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TRUSTED TRAVELLERS: there's no such thing

by Philip Baum

Ask most Airport Security Managers what keeps them awake at night and they are prone to respond "the insider threat". There is a well-founded concern that those we employ to clean our aircraft, cater our flights, handle our baggage, secure our perimeters or fly our airlines may well turn out to be the very people who target our industry. So, despite all the expenditure on creating the illusion of security with sophisticated technologies deployed to detect picograms of explosives in passengers' bags, we remain vulnerable to an attack perpetrated by those who know how to bypass the checkpoint.

Addressing the insider threat is no easy task. Identifying 'cleanskins', devoid of any criminal record, in an environment where there is a high staff turnover rate, a higher than average number of overseas workers with limited background checks and where speed is the nature of the game, is almost entirely dependent upon other employees reporting concerns about their colleagues. Indeed, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that, once they have an airport pass or ID in hand, an airport employee is deemed to be 'trusted'. The degree of that 'trust' varies globally, with most developed nations, with the notable exception of the United States, recognising that even staff require screening (body and belongings) prior to accessing security restricted areas.

For all persons cleared to work airside, we have performed an abundance of checks...or should have! Not only the security checks in order to be cleared to be issued with a pass, but also pre-employment reference checks. In other words, we have a significant amount of data and, in all cases, there will have been at least one, and probably more, face-to-face interview. And yet, despite this, we fear the insider threat.

There would be nothing new about an insider targeting an airline. It was on 11th April 1955 when an Air India flight was destroyed en route from Hong Kong to Jakarta after an aircraft cleaner, by the name of Chow-Tse Ming, infiltrated a device on board in an attempt to assassinate the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. All souls on board were lost, yet Zhou Enlai had never boarded the flight.

More recently, there have been a number of plots involving insiders, including one by a former cargo handler against fuel farms and pipelines at New York's JFK in 2007 and another by a call centre technician, Rajib Karim, against British Airways a year later. Last year, an avionics technician by the name of Terry Lee Loewen demonstrated a willingness to drive a vehicle which he believed to be laden with explosives into Mid Continent's Airport in Wichita.

Away from aviation, one would have hoped that an armed services base would be close to immune from an insider attack. Reality is something different. Major Nadal Malik Hasan, himself a psychologist, was responsible for killing 13 people and injuring another 30 at Fort Hood in 2009. In 2013, Aaron Alexis, a civilian contractor with security clearance, killed 12 people and injured

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three others at the Navy Yard in Washington DC. And, back at Ford Hood earlier this year, former Iraq war veteran Ivan Lopez became involved in a dispute which resulted in three people being shot.

True, the last incident may have been the actions of a disturbed individual rather than a terrorist but, as I have long argued, our concern should not be restricted to terrorist activity. A number of commercial airlines have been brought down by suicidal pilots, including a Royal Air Maroc flight in 1994, a Silkair flight in 1997, an Egyptair flight in 1999 and, last year, a Mozambique Airlines flight. Meanwhile, we still await the discovery of MH370 to determine whether the speculation regarding the mental health of the Captain of that flight was well founded or not.

So, my big question is, if we are kept awake at night worrying that an insider might target the industry, despite the abundance of background checks they have undergone, how on earth can we possibly embrace a passenger screening system that aims to differentiate based on the limited data that will result in a person being classified as 'known'?

Interestingly, and worryingly, people are already switching the term 'known' to 'trusted'. We cannot 'know' or 'trust' a stranger. If it happens to be the Pope, the Queen, the Dalai Lama, or even David Beckham or Maria Sharapova, of course we know that they will not intentionally endanger a flight, but that list of world-famous VIPs is very short indeed. You do not know that a person you have never heard of, never spoken to and never met is not a threat; he or she may just be a 'cleanskin'.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word 'trust' is defined as having "a firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something". We trusted Rajib Karim, Terry Lee Loewen, Nadal Malik Hasan, Aaron Alexis and Ivan Lopez because we believed in their integrity. Sadly we live in a world where that is not enough. Differentiation is the way to go, but not based on a bureaucratic system of pre-clearance.

What keeps me awake at night is the trusted traveller...because there is no such thing! ■

