

Improving Immigration Services through Innovations at Incheon International Airport

Introduction

Since 2005, Incheon International Airport, the main gateway to Seoul and the Republic of Korea, has been rated the best airport worldwide by Airports Council International every year. Recently, it was rated the world’s best international transit airport by Skytrax, a consultancy that reviews and ranks airlines and airports (Skytrax 2019). Incheon International Airport is considered an international hub for connecting flights and those airlines’ operations, and Incheon Immigration Office is responsible for the annual inspection of more than 22 million passenger arrivals and departures. In 2004, however, Incheon’s customer satisfaction was lower than other major airports, including Hong Kong International Airport on Chek Lap Kok Island (ranked first) and Changi Airport in Singapore (ranked fifth)—mainly because of the long waits at security inspection. These waits negatively affected the efficiency of airport operations and the experience of travelers at the airport.¹

Incheon’s low ranking pushed the Korean government—particularly the Ministry of Justice, which oversaw the immigration and security processes at the airport—to look at immigration inspection for more effective ways to meet two primary requirements: (a) promoting security and efficiency and (b) establishing cooperation among various agencies. This note examines how the Incheon Immigration Office was ultimately able to achieve large gains in efficiency.

Development Challenge

The core development challenge was improving transportation systems and, as a result, attracting travelers to use them. As airline deregulation in Northeast Asia expanded, competition among airports around the world grew because of economic growth and globalization that made traveling abroad more accessible for an increasing number of leisure travelers. To achieve the goal of making Incheon International Airport an international hub in Northeast Asia, the Korean government would need a strategy to respond to travelers’ needs, to set standards for the airport administration, and to measure customer satisfaction.

Intervention

The Ministry of Justice designated 15 agencies that would be involved in the reforms and created an Innovation Leading Team to carry out those reforms in January 2005. The problems with the immigration inspection system were identified on the basis of environmental and



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PROJECT DATA

SECTOR:

Governance; Transportation

DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE:

Improving transportation systems

DELIVERY CHALLENGES:

Intra-Governmental Relations; Opposition and Lack of Consensus

COUNTRY:

Republic of Korea

REGION:

East Asia

PROJECT DURATION:

2005–2008

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¹ According to Airports Council International’s Airport Service Quality (ASQ) program, Incheon ranked 16 of 45 airports surveyed in 2004 (Airports Council International, <https://aci.aero/>).

SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat) analyses. From those analyses, the team developed a strategy to bring innovation to the immigration inspection system. The team's strategy was to focus on two identified weaknesses: (a) the bureaucratic structure and (b) problems related to the work system, such as inflexible staffing of inspectors and outdated inspection operating systems. The new strategy aimed to reform inspection services, to make them "more passenger-oriented ... with a flexible working system and a service-oriented immigration policy" (Chung 2017). Ultimately, the aim was to improve the position of Incheon International Airport as a hub in Northeast Asia.

The major components of the reforms that the innovation team developed included retraining of airport staff members, and most important, an organizational overhaul. These changes involved integration of the arrivals and departures sections, in line with similar integrated systems in Europe, Japan, and Hong Kong. Within the integrated divisions, smaller and more flexible teams were created. And under the new organizational structure, the team created a flexible working system that enabled inspectors to move to areas where more passengers were entering the system. Implementation of the reform program was organized in five steps. The first step was to select a theme based on environmental analysis and establish benchmarks and performance indicators. The second step involved selecting problems, analyzing the indicators, and establishing goals. The third step was to develop the innovation program, which included analyzing key tasks and creating a Should-Be-Map of what the process should look like at the end of the overhaul (Eckes 2002). The fourth step was to execute the program and to analyze and publicize the results of the changes. In the final step, the team evaluated and reflected on feedback from the previous steps.

Addressing Delivery Challenges: Intra-Governmental Coordination; Opposition and Lack of Consensus

As airport officials and the Ministry of Justice worked to overhaul the immigration inspection system, they encountered delivery challenges that hindered the process of reform. Primarily, the airport organizations and businesses had individual goals and their own working cultures, and they did not view themselves as part of the big picture of Incheon Airport. There was a lack of cooperation and coordination among the relevant agencies, many of which were initially reluctant to participate without more resources and guidelines for the changes in policy.² Moreover, some airport employees were resistant to the changes.

Managing Organized and Systematic Process Innovations and Overcoming Resistance to Reforms

The task force team decided that relevant agencies should undergo fundamental transformations in their existing practices and inefficient systems, even in the face of some agencies' resistance to change. The Innovation Leading Team was set up to implement the proposed changes and included members who had a wealth of hands-on experience. The team was required to participate in multiple intensive trainings organized by the Ministry of Justice and aimed at fostering innovation-pursuing and goal-oriented mindsets.

The need to revise laws and guidelines was perceived as cumbersome by some agencies, and staff were sometimes reluctant to implement such changes. To address this reluctance, higher-level agencies were asked to participate in rewriting the new guidelines, thus lightening the burden of revising them. This process also helped agencies work more effectively and was promoted as such—during the review, other inefficiencies were discovered and addressed.

Tackling Lack of Coordination among Agencies

Most of the reform tasks had to run through a wide range of government agencies, but many of these agencies were reluctant to participate because of insufficient human resources and a lack of internal guidelines for policy changes. Each organization had its own perspectives and interests; although each organization could be seen as successful in hitting their internal targets and metrics, the airport did not seem efficiently integrated. The airport also struggled to

² A number of different agencies were involved, including the following: Ministry of Security and Public Administration; Ministry of Planning and Budget Customs; quarantine stations; Incheon International Corporation; National Intelligence Service; Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism (Chung 2017).

successfully meet workload demands. Stakeholders lost sight of their shared goal after the airport was successfully opened. A lack of shared vision and operational expertise was coupled with a lack of experienced personnel working at the airport, which resulted in inefficient management and poor customer service. An absence of a customer service mindset among airport employees was another stumbling block. Airport operations are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but shifts were not standardized, with some employees working in more difficult conditions than others. Employees working more difficult shifts were sometimes dissatisfied with the working conditions, which were not distributed evenly.

The first step to solve this problem was to formulate shared goals, to present those goals at a consultative meeting of all airport organizations and businesses, and to ask for active cooperation among stakeholders.

To encourage and persuade stakeholders to cooperate with one another, the Ministry of Justice involved and coordinated with the Service Improvement Committee for internal agencies, which included the Planning Division of Immigration Service and Innovative Human Resource Office, as well as external organizations, such as Incheon Airport Security Measures Council and the Working Group Meeting for Security Measures. Additionally, the Ministry of Justice organized a consultative group for collaborative implementation of reforms to address resistance from the participating organizations.

Overcoming Employee Opposition

Employees who were suspicious of the reforms perceived the innovation policy as a formality for their evaluation. They considered that a poorer working environment would result from efforts to improve customer service, to restructure the work system, and to change related policies. To address this misconception, the Innovation Leading Team carried out tasks as part of a coherent plan and took efforts to explain that plan to employees. Management informed employees that an environmental analysis showed that such innovation was the only means to increase customer satisfaction and improve overall operations of the Immigration Office. This transparency helped to persuade employees to accept the reforms and to develop a positive attitude about the changes. With consistent training opportunities to develop skills and tools, employees changed their perspectives of the proposed reforms.

Lessons Learned

In the end, the reforms at the Immigration Office of Incheon International Airport were successfully completed; the airport became one of the busiest airports in the world. It has won the Airport of the Year title at the World Airport Awards and was named as the winner of World's Best Transit Airport in 2019 (Skytrax 2019).

Several lessons can be drawn for countries that seek to overhaul processes related to infrastructure and transportation system management. First, the commitment of top policy decision makers was vital to the success of the process innovation reforms. It was paramount to ensure that the top decision makers supported and understood the ins and outs of the proposed reforms.

Second, it was essential to obtain the cooperation of related organizations because airport operations are interrelated, with various departments forming an interconnected system. From start to finish, this cooperation was necessary to enable consistency in the governance system by sharing information and by ensuring that the reform efforts were synchronized among the different departments.

Finally, a focus on improving information and communication technology enabled a number of systems to be built into the immigration inspection process for safety and security. While high-tech devices proved useful, such as in automating some aspects of the immigration process, expensive high-tech devices are not automatically a solution. Rather, in seeking to implement these kinds of reforms, an integrated inspection policy—or the creation of an innovation-friendly policy environment—may represent the first phase of the reform process.

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