

Blind Citizens Australia



Accessibility vs usability – transport perspectives of people who are blind or vision impaired

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I would like to start with a quote stated by a middle aged gentleman about his blindness: “I’m not a baby, I’m not an imbecile, I’m a fully grown adult, I just can’t see”.

There are many misconceptions about blindness, one being that it constitutes a complete loss of sight. The reality is that there are numerous visual conditions which mean that blindness and vision impairment cannot be typecast. The second assumption is that a person who is blind must also be deaf or cognitively impaired, with some people raising their voice or speaking v-e-r-y slowly. Another is that a person requires physical assistance to get around. In this instance, a good friend of mine, Kate, who is a cane user, shared her story of how she was lifted onto a tram by two members of the public despite protesting and threatening bodily harm.

Whilst transport accessibility has progressed substantially, there are still a number of challenges which have yet to be addressed adequately. The first is disability awareness. Whilst there has been a great deal of forward progress in the provision of compliant accessible infrastructure, disability awareness has not developed accordingly. Within the five years of implementation, the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (DSAPT) has led to marked changes in transport provision for people who are blind or vision impaired, including safer pedestrian railway crossings, Tactile Ground Surface Indicators (TGSIs) along the edge of railway stations which provide information regarding hazards to be aware of, as well as many other improvements. However, knowledge of the constraints of disability is not as strong.

In addition, awareness of the purpose of infrastructure developments is often limited to senior representatives who need to ensure that their organisation is not subject to a complaint under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). For the thousands of employees who work

in ensuring the running of our transport system, a large proportion would not be aware of the purpose of TGSIs or the like.

There are many examples which aptly demonstrate this point – audible announcements being turned off on trains, with some drivers noting that they are “annoying” which has left many people who are blind or vision impaired unable to independently travel; bus drivers telling vision impaired customers to read the destination at the front of the bus despite many customers stating that they are unable to, taxi drivers asking blind passengers to direct them using a Melways; and the new green information and red emergency panels which advise Braille users to press the green button for information and red for emergency, which is highly useful for people who are colour blind.

A more poignant example is the case of Laura, a middle aged woman who is deafblind. In many of our conversations, Laura has noted that the ability to travel on Melbourne’s public transport has improved immensely over the last two decades, however there are still many aspects which are unusable. I would like to recount one instance. Laura was waiting for a tram to arrive and was using yellow cue cards with thick black numerals which are extensively used in America to indicate that a person is deafblind. Laura held three cards signalling for the tram number 112 and waited for the tram to approach. When the 112 tram arrived, the driver stopped and signalled for Laura to board. As Laura was unaware of whether this was the tram she was after, she waited to be approached. The driver came out of his tram and walked up to her and tried to communicate with Laura, at one point yelling in her face, however Laura was unable to understand him. The driver, unsure of what to do, got back in the tram and drove off, leaving her to wait for the next tram to arrive.

This example aptly illustrates the distinction between accessibility and usability. Whilst these two terms may appear interchangeable, they are in fact intertwined. Whilst a piece of infrastructure may have been updated to be fully accessible, this may not automatically translate to usability.

Many of my colleagues and counterparts in the disability sector would agree that whilst a target of 25% compliance has led to increased accessibility, the journey from A to B may not be fully accessible. For wheelchair users, an accessible tram stop at one point of a route does not necessarily mean that the stop where they would like to depart will also be accessible. This is also true for transport users who are blind or vision impaired and reliant on a continuous accessible path of travel – if only one part of the system is inaccessible, the entire route is essentially inaccessible.

Whilst the provision of accessible infrastructure has generally focused on transport hubs and modes, there also needs to be a focus on how a person gets to these modes. In order to have a holistic approach, there must also be consideration of footpaths, walkways and good design to allow easy interconnection with other modes. This is becoming more and more important.

Furthermore, the above example of Laura supports that whilst compliance benefits a large proportion of the population, there are still many groups, such as people with multiple disabilities and individuals who are deafblind, who fall within the gaps.

Whilst I continue my presentation, I would like you all to consider the following scenario which is an issue that remains for the most part unaddressed.

- Emergency procedures: How do you as an operator evacuate a person who is blind and communicate with a person who is deafblind? This example is particularly poignant in light of media coverage by the Sydney Daily Telegraph regarding a quadriplegic man left stranded on a CityRail train for hours without vital medication during the first Harbour Bridge breakdown and was told that he would be rescued in two or three days. CityRail has since advised that the evacuation ramps on the next generation of CityRail trains do not take wheelchairs.

Privatisation of the network has also adversely affected the ability of many people who are blind or vision impaired to independently use the system. Without a direct contact point for queries or assistance, many no longer view public transport as an option. Furthermore, drivers and staff are being placed under increased pressure to not only perform their roles, but to be the living, breathing face of transport.

An additional challenge is that accessibility is often considered as an individual component within transport planning, rather than as part of an inclusive approach. Whilst it is argued that we have one of the best public transport systems in the world, the system, without prior knowledge or experience is not easy to use independently. There is a heavy reliance on the visual and cognitive - knowing the times when trains change direction in the City Loop, which platform a set train departs from at different stations and interconnectivity between transport modes are only some of the challenges. These issues do not just affect people who are blind or vision impaired - many sighted colleagues have noted that using a new station for the first time is an intimidating process as they are unfamiliar of where they need to go.

The consideration of accessibility as an individualised component can be demonstrated in the upgrade of bus stops across municipalities. As part of a government funded program, bus stops in many municipalities are being retrofitted to be DDA compliant, which includes shelters, new timetables and Tactile Ground Surface Indicators (TGSIs). In regards to TGSIs, these include directionals which align a person to the entry point of the bus. As someone who uses public transport every day, including community buses, I am aware through my conversations with many drivers, that a large proportion of drivers have worked in the industry for in excess of ten years and have little understanding of what these developments mean. This is true in regards to TGSIs, with many bus drivers stopping well ahead or behind the TGSIs, sometimes in excess of 10 metres. For a person who is blind, it may be difficult to gauge what

type of vehicle has stopped. It is not the first time that I have flagged down a truck by mistake at night.

In addition, where the infrastructure is located may not be compatible with how the mode is used. For example, where a bus loading area is provided separate from the road, TGSIS are often placed at the centre of this bay, however the bus must stop at the very start of the bay. If a person were to follow the directionals, they would probably walk right into the centre of the bus.

Patronage is also a consideration for a person with a disability in being able to adequately use the network. It is no small feat to board a train with a dog guide when there is no standing room. With the goal to reach patronage levels of 20% as outlined in Melbourne 2030, this will need to become more of a consideration, particularly when considering that ageing and disability are invariably connected.

Taking all of these factors into account, there is a greater need to look beyond the minimum provision of standards and to ensure that sufficient consultation is undertaken with disability groups. It is important to ensure that good design principles are considered from the very early stages of planning, with components such as:

- Simple, easy navigable design – this assists people with a disability, tourists, older citizens, make logical sense
- Consistency – in all aspects. Eg. contrast of poles, consistency, layout of stations, signage located logically.
- A range of access options where possible – lifts, stairs, ramps
- Contrast – problem with clear glass, stairs
- Taking into account specific access requirements, including emergencies, height of rolling stock relative to the platforms.

Whilst the Australian Standards, Building Code of Australia and DSAPT are important reference documents, they do not provide the entire picture. Whilst these standards provide defining guidelines, these are still open to a level of interpretation and can lead to technical compliance but inability to use the infrastructure for the

purpose it was constructed. The teal blue TGSIs at Richmond Station is an example of this. For those of you who are not aware, the TGSIs at Richmond are teal blue with a yellow line. Concern was expressed that a person with a vision impairment would not be able to adequately identify the yellow safety line as the colours used were too similar, with insufficient luminance contrast provided. Through consultation and a lot of hard work with Connex, a new standard was developed whereby all metropolitan train stations in the network have been fitted with burnt orange TGSIs which are compliant, ensuring the safety of vision impaired travellers.

Whilst my presentation may seem somewhat critical, it is not aimed to be. The aim of this presentation is to highlight areas where further compliance and work is necessary to ensure a system which is both accessible and usable. Furthermore compliance to the DSAPT is only half of the picture. There is no denying that the provision of accessibility in a 100 year old network is a difficult and costly process, however it is a process which benefits many more groups than just individuals with a disability. We must not be shortsighted in thinking that provision of access for people with a disability negatively compromises the system or that accessibility is unjustifiable because only a small group require it. The numbers are growing and will continue to grow. We are the next generation of people with a disability, with one in five people in this room set to be affected.

There needs to be a continued focus in ensuring that accessibility remains on the agenda and is incorporated as part of inclusive design. The rollout of DSAPT and adhering to the set timelines is only one step. The way forward must also include increased consultation with disability groups to ensure that the developments proposed actually assist the people they are aimed for, rather than hinder. Compliance must also translate to increased awareness of disability and awareness of the purpose of accessible infrastructure, otherwise resources and funds are not producing the targeted results. With all of these factors acknowledged, the journey from A to B and from now

to the future may be a little more straightforward, without too many potholes in the path of travel.