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Article

Digital Vaccine Passports – The New Normal?

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Abstract

Uncertain times call for extraordinary measures! This statement has never been more relevant ever before. This world has gone turtle over a 100 nanometer virus strain which has forced us to rethink a lot of things in life. Travel – be it for work or leisure, has been the most affected due to the highly contagious nature of the Corona virus. There have been unprecedented travel bans and restrictions both inter country as well as intra country. Whatever little transit that has been allowed, has been followed up by extraordinary checks and processes at all entry and exit points to prohibit the transmission of the contagious strain via human carriers. Technology and AI is being leveraged to contain the spread and reopen the world economy.

In the same pursuit, The **Technical Group of Global Tourism Crisis Committee** – a United Nations body – is striving to take innovative actions to ensure safe cross border travel and restore international mobility. One of the key agendas that the above-mentioned committee has called for is the support for the standardization, digitalization and interoperability of testing protocols and certification systems, based on commonly agreed evidence and risk-assessment indicators for origin and destination country/territory. One such innovation that has been doing the rounds is Vaccine Passports.

Vaccine Passports – What is it ?

A vaccine passport is a set of documentation verifying that a person has been vaccinated against Covid-19. It will be a digitally available certificate which can be downloaded online from the government site and can be saved on the mobile and other such devices. Countries may adopt variations in the format. Some versions might also allow people to prove that they have tested negative for the virus, and therefore can more easily travel. Different versions are being worked upon by airlines, industry groups, nonprofits and technology companies and the end game would be to make it as simplified and accessible as possible. One can expect something similar to a mobile app or a digital wallet.

This attempt to digitize vaccination status to facilitate safer and convenient travels can also be seen as a component of the larger strategy to digitize travel and associated processes. The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has been working on digital solutions to streamline the travel credentialing process for years. With the onset of the pandemic, they have devoted their efforts towards providing vaccination status. The core idea is to make available all the relevant information on phone, so that a significant amount of time is saved.

In view of the same efforts, IATA has launched a **Travel Pass Initiative**. IATA Travel Pass will incorporate four open sourced and interoperable modules which can be combined for an end-to-end solution:

Registry Of Health Requirements	Registry Of Testing/ Vaccination Centers	Lab App	Contactless Travel App
Enables passengers to find information on travel, testing and vaccine requirements for their journey	Enables passengers to find testing centers and labs at their departure and/or arrival location that can conduct COVID-19 tests in accordance with the type of test required for their journey	Enables authorized labs and test centers to securely send test results or vaccination certificates to passengers	Enables passengers to (1) create a 'digital passport', (2) verify their test/vaccination meets the regulations & (3) shares test or vaccination certificates with authorities to facilitate travel.

Registry Of Health Requirements	Registry Of Testing/ Vaccination Centers	Lab App	Contactless Travel App
Powered by IATA Timatic			Can be used by travelers to manage travel documentation digitally and seamlessly throughout the travel experience.

Source: IATA

Vaccine Passports – Related News and Developments

- According to **reports**, Denmark is one of the first countries to launch its own digital COVID Vaccine Passport. The purpose of this passport will be to declare if the person has been vaccinated against the coronavirus. This passport will grant privileges to vaccinated citizens to travel beyond country borders. Reportedly, citizens who have successfully completed their vaccination can download the required certificate from the government website and save it on their mobile phones. It's also being said that Denmark government would soon issue digital Corona passports within 90 days for business travelers. According to Morten Boedskov, Denmark's finance minister, "This is about us, as a country, exploiting the technical advantages we have. We can be amongst the first in the world to have this and show it to the rest of the world". Lars Sandahl Sørensen, CEO of the Confederation Danish Industry believes that "By using the digital head start we have, we can allow travel and participation in cultural life in Denmark. We will benefit from the corona passport for many years."
- Denmark, along with other northern European countries, has been pushed for paperless communications in both the public and private sectors since long. The corona/vaccine passport is considered to be a part of its effort towards reducing bureaucracy by using electronic verification. According to the officials, the decision to use this passport for purposes other than travel, such as access to restaurants, music festivals and sports events etc., will be taken at a later date.

- According to government officials, **Sweden** plans to launch a digital coronavirus “vaccine passport” by summer, assuming there is an international standard in place by then.
- The firms in Singapore have also developed digital vaccine passports to confirm travelers’ Covid-19 test results as the borders reopen. These digital health passports allow hospitals and clinics to share healthcare data across borders using the blockchain technology.
- Hungary is planning to launch an ‘**immunity passport**’ that can act as evidence that the traveler had been earlier infected by the coronavirus and thus has antibodies against the diseases.
- In one of his executive orders aimed at curbing the pandemic, US President Joe Biden has asked government agencies to “assess the feasibility of linking coronavirus vaccine certificates with other vaccination documents, and producing digital versions of them.”
- Iceland is the first Schengen country to issue digital Covid-19 vaccine certificates. Certificates meeting the Chief Epidemiologist of Iceland’s guidelines given by an EFTA/EFTA state will be considered valid at the border of the country. Travelers with the certificate need not undergo screening and are also exempted from official border restrictions.

Existing Vaccine Passports



- As mentioned earlier, IATA has also launched its Travel Pass Initiative. According to Nick Careen, senior vice president – IATA, “It’s about trying to digitize a process that happens now and make it into something that allows for more harmony and ease, making it easier for people to travel between countries without having to pull out different papers for different countries and different documents at different checkpoints.”
- IBM has also been working on its own Digital Health Pass, which according to them has been designed to provide support to organizations aiming to re-open their businesses. Built on Blockchain Technology, it will enable organizations to verify the health credentials for employees, customers and visitors entering their site based on criteria specified by the organization.
- A digital health passport called CommonPass is being developed by The World Economic Forum and the Commons Project Foundation. It would allow travelers to access testing or vaccination information. The pass would generate a QR code that may be shown to authorities.
- The Mvine-iProov passport: created by biometrics firm iProov and cyber security group Mvine. This passport is being backed by Innovate UK.
- Covid-19 Credentials Initiative is a coalition of over 300 individuals. It aims to set standards for vaccine certificates.
- Vaccination Credential Initiative is a coalition of health and technology partners including Microsoft, Oracle and The Commons Project.
- Verifly is a digital health passport app which is currently being used by British Airways and American Airlines
- Scan2Fly is Air Asia’s digital health pass

Need for Vaccine/Immunity Passports

- With the given contagious nature of the Virus, screening travelers for a Covid negative status has become the need of the hour. Vaccine Passports, which are supposedly a validation of a Covid Free Status are therefore need of the hour.
- Vaccine Passports will aid the travel industry as well as facilitate other sectors which are based on the travel sector. It will also unfold opportunities for those who have

been otherwise denied work permissions owing to travel ban. More so, it will also provide incentives to people to get vaccinated so as to ensure a hassle free travel.

- An internationally standardized vaccine passport can help bring uniformity and ease of administration while facilitating travels. While the vaccine passports need not be digital, such digitization can help bring security and simplification to the entire process. Jamie Smith, senior director of business development at Evernym, who has been working closely with IATA and others to develop the vaccine pass, says – “Imagine a future where a plane lands in an airport and a hundred people have a travel pass, 100 have another health wallet, 50 have bits of paper and another 25 have some kind of government document. What does the airport do? How do they process all those people in a standard, simple way?”
- According to European Union’s law enforcement agency, sales of fake negative test results are becoming more widespread among those willing to travel. That is another reason why the industry is trying to develop digital passes that are secure.

Objections/Cons

- Vaccinations have not been scientifically proven to be 100% effective. David Archard, the chair of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, says – “So there is a danger of simply assuming because you’ve been vaccinated, you don’t then spread Covid-19, and that would not be a good scientific basis for a policy of passports.”
- Most countries are in the early stages of the vaccine rollout, and given concerns about the impact of existing variants – in particular the one discovered in South Africa – on the ability of vaccines to offer protection, it would be premature to introduce the passport system.
- There has been a huge hue and cry wherein people say that such vaccine passports will be discriminatory. It means it will give privileges to those who have been vaccinated over those who have not. And with the vaccine rollout being based on a priority system, some people will be immunized before others. Those who choose not to get vaccinated despite being offered the vaccine may also lose out on opportunities. There is a danger of stigmatization of individuals who lack certification.

- As mentioned earlier, such certification requirements may also lead to increased cases of fraud. This mandatory requirement might also lead to these certificates being sold in the black market.
- Also, with countries like Hungary going for immunity passports, where even if a person has been infected with Covid in the past, it is assumed that he has developed antibodies and on the same assumption, immunity passports are issued. It, however, can be a dangerous practice. WHO has warned that such assumption might prove fatal to the world as it's not a surety that antibodies will remain in an individual's body for long. Cases of people contracting Corona more than once are a case in point.
- Then there are obvious concerns related to the privacy of the individual. Ideally, health information such as vaccination records is stored nationally and is a matter of confidentiality. These passports could mean that data is shared with outside companies, raising ethical concerns that need to be addressed.

Whether and how will the said passport be launched and systemized is a question the world is asking. While understanding that such a program will definitely bring an administrative ease, the genuine concerns raised cannot be overlooked. It is upon the world leadership to provide an amicable solution while addressing legit concerns that the stakeholders have highlighted.

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