



WHAT IT COSTS YOU

Manual Check In vs Smart Check In

A field guide for event people who are tired of long lines, lost time, and guessing at ROI.

By fielddrive, the onsite event technology team that has checked in over 3.5 million attendees across 50+ countries.



Why this guide exists

Ask any event organizer about the worst part of event day and most will say the same thing: check in. The line that will not move. The name that is not on the list. The badge printer that jams at minute one of a three day conference.

We have spent over ten years inside that problem, not watching it from a distance. fielddrive has staffed check in desks, fixed jammed printers at 6 a.m., and rebuilt registration lines on the fly for events from 200 people to 20,000. This guide is what we have learned about the true cost of manual check in, and what changes when you make the switch to smart, touchless check in.

We are not neutral here. We build smart check in technology. But every number, story, and quote in this guide is real, drawn from our own events, our customers, and outside research we link to throughout. You can check our work.

1. What we mean by manual vs. smart check in

Manual check in is the version most of us grew up with. A printed list, a table of badges printed ahead of time and sorted by hand, a staff member scanning the alphabet for your name while you wait. It works. It is also slow, hard to scale, and easy to get wrong.

Smart check in (also called touchless or self check in) replaces the paper list with a kiosk, a QR code, or facial recognition. The attendee scans in, the system pulls their record, and a badge prints on the spot, often within seconds. No list. No guessing. No separate line for late registrations.

The difference sounds small until you measure it across a full event day. That is what this guide does.

Find us on social:



www.fielddrive.com



2. The real cost of manual check in

Manual check in costs more than most budgets admit, because the costs are spread across line items that never get added together: staff hours, printing waste, badge fraud, lost data, and the harder to measure cost of a bad first impression.

2.1 Time, multiplied by every attendee you have

Independent research on event staffing backs up what every organizer already feels in their gut. Manual check in steps such as searching a printed list, handwriting a badge, or resolving a payment issue can push the time per attendee past one minute. Modern check in technology with QR codes cuts that dramatically.

Source: Bizzabo, How to Staff Your Onsite Event Check-in Desk

Run the math on a midsize conference. At one minute per attendee, a 1,000 person event needs over 16 hours of check in time. Split across five check in stations, that is still more than three hours of solid queuing during your busiest arrival window, the first impression every attendee has of your event.

2.2 Staff hours that never show up on the program

Before fielddrive, LEAF Inc., the professional development arm of the New York State Council of School Superintendents, ran check in from a paper binder. Staff alphabetized badges by hand, sometimes starting three months ahead of an event.

Find us on social:



www.fielddrive.com



"We were printing them off a regular printer, inserting them into plastics and alphabetizing them."

Deborah Orsini, Assistant Director for Finance and HR, LEAF Inc."

That is hundreds of hours of staff time spent on a task that adds zero value to the attendee experience. It is time your team could spend on content, sponsors, or the dozen other things that actually make an event memorable.

2.3 Badge fraud and walk ins you cannot track

Paper based badge systems create a security gap most organizers do not see coming. LEAF Inc. used the same badge template across events, which meant attendees could reuse an old badge to get into a new event for free.



"People would just recycle an old badge and think that because they're a member, it was okay."

Deborah Orsini, LEAF Inc.

Unregistered walk ins compound the problem. With a paper list, a walk in means a manual entry, a handwritten badge, and a registration record that may never make it into your final attendance numbers. Multiply that across a multiday event and your data is no longer reliable enough to report to sponsors or your board.

2.4 The line is your brand, whether you planned it or not

Before partnering with fielddrive, REBA (the Reward and Employee Benefits Association) ran separate check in lines for delegates and sponsors at its Wellbeing Congress.



"We'd have the delegates on one side and the sponsors on the other. It was slow and painful!"

Caroline Baldwin, Marketing Director, REBA

Attendees do not remember your keynote speaker if they spent the first 20 minutes of the day standing in a queue. The check in line is the actual front door of your event, and a slow one tells every attendee something about how the rest of the day will go.

Find us on social:



www.fielddrive.com



3. What smart check in actually changes

Smart check in is not just a faster version of the same process. It removes entire categories of cost, not just the time.

3.1 Speed, without the staffing math

fielddrive kiosks support ID scanning, facial recognition, and QR code check in side by side, and print full color, two sided badges at a rate of about six seconds per badge. That is the difference between a queue that grows all morning and one that clears itself.

When LEAF Inc. switched to fielddrive's self check in kiosks, the long lines that used to form around the paper binder simply stopped happening.



"With fielddrive, they're not long anymore."
Deborah Orsini, LEAF Inc.

3.2 Live badging instead of printing ahead of time

Smart check in removes the entire step of printing badges ahead of time. Badges print live, on demand, the moment someone checks in. There is no three month head start, no alphabetizing, and no wasted badges for people who never show up.



"We don't have to spend the entire day before the event putting badges together anymore."
Deborah Orsini, LEAF Inc.

Find us on social:



www.fielddrive.com

REBA had a similar experience. Once delegate and sponsor badges moved to a single live printing system, the two lines became one.



*"Seeing participants check in so quickly was fantastic."
Caroline Baldwin, REBA*

3.3 Security that travels with the event, not the badge

Custom, event specific badges close the reuse loophole that paper systems leave open. Every badge is tied to a specific event and a specific registration, which makes a recycled badge from last year instantly identifiable.



*"Customizing the badges made a huge difference in identifying those who weren't actually registered."
Melanie Seiden, Associate Director for Membership, LEAF Inc.*

3.4 Walk ins handled in seconds, not in a side conversation

Smart check in treats a walk in the same way it treats a already registered attendee. The kiosk captures the registration on the spot and prints a badge immediately, no separate desk, no handwritten entry.



*"Handling walk ins used to be a challenge, but now it's all automated and simplified."
Melanie Seiden, LEAF Inc.*

3.5 Data you can act on while the event is still running

Manual check in gives you a final headcount, days after the event, if you are lucky. Smart check in gives you a live feed: who has arrived, who from a specific sponsor company is in the room, how many VIPs have checked in, all queryable in plain language while the event is happening.

fielddrive Insights lets organizers ask the system direct questions, such as who has checked in, or how many people from a given company have arrived, and get an answer in seconds instead of hunting down a staff member with a clipboard.

LEAF Inc. used this live visibility, paired with its STOVA integration, to track walk ins and badge reprints as they happened.



*"Having access to live data has been crucial. We can track who's checked in and immediately address any discrepancies."
Melanie Seiden, LEAF Inc.*

Find us on social:



www.fielddrive.com

4. Putting a number on it: manual vs. smart, side by side

Here is the same event, run two ways. The comparison below uses the staffing math from independent research alongside what fielddrive customers report after switching.

What you are paying for	Manual check in	Smart check in
Time per attendee	Up to 60+ seconds with list lookup and handwriting	About 6 seconds per badge print
Badge prep	Weeks of printing ahead of time and alphabetizing	Printed live, on demand, no need to print early
Walk ins	Separate desk, manual entry, easy to miscount	Same kiosk, same flow, automatic record
Badge security	Reusable templates open to fraud	Unique, event specific badges and QR codes
Attendance data	Final count, often days after the event	Live, queryable data while the event runs
Revenue potential	None, it is a pure cost center	Sponsor branded kiosks and badges, lead retrieval revenue share

Find us on social:



5. When check in stops costing you and starts paying you

The most surprising part of this whole comparison is that smart check in can flip from a cost center to a revenue line. REBA proved this at its 2024 Wellbeing Congress.

fielddrive shares revenue with organizers whenever an exhibitor buys a license for fielddrive Leads, the lead retrieval app. REBA also sold branding space on the check in kiosks and badges to a sponsor. Together, those two moves did more than cover REBA's cost of using fielddrive.



"We were pleasantly surprised when we realized our commission had increased significantly. The monetization opportunities have allowed us to generate a surplus, which was a lovely added bonus."

Caroline Baldwin, Marketing Director, REBA

REBA ended up with a 20% profit against its investment. That is the real ceiling of what smart check in can do. It is not just cheaper than manual check in. Run well, it can pay for itself and then some.

Find us on social:



www.fielddrive.com

6. Making the case to your own team

If you are the one trying to convince a finance lead or an executive director that switching from paper to smart check in is worth it, here is the short version that tends to land:



Add up the staff hours spent printing badges early, alphabetizing, and managing the check in desk across a full event cycle, not just event day.



Count the badges printed for people who never showed up, plus the wasted paper, plastic sleeves, and reprints from manual lists.



Ask what your current system tells you about who is in the room right now. If the honest answer is nothing until after the event, that is a real cost too.



Ask whether your badges could be reused at next year's event without anyone noticing. If yes, that is a security gap with a price tag.



Check whether your check in process could ever generate revenue, instead of only consuming budget.

Walk through those five questions with real numbers from your last event, and the case for smart check in tends to make itself.

Find us on social:



www.fielddrive.com



7. The bottom line

Manual check in feels free because the cost is hidden in staff time, paper waste, and data you never get to use. Smart check in has a sticker price, but it replaces all of that with speed, security, and data you can act on while your event is still happening, plus, for organizers who set it up right, a way to turn check in into a revenue line instead of a cost center.

Melanie Seiden at LEAF Inc. summed up the shift better than any spec sheet could.



"It's been an extremely positive experience from start to finish. fielddrive took so much stress off our team, saving us time we didn't even realize we could have. Switching to fielddrive has made all our staff happier, and it feels like we've leveled up from a state conference to a national conference."

Melanie Seiden, Associate Director for Membership, LEAF Inc.

That is the real cost comparison. Not just minutes saved per badge, but what your team gets to do with the time, budget, and attention that manual check in used to eat up.

Find us on social:





About fielddrive

fielddrive has spent over 10 years building onsite event technology, from touchless check in and live badge printing to lead retrieval and AI powered event insights. The team has checked in more than 3.5 million attendees across 50+ countries, working with organizers such as the European Parliament, EY, Thomson Reuters, and hundreds of associations, agencies, and corporations running events of every size.

Learn more or talk to an onsite expert at www.fielddrive.com.

For more helpful guides and tips, check out [fielddrive Onsite Academy](#)
our in-depth resource repository for all things events!



SCAN THE QR CODE

www.fielddrive.com

✉ marketing@fielddrive.com ☎ +32 3 860 16 90