

**INDIAN OCEAN BASED AIR
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FUTURE CULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR AIRLINES AND AIRPORTS

»
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Future Cultural Challenges for Airlines and Airports

By Finn Majlergaard, CEO Gugin

Introduction

Assuming we are all alike is one of the greatest mistakes we human beings are making all the time. Another mistake we constantly make is to assume that our way of doing things is the only right way. So when people do things differently e.g. how people queue up or what we ascribe status to we try to educate them to do or see it our way. This

is usually not well received and a conflict starts.

Until today people around the world have largely agreed on how we should behave in an airport and onboard an aircraft. The passenger growth has been so moderate that all the new passengers adopted the existing behavioural patterns without any major questions. With the rapid



growth in the number of passengers ahead, we will experience a lot of cultural clashes both in the airport and onboard the aircraft because some of the new passenger groups have cultural norms and values far from the existing group of passengers.



Some examples of upcoming cultural conflicts

- What if one ethnic group insists that they have priority over another ethnic group?
- What if a gender insists that it has superiority over the other gender?
- What if a person with one religious belief refuses to sit next to a person with another religious belief?
- What if an obese person claims the right to occupy 2 seats?
- What if some passengers complain about another passenger's or group of passengers' odour?
- What if a group of passengers gets irritated because of a number of elderly people who needs more time when boarding or de-boarding the aircraft?

The list is endless which is why we have to develop a culture where the norms prevent conflicts to develop. We also need to train staff both on the ground and in the air to tackle cultural disagreements before they develop into a conflict.

Your rules don't matter

You might have rules for how you want your crew and staff to behave in different situations, but to your customers, these rules don't matter. The only thing that matters to each of your customers is the sense of justice and level of fairness that he or she experiences. That sense of justice and perception of fairness is very individual based on cultural background, social class, age, occupation, religion, nationality and many other factors.

3 key cultural challenges

According to the IATA report India, China, Indonesia and sub-Saharan Africa are the new fastgrowing markets. Africa alone will provide 192 million new passengers by 2013 according to IATA.

This is of course great news for the aviation industry. There are however some challenges associated with these new markets that have to be addressed by both airports and airlines.

While IATA and others are focused on political, legal and economic risks Gugin has looked at the cultural risks and opportunities associated with the rapid growth in relatively new markets. The impact and influence of cultural norms and values are often severely underestimated until they take an organisation down. In the introduction, we mentioned how much the incident at United Airlines cost. There are many other examples like this and a lot more will come partly because we will have more cultural conflicts and partly because the incidents are good stories for the always hungry media.

New Groups of people will introduce a new culture

Millions of new passengers from emerging and frontier markets will change the way we behave in airports and onboard aircraft. Until recently the steady growth in the aviation industry has predominantly happened in the western world and in affluent social groups elsewhere who could afford to fly either for business or pleasure. That is going to change and the change process has already started.

The existing norms (how we are expected to behave) will come under pressure. A norm is a social contract between a group of people who implicitly agree on how to behave and who to give privileges and status to. It has worked until today because the majority of the travellers are coming from the same cultural super-system. There is a common cultural agreement on equality between genders, religion, age, race, social class, etc. There is also a common agreement on that priority is given to first- and business class passenger and frequent flyers irrespectively of their genders, religion, age, race, social class, etc.

More passengers will claim that their cultural values are superior to your rules

We expect that more cultural clashes will arise as new large groups of people are going to start flying. We will see people who will try to extend the privileges they have due to the status in their local community in the airport and on board the aircraft. It will be people or groups of people who will claim a special status because of their race, gender, social class, religion or sexual orientation.

They will object against waiting in line with other passengers and will not respect the FIFO principles. Neither will they respect the



privileges that are given to first- and business class passengers and frequent flyers.

The equality norms will be challenged

Today almost everybody accepts that some passengers have privileges because of their travel class or their travel frequency. But we would not accept that some passengers had privileges because of their race, gender or religion.

More overweight passengers will require more space

One person, one fare, one seat. This has been the guiding formula for air travel since the early days of commercial aviation. But what happens when one person can't fit in one seat? Last November, after a six-year

legal battle, Canada's domestic airlines were forced to comply with an FTA rule instituting a one-person, one-fare policy that would see obese passengers receive an extra seat at no extra charge. The argument was that obesity is a disability and it would, therefore, be discrimination if they were charged more. OECD predicts that 50% of the US population and 35% of the global population will be obese by 2030. Apart from the obvious challenges for the healthcare systems, the rapid growth in numbers of obese people will also challenge the aviation industry. With airlines trying to squeeze more and more people into the aircraft – at least in economy class – there will be more and more people who cannot fit into their assigned seat. This is not only a problem for the obese person but also for the people sitting next to her or him. Boarding and de-boarding will also be slowed down, which might make the other passengers irritated and stress the crew who try to make sure the aircraft can depart on time. It will lead to higher costs and a decrease in employee- and customer satisfaction.

Elderly people will fly a lot more and they want respect

The number of elderly people is growing rapidly across the world due to better





healthcare and lifestyle changes. In the year 2015, there were 900,9 million people over 60 years old. That number will increase to 2.092 million in the year 2050 according to a UN report (3). Not only will we get a lot more elderly people, but many of them will also travel because they have money and a fairly good physical health.

That is, of course, good news for the aviation industry but there are some cultural challenges that need to be addressed. Similar to the issue of obese and overweight people a lot of elderly people will require more time, assistance and more space when boarding and de-boarding the aircraft. They will need more help from the flight crew getting settled in their seat.

The crew will feel a dilemma because they only have limited time and resources during the boarding the de-boarding process. They also have to pay attention to all the other passengers while doing all the other tasks. One side of the dilemma is that the elderly passengers will feel that they get bad service, but the crew simply don't have time or resources to assist all of them.

The other side of the dilemma is that the other passengers will get irritated that the boarding and de-boarding process takes a lot longer than it used to. Most passengers will understand that elderly people need more time and space but only to a certain extent. Beyond the border of tolerance, it is expected that the airport and the airline find alternative solutions.

The big question is, how do we secure that all passengers get a positive experience while the turn-around time in the airport can be kept down and the flight crew have sufficient time to do everything they have to do? The solution will require a paradigm shift in customer service and in operation management.

What shall airlines and airports consider?

As change is inevitable you have to decide whether you want to influence and control the change process, or you want to remain responsive to whatever happens. If you decide to stay ahead of the game and try to lead the cultural change in a favourable

direction you have to plan ahead and control the execution very carefully. If you go too slow people will not change behaviour and if you go too fast people will discover what you are up to and resist the change.

Gugin has facilitated cultural change processes for companies and organisations around the world since 2001 and we will be very happy to work with you too. There are a number of macro drivers that affect all industries. It is political, economic, social, technological, cultural, environmental and legal drivers. They influence each industry differently, but they do influence you and your industry whether you like it or not.

At the industry level, we have a number of additional drivers we have to take into consideration. You can influence any of these drivers but your response to them will determine how well you as an airline is positioned in the future. So if you can facilitate a cultural change that prepares you for the future reality you are in a much better position than your competitors. Anyone can fly a person from A -> B but only your airline can give that person a unique experience.