vaccinated, have a negative COVID-19 test, or can prove they have recovered from the virus.

An Australian Border Force quarantine worker receives her Pfizer vaccine. **Edwina Pickles**

Plenty of countries are also rolling out national certification schemes. China has launched a vaccination passport and a digital version is available on the WeChat social media platform. In Israel, where more than half of the population have been vaccinated, people are getting used to supplying proof they've either had the jab or have recovered from the virus. The

country has developed a “green pass” for access to venues as diverse as hotels, gyms and synagogues.

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In Australia, the government is encouraging everyone to link the Medicare Express app to their myGov account so you’ll have a digital version of your immunisation record to hand.

How these national registers will interoperate with international certification schemes is still unclear. Which vaccines will be accepted? What about those developed by Russia and China where trial data is still patchy? How will the electronic records be secured? What happens if your phone runs out of battery just as you try to board a plane?

Those in the thick of the development jungle agree there are plenty of challenges to be overcome. Drummond Reed, chief trust officer for Evernym which has been working with IATA and others, told *The New York Times*, “The global passport system took 50 years to develop ... Now, in a very short period of time, we need to produce a digital credential that can be as universally recognised as a passport and it needs an even greater level of privacy because it’s going to be digital.”

Fortunately we have the rest of the year to get it sorted, notes Tom Manwaring, chief executive of Express Travel which has more than 500 agents across Australia, all of whom have done it tough during the pandemic.

“We think Australians will start booking international flights in the third quarter of this year for travel in 2022. Before then we will hopefully have

reciprocal travel going with New Zealand – possibly Singapore and Fiji as well – so we have time to work this out,” says Manwaring, who also chairs the Australian Federation of Travel Agents.

Indonesian Tourism Minister, Sandiaga Uno. **Achmad Ibrahim**

These narrow travel corridors will give authorities the chance to test verification processes so they can build up to larger volumes by 2022.

“All of these apps and digital certificates are great but at some point they have to flow into a single source so there is a system with some commonality.”

For now, Manwaring is putting his money on IATA's app. “It will be a bit of mess for a while but airlines are the common denominator in international travel. If they all implement the Travel Pass and national health authorities get behind it, we will start to get something that is manageable.”

Right now, the emphasis is still on negotiating bilateral, reciprocal travel arrangements that rely on COVID-19 testing to prevent the virus spreading, rather than vaccination. That's the approach of Indonesia which is

negotiating green corridor travel arrangements with China, Singapore, South Korea, the Netherlands and the United Arab Emirates.

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Vaccination passports are a nice idea, says Indonesia's Tourism Minister, Sandiaga Uno, but one whose time is yet to come. With the world's wealthier nations snapping up vaccine supplies, equity is a huge consideration.

The Economist Intelligence Unit has forecast that while developed countries may be able to vaccinate their adult population by 2022, low-income countries won't get to that point until 2024. Some countries may be able to afford to exclude those who are not vaccinated but many would be reluctant to do so, on equity grounds.



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"For now, our focus is on point-to-point solutions. We're also taking advice from the World Health Organisation, regarding access to vaccines worldwide," Sandiaga told *AFR Weekend*.

But with some carriers – including Qantas – vowing not to transport non-vaccinated customers, the pressure to develop an internationally recognised certification system will not go away.

“Short of everyone jumping in Tiger Moths and flying solo, there will have to be a way to prioritise travel for those who have been vaccinated,” Manwaring says. “I certainly hope we will soon get some clarity on what that will be. The future of our industry depends on it.”

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