

COUNTRY:.....**FRANCE**
FAMILY NAME:OELSCHLÄGER
First Name:.....Dirk
Title:Senior Advisor Passenger Transport
Company:.....UIC
e-mail address:oelschlaeger@uic.org

SHORT BIOGRAPHY:

Born on 30 August 1964 in Rendsburg, Germany, Dirk Oelschläger started working for Deutsche Bahn (German Railways) in 1995. He worked in political and strategical departments of Deutsche Bahn Holding, such as Transport Policy and International Relations. In 1998 he was seconded for 18 months to the European Commission in Brussels, where he was working at the former DG VII, what has become DG MOVE today. When he returned to Deutsche Bahn in 1999, he took a post at the infrastructure branch of German Railways, DB Netz, where he assisted the development of the new business unit “Regional Networks”. In 2002, he returned to international affairs by joining the department “External Organisations and International Cooperation” at DB Netz. Since March, 2009, he is working at UIC as Senior Advisor Passenger Transport”.

The PASSAGE Project: Best Practice For Accessibility

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by Dirk Oelschläger, UIC

1. The Legal Background

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities calls for full and effective participation and inclusion in society. This means that accessibility to transportation shall be ensured for persons with disabilities on an equal basis to others.

The “REGULATION (EC) No 1371/2007 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 23 October 2007 on rail passengers’ rights and obligations” – known as “Passenger Rights Regulation” or PRR – transposes this principle into the law of the European Union. It grants people with disabilities a right to transport like everybody else. From the perspective of a railway undertaking this means the provision of accessible information for different types of disabilities and the obligation of making all services accessible as much as possible. Where autonomous access to trains is not possible, appropriate assistance should be provided.

On a more detailed level, Technical Specifications for Interoperability for Persons with Reduced Mobility (TSI PRM) stipulate how infrastructure, rolling stock and telematics applications should be adapted in the future in order to facilitate access to railway transport for everybody.

2. Focus: Access and Assistance

The focus of the UIC PASSAGE project is on assistance provision in order to fulfil the stipulations of the PRR and on the exchange of best practice among the experts of the member railways.

3. Accessibility is good for everybody.

Investment in making railway services more accessible is not only for the benefit of persons with disabilities. It is an investment into a better society as a whole. Improving infrastructure for wheelchair users and visually impaired people is also for the benefit of elderly people, passengers with heavy luggage or persons with children in prams. Our European societies are ageing, and appropriate services for elderly people become more and more important. Elderly persons want to stay mobile as long as they can and they will choose the mobility provider which best serves their needs. And, finally, all what we now in the age of between 35 and 60 decide to invest today, will help us later when we become old.

4. Comprehensive signage is essential.

Today's stations serve a lot of functions, but above all they should welcome rail passengers and facilitate their train journey. A comprehensive signage should lead the passenger to find his way to the train and help him to distinguish commercial services, such as shops, amenities and ancillary services, from services directly connected to his journey, such as information desks and waiting areas.

One or more welcome points at the entrance(s) of the station should provide an opportunity for persons with reduced mobility to call for assistance.

Tactile pavings should guide sight-impaired people in a safe way through the station.

Timetable information should be clear and comprehensive also for persons with learning difficulties.

Moreover, real-time audible and visual information should inform the passenger in a comprehensive manner about any short-term changes of his journey, such as delays, change of the track of departure etc.

More details about the above can be found in UIC Leaflet 413.

5. Appropriate service = better business

Despite modern communication and booking means, such as internet and multi-language touch-screen vending machines, ticket counters and booking offices at a station continue to be important places where passengers seek information and want to establish a direct dialogue with a human being. Above all elderly people and persons with reduced mobility appreciate the existence of such centres in stations. Open counters facilitate communication above all with hearing-impaired persons. In stations where traditional closed counters prevail, induction loops for hearing aids should be installed.

Smaller stations are often unstaffed, so appropriate electronic solutions should be found in order to make them accessible for persons with reduced mobility, too. The pictured solution is a sit-down kiosk, accessible for wheelchair users, which does not only sell tickets, but also provides various ancillary information.

6. Better information = better planning

The more information a potential passenger has at his disposal, the better he can plan his journey. Above all persons with reduced mobility, including elderly people, wish to know beforehand whether they need assistance or can make their journey autonomously. In Great Britain, the scheme “Stations Made Easy” has been developed, which provides detailed accessibility information of all British railway stations.

“Stations Made Easy” provides information on how to get into the station (access from bus stops, car parks, other entrances), how to navigate in the station (length of walkways, lifts, stairs, escalators, ramps), what to find in the station (facilities, shops, amenities), where to buy a ticket (travel centres and ticket vending machines), and finally how to get on the train (routes to the platforms, available information channels).

7. “Stations Made Easy”: Example York

The application is web-based, and for every station, a schematic map is available. The pictured example is the station of York in Northern England. By hovering the mouse pointer across different elements of that map, pop-up windows appear and provide photos and details of that specific element (e.g. lift, ramp, ticket counter, vending machines). “Stations Made Easy” is a very sophisticated scheme that requires much discipline from the responsible station managers, who have to regularly report any changes (including temporary impairments, such as

construction and repair works) to the scheme. So the scheme needs regular updating in order to maintain its value for the customer.

8. Challenge: barrier-free access to train

The historical challenge of railways in Europe is to provide level access from the platform to the train. Rolling stock and platform heights have developed in many different ways in Europe. Harmonisation is easier on regional networks with dedicated rolling stock (such as metros, regional lines), but the problem remains at nodal points where different types of trains may serve the same platforms.

9. Second-best but realistic: Assistance

So, unless barrier-free access to trains is possible, appropriate assistance must bridge the gap. Railways in Europe have developed a variety of assistance schemes and services, and one of the objectives of the UIC PASSAGE project is to compare them, assess them and to exchange practical information among the responsible experts. During our project meetings, we have already identified a number of these schemes as good practice and partly were given on-site presentations, like in the case of the Spanish “Atendo” service in Madrid, the Belgian scheme “B for You” in Antwerp and the nationwide call centre for the German service “mobil mit Handicap” in Schwerin.

The PASSAGE project has developed over the years as a valuable information exchange forum for the responsible experts and continues to attentively monitor the development of the European legal framework regarding persons with reduced mobility and its potential implications on future railway business.