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Importance of data security in visa industry

With inevitable cyber concerns, it is crucial for visa providers to raise security audits and encryption of data, and introduce watertight password control systems

By: FE Bureau | New Delhi | Published: July 2, 2018 1:59 AM

The e-Visa scheme launched in 2014 has given a spur to the travel and tourism sector in India. Last year, the government earned Rs 1,400 crore in revenues from the scheme. The e-Visa facility, which is in sync with the vision of Digital India, is now available for nationals of 163 countries for entry into India through 25 international airports and five seaports.

It is, thus, imperative for the visa industry and visa providers to build a strong verification system, apart from collecting biometric data. Visa providing companies must strive to ensure security and protection of personal information of their applicants. Thanks to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which became effective on May 25, 2018, companies dealing with EU citizen data, though located outside the EU, are obliged to be compliant, without which any breach would lead to colossal penalties.

It is undeniable that digitalisation has led to matchless ease and comfort to tourists and e-Visas are much easier to obtain than conventional visas, which saves people from most of the complexities of the conventional process. Now, visitors just need to fill up the form online and pay the visa fee. In 2017, Indian missions abroad introduced e-tourist, e-business and e-medical visas to help travellers get their visas issued in a few simple steps. This has further led to a surge in the foreign tourist arrivals in India—from last year's 2.78 million (January-March 2017) to 3.13 million during the same period this year. Similarly, arrivals on e-tourist visa were 761,698 during January-March 2018 as compared to last year's 467,314 (same period). The government has added new categories like film visa and intern visa as well.

The e-Visa trend for an Indian-outbound traveller is at a nascent stage, since only a few countries provide this facility for Indian passport holders. A few countries do provide visa on arrival, and in some countries, like Singapore, it is imperative for e-Visas to be processed only through authorised travel agencies appointed by the respective consular missions.

At a time when doing business is rapidly changing with significant technological advancements, it is important for companies to leverage technology and reap its benefits. Digitisation can bring innovation to age-old systems and processes. It is time the government tapped and utilised the hidden potential of advanced tools such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, Big Data, etc, to bring more safety and convenience to tourists and visitors.

Apart from the e-Visa facility, the government has launched the e-FRRO (e-Foreigner Regional Registration Office) scheme, which aims at providing hassle-free travel to visitors to India. Foreigners can now avail various visa and immigration-related services online. They no more have to visit Foreigners Registration Office or Foreigner Regional Registration Office unless they are called specifically. Such schemes are great tools of development and are playing a vital role in giving a fillip to the tourism sector.

Privacy and security controls are paramount to any industry and visa industry is no different. The e-Visa providers must give travellers better control over their personal data. With the inevitable cyber concerns, it has become crucial for visa providers to increase security audits and encryption of data, and introduce watertight password control systems. It's time they take the protection of customer and employee data as the top priority and strive to innovate the processes while quickly adapting to the changing trends.

The need of the hour is to have a significant focus on transparency and accountability of customer data to prevent tourists and travellers from data breach. The government must bring in more experts who are adept at facilitating data protection and data governance. They must come out with innovative legal processes and techniques that ensure data protection and make sure that travellers have a comfortable and breach-free journey.

By- Shikhar Agarwal, Joint Managing Director, BLS International Services Ltd

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SHIKHAR AGARWAL

Joint Managing Director, BLS International Services Ltd

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