



HOTELS: NEWS

Checks, balances in digital key rollout

By [Jeff Weinstein](#) on 7/14/2021

For better or worse, digital key solutions are quickly becoming ubiquitous among the big brands. If it is contactless service guests want as the world recovers from COVID, the industry is here to offer digital keys through their apps.

Guests gain access to rooms and floors via their smart phones. Keys are deactivated upon check-out. But with every system rollout comes challenges. So, HOTELS talked to Hilton about its program, as well as the two bigger system providers in this space, Onity and ASSA ABLOY, to get their feedback.

Mike Gathright, senior vice president, Customer Experience at Hilton told HOTELS digital key is now available at more than 5,200 properties in 42 countries and territories (80% of total portfolio). Last year alone, despite the pandemic, digital key rolled out to an additional 383 Hilton properties. In fact, he added, Hilton guests have opened hotel doors with digital key more than 121 million times, with more than 25% of all 115 million Hilton Honors members choosing to use digital key daily.

Gathright added that since Hilton launched digital key in 2015, it estimates reducing roughly more than 114 tons of plastic as a result of Hilton Honors members downloading more than 30 million digital keys.

With all that downloading comes a bit of consumer stress about potential hacking. Gathright said before new technology is deployed to hotels, more rigorous internal testing is supplemented with certification by external security experts.

To address the traditional human authentication to check photo IDs and reduce fraud, Hilton ties each digital key to a specific guest account on the reservation, which cannot be shared or placed on another device. "We have various system checks in place to detect any unusual activity that might, for any reason, indicate a problem with the digital key request," Gathright added. For additional confirmation, he said every time a digital key is requested under an account, Hilton sends a confirmation email to the email address in the guest's Hilton Honors profile confirming that he or she requested the key. "Based on their preference, we've also given our guests the option to hide their room number after the first time they unlock the door," he said.

The next priority in this area for Hilton is a focus on the contactless arrival/departure, contactless payments and in-room technologies. In fact, in early June, Hilton launched a technologically advanced booking experience that enables individuals to book and instantly confirm at least two connecting rooms on Hilton.com or through the Hilton Honors app.

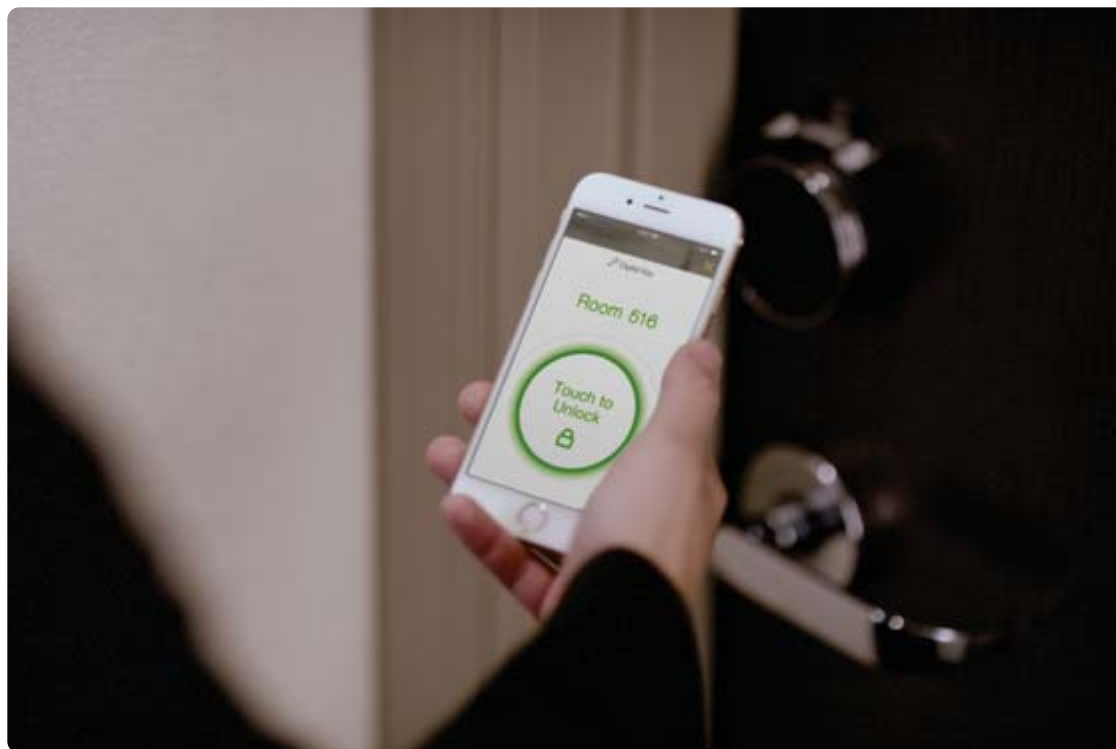
The way forward

Acceleration of the digital key rollout industrywide is only going to further accelerate, according to leading suppliers such as Supra & Onity at Carrier and ASSA ABLOY Global Solutions, with independent hotels queuing in line for systems that do not require building out a large IT infrastructure.

While suppliers have customizable, off-the-shelf mobile apps to deploy mobile key solutions, budgets, especially these days, are the biggest challenge for smaller groups to deploy digital keys. But beyond that, the

other challenge often heard is “where do we start” without having to make a huge infrastructure investment, according to Fayyad Sbaihat, president, Supra & Onity at Carrier.

Cloud-based solutions offer myriad options. “For instance, you can use an off-the-shelf mobile app and reskin it, you can integrate it into your brand’s existing PMS, or if you don’t have your own app, but still want additional services, you can integrate a digital key into a third-party application, too,” Sbaihat said.



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A recurring issue that hoteliers can encounter is ensuring that digital key technology is compatible with existing door lock hardware, access management software or is capable of integrating with third-party property systems, according to Cris Davidson, vice president of Global Key Accounts for ASSA ABLOY Global Solutions. “Some hotels may find that they may need to first invest in costly upgrades or complex integrations before being able to adopt digital key functionality,” Davidson said. However, such issues can be overcome. For example, with VingCard door locks, in most instances, activating digital key does not require the replacing of existing hardware and can be achieved with minimal disruption to operations.

Davidson said, depending on a hotel’s specific needs or goals, digital key can be either integrated into a property’s existing guest-facing app or can be implemented as a standalone solution. “Hotels can even take advantage of strategic collaborations between digital key solution providers and other hospitality technology vendors to provide guests with more options to enhance convenience and their hotel stay experience,” he said. “This can include integrating a digital key mobile app with the ability for guests to control in-room amenities such as lighting or thermostats using personal devices.”

Sbaihat added, “The most important thing we try to reinforce is that this is an investment in the future. We work with properties to offer cost-effective upgrade options to get them to Bluetooth faster – from board upgrade, to half lock or full lock options. We have a third-party leasing program available for those properties who prefer to pay over time, and we offer flexible payment terms for those properties who desire the upgrade now and pay later.”

Managing hacking challenges

To address both operator and consumer concerns about hacking, Onity has all of its locks, key technologies and system software evaluated by independent third parties for security assessments and third-party penetration tests to ensure security. Its applications use multiple layers of controls, including jailbreak detection and encrypted storage of credentials on the phone that is encrypted uniquely for every phone. In addition, every Bluetooth communication session is unique with rolling codes and session keys, making recording/replaying impossible, according to Sbaihat.

Davidson said with ASSA ABLOY's mobile access solution, all digital key and room number information is always transmitted to guest devices using secure communication channels that are equipped with the latest encryption protocols. "Once present on a guest's device, the data is not only protected from theft due to a guest's own device password settings, but is also stored within a digital strongbox located within the app," he said. "When a guest presents their device to the appropriate door lock reader, digital key data is again transmitted using a secure communications channel, with the data only passing through the space between a device and a reader to prevent the risk of data sniffing."

Digital key platforms can now offer an option to include a secondary password in addition to guest device passwords before digital key access is granted, Davidson said, adding that more advanced solutions are also being enhanced, with abilities that can verify a user's identification in a manner that is as effective as manual front desk processes.

What's next?

As with a large majority of hotel technologies, the future of digital key will see more systems and services become integrated with the platform to further maximize operational efficiency and the ability to provide guests with even more options for enhanced convenience, Davidson said.

Digital key rollout and Bluetooth-enabled locks will lead to a fully connected and personalized guest experience, including using smartphones as a point of sale solution to validate room charges, and for overall healthy stay solutions like contact tracing, density management and geo fencing, Sbaihat said. "We're just scratching the surface of what's possible with mobile access. Culture has demanded a focus on contactless check-in and access, but the guest experience can be enhanced in far more ways.

"Imagine a guest entering their room using a mobile key, then a custom welcome message displays on the TV, lamps turn on automatically, drapes are drawn at night and the thermostat adjusts to the preferred temperature based on the guest profile," Sbaihat said.