Access Control: the Achilles Heel of global port security

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With the many security challenges facing international ports today, one needs a firm, consistent system to deal with the thousands of employees, vendors and visitors who pass through every day. At the forefront of such security concerns, and also one of the most demanding issues, must undoubtedly be access control, as large areas and facilities requiring public and restricted access need to be both policed and well secured.

Port authorities, stakeholders, and even the International Maritime Organization (IMO), have recognised that access control is a global security problem and have tried to address the issue. New technologies have been introduced or mandated, and security itself is normally a multi-partnered response between the port police and in-house security consisting of local police, border security, and international agencies. While technology is obviously of great use and benefit, expensive access control technology alone does not make a secure environment; one needs a balance between technology and well-trained individuals.

Access control technology

The objective of any large scale international port with multiple entrances and gates is to permit controlled accessibility for ease of movement for visitor and worker alike in a secure and safe environment. One of the newest technologies put in place in the USA is a biometric smart card system primarily used for worker identification. The Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) is a new ID technology that incorporates smart cards with fingerprint biometrics and digital photos of the worker. Integrated into the existing access control systems, including other smart card and fingerprint readers, verification/reader stations can be deployed at multiple locations around a port facility where pedestrian or vehicle access is required. Such technology is able to improve the standards of a port facility's access control and security needs.

Other technologies employed in access control include, but are not limited to: electronic gates; CCTV cameras; VACIS X-Ray machines; baggage X-Ray machines; drug and explosive sniffing equipment; walk-through metal detector archways; and metal detector hand-held wands. All are used by security personnel to speed up the movement of cargo and container transportation traffic as well as to screen pedestrian movement and all are invaluable tools that all ports need.

Security personnel

Such technology, though, is useless unless used properly. Many ports spend millions of dollars on technology and equipment upgrades yet persist in hiring under-trained security personnel, and don’t have a strong enough uniformed presence to make a significant difference. While only the individual port can decide to what level and number of security personnel they feel comfortable with, that port must be made aware that liability lies solely in the hands of these personnel. Reputations, perceptions, and opinions can all disappear overnight.

Access control today comes down to determining which areas require what levels of security. I think the appropriate uniformed presence is either the missing link or the forgotten factor to being a good detriment to unwanted access; the critical assets of any facility (people, property, information, and reputation) must be protected with good security staff, not just equipment.

Case study

An example of how bad poorly trained security can override good technology can be exemplified in a recent attempt I made to visit a friend on a cruise ship. I succeeded in getting to the ship, but in doing so, I bypassed all access controls and security levels unchallenged and was assisted by port security which obviously did not understand their roles well and did not seem to realise the gravity of their actions. I was quite shocked to realise that I had managed to reach my intended destination within minutes with no ID checks and no security screening: I was basically allowed to go anywhere at will and wander by myself through what was meant to be secured access controlled areas (stepping over pallet jacks and going around longshoremen and guards and customs officers in the process).

Upon reaching the ship, though, I retraced my steps and returned immediately back to my starting point outside of the terminal, as I wanted to avoid the possibility of a port official approaching me and saying that I had somehow done this deliberately to test their port security, when in reality I was legitimately trying to visit a friend on a ship.

The second time around, I tried to get to the ship again by deliberately asking all different levels of security and information staff ‘questions’ on how to reach my destination and thereby forced all levels of security to verbally respond and decide on my progress. I again stopped in the same secure customs area at an x-ray machine where two guards and one customs officer were...
in conversation. Barely acknowledging me or my briefcase, all three individuals waved me on and appeared upset when I asked for my briefcase to be inspected. Again, they waved me on and told me everything was fine. I tried one last time and asked if they at least wanted me to walk through the archway. Surprisingly, they agreed and actually watched as I did so, but within seconds they were back in conversation and threw my approval to continue over their shoulders. Besides their attitudes, I found it remarkable that both the x-ray machine and walk-through metal-detector were not even plugged in and turned on! I left this check point and was joined by another customs officer and a cruise ship representative. Together, we walked the final leg to the ship and were met by the guard on duty – he was fast asleep and had his head resting on the booth desk located next to the ship’s gangway. Both the customs officer and the cruise ship rep ignored the guard and offered me board the ship; I refused (which confused them) and instead tapped the sleeping guard on the shoulder to wake him and asked for his permission.

Ironically, I was later informed that on that particular day, all security agencies were told in advance to be extra-vigilant as the security access points in their port were going to be challenged by their senior security staff. If this was their level of heightened vigilance, I shudder to imagine the level of security they would have had if I had decided to visit the cruise ships on any other day!

Conclusion

The point of this article, though, is not to simply draw attention to a particular Port Authority’s security failures, neither is it simply to praise them for spending millions of dollars on technology. Rather, my intention is to make the acute point that without a good physical security presence of well trained individuals, expensive access control technology alone just doesn’t get it done – for any port! It is all about balance and maybe that (or the lack of it) is the Achilles Heel for those Port Authorities who can identify with this problem.

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