

“PRM demographics are changing: The next generation of PRMs will be a tech-savvy, well-educated generation that values independence over everything else”



ACCESSIBILITY

It is the aim of an airport to ease the journey and ensure it is a positive experience for all passengers, including those with reduced mobility or additional needs. Although the intention is the same, how airports are approaching this varies...



“It will be the promotion of a consistent level of service across the passenger journey that will drive meaningful change, and not a singular fixation on easy-to-measure metrics”





Compliance vs. compassion

Brian Cobb, Chief Innovation Officer at Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport (CVG), describes the airport's ambitions to advance accessibility among its community.

AS A SKYTRAX award-winning airport for seven of the past eight years, Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport (CVG) is well positioned as a leading global airport. A key tenet is to 'Go Beyond', further prescribed for employees and business partners to 'make travel through CVG an unforgettably positive experience'. This conscientious approach encourages furthering its market base among those less travelled. It's about giving a voice and options to those who have been turned off, or worse, turned away from the joys of air travel.

Where compliance falls short

We're likely bound by rules established by a regulatory body, and within those rules are more specific standards for supporting disabilities on behalf of employees. The inevitable question is: "Will we comply to minimum standard, or will we go beyond to maximise accessibility."

Immediate questions from the organisation's leaders come into play, with typical lines being "is it really necessary?", "there are other, more important priorities?", "what is the return for what seems like a small number of users?". These questions can be frustrating, giving the appearance that the bar is set higher to reach approval for accessibility needs. How many of us are lobbying for the compassionate



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approach that actually lowers the bar as the ethically right thing to do?

Consider the cost

No business is successful by discouraging use of its product. Couple this with the consistent rise in disabilities, considering improved global diagnosis, such as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and burgeoning physical challenges. Juxtapose this with the growing wealth of the world's developing nations' population and direct forecast impact for air travel demand. If we do nothing towards social acceptance and support for improving accessibility, we risk depriving air travel for an entire population and their caregivers. Or perhaps we're better to market this in financial terms as losing consumer confidence and their business.

Consider this simple market impact for ASD. The U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) in 2018 "determined that one in 59 children in the United States are diagnosed as being on the spectrum", with "Autism affecting all ethnic and socioeconomic groups"¹. While the spectrum itself has varying degrees of capabilities, the fact remains that social challenges exist. These social challenges can be debilitating. Furthermore, their caregivers are often constrained themselves as they must consider all limitations in daily life.

Facilitate change

CVG created LIFT™ (Leading Individuals Forward Together) in 2012. The programme has been met with resounding success and consistent growth. Initially formed for support around ASD, LIFT has since branched to include numerous disabilities and travel-related health challenges. With support of community health professionals, each learning event is designed to provide comfort and encouragement for the individual and their caregivers, raise understanding and instill sensitivity of the disability among airport community personnel and employees.

The award-winning LIFT programme continues to organically build upon its prior successes. Recently expanded programmes include the introduction of non-ASD learning disabilities, miniature therapy horses, site familiarisation for service animals in training, and awareness for heart patients with advanced mechanical implants.

After learning about an invasive experience through security and multiple lines of questioning by airline staff that one heart patient had to endure, CVG staff recognised the lack of awareness surrounding a new technology. A ventricular assistive device (VAD) is an advanced treatment option for end-stage heart failure. It is a mechanical pump that's implanted in the heart to help it pump more effectively. Unfortunately, the device design appears as the passenger is hiding wires connected to an exterior pack. The pack is actually a battery unit connected to multiple wire leads that may not be disconnected at any time.

CVG's U.S. Federal Agencies and airline partner staff were fascinated with the in-person patient learning through first-hand experience. Immediate knowledge sharing took place and compassion took hold as each agency and airline committed to sharing the learning materials among their respective headquarters.

In place now

Before-you-fly interactions at CVG are notable given our interest in starting our customers' journey prior to when they leave home. Customer experience staff worked to develop several options to pre-journey the airport for those less familiar or not well-travelled in a larger airport environment. Leveraging Google 360 technology, staff coordinated with a 360 specialist to photograph and stitch full facility tour capabilities in high-resolution. CVG remains one of very few U.S. airports to offer touring capabilities via desktop or mobile.

Another of CVG's initiatives included the addition of Aira. As a subscription-based, third-party company, Aira offers real-time hands-free wayfinding navigation for the visually impaired.

Over recent years, CVG has removed all revolving and bi-fold doors and replaced them with automated, wide-access doors; modified all security lanes to accommodate wheelchairs; reprogrammed elevators to 'home' position with doors open



and lights on at the most frequently used floor; developed a ground-based business continuity plan for conveyance outages and/or emergency egress whereby accessible ramps will be mated to passenger-loading bridges and coupled with accessible shuttle buses.

On the horizon

In the coming years, CVG expects robotics and autonomous technologies to advance the experience of PRMs. CVG was the first U.S. airport and the second world-wide to trial WHILL, an advanced personal electric vehicle. CVG's premise was simple: Could we reduce the need for human service to push wheelchairs if a consumer with limited mobility could navigate the airport via WHILL? The study period indicated a reasonable acceptance rate and quick study – 30 seconds or less – on how to use the semi-autonomous chair. The add-on benefit of the device was a caregiver feature, allowing them to navigate the chair via smartphone over Bluetooth connectivity. The future design considered full-autonomy mode via connecting to Wi-Fi nodes acting as waypoints. Ultimately, the device has yet to be incorporated for full passenger use due to the facility design requiring multiple up-down transitions. However, CVG has been quick to share its study results with others which led to additional pilots and full deployments in airports around the globe.

A robotic development currently underway is the modification of Segway's Loomo. Loomo is a next-gen miniature Segway that doubles as a self-curated robot via open code capabilities on the Android platform. CVG is collaborating with one of its university partners on a use case to again facilitate a 'digital concierge' with critical focus on passengers with limited mobility. We anticipate Loomo operating as a terminal-to-gate wayfinding guide, capable of transporting a customer's carry-on, acting as an interpreter, and several other to-be-developed features.

CVG's hard work and dedication ensures that our staff and airport community remain transfixed on the horizon, advancing industry agendas, and ensuring that all existing and future customers enjoy access to the fascination of flight. ✉

 **ABOVE:** Segway Loomo pilot test at CVG, demonstrating the carriage of a customer's carry-on bag

“It's about giving a voice and options to those who have been turned off, or worse, turned away from the joys of air travel”

REFERENCE

1. <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-facts-and-figures>



Passengers with additional needs require consistent standards

Gatwick Airport's Accessibility Manager, *Sara Marchant*, looks at how the UK's proposed Passenger Charter is an opportunity to introduce consistent standards for passengers with reduced mobility across the entire airport journey.

THE UK'S LONG-TERM vision of aviation is set out in its Aviation 2050 Green Paper and one proposal it contains is for a Passenger Charter to strengthen airports' and airlines' customer experience.

This would build on the good work already being done by airports in this area and seeks to improve the airport experience for passengers with reduced mobility.

Lots of good work has been done here, but the Charter could be an opportunity to introduce some truly consistent standards across all airport stakeholders as this is where things often go wrong and disabled passengers experience poor service.

To be truly effective in helping passengers with a disability, any new standards must apply to every organisation that comes into contact with the passenger during their journey, be they an airport, airport partner, airline or handling agent.

This is key, as during a journey a passenger will deal with various organisations and poor service at any point can ruin the entire experience.

Airports are often fragmented environments where hundreds of different organisations can be based on a single campus. Ensuring consistent standards can therefore be a challenge but a broad-based charter may help bring these often-disparate parties together.

Critically, it will be the promotion of a consistent level of service across the passenger journey that will enable the Charter to drive meaningful change, and not a singular fixation on easy-to-measure metrics such as waiting times. Passengers value how they are treated, not just the time in which it takes to complete one part of a journey.

Similarly, the Charter must not lead to significant cost increases for passengers, as this could have the unintended consequence of excluding certain demographics from travelling altogether.

The Gatwick family

One way we are driving consistent and meaningful change across the airport is through the 'Gatwick Family' initiative. In a nutshell, the initiative is looking to unite the entire 30,000-strong workforce, whether they work for Gatwick, an airline, ground handler, retailer or caterer with the aim of building closer, more productive relationships with each other.

Not only does this make Gatwick a better place to work, it is helping us deliver better journeys for the airport's 46 million annual passengers.

Through this collaborative, campus-wide approach we have already become more effective at tackling disruptive passengers. People causing trouble are only a tiny fraction of the airport's 46 million passengers, but just one individual can cause disproportionate harm once on board an aircraft.

Through the Gatwick Family initiative, we have raised awareness of the issue and created a network of staff – in bars, restaurants, terminals and shops – that report incidents of disruptive behaviour early, before they potentially escalate.

We have also significantly improved diversity awareness among all staff. The initiative however has been particularly important in our efforts to ensure that we are delivering consistent standards for passengers with a disability, be it physical or hidden.

Staff training is key

A fundamental part of our efforts to become the UK's most accessible airport was to train all frontline staff to recognise which passengers might need a little extra help. We rolled out training on a range of hidden disabilities and all staff are now able to recognise and confidently deliver appropriate help to passengers who require assistance in an empathetic and positive way. We provide this training ourselves and free of charge for other organisations across the airport campus, including airlines and ground handlers, to drive consistent standards across the passenger journey.

At the time of writing, over 2,500 staff across at least 14 different businesses on the airport campus have received training to recognise and help people with dementia alone.

We also introduced the UK's first hidden disability lanyard scheme which is a discreet signal that the

person wearing it may need a little extra help and support when passing through the airport.

Thanks to the relationships built through the Gatwick Family and our widespread free training programme, the lanyard is now widely recognised across the airport campus so staff know what to do if they see a passenger wearing one.

Such has been the success of the scheme, that not only is it being used by every major airport in the UK, it is being adopted by many international airports and is also being picked up in different industries – rail, shopping complexes, cinemas, hospitals, major supermarkets – with interest continuing to grow.

Gatwick has encouraged this consistency of approach by supplying training slides, posters, graphics and photos for free, so that everyone uses the same symbol.

Talk to the experts

It is also important that discussions are not limited to organisations on the airport campus. We have been careful to work closely with disability and passenger groups to define our new, improved service standards in partnership with them.

Our training is also written in conjunction with both disability charities and individuals with relevant disabilities. People living with disabilities also attend or deliver training where practical and we have found that this really brings the issue to life for staff being trained and helps make it both meaningful and memorable.

These relationships with disability charities have also helped us design new infrastructure – another key component to a good passenger journey. We recently became the first UK airport to open a sensory room following close consultation with the National Autistic Society, and our design teams used a tool provided by the Royal National Institute of Blind to make sure the perspective of blind and visually-impaired passengers was considered when designing new facilities.

Given the large number of passengers passing through the airport we know that we will not get it right every time. However we are broadening the range of disability groups we engage with and have new feedback and learning mechanisms in place to help us constantly improve our accessibility services, facilities and training.

We are determined to do everything possible to ensure that passengers in need of assistance have an equal opportunity to fly. ✉

The UK government is seeking views on its long-term vision of aviation – Aviation 2050 Green Paper – until 20 June 2019. The green paper outlines a new aviation strategy, including the proposal for a Passenger Charter.

“Passengers value how they are treated, not just the time in which it takes to complete one part of a journey”



SARA MARCHANT, Accessibility Manager for Gatwick Airport, started her career in Law Enforcement working on the Investigation Division of HM Customs and Excise for 17 years and has spent the last 11 years at Gatwick Airport, helping to improve the passenger experience. She has been focused on improving accessibility – with particular regard to hidden disabilities – training and awareness, engagement with charities and support groups, whilst working with project designers to make new and upgraded areas of the airport accessible.

From assistance to bespoke **customer service**

As the aviation industry moves towards a more focused approach on passengers with reduced mobility, accessibility within airports is changing. We spoke to **Roberto Castiglioni**, Chair of the Heathrow Access Advisory Group, who takes a closer look at how the industry should handle this.

ON 2-3 MAY 2019, Heathrow Airport hosted an international workshop which focused upon passengers with reduced mobility (PRMs) and hidden disabilities.

The European Commission, UK Department for Transport, UK Civil Aviation Authority, ILT (Dutch NEB), ENAC (Italian NEB), IATA, airports, airlines and service providers came together to discuss the state of play regarding accessible air travel.

Where does the industry stand?

The findings of the European Commission, currently revising the Interpretative Guidelines of 2012, provided a good insight in terms of accessibility in the aviation sector.

After their first round of consultation with industry and disability organisations, the European Commission listed a number of topics they wish to address in the new working document: A definition of PRM; a pre-notification of special assistance needs by PRM; transmission of information between travel agents, airlines and airports;

safety rules of airlines to carry PRMs and their mobility equipment; assistance dogs (e.g. training requirements); medical equipment (e.g. what should be carried for free); liability in case of loss or damage of mobility equipment; calculation of PRM charges; and the quality standards of airports.

The ongoing process will see the Commission run further rounds of consultation of NEBs and stakeholders at EU level this autumn, and the adoption and publication of revised interpretative guidelines this winter.

The list of key topics raised, with more likely to surface, tells us how much remains to be done to make air travel accessible for people with disabilities. However, these topics are technical and likely to impact operation frameworks more than the passenger experience.

Understanding the needs of individuals – and designing services around them – is crucial if we are to make substantial progress in this field. At the workshop, Heathrow Airport presented the outcome of its initial Proof of Concept (PoC), which was run in cooperation with British Airways in April 2019.

“**Current assistance models are built around one-to-one assistance schemes, exactly the opposite of future aspirations**”

The joint exercise targeted high-density flights (flights with more than 10 pre-booked PRMs onboard) to understand if the traditional wheelchair service still meets the needs of passengers. Passengers from all selected flights were offered guidance in their native language, group movement to final destination, assistance with hand luggage, or full wheelchair service.

The findings speak for themselves: 20 per cent of passengers said they booked wheelchair assistance because they needed help navigating the airport or assistance with their hand luggage; 48 per cent said they would have preferred not using a wheelchair; 84 per cent said they would rather choose to book an alternative service offered in the future. The Net Promoter Score of passengers who participated in the trials is almost double the Net Promoter Score of PRMs using standard services.

Quite clearly, these results warrant further studies on alternative assistance services that best meet the needs of passengers. More PoCs are scheduled to take place in coming months.

Where does the industry want to get to?

PRM demographics are changing. The next generation of PRMs will be a tech-savvy, well-educated generation that values independence over everything else.

Current assistance models are built around one-to-one assistance schemes, exactly the opposite of future aspirations. In coming years, one-to-one assistance services will only be required for a marginal segment of the travelling public. The vast majority of PRMs will only require help in specific instances.

For example, passengers who are in a wheelchair will likely only need help boarding or disembarking. However, this implies that infrastructure must be fully accessible; mainstream solutions like e-gates, help points, border force desks and concessions will need to follow universal design criteria.

In other words, the future will see airports and airlines move away from traditional assistance frameworks and embrace the new concept of bespoke customer service.

How do we get there?

Accessible infrastructure is the key element of this journey. The goal is to create inclusive airports and inclusive airframes.

The inclusive airport is a place where a person with a disability can enjoy the same level of access as everyone else. Inclusive airframes are those who feature provisions like accessible toilets and a dedicated space for those who can only travel in their own wheelchair.

Enhanced digitalisation of the journey will be the pillar upon which the future of bespoke customer



↑ ABOVE: The Heathrow Access Advisory Group (HAAG) is focused on offering passenger-centric accessibility services, and frequently consults with PRMs to determine what these should be

service rests. PRM management software will need significant development to integrate features like digital self-enrolment to services, passenger real-time tracking, push/pull messages between passengers, service providers and airlines. PRM software will also require integration with fleet tracking and management of autonomous mobility devices.

Digitalisation of personal wheelchair passports will ensure handling agents can access real-time information about the device, for example how to put batteries in flight safe mode, how to fold or restore the device and technical information like weight and dimensions.

Assistance frameworks will need a major overhaul to ensure they are fit for purpose. The current blanket offering of wheelchair services on a one-to-one basis, holding passengers at PRM lounges to manage their flow whilst disregarding their individual aspirations, and the patronising experience of being escorted through the airport will be relegated to the past.

Agents training will also require a full overhaul. Training packages built around the medical model of disability will be replaced by models designed around customer service. In a not so distant future, PRMs will be offered a range of options regarding their journey, from manual or electric self-mobilisation to one-to-one assistance and everything in between. Access to choice is fundamental to drive customer satisfaction to the highest possible levels.

Far too often airports are required to make unscheduled refurbishments or post-delivery adaptations to meet accessibility standards. Designing accessibility-focused blueprints saves time and significant financial resources.

The future of bespoke customer service is set to enhance the passenger experience, improve customer satisfaction, and drive efficiencies to ensure long-term financial sustainability of a field that the ageing population is set to drive to continuous growth. ✉



ROBERTO CASTIGLIONI has been a member of the UK Civil Aviation Authority Access to Air Travel Advisory Group since 2012. He works with airlines, airports and PRM-service providers across the world to improve access to air travel for people living with disabling conditions. In his capacity as an accessible air travel expert he has worked with National Enforcement Bodies across Europe and on projects for the European Parliament and European Commission. He has been a member of the easyJet Special Assistance Advisory Group (ESAAG) since 2012 and has chaired ESAAG's Airport Experience working group since 2014. In September 2017, Castiglioni was appointed Chair of the Heathrow Access Advisory Group (HAAG) and joined the European Network Accessible Tourism NGO as an Accessible Air Travel Expert.