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EMPLOYEE COMPETENCES OF AIRPORT SPECIAL ASSISTANTS

Introduction

According to the recent results of Labour Force Survey (LFS), *the number of people aged 16+ with disabilities in Poland amounted to 3.0 million (3,040,000), which means that 10% of the population aged 15 and more have a legal disability certificate*[1], while according to the National Population and Housing Census, in 2011 there were 3.1 million (3,133,500) certificate holders and the total number of the disabled reached almost 4.7 million (4,697,000) which accounts for 12.2% of the whole country's population[2]. The above figures show that a substantial number of the members of society are affected by the problem, which is noticeable in everyday life. According to E.Popławska: *They also learning, work and are successful in sports, politics and work. They are among us and it is not difficult to notice them*[3]. Thus, we cannot ignore the challenges that the society is facing – there is a need to eliminate architectural, technical and communication barriers and to protect people with various dysfunctions against discrimination and social exclusion.

The adaptation of regulations and social rules that should ensure equal treatment of persons with disabilities is a long-term process of reaction to the changes and the new information about their needs. Moreover, some flexibility is necessary in the solutions that are offered in order to adapt them individually to particular types of disability[4]. This concerns airports, which adapt their services and infrastructure to facilitate travel by passengers with various disabilities or reduced mobility. Detailed guidelines regarding the ways how airports should protect and support passengers with disabilities are included in the Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006 , which imposes such obligations without the possibility to deny or limit the assistance[5]. These issues are also regulated by the European ground services directive, in ICAO Annex 9, issue 11 (regarding facilitation of air transport).

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[1] http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/p,78,dane-demograficzne (Accessed: 14 August 2019).
[2] http://www.niepelnosprawni.gov.pl/p,78,dane-demograficzne (Accessed: 14 August 2019).
[3] E. Porawska, *Niepełnosprawność w naszej codzienności*, Wydawnictwo „HEDOM", Warszawa 2011, p. 19.
[4] Ibidem, pp. 66, 74, 75.
[5] Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 concerning the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility when travelling by air

It is also important that airport special assistants (ASA) should have adequate competences.

The aim of this article is to describe the character of the work and competences of airport assistants of passengers with disabilities and to present suggestions of good practices of the service with regard to the type of disability.

1. Passengers with disabilities and barriers that they face in travel and everyday life

The definition of a disabled person or person with reduced mobility PRM is given in Regulation 1107/2006 which was mentioned above. It says that a disable person is *any person whose mobility when using transport is reduced due to any physical disability (sensory or locomotor, permanent or temporary), intellectual disability or impairment, or any other cause of disability, or age, and whose situation needs appropriate attention and the adaptation to his or her particular needs of the service made available to all passengers*[6].

The everyday life of people with dysfunctions that involves overcoming different barriers is difficult emotionally and challenging. The barriers that disabled people and PRM face on a daily basis involve the following restrictions :

- architectural,
- technical,
- communication,
- psychological.

Architectural barriers include obstacles that make it impossible for people with disabilities to have access to and use places, buildings, furniture, equipment etc. that are easily accessible and necessary to nondisabled people. They are for example: stairs, curbs, inconvenient (too high) check-in desks, etc.

Technical barriers include obstacles that result from the lack of adequate facilities or equipment that facilitates mobility or their inadequacy to particular types of disability, which frequently results in social exclusion or problems with functioning in society of the disabled.

The term *communication barrier* refers to obstacles that are encountered in the course of communication processes and make them impossible or difficult. The limitations may refer to

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[6] Ibidem.

hearing problems, which impede easy transfer of information and or the communication with the group affected by a particular disorder or dysfunction.

Psychological barriers are all kinds of limitations that may result from assessments, stereotypes, prejudices or curiosity; they may accompany persons with disabilities and the people who have contact with the disabled. They may be the result of bad experiences or the lack of knowledge about a particular dysfunction and fear that is involved with the necessity to face it and the anxiety whether sufficient help can be offered . Psychological barriers include negative attitude, timidity, a lack of interest in the problem, a neglect of listeners, a lack of concentration, emotional over-involvement, a lack of factual preparation, dogmatic thinking, the inability to listen and weariness.[7]

Due to the fact *that barriers created by the society constitute a significant mental burden to many people with disabilities, which consequently has an impact on their future*[8], legal regulations aiming at the protection of these people force airport management to introduce changes and to eliminate obstacles so that the disabled have equal travelling opportunities. According to S. Kawula, *a commonly expected assistance to individuals or groups in difficult, stressful and breakthrough situations that they cannot cope with*[9] is an important element of social support.

2. Types of airport assistance and statuses of disability

Airports are responsible for the elimination of any barriers that are faced by persons with disabilities, restricted mobility or any other dysfunctions that make it difficult for them to take advantage of the services that are offered. Airports meet this demand by removing architectonical and technical barriers through the adaptation of the infrastructure and provision of adequate ramps, parking spaces and toilets. The provision of special vehicles, the so called *ambulifts*, facilitates boarding of such passengers without the necessity to use stairs. Airports also provide the opportunity to receive special assistance at the airport and during flights, in transit trips, at the check-in procedures and luggage collection, etc. The facilities include **blue path**s *at the airport, which is a system of signs and special help points which makes it easier*

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[7] https://mfiles.pl/pl/index.php/Bariery_komunikacyjne (Accessed: 14 August 2019).
[8] E. Porawska, *Niepełnosprawność...,* op. cit., p. 78.
[9] T. Żółkowska, *Usługi dla dorosłych osób z niepełnosprawnością intelektualną – integracja czy segregacja* [in:] A. Klinik (ed.), *W stronę podmiotowości osób niepełnosprawnych*, Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls", Kraków 2008, p. 16.

for disabled persons to travel through the airport and to reach terminal facilities. [10]. Moreover, the development of the codes of good conduct[11] provides good practices regarding conduct with passengers that need assistance.

In order to provide effective and adequate assistance to disabled passengers with regard to the variety of the existing dysfunctions, the aviation sector introduced the so called statuses of disability, which enables airport and airline staff to share the information on the type of assistance that is desired by a particular passenger and to make necessary arrangements and adaptations. The status is entered in the booking and transferred to the members of the staff whose duty is to provide adequate assistance at all flight stages until the final destination. Thus, the airport staff is able to prepare in advance the necessary facilities, which results in an efficient and safe service with the compliance to all procedures and requirements of airline companies. Diagram 1 below presents statuses with regard to disabilities that are most commonly used at airports.[12]

Diagram 1. Status and disability type

reduced mobility – **WCHR, WCHS, WCHC**	hard of hearing and deaf– **DEAF**	hard of seeing and blind – **BLND**
psychological and mental problems (Asperger, Schizofrenia, Alzheimer, memory problems, etc.) – **DPNA**	passenger with emotional support animal - **ESAN**	**MEDA** - medical assistance, MAAS - "meet and assist", other passengers qualified as PRM

Source: https://www.airport-poznan.com.pl/pl/dla-pasazerow/wylatuje-z-poznania/asysta-prm/normy-jakosci (Accessed: 14 August 2019).

An adequately assigned disability status is an important factor in the management of work and assistance to the disabled. It helps avoid the discomfort of continuous explanation of the type of assistance the passengers apply for. As a result, an emphasis should be placed on the

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[10] http://www.krakowairport.pl/pl/pasazer,c70/przed-podroza,c72/specjalne-potrzeby,c75/osoby-niepelnosprawne-i-o-ograniczonej-sprawnosci-ruchowej-prm,a195.html (Accessed: 14 August 2019).
[11] www.krakowairport.pl, *Kodeks dobrego postępowania przy obsłudze osób niepełnosprawnych oraz osób o ograniczonej sprawności ruchowej podróżujących drogą lotniczą w Kraków Airport* (Accessed:14 August 2019).
[12] https://www.airport-poznan.com.pl/pl/dla-pasazerow/wylatuje-z-poznania/asysta-prm/normy-jakosci (Accessed: 14 August 2019).

first contact of the PRM Assistant with the disabled passenger during which adequate questions should be asked to verify the status assigned during the booking. The verification and possible change are crucial to the provision of adequate assistance in the course of further journey. Incorrectly assigned statuses impede assistance and result in the necessity to wait for the service or the necessary equipment, which disrupts work at the airport, extends the service time and engages airport special assistants who may be needed with other passengers. These factors may cause flight delays, which involves additional costs.

3. Characteristics of the position of airport special assistant

The staff of the airport or air carrier that provides direct assistance to passengers with disabilities and persons with reduced mobility should have knowledge in providing the assistance. Consequently, the assistants should be guaranteed adequate training in this area. However, this does not mean that the staff will have expertise on all types of disability and know how to deal with all the equipment used by passengers with disabilities or persons with reduced mobility. As a result, proper communication between the passenger and the attendants is crucial so that the assistance should meet the passenger's particular needs. The staff should make all reasonable efforts to provide the assistance in an adequate way.[13]

The basic responsibilities of airport special assistants include providing passengers the necessary assistance in:

- checking-in luggage, transportation from the check –in point to the aircraft, boarding and disembarking with the use of the accessible equipment with regard to the passenger's needs,
- moving from/to the aircraft door to/from the seat,
- luggage reclamation.

The assistance to passengers with disabilities is provided in the working hours of particular airports. Thus, special assistants work at all times of day and night, which means they must be available and ready to stay at work in case of unexpected situations, e.g. flight delays. They are expected to have at least communicative knowledge of English and computer skills that are necessary to manage applications of passengers with disabilities that are sent by air carriers.

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[13] https://www.ulc.gov.pl/pl/prawa-pasazera/poradnik-dla-pasazerow/978-osoby-niepelnosprawne (Accessed: 14 August 2019).

In order to ensure high quality service to PRM at airports, it is crucial that appropriate employees should be selected who have abilities to take the position in question. The recruitment process should concentrate on competences that the candidates should possess and that cannot be trained on the job such as empathy, tolerance and kindness. Employees who are impatient and not open to diversity may quickly experience job-burnout and cease working with due diligence and care.

4. Competences and good practices in airport special assistance

The work of airport special assistants involves the necessity to work under time pressure and the physical effort that is needed when transporting PRM passengers to aircraft. Due to the variety of impairments, mental resilience and the ability to respond to other people's needs are necessary. The stress and tension that are experienced by the staff require significant skills to interpret the symptoms, alleviate them or to be able to ask for help. This requires high personal and communication (not only linguistic) competencies and the feeling of responsibility for the tasks assigned as well as the ability to cope with challenges that may emerge unexpectedly.

The managers of PRM staff are responsible for providing adequate conditions of work and sufficient amount of equipment and employees, which guarantees proper accomplishment of the tasks. In the course of trainings, emphasis is placed on a appropriate execution of duties, e.g. the methods of moving the disabled or managing stress, which helps avoid injuries or health problems among the staff and consequently results in the decrease of sick leaves among the employees and in their job satisfaction. Regular auditing of the assistants' work is required as it leads to catching errors early and making appropriate corrections in staff training.

Proper management should develop working environment that is based on trust so that employees could always ask for help or present irregularities in service and obtain their superiors' support. This is very important at airports as early detected errors can be rectified. Moreover, the notification of mistakes may result in the correction of procedures and principles, which helps avoid possible serious consequences in the future. One should agree with J.Palka, that *the greater the risk appetite of the employee, the more trust must he/she put in the superiors and co-workers, and vice versa: the less risky the operation, the less important the high level of trust*[14].

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[14] J. Palka, *Otwartość w procesie komunikowania się ludzi w organizacji* [in:] W. Adamus (ed.), *Wybrane aspekty zarządzania organizacjami*, *Krakowska* Szkoła Wyższa im. Andrzeja Frycza Modrzewskiego, Kraków 2005, p. 58.

Good practices in communication with PRM persons should include an introductory interview, which helps determine adequate form of assistance and assign an appropriate status. This is important in the case of passengers who cannot manage stairs unaided (WCHS) or the ones who need assistance to reach the seat and be moved (WSHC). A wrongly assigned status may lead to the passenger's feeling of discomfort because of the necessity to wait for adequate assistance. Another good practice should be, when talking to PRM passenger, that the assistant does not physically dominate over the disabled person; the assistant should step aside to avoid the passenger's feeling of being hemmed or sit beside on a chair.[15] It is crucial that the assistant should be patient, understanding and not afraid to ask questions if he/she cannot understand the passenger, especially when the passenger has problems with speaking. It is also important that the assistant should speak directly to the disabled passenger and not only to the accompanying person.

The service to passengers with the DPNA status, which implies various psychologic and mental problems (such as Asperger, Schizophrenia, problems with concentration or memory, etc.) involves significant abilities to show patience, understanding and adequate use of language; e.g. avoiding childish speech and adjusting the pace of speech[16]. Other issues concern the necessary amount of time devoted to the passenger and the skill to meet individual needs. It is a good practice to provide a separate room or individual transportation, which may increase the passenger's comfort and alleviate the stress. As in the case of PRM, when servicing DPNA passengers, it is important to address them personally using concrete and not abstract language.[17]

When starting servicing a hard-of-seeing or deaf (DEAF) passengers, it is important not to approach them from behind or touch unexpectedly. A convenient distance and standing in front of the passenger make lip reading possible. It is important to speak calmly and not too quickly, in short and clear sentences with clearly pronounced words. The assistant should not shout or cover the mouth.[18] Natural gestures and facial expression are advised to make the passenger feel comfortable. When the assistant cannot use the sign language it is advisable to apply additional forms to support correct understanding such as writing or translators.

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[15] A. Jędrzejczak-Spycha (ed.), *Savoir-vivre wobec osób z niepełnosprawnością*, Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Integracji, Warszawa 2016.
[16] P.J. Moran*, Efektywna komunikacja z osobami ze spektrum autyzmu,* Harmonia Universalis, Gdańsk 2017, p. 97.
[17] Ibidem, p. 40.
[18] M. Gajda, *Jak porozumieć się z osobą niesłyszącą?, „*Magazyn Integracja", 6/2006.

Passengers very frequently want to use such means of communication as both the assistants and the passengers are made sure that their arrangements have been properly understood.

When welcoming a blind person, the assistant can touch delicately the passenger's shoulder and introduce him/herself. Having obtained the information about the desired form of assistance, the assistant should adapt the service to the passenger's expectations and – in the case of a blind person – offer the arm and follow half a step behind. It is important to inform the passenger where they are going, what they are doing and what is happening around them. The passenger should be informed about the dangers and obstacles that may be encountered by a blind person; in smaller planes, for example, it is easy to hit one's head, etc. When talking to a blind passenger, it is important that typical expressions of everyday language are used such as *see you later* or *good-bye* to make the contact natural and make the passenger feel at ease.[19]

5. Analysis of the competences of airport special assistants and good practices in airport special services – results of author's survey

In order to identify key competences of airport special assistants and good practices of work at airports, in August 2019 a website-based survey was conducted. The link to the questionnaire was sent to 25 airport special assistants at an airport in Poland. The research tool was a survey questionnaire that was completed correctly by 10 employees (some of the staff did not complete the questionnaire or completed it partially). Despite the fact that the research group was insignificant in number, some conclusions can be drawn that may be useful in further research on the competences in question and the good practices in servicing persons with disabilities at airports.

According to the survey, 100% of respondents admit that an adequate way of communication and conversation with passengers is the most crucial factor of special assistance. The competences that the respondents mention include: the ability to work with people under time pressure, patience, divisibility of attention, the experience in work with people, the ability to concentrate and to manage unusual situations. The list also includes empathy, physical and mental strengths as well as the necessity to have appropriate trainings that increase staff competences.

Good practices of assistance to PRM passengers include help during security check, sense of humour, patience and equal treatment. Moreover it is important not to impose oneself, make

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[19] A. Jędrzejczak-Spycha (ed.), *Savoir-vivre…,* op. cit.

sure about the level of mobility impairment, adjust the equipment to the degree and type of the impairment, assist the passenger at the check-in and offer airport facilities that are necessary in transportation at the airport.

According to special assistants who were surveyed, servicing DPNA passengers should avoid assessments; the assistance should be open to their needs in the course of airport procedures and it should have individual approach. They also mentioned composure, calm and clear and straightforward messages. In the case of passengers with hearing impairments, the qualities that support the service include: eye contact, the use of paper and pen, mobile phones, gestures, the ability to use sign language and the desire to communicate despite the barriers.

As regards the passengers with sight impairment, the respondents think that it is important to be attentive to passengers' needs and inform them about everything that is happening around so that they do not feel at a loss. Moreover, an arm should be offered and the passenger should be informed about possible obstacles when going to the plane. According to the respondents good practices include the necessity to stay confident, carry a relaxed conversation to alleviate the stress and be cautious on the way to the plane.

All respondents stated that they liked their job but they listed several factors that make their work more difficult: late arrival at the airport of passengers with disabilities, a lack of cooperation of the passenger, bad communication, organizational chaos, a lack of adequate infrastructure and space for the disabled passengers. Other elements that impeded the work of airport special assistants were: insufficient number of employees, a lack of adequate conditions for relaxation and rest and a sense of underestimation by the management.

The survey confirmed the significance of competence management in the work of airport special assistants. One of the most important issues is the elimination of factors that obstruct everyday work which will have a positive impact on the completion of tasks by the staff and consequently increase the quality of the service. Adequate recruitment that selects candidates with appropriate soft skills as well as suitable introductory and refreshment trainings will help the staff gain and maintain the necessary skills. The emphasis on the communicative professionalism of the staff and its continuous development through training and briefing will be helpful in the accomplishment of tasks. Moreover, continuous improvement of the infrastructure and facilities and adequate organization of work will influence the quality of the service.

Conclusions

It is a common knowledge that persons with disabilities are entitled to equal treatment and protection against discrimination . Unfortunately, a common practice is that the barriers that they face make it impossible for them to function in society in the way healthy people do. The airport assistance helps the disabled regain independence. Thanks to the introduction of good practices in passenger service management and the emphasis on good communication, most of the inconveniences related to the existing barriers become less troublesome and stressful. As a result, a person with disabilities may enjoy travelling and find it satisfactory while the airports may expect an increase in trust, receive good opinions and have no complaints about bad service.

In order to ensure high quality airport assistance, it is important to take into consideration the issue of communication between the staff and the passengers, the development of staff competences and first of all to employ the right candidates who are empathic, kind and open to other people as these are the qualities that cannot be taught in an ordinary introductory training. Another important aspect to be considered by the management is to provide good working conditions and training in order to improve the staff communication competences, which will eventually result in their satisfaction with the contact with passengers, increase their skills to overcome problems that are caused by communication errors.

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[7] www.airport-poznan.com.pl/pl/dla-pasazerow/wylatuje-z-poznania/asysta-prm/normy-jakosci.
[8] www.krakowairport.pl, *Kodeks dobrego postępowania przy obsłudze osób niepełnosprawnych oraz osób o ograniczonej sprawności ruchowej podróżujących drogą lotniczą w Kraków Airport.*

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       niepełnosprawnych,* Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls", Kraków 2008.

Abstract

Airports face the necessity to provide assistance to persons with disabilities and reduced mobility with the access to the services they offer in order to ensure equal travelling opportunities. This is done by the elimination of barriers that disabled passengers encounter. The article describes the types of disabilities with regard to the necessity to offer adequate assistance, the desired competences of airport special assistants and it suggests good practices in communication management with passengers who expect to obtain help in overcoming the existing barriers.