

Air Rage: An Emerging Challenge for the Airline Industry

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Abstract

Airline personnel have, increasingly, found it necessary to deal with unruly and disruptive passengers, some of whom display violent behaviour. This behaviour can result in serious injury to staff and passengers and can compromise the safety of the aircraft. Termed 'Air Rage' this phenomenon enjoys regular media attention and airlines, unions and governments are attempting initiatives to tackle this issue.

This paper examines the main incidents of air rage and presents reasons why this phenomenon should come to the public eye in recent years. This paper also summarises initiatives that airlines, air transport unions and aviation authorities have introduced in an attempt to combat air rage incidents. Finally, the paper concludes by reporting on preliminary research undertaken to assess the importance of including air rage in higher education curricula and discussing the role higher education can play in better preparing graduates to deal with these situations.

Key words: Air Rage, The Air Travel Industry, Higher Education

Introduction

By many measures, the travel industry is becoming busier. Skies are congested, airports more crowded and air travel is becoming more accessible for more people (Jeannot 2000). This increased congestion at airports and on airplanes may result in a change concerning the notion of travelling by air. Those who use air travel on a regular basis may, increasingly, consider the experience mundane; infrequent or first time travellers may find it a disappointment – the relaxed, spacious and glamorous image portrayed by many airline advertisements is often at odds with that experienced by those travelling economy. Indeed, Bor (1999:5) suggests that ‘it does not require a degree in psychology to recognise that the reality of air travel is far removed from the expectations and images that the increasing number of air travellers have of the experience’. Additionally, any mystique surrounding the air travel industry has been all but eradicated by ‘fly on the wall’ documentaries (eg, ‘Airport!’ and ‘Airline!’). Airlines are constantly striving to attain full aircraft on busy routes, while achieving a profit in what has increasingly become a very price sensitive industry. The occurrence of air rage incidents may be, in part, attributable to the constraints under which the air travel industry operates.

This paper aims to identify the main incidents of air rage and presents reasons why this phenomenon should occur. This article also summarises the initiatives that airlines and aviation authorities have introduced in an attempt to combat air rage incidents. The paper reports on empirical research undertaken amongst Australian educators in order to assess the importance of including air rage in higher education curricula. It concludes by

discussing the role higher education can play in better preparing graduates to deal with situations such as these and identifies future collaborative research.

Air rage is a relatively new but high profile phenomenon, such incidents being regularly reported in the popular press (see for example ‘The Passenger from Hell’ as reported in the Sunday Mail, 19 November 2000). The International Air Transport Association suggests that air rage occurs when a passenger acts in an unruly or disruptive behaviour, normally at some point during the flight (IATA 2000). Therefore, while the phenomenon is termed ‘Air Rage’, it can occur during check-in, at luggage retrieval or indeed at any point during the air travel experience. The International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) defines the phrase Air Rage as being:

“one of the labels given to a wide variety of behaviours (displayed by passengers) that can range in their effects from causing discomfort to putting lives at risk” (ITF, 2000a:5)

McDonnell (1999) suggests that there is an impression that violent behaviour, in general, is increasing in society and while there are many examples of similarly unruly, aggressive, outrageous and seemingly excessive behaviour in contemporary society (see for example Road Rage; Mizell, 1997; Joint, 1997; Connell, 1999), the unique environment of an aircraft in flight makes such behaviour disturbing, frightening and, potentially extremely dangerous. Should such an incident occur, neither passengers nor

staff have the opportunity to remove themselves, nor is there the option of requesting immediate outside assistance.

Recent Incidents: A Review of Current Literature and Research

This disruptive, or unruly behaviour can take several forms, ranging from relatively minor infringements, such as arguing with fellow passengers, expressing dissatisfaction with the service or refusal to stop smoking, to more serious and abusive incidents such as the assault of fellow passengers and/or crew and damage to the aircraft. Bor (1999) highlights several problems surrounding the compilation of statistics relating to air rage incidents, such as the fact that official records have only recently been kept and sometimes a reluctance on the part of air crew to report offenders. There has, however, been a dramatic increase in such incidents which shows no sign of abating. The ITF (2000a) considers that most statistics are likely to underestimate the problem and a recent survey by the International Air Transport Association shows a five-fold increase in world wide Air Rage incidents from 1132 incidents in 1994, to 5416 incidents in 1997 (IATA 2000). According to the US Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS), unruly passenger reports have increased eight-fold to 534 in 1999 (ASRS 2000). The two major Australian airlines only began recording air rage incidents in 1998 when 30 episodes were noted, this increased to 650 recorded occurrences in 1999. The main Japanese carriers report a year on year doubling of unruly behaviour incidents to 330 in 1999. In the United Kingdom, Calder (2000) reports that:

‘some 1200 incidents occur on board UK airlines in a full year, of which, around 70 are more serious episodes’

Thus, incidents of air rage are increasing and while many incidents involve young (20-35 year old) males, often travelling in groups for leisure purposes (Calder, 2000), there are many examples of air rage incidents perpetrated by older males and females in all age groups. Jenkins (2000) reported the case of a Grandmother who was jailed for six months for punching a stewardess three times in the face on board a transatlantic flight from Manchester to Florida. Fairechild (2000) details the case of an American passenger who grabbed a flight attendant’s finger and bent it backwards. In attempting to explain her behaviour, the passenger stated that she did not like the way the flight attendant had told her to put her tray and seat in an upright position before landing. Birkland and Mapes (2000), suggest that an Alaskan Airlines flight could have been lost had it not been for the intervention of passengers in restraining a fellow traveller gaining access to the cockpit. A group of tourists travelling from Ireland to New York were so unruly during the flight that the air crew had to enlist the help of a wrestling team, coincidentally travelling on the same flight, to restrain them.

Business class passengers are just as likely to cause trouble as those travelling in economy. In the past year, four out of ten business class travellers have witnessed verbal or physical abuse of passengers or crew in flight. It would also appear that the normal standards of civilised behaviour between genders appears to take a sharp dip in business

and first class cabins, with 6% of female business travellers reporting unwanted sexual advances from fellow passengers (Independent 2000).

In the absence of formal rules and international law concerning incidents of air rage, the methods of controlling such incidents have varied from airline to airline; often with cabin crew having to make on the spot decisions and take immediate action. One common reaction is to attempt to physically restrain passengers by using head set cable or seat belts to tie their hands to the seat. This proved only partly successful in the case of one passenger who, after being tied to his seat, continued to display such violent behaviour that the seats around him had to be removed (Laliberte 1997).

This course of action can also have tragic consequences. Fairechild (1998) reports an incident when an unruly passenger travelling from Budapest to Bangkok was tied to his seat and a doctor travelling on the same flight injected him with a tranquilliser in an attempt to calm him down. The passenger died during the flight due to a mixture of the tranquilliser and alcohol consumed before and during the flight. More recently, Roche (2000), detailed an incident on a domestic carrier in the United States where a young man displayed violent behaviour and was restrained and subdued by eight passengers. The man died later in hospital as a result the trauma administered by his fellow travellers.

However, the incident that appeared to galvanise the airline industry into action occurred during a flight from London to Malaga when a female cabin crew member was attacked

by a passenger (BBC, 1998a). In this incident the passenger hit the cabin crew member with an empty bottle causing her to require 18 stitches (ITF, 2000; BBC, 1998b).

The Aviation Safety Reporting System (2000) revealed that passenger misconduct causes significant problems to flight deck crews as well as cabin attendants. Their study found that in 43% of passenger related incidents, flight crews experienced some level of distraction from flying duties. In 22% of cases, a flight crew member had to leave the cockpit to assist flight attendants in dealing with an unruly passenger and in 13% of cases flight crews made the decision to divert to an alternate airport to remove the passenger. As the principal role of both flight deck crew and cabin attendants is to ensure cabin and passenger safety, the fact that air crew are being distracted from their duties to attend to unruly passengers is of concern to all those travelling.

Several reasons have been presented in an attempt to explain this behaviour. Many commentators (see for example Calder, 2000; Jenkins, 2000; Wintour 2000) report that the ready availability of alcohol is a prime contributing factor to the increase of air rage incidents. This, coupled with the combination of banning of smoking and anxiety regarding flying, may induce incidents of unreasonable or violent behaviour (IATA, 2000; ITF, 2000). Other reported reasons include delays and overbooking (Khan 2000), boredom (Calder 2000), cramped conditions (Birkland and Mapes 2000), loss of individuality (Elliott 2000), everyday stress and stress associated with air travel (Ray as cited in Calder 2000:16). In addition, it may be suggested that concerns over individual safety, especially after major airline accidents or incidents may contribute to passenger

anxiety which in turn may have an effect on passenger behaviour (Siomkos, 2000). Additionally, the dry and pressurised environment of the aircraft cabin may contribute to stress, irritability and an impairment of reasoning (Bell, Greene, Fisher and Baum, 1996). It is however, recognised that the concept of Air rage is very under researched, indeed no articles concerning Air Rage were discovered when a review of the previous seven volumes of *The Journal of Air Transport Management* and the previous four volumes of *Transportation Research Part F* was undertaken. It is therefore suggested that many of these aforementioned explanations for air rage incidents are anecdotal.

One area of rage behaviour that has received extensive research is that of Road Rage. The increase in incidence of road rage behaviour has been well documented, with most research indicating a majority of drivers experiencing road rage incidents (see for example, Automobile Association, 1995; Parker, Lajunen and Stradling, 1998) The potential reasons for a person engaging in a road rage incident have been identified in a variety of studies. For example, it has been suggested that road congestion is a contributing factor to feeling angry while driving. This, coupled with the frustration of experiencing near accidents where they felt other drivers were to blame lead to feelings of anger (Underwood, Chapman, Wright and Crundall 1999). Additionally, drivers are more likely to engage in road rage incidents if they are provoked through, for example, verbal or non verbal gestures (McGarva and Steiner, 2000) and is often directly linked to the frustrating behaviour of other drivers (Yagil, 2001).

Clearly, while there may be links between causal factors of road rage and air rage in, for example, the feelings of frustration experienced by those travelling by air and road, the environments are sufficiently different to conclude that many factors that could contribute to air rage incidents are not relevant to road rage. Therefore, while it is difficult to identify the main factor that causes air rage behaviour and it is considered that an air rage incident is often a combination of the aforementioned reasons, increasingly, airlines are considering that the banning of smoking on flights is a major contributing factor - an irrelevant issue for car drivers as it is assumed that most drivers would be able to smoke while driving if they so desired. Such is the strength of feeling regarding the issue of smoking on flights that certain airlines (see for example Austrian Airlines) that operate a non smoking policy are providing passengers with nicotine chewing gum or inhalers in an effort to reduce the anxiety experienced by smokers during a non smoking flight (Calder 2000). However airlines need to act cautiously regarding the issue of any stimulant to passengers as this itself may trigger unreasonable behaviour. Concerning airline policies on smoking, the ITF (2000a) consider that denying passengers the opportunity to smoke is linked to a high proportion of disruptive incidents and that non smoking policies should be designed with the central aim of avoiding disruptive behaviour. They conclude that;

“Controlling the availability of smoking opportunities can be a more effective means of managing the (air rage) problem than outright prohibition” (ITF 2000a:10)

There is little specific information available to the airline industry that would assist in the identification of potential offenders. It would be unfair to categorise all passengers who have obviously been drinking as likely to cause an incident; their alcohol intake may just result in them falling asleep. To date, little research has been undertaken that profiles the typical perpetrator (age, gender, etc), the travel conditions (class, timing), potential causes (eg, delay, alcohol) and the nature of the disruption (physical assault, aircraft damage). Bor (1999) suggests that an air rage incident may be triggered by a combination of issues, including an accumulation of stress and the unique environment of the aircraft cabin.

Industry Responses

While attempting to determine causes of air rage incidents is a worthwhile endeavour and an effort at profiling a typical air rage perpetrator may be useful for airlines, it is necessary for various interested parties to attempt initiatives that will address this issue. Therefore, airlines, in conjunction with governments, unions and industry bodies are now introducing codes of practice in an attempt to control air rage. This is being carried out for several reasons. Firstly, there is the obvious safety aspect; airlines are both legally and morally bound to protect both staff and passengers. An injured crew member or passenger may consider an airline that does not take steps to control this problem as acting in a negligent manner. Secondly, air rage is potentially damaging to the image and reputation of an airline. Many airlines actively promote a calm and trouble free travel experience which does not correlate with widely available reports of air rage incidents. Therefore, as air rage is currently a very high profile phenomenon, airlines are acutely

aware of the potential damage caused should an excessive number of incidents take place on one particular carrier.

Thirdly, airlines are aware of their responsibilities to all passengers and fully understand the consequences of flights disrupted by air rage incidents. It is relatively common for an aircraft to divert to an alternate airport in order to eject an unruly passenger. In these cases, it is very likely that the remaining, well behaved, passengers are delayed and, although most airlines are insured for late arrival, some delayed passengers are attempting the strategy of suing the airline (Ward and Ing, 1999).

In addition, it may not be too far fetched to recognise that travellers who booked their flight through a travel agent and who subsequently witnessed an air rage incident on that flight may decide to pursue damages from their travel agent. This would especially be the case should the agent have recommended the airline in question, that it became evident that the recommended airline had a history of air rage incidents, and that the passenger was not informed of the potential of an air rage incident occurring.

There have been a variety of measures introduced in an attempt to combat air rage incidents. Individual airlines (see for example British Airways) have introduced football-style yellow card warnings to disruptive passengers that warn offenders that they face arrest on touchdown unless they stop their behaviour (BBC, 2000c). Swissair have decided to have a supply of handcuffs on each flight in order that crew have the equipment required to effectively restrain rowdy customers (Capella, 2000). Similarly,

the punishments distributed to air rage perpetrators have become more severe with many facing heavy fines or periods in jail (BBC, 2000d; Davenport, 1997). The International Air Transport Association has recently adopted methods for dealing with unruly passengers developed by Gatwick Airport and the Civil Aviation Authority in the U.K. is working with airlines to develop a range of measures to enable staff to deal with problems.

However, the drive against air rage is being coordinated ostensibly by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) through their Zero Air Rage campaign. This campaign is being fought on three fronts: The ITF (2000b) suggest that firstly, governments should have in place by the end of 2002, laws which give their police forces and courts the power to prosecute all incidents which occur on any flight from any country which land in their territory. Additionally, as a means of discouraging air rage behaviour, it is suggested that governments should introduce legislation that allows the courts to impose severe sentences for perpetrators of air rage. Secondly, industry bodies and trade unions should have in place, or act as, functioning liaison bodies for the planning and implementing integrated strategies for the prevention, management and policing of disruptive passengers. Finally, airlines/airports themselves should have in place comprehensive policies for preventing, managing and penalising disruptive passenger behaviour by the end of 2001.

It can therefore be seen that various parties are taking the issue of air rage very seriously. There are already examples of airlines communicating their stance on air rage to

passengers, for example detailing what is deemed unacceptable behaviour along with consequences on the back of the safety card in the seat pocket. This issue should also be taken seriously by educators who are preparing graduates who may decide to pursue a career in the air travel industry.

Primary Research and Results

As a means of understanding educators views regarding the importance of including air rage in the curriculum for Travel, Tourism and Hospitality students, primary research was undertaken. Craig-Smith (1998) found that there were 24 higher education institutions in Australia that offered Tourism, and/or Travel Management qualifications at degree level. Fifteen of these higher education institutions were contacted and course or program directors with responsibility for the Travel Management portion of the curriculum were identified. These members of staff were then asked to take part in a structured in-depth telephone interview. This method was considered expedient as it proved cost effective and expeditious. Ticehurst and Veal (1999) suggest that telephone interviewing is an appropriate method when the subjects of research are relatively few in number and when the research is in its early stages. Lucas (1999) highlights that telephone interviewing can be an effective method as it allows for the interaction with the respondent and enjoys a low non-response rate. However, it is understood that this method can only illicit a small amount of data per respondent and will therefore provide only a partial picture.

While it was found that the majority of respondents understood the concept of air rage and some could identify the more high profile incidents, there was no evidence of its

inclusion in the majority (12) of programs. The remaining three programs placed varying levels of importance on the concept of air rage. One program director stated that students spent a considerable amount of time studying air rage and were expected to answer at least one question concerned with air rage during an end of subject examination. The remaining two subject coordinators stated that the concept of air rage was introduced through a case study which was part of the students' tutorial program.

The twelve respondents who stated that air rage was not mentioned in the curriculum were asked if there were plan to introduce the topic in the near future. No respondents had definite plans to introduce the topic and when asked if they considered the topic was worthy of inclusion, only five suggested that it may be included when subjects were reviewed.

Several reasons as to why air rage would not be introduced into the curriculum were presented by the seven respondents who stated that air rage would not be included in future subjects. Many respondents stated that the topic was not of sufficient importance to include, several suggested that it was considered that the current curricula already equipped graduate with the necessary skills required to cope with such situations, and finally, some respondents suggested that the topic was not really applicable as it was felt that these students would not have to cope with such incidents.

Discussion and Conclusions

These results suggest that not enough importance is being given by higher education to the concept of air rage. If one considers that many graduates in Tourism, and/or Travel Management become employed in the airline industry it could be argued that graduates should, at least, be made aware of this phenomenon. While it is recognised that the concept of rage, be it air rage, road rage or another form of rage behaviour, may be discussed in other subjects (for example Psychology), it was found that none of the programs in question required students to undertake such subjects as core to their final award.

Indeed, it could be suggested that graduates should be given the appropriate and specific skills required to deal with situations such as these as a matter of course. With the increase in the incidence of 'rage' incidents the suggestion is that all graduates who are being educated for, and planning to join, the service industries are given specific skills to cope with the stressed customer who may react in an aggressive manner. Indeed it could be argued that a graduate with the appropriate skills to be able to deal with such incidents will not only be able to manage such incidents, they will be presenting a professional image and diffusing a situation that, inappropriately handled, may cost the company in law suits and lost customers.

Air rage is now a phenomenon recognised by the aviation industry, but one where knowledge of contributing factors is still unclear. It may be useful to undertake an analysis of all air rage incidents with the aim of producing a summary that presents a

profile of a typical air rage perpetrator. The advantage of this strategy would be to assist travel industry personnel to recognise signs that identify travellers who could potentially act in an unruly manner. In addition, an analysis of air rage incident situations would be useful. This could provide a situational overview that could point out when during the flight an air rage incident is most likely to happen, if where a person is seated has any bearing on unruly behaviour or if there were any delays or other factors that could influence a persons behaviour. Such an overview may go some way to preventing incidents occurring. The fight against air rage appears to be being co-ordinated by the aviation industry unions who are suggesting policy that will protect their members. Airline responses to air rage need to be encouraged, formalised and documented; they too have a duty to protect their staff and an obligation to provide a safe environment for their customers. However, adopting a proactive stance against air rage will make good business sense as, increasingly, passengers may choose a particular airline after reviewing their policy concerning air rage. An airline that operates a clear policy regarding unruly passengers and effectively trains staff to identify, diffuse and/or deal with air rage situations may enjoy market advantage over a competitor that does not.

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