

## Disruption Happens- How you manage it is crucial

Disruption to any transport operation is an ever present threat and especially so on air-rail links. Disruption can range from minor to major with consequences also having a similar range. Managing the disruption can have a significant impact on the consequences of any event – particularly in the area of protecting the customer experience.

A review of the arrangements for managing disruption is usually undertaken following either regular and sustained disruptive events or a significant event with enormous repercussions. These events can lead to a general reputational problem that will have chronic effects on customer retention or acute effects in terms of missed flights and significant compensation events. These real examples demonstrate this:

A train heading for the airport is brought to a stand three miles short of the airport station. The power goes off and the battery back-up lasts little more than 10 of the requisite 60 minutes. Train rescue is necessary but operational staff are concentrating on diagnostics rather than solutions for customers. After 2 hours, three hundred customers are transferred to another train and they arrive at the airport when most of the last flights of the day have gone.

Some customers leave the airport rail station in the hope of a solution from the airline, most return to the rail station to join the 250 customers demanding compensation. Processes are not in place to compensate or to provide alternative means of travel and hotel accommodation. Several hours later ad-hoc arrangements are made and an unsatisfactory recovery delivers accommodation and cash in hand compensation. Letters of complaint follow for weeks.

A train heading to the airport is brought to a stand halfway between the city centre and the airport on a dark wintery evening, some 10km away. It being rush hour many business travellers are quickly anxious about their ability to get a flight. The overhead line power to the train is off. The infrastructure operator promises a solution soon.

After one hour the train has still not moved: worse still the public address system and train lighting does not work due to the lack of electricity supply. Being literally left in the dark without information 20 of the 180 passengers start to get off the train and find their own way to the airport. All train movements on other lines in the area are stopped for safety whilst the renegade passengers find their way to the nearest fence and over-bridge to take taxis and local bus transport to the airport.

The source of the power failure is still not found and eventually the emergency response team arrive almost 2 hours into the incident. They lead the remaining passengers to the road side and after a further hour coaches arrive to take them to the airport after flights to most destinations have gone.

In both these incidents operator and customer are equally dissatisfied that a system was not in place to:

- Recover from the failure quickly
- Keep communicating with customers – even without power
- Provide alternative travel arrangements
- Provide accommodation
- Compensate equitably
- Get people to their families, colleagues and their customers in time for the important event

A review is a necessity when it is not clear that lessons from these events are being learnt and procedural changes made to improve future performance in this area have not been fully implemented. The review can capture any gaps in:

- the strategy or vision for managing disruption and its effect on the bottom line;
- any existing initiatives in place and their effects;
- embedding of key processes within key roles;
- cohesion across functional areas in responding to disruption;
- awareness of roles and responsibilities during disruption; and
- fitness for purpose of the existing arrangements.

The review will help in translating feedback and research to better understand customers' concerns resulting in real action to meet their aspirations and deliver the opportunities for growth and expansion to meet emerging needs.



## Methodology

The most significant threat to service delivery is disruption. Transport providers must make every effort to minimise the effects of disruption when it occurs whether minor, major, planned or unplanned. On air-rail links operators need to be especially prepared to deal with every eventuality with confidence and ensure that they:

- Put the customer first in decision making considering the end to end journey
- Keep employees and customers fully informed of progress in dealing with an incident and service recovery throughout its course
- Be prepared at every level and in every role to manage disruption in whatever form
- Be an industry leader in the field of managing disruption

Airport customers are usually very clear about their view on the management of disruption yet it remains a critical challenge for operators if they are to meet and exceed this expressed customer need. In order to achieve this aspiration they need to ensure that:

- Processes, procedures and systems cover all eventualities and are able to meet the needs of customers and staff
- Contingency plans are in place that deal with disruption to a degree of depth that supports decision making
- Training and resources cater for the needs of every employee in meeting the needs of customers during disruption, including information provision
- Customer information is provided that is consistently timely, freely available and useful
- Measures of response to disruption are in place along with an effective lessons learnt process to support continuous improvement

In order to achieve a step change in the management of disruption, a management systems approach should be taken to address this complex problem. In addition to clear strategy and policy intent, a series of processes should be developed and documented to set out key roles and responsibilities at times of disruption. This enables a structured and consistent approach to be taken in the event of disruption and facilitated measurement of performance and continuous learning. A disruption management system may be used to set out key processes.

A summary of the likely processes and their scope is outlined below:



## Process Summary

**Policy:** Sets out company strategy and policy relating to management of disruption.

**Planned Disruption:** Sets out the arrangements for identifying, assessing, planning, resourcing and executing service provision during planned disruptive events.

**Major Disruption:** Sets out the arrangements for responding to major service disruption including implementation of contingency plans that are customer led. It also details how escalation of disruption from normal to minor to major is managed. Additionally, it identifies key major disruption risk areas and actions to avoid/mitigate impact on customers.

**Minor Disruption:** Sets out how minor disruption should be managed to minimise/avoid impact on customers.

**Service Recovery Implementation:** Sets out how service recovery should be managed to ensure customer service is properly balanced with the need to return to normal service considering the range of service recovery techniques, flows and timing.

**Pinch Points:** Sets out the arrangements for avoiding disruption in high risk areas through a range of proactive monitoring techniques and deployment of technical and operational staff.

**On-call Arrangements:** Sets out arrangements for use of on-call staff to support disruption management.

**Disruption Management Centre:** Sets out when and how the incident room will be initiated, its function, facilities and resourcing.

**Disruption Conference:** Sets out how conference calls will be initiated and managed to deliver effective support to management of disruption.

**Customer and Staff Information:** Sets out arrangements for the provision of timely information to staff and customers, the channels to be used and how information will be maintained.

**Operation of Information Technology:** Sets out how the disruption IT will be initiated, what information will be provided and how it should be used.

**Disruption Resourcing Arrangements:** Sets out how support resources can be requested and how these will be despatched to support the management of disruption at key locations.

**Communications Team Support:** Sets out how the communications support team will ensure that key media and stakeholder information is developed, issued and maintained in a timely manner.

**Substitute Services:** Sets out how substitute services are planned and initiated for planned and unplanned disruption.

**Post Disruption Reviews:** Sets out how disruption management performance will be assessed and how improvements will be identified and tracked for implementation.

**Customer and Staff:** Sets out how customer and staff feedback will be gathered post disruption and how this will be disseminated within the organisation to ensure staff are aware of the impact (positive and negative) on customers and staff during disruptive events.

These processes may be used to form the Disruption Management System (DMS).

Also critical to success is the development of Customer Service Contingency Plans. These plans identify the most likely disruption scenarios and their impact on customers both in journey time and journey options. They also set out:

- Where additional staff will be required
- What information should be given to customers (a prewritten script specifically for the disruption scenario)
- Where replacements are being provided
- What alternative journey options exist

## Implementation

Having processes and plans documented will achieve little without effective training and briefing. A blended learning approach to managing disruption should be adopted. This approach takes real life scenarios and looks at these from both a customer and staff member view. Training is also cross functional to ensure cross fertilisation of views and to support cross role understanding at times of disruption.

To further support the implementation of this approach, table top exercises can be held to ensure key on-call staff and managers are aware of the arrangements and are able to implement them effectively.

## Conclusion

The management system approach to managing disruption provides structure to the response to disruptive events using a systematic yet pragmatic approach. It makes sure that customer information is integral to any disruption recovery providing customer service recovery in parallel as part of real time operational processes.

