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FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

Understanding Communication Access on V/Line trains: Perspectives of staff and customers



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An Easy English version of the report is available from Scope and V/Line.

<http://www.vline.com.au/journey/tips/accessibility.html>

<http://www.scopevic.org.au/index.php/site/whatweoffer/communicationresourcecentre/communicationaccess>

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Executive Summary

Issues of communication pose significant barriers to use of public transport. This is particularly the case for the diverse group of people who have communication difficulties as a result of cognitive, physical or sensory impairment, as well people for whom English is not their first language such as international tourists. V/line is committed to make its system understandable and useable by people with communication difficulties by 2015.

Scope in collaboration with LaTrobe University undertook a systematic investigation of the barriers and facilitators of accessible and responsive services for V/Line passengers who have communication difficulties. Services on the Melbourne-Geelong corridor were used as the focal point of the investigation.

Perspectives about current communication practices, skills, attitudes and expectations of staff and passengers were sought. Forty-five customers with communication difficulties and twenty-four staff participated in focus groups or an individual interview. Thirty percent of front line V/line staff (454) responded to an online survey. The data was analysed thematically and using descriptive statistics.

The data from all sources revealed that front line staff generally held positive attitudes about people with a disability, were comfortable in their interactions with people with communication difficulties, and saw customer service as their priority. Staff found it most difficult to communicate with people with cognitive impairments. Staff made little use of formal communication tools. Customers with communication difficulties found most staff helpful most of the time but identified some variability in staff communication skills. They reported difficulties relating to signage, complexity of written information such as timetables, and inconsistencies in the quality of the communications infrastructure on trains.

Both groups identified the need for a greater variety of interactive communication tools, strategies for customers needing assistance and education programs. Customers recommended infrastructure changes including improved signage, and multiple ways to receive or access information.

A range of technological and non-technological communication strategies will be trialed with V/line staff and customers to improve communication access. The recommendations will be evaluated over the next two years.

Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a systematic investigation of the barriers and facilitators of accessible and responsive services for V/Line customers who have communication difficulties. It brings together perspectives from both customers and V/Line staff about the access difficulties of using the system, providing assistance to facilitate its use, the current strategies used by each group, and ideas about tackling the identified issues. The investigation had a particular focus on services in the Geelong corridor, but also surveyed V/Line staff from across the network. The report considers the implications of the findings and makes recommendations for action to inform V/Line generally and particularly for stage 2 of the project, which aims to design and evaluate an intervention to improve the communication accessibility of V/Line services to people with communication difficulties.

In line with current disability and anti-discrimination policies of the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport (2002), V/Line and the Victorian public transport system more widely have given considerable attention to the accessibility of services to people with disabilities. Attention however, has tended to be focused on issues of physical rather than communication access. This study investigated the extent to which V/Line makes its system understandable and useable by people with cognitive impairment and other forms of communication difficulties. In particular, the effectiveness of help available through interpersonal interactions with staff and other more anonymous forms of information provision, such as signage, announcements, printed and online materials.

The focus of the enquiry was people who have communication difficulties who, in a very broad sense, are people 'who have difficulty telling you what they want, understanding what you're saying or gaining information through usual written or verbal means'. The group is diverse and comprises people with a range of impairments, including: people with an intellectual disability; people with cerebral palsy; people who are deaf, people who have had a stroke or brain injury or who have some other form of physical, sensory, cognitive or learning disability that makes it hard for them to speak or understand. It is arguable that, if the V/Line system is accessible to people with a disability who have communication difficulties, this will also benefit people without disabilities who have difficulty communicating such as international tourists, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and those with low levels of literacy.

The investigation was guided by a reference group that comprised key V/Line staff from across the organisation, people with communication difficulties and members of the research team. This report provides an overview of data collection methods, and a consolidated account of the findings that draws together data from the focus groups, individual interviews, and an online survey of staff. The perspectives of customers with communication difficulties and then staff are presented taking into account the stages of their journey that customers encounter V/Line services, i.e. prior to the journey, experiences at the station, on the train and getting off at the destination.

Summary of Methods

Data was collected from the range of people involved in using, designing or delivering V/Line services. Ethical approval for the study was gained from the human ethics committees of La Trobe University and Scope. A total of 45 staff, and customers with communication difficulties participated in focus groups and interviews. They gave signed consent for their participation on the basis they would not be individually identifiable in the report of the study.

An open-ended exploratory approach was used in the focus groups and interviews to identify areas of good practice as well as points of difficulty in the system, and seek perspectives about:

- Experience and expectations of people with communication difficulties who use V/Line services.
- Staff skills, attitudes and knowledge about communicating with people who have communication difficulties.
- Practical strategies staff currently use to communicate with people who have communication difficulties.
- Strategies to improve V/Line responsiveness to people with communication difficulties.

Focus groups and interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. Notes were taken as well as digital recordings of the focus groups and interviews. Recordings were transcribed and the transcriptions checked and then analysed thematically.

Data Collected from Customers with Communication Difficulties

Twenty-one customers with communication difficulties, who used services in the Geelong – Melbourne corridor were recruited to participate in the study through advertisements in

newsletters of disability service organisations, an open invitation to all customers and word of mouth through existing networks of people with disabilities. Nine people participated in two focus groups, and twelve people were interviewed individually. While there is no claim that this group is representative of customers with communication difficulties it did include the spectrum of people who have communication impairments, including intellectual disability, autism, cerebral palsy, acquired brain injury, deafness and deaf-blindness. It also included a mix of gender (see Table 1 in appendix). In addition, staff from one disability service organisation that supports people with intellectual disability to learn travel skills participated in one of the focus groups, and whilst their main role was providing support for their clients' participation they also gave their views about V/Line accessibility.

Data Collected from V/Line Staff

Twenty-four V/Line and Public Transport Victoria (PVT) call centre staff participated in a focus group or interview. The two focus groups included customer service staff and conductors who were based either in Geelong or at Southern Cross. The eleven interviews conducted with staff included five conductors, one customer service officer, one service manager, and a ticket booking officer, two authorised officers and one food service manager. Two staff from Travellers Aid which is an organisation supported by V/Line were interviewed, and a focus group was held with four staff from the PVT call centre. In all cases the staff were invited to participate through an invitation via V/Line communications department.

An online survey was compiled based on the initial analysis of data from the interviews and focus groups. The survey had 46 items, with sub-sections tailored specifically for different groups of front line customer service staff (conductors, customer service officers, booking office and call centre staff). The survey was mostly closed questions and had five sections which covered demographic information; training and experience of people with disability and communication difficulties; scenarios asking about actions staff would take in particular situations; general attitudes towards customers with disabilities; and rating the potential usefulness of various resources such as communication aids or changes to infrastructure to increase communication access.

The internal survey was sent to all V/Line staff (n=1491) through the email system, consisting of 454 (30%) front line staff with customer contact and 1037 (70%) head office staff. A total of 161 V/Line staff completed the survey, 111 (69%) of the responses were from frontline staff, and the remaining 50 responses (31%) were from head office staff who

occupied a range of different positions in the organisation which do not necessarily involve front line customer service.

Whilst there were an unexpectedly high number of responses from head office staff, there was a much higher representation of frontline staff, as 111 of the 454 frontline staff (24% response rate) completed the survey, compared to 50 of the 1037 head office staff (5% response rate). Most importantly the data collected strongly reflected the findings from the focus groups and interviews. The survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Findings

Perspectives of Customers with Communication Difficulties

Staff Attitudes and Interpersonal Communication – ‘most of the time staff are very helpful’

Positive and helpful attitudes. Customers for the most part spoke very positively about the attitude, friendliness and helpfulness of V/Line customer service staff, at the booking office, on the train and on the platforms. For example talking about booking office staff one person with cerebral palsy said, *“most of the time I would say 90% of the staff are very helpful”*.

Many of the customers with communication difficulties travel regularly and talked about the benefits of being known by staff who took the trouble to remember their particular access needs. For example, one man with cerebral palsy said,

Well because I’m a regular traveller a lot of the staff know me quite well and they’re very obliging and they help me because I can’t physically take my money out ... they walk around and greet me on the other side.

A regular traveller who had a hearing impairment said about the customer service staff,

The one at North Geelong and the one at Marshall, they know me from travelling so long, so they are pretty familiar with my communication, quite often they will make sure they mime it or they’ll write it down for me... Well if it’s like ten minutes they will do like ten (shows ten fingers) or if they are not quite 100% sure they’ll just like (shrugs shoulders). Sort of using their body language as well.

A customer with intellectual disability talked about how staff *“take the time to listen and help them to understand”*.

Uneven responsiveness to communication needs. A small number of customer service staff were reported to have a less positive approach to accommodating the needs of people with communication difficulties. For example, one man with cerebral palsy said;

I: He wasn't really interested in serving you?

J: Yeah, as I said to you, the majority are fantastic.

I: The majority are fantastic, so you can tell immediately by just the way they are and the way they look at you, their facial expressions?

J: Straight away.

Staff were not always responsive to providing information in alternative formats. For example a person who was deaf said,

I don't find them (at Geelong station) as helpful or as friendly as the other two platforms in North Geelong and Marshall. So it makes it a little bit harder because they don't seem to like to write anything down or they rely on verbal communication. I don't understand I can't hear you.

He went on to talk about the difficulty of being updated about a delayed train.

We were waiting for three hours at the North Geelong train station for the train to arrive and I had to keep going up to ask. The people knew that I can't hear, and they knew where I was sitting..... so I had to keep going up and going 'when's the train coming?' so sure that's a little frustrating there, that waiting for the train so, if you're not sure exactly what's going on or anything, have to go up and ask the people.

One person talked about customer service staff who were unapproachable, saying

The only platform that really does have those people is in Geelong train station where they have someone standing there and talking. Actually no to be honest I don't feel comfortable enough to go up and ask them. I don't know what it is but it is just like oh no, no, no.

A disability support worker talked about negative attitudes of V/Line staff towards people with disability, saying,

I'm currently working with one guy doing travel training from Geelong to Melbourne and just some of the looks that you get from some of the people, it makes me quite angry actually [from V/line staff] Yes from V/Line staff.

Supporting physical access. Some people with communication difficulties also have problems with physical access and rely on help from customer service staff to get on and off trains. For these people the attitude and communication skills of staff are as important as the physical assistance they provide. Customers reported mixed experiences of staff in this respect. They said for example,

The conductor, he or she will set it down, on the platform. Most of them use their initiative and quickly work out he must be waiting to get on a train I'll get the ramp.

Well on Sunday I was coming back to Melbourne and the lady knew, I know the lady conductor well, and she was really lovely and she got the ramp up straight away and then during the trip we just chatted for a couple of minutes and then towards the end of the trip, I was running out of water in my bottle and I asked her if she wouldn't mind getting some more water for me and that was not a problem.

In contrast several people mentioned less positive experiences.

I was going from Geelong to Melbourne and I wanted to get off at North Melbourne instead of Spencer Street and they forgot.

The train was running late and he said very angrily to just get in the goods van, you. Which is not allowed but the train was very full.

Customer Suggestions for Improvement.

The need for staff to understand the diversity of people with communication difficulties, even among those with similar impairments, was highlighted by one customer, who said,

Staff would benefit from knowing that we (deaf people) have diverse levels of English and understanding, so that would help us if they understood the differences.

A customer with an intellectual disability talked about the importance of staff talking to her rather than making assumptions that she couldn't understand and that the person accompanying her was a carer. She said,

They need to have more like eye to eye contact because they see my husband as being my carer and they always talk to him and I get so offended because I'm just like my husband, they think I can't understand, but I can.

Some customers who experienced difficulty in being understood by booking office staff suggested that the availability on the counter of a low tech tool such as a communication board would help them indicate what they wanted.

Some customers wanted staff to take their disability related needs into account but as far as possible treat them in the same way as other customers. This can require staff to tread a fine line between being respectful and overcompensating for a person's disability which can result in feelings of being patronised. For example, customers said,

I know I'm entitled to a pass but I'll be honest I prefer to pay my way.

Yes that's one of my frustrating things, as I said to you before I always like to buy a ticket and 99% of the time conductors, they won't ask me for my ticket.

Talking about how she liked to do what everybody else had to do, for example show her ticket when the conductor came through the carriage, one woman with intellectual and physical disability said, “ *the good ones will wait for me but the bad ones will say 'I'll come back'”*.

Several customers talked about the need for reassurance and that they would appreciate it if help was offered to them rather than always having to ask. For example, one person said he would like to be asked if he needed anything, such as staff saying, “*Do you need any help at all? Have you got a maxi taxi booked?*” This sentiment was echoed in comments from other customers, who said,

Maybe [staff should] approach us and say like – if you need anything or to stop at a station, there's a buttonthere are measures in place to help us – we just don't know about it.

I normally ask someone to help me but it is hard if I am having a bit of a self conscious day and when I don't want to talk to anyone, so it would be good if someone was there to help me.

This theme of staff offering help was also evident in the interviews with staff but, as will be discussed in a later section, they found it difficult to identify some people with less visible disabilities, who might need help but didn't actively ask for it. Some people with communication disabilities thought that an introduction card that could be downloaded from the V/Line website that explained the assistance they needed whilst travelling might help to alert staff to their needs. Such a card could be printed off in regular and large font and/or in

Braille. Several customers suggested that V/Line could include more images of people with disabilities in the marketing material to support the message that they are welcome.

Information and Infrastructure - ‘I couldn’t read the sign and ended up on the wrong train’

Timetables, other printed or online materials. Most people without cognitive impairments found the printed materials such as the timetable and the website easy to use and very helpful. Many people relied on the website to look up timetables, fares and book tickets.

I: Do you use the help desk to help you find out which train to catch?

S: Yes. Or I look it up on the internet, that’s very accessible.

Some people experienced difficulties when online information about metropolitan travel and V/Line travel was not linked and there was inconsistent information about fares on different sites:

(I use) either the Public Transport Victoria website or the iPhone app to find out what service to catch so that I can work out most connections. Occasionally, because the PTV apps are not always accurate, I’ve sometimes looked up my preferred suburban route on the PTV app or website and then I use the V/Line app to find out what V/Line service and put two and two together.

Many people with an intellectual disability who live independently in the community do not have easy access to the online world, or find it difficult to use. This group rely primarily on written information and timetables, which some found difficult to understand and not well suited to people with low literacy skills. In particular they talked about difficulties of using printed timetables that had small fonts and were printed on shiny reflective paper. Some people with intellectual disability also found the use of the 24 hour clock too complex and difficult to understand. As one person said about the timetable “*make it bigger, simpler*”. It was suggested that timetables might be prepared in alternative more accessible formats which made greater use of pictures to represent different destinations, such as the approach used by Talking Transport in Wellington (<http://www.youtube.com>).

Signage – at the station. Customers consistently talked about the difficulty of understanding the signage at Southern Cross Station which made it hard for them to find their way around the station. Issues raised were:

- the overall number of signs which could be confusing and sometimes gave conflicting directions;
- the placement of signs which were often seen as being too high and thus affected readability;
- the design elements of signs which made them difficult to read, such as the small size, and containing so much information that it was hard to distinguish the main message, and uses of colours that were hard to see for people with vision impairments.

For example, one man with an acquired brain injury said,

“I found that there was too much on the screenthere was heaps of information which I suppose cos we all need different information”. Another man said, “I couldn’t read the sign and ended up on the wrong train.”

Anxiety about getting on the right train was a consistent issue raised by customers with communication difficulties, and quite a few reported that they had experience with getting on the wrong train. For example, one customer said, *“I think the worst part for me is coming home to Geelong from Southern Cross. I once got on the wrong train and it was going to Sunbury.”*

People with communication disabilities suggested having more descriptive information, both written and pictorial as well as the platform numbers, would help in knowing which train to catch. For example one customer with a hearing impairment said, *“obviously a visual cue of this is the Geelong train or this is the Sunbury train, okay.”*

Difficulties finding the right train unrelated to signage. The lack of a consistent platform for each line or destination made it harder to get to the right train. This meant customers had to re-find their way to the right platform each journey rather than relying on prior learned knowledge.

Another problem raised was the designation of two parts of a platform, as A and B, and the lack of clear visual separation between the parts of the platform and the two trains that might be waiting. For example, as customers said,

Say platform 1A and 1B, that’s easy enough to [sort out], you have just got to make a massive gap in between the two trains, so you can tell [which is which], but when they’re cramped up you think oh that’s one big train yep that’s the one that I catch.

Signage and announcements – on the train. Difficulties that customers experienced in following signs on the platform were sometimes compounded by the absence of visual information in the train informing customers of its destination. As one man said, “*if the screens are wrong and when you get on to the train you usually don’t know you are on the right train*”. This was not the case on all trains, and where there were digital displays on a train customers found them very helpful, as one man said,

The modern trains have got the message on the internal carriage, it comes up on the screen but that doesn’t work a lot of the time and if you had a hearing impairment and you relied on the visual you could miss your stop.

Similarly, reliance on verbal announcements on trains made it difficult for people with hearing impairment or who took longer to understand language to find out what was happening. For example,

There has been a situation on the way to Melbourne...with my hearing aids on, I can hear background noises and all that and I know that when someone speaks over the speakerphone and all that but I have got no idea.

People with communication disabilities also experienced difficulty in getting off at the right station. Sometimes this was because there was no auditory and visual information telling customers about the next stop. Poorly lit stations or tinted windows on the trains made it difficult for some to read the name of the station. As one customer said,

It is dark outside and it’s light inside so you can’t see what station you’ve stopped at in the dark and I’ve mentioned that to the driver, what’s the next station, but then I can’t hear his response.

Communicating changes. Receiving timely and understandable information about changes that might occur prior to or during a journey, such as to the departure platform or time, or replacement of trains by buses and delays en route, was frequently raised as an issue. People with hearing impairments found the SMS alert systems for delays very helpful.

I think, you know I’ve signed up for that SMS service so the good thing about that is quite often is because I’ve picked Marshall train station they’ll SMS me to say the train has been delayed from you know by ten minutes or half an hour.

When the train has got cancelled and you’re catching the buses...it’s [confusing] because there are so many buses there... it’s not only buses for going to Melbourne

there are other buses going [other places] so sometimes no one is around to ask which bus do I catch? You jump on and hope for the best.

Some customers talked about the difficulty of hearing auditory announcements at Southern Cross, and some suggested the quality was much better at the Geelong station.

Other forms of supports - other customers. When there were no V/Line staff present or they were busy, people with communication difficulties talked about relying on fellow customers for information. For example, someone said,

...if they [staff] are really, really busy I might ask somebody in the queue to (get my wallet?) ready open. I often have to ask somebody that I'm sitting with [if there is an announcement whilst she is on the train].

Making Complaints

Most people with communication difficulties said they did not make complaints as it was difficult to do so. One disability support worker commented that people with an intellectual disability “*will sometimes not come across and say this happened to me, they will hold it inside, they won't come out and say I have had an issue*”. Only one person talked about having made a complaint, and this had been because he was really angry with the way he had been treated. He recounted the outcome as the conductor being reprimanded, saying “*a connie had been reprimanded*”.

Inconsistencies in the System and Between Staff

An overarching theme was the lack of consistency in the way customer service staff responded to people with communication difficulties. The majority of staff, but not all, were reported as being friendly and helpful and able to accommodate the needs of people with communication impairments. Some staff reported making notes to record who was getting off and where, but this was not a universal system. There were also inconsistencies with V/Line infrastructure, primarily caused by the continual evolution of the system and therefore the mix of old and new trains. This meant the system was not always responsive to people with communication difficulties. For example, the digital display on the newer trains was very helpful to customers with hearing problems, in notifying of changes or delays, confirming they were on the right train and in alerting people to the imminent approach of their destination. However, this technology is not available on all trains and when it was available

may not always have been switched on by conductors. As one man said, *“I hate getting on the older trains because I never know if I am on the right one or not.”*

Similarly, some customers drew attention to the difficulty of seeing out of the windows of the older trains which meant checking their journey’s progress or confirming their destination was difficult. Another example was the notification of delays via the SMS system which, though very useful, was only available for the journey from Geelong and not for journeys starting from Southern Cross. As one customer said, *“but when I’m in Southern Cross, I don’t know if the train has been delayed or anything, I don’t get a message, only when I go towards Melbourne”*.

A lack of consistency in the platforms from which trains departed Southern Cross, and an absence of designated platforms for particular lines made finding the right platform and train more difficult than necessary.

Perspectives of V/Line Staff about Communication Access

Staff perspectives matched in many ways the picture gained from customers with communication difficulties, and affirmed that most staff saw customer service as a priority and made every effort to adapt to the communication needs of each customer. The resourceful and committed staff who participated in the face-to-face focus groups and interviews had positive attitudes towards people with disabilities and were not just a group of handpicked staff. Rather they were fairly representative of front line staff, as their perspectives were clearly reflected in the survey responses from the much larger group of 161 staff who were surveyed.

In the course of their work, V/Line employees frequently interact with people who have communication difficulties. For example, 54% of the total survey sample and 70% of the four focal occupational groups reported such interactions on either a weekly or daily basis. Among the four focal occupational groups, booking office staff reported the highest proportion of interactions (73%) while call centre staff reported the smallest proportion (33%).

It appeared that as a group of employees, V/Line staff brought considerable experience about disability to their current job. For example, 72% of staff reported that they had had experience with people with a disability either in their family or prior work life.

The analysis of the survey data concentrates on the four focal occupational groups who have most contact with people with communication difficulties; conductors, customer

service officers, booking office staff and call centre staff. The appendix has more detailed data compiled from the survey.

Staff Attitudes

The survey included a slightly adapted version of five items that have been found to measure a one dimensional factor of *discomfort in interaction with people with disability* (Iacano, Tracey, Keating & Brown, 2009). Each item was scored from 1-7, and the higher the score the greater level of discomfort when interacting with people with disabilities. The average total score for survey respondents was 9.54, with a range of 5-35. The occupation group that had the lowest scores indicating the least discomfort with people with disabilities was conductors (8.86). Overall these findings suggest that V/Line staff are very comfortable in interacting with people with disabilities.

Staff Training

There was a consistent pattern, shown in Figure 1, that the proportion of staff who had completed training decreased as training become more specialised, and for all types of training, conductors had received more than the other categories of staff.

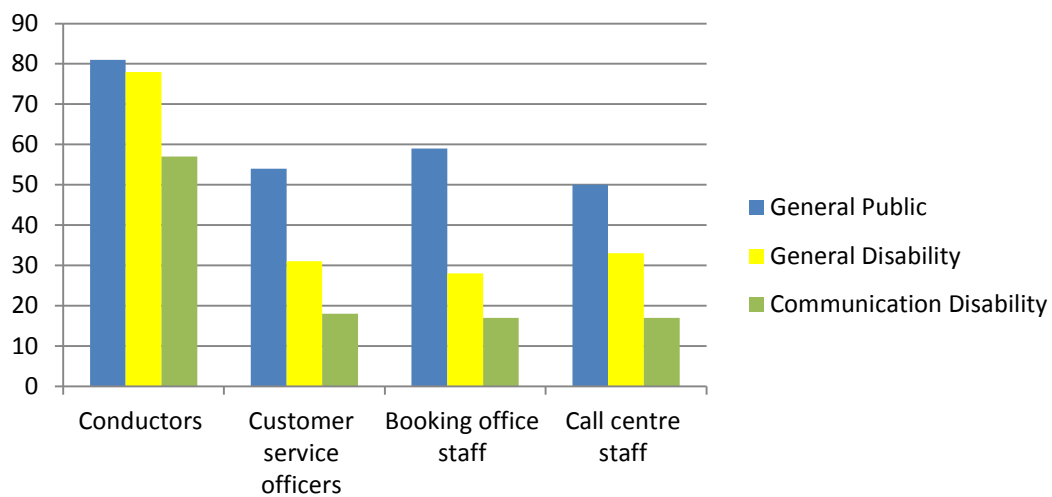


Figure 1. Proportion of each occupation that received each of three types of communication training.

For most staff however, training has been undertaken more than 12 months ago as shown in Table 25.

Table 25. Time Elapsed Since Communication Training by V/Line Occupation

Occupation	Communication Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication	
	1-12 months	13+ months	1-12 months	13+ months	1-12 months	13+ months
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	13	87	10	90	15	85
Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	19	81	17	83	14	86
Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	6	94	13	88	20	80
Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	33	67	0	100	0	100
Total (<i>n</i> = 111)	14	86	12	88	15	85

Training was perceived by staff to be useful in carrying out their everyday work, and there was some indication that receipt of training had had an impact on the ease with which staff communicated with people with communication difficulties.

Table 26. Perceived Usefulness of Communication Training in Day-to-Day Work by V/Line Occupation

Occupation	Communication Training Useful?								
	General: Public			General: Disability			Specific: Communication		
	Very	Somewh	No	Very	Somewh	No	Very	Somewh	No
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	50	50	0	66	34	0	52	48	0
Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	43	48	10	42	58	0	57	43	0
Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	24	76	0	50	50	0	20	80	0
Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	100	0	0	50	50	0	100	0	0
Total (<i>n</i> = 111)	44	54	3	57	43	0	50	50	0

Although differences were small, among the overall sample, the type of communication training undertaken influenced the level of difficulty in communicating with people with

different disabilities. Relative to the more general types of training (i.e. general public and general disability), higher proportions of the sample who had undertaken specific communication training consistently reported that it was *easy* to communicate with customers who had difficulty with (a) English (b) seeing (c) hearing (d) speaking (e) understanding and (f) confusion. For customers who had difficulty reading, training in communicating with the general public appeared to be the most helpful.

Groups with whom Staff had Most Difficulty Communicating

The diversity of people with communication difficulties and the differing challenges that arise with V/Line’s different occupational groups were evident in the survey findings. For example, compared to conductors, a smaller proportion of booking office staff reported difficulty in communicating with people who they found difficult to understand (70% compared to 45%). Conductors found it most difficult to meet the needs of people who had difficulty understanding (70%), and then people who were confused or did not speak English (54%), and people who had difficulty speaking (43%).

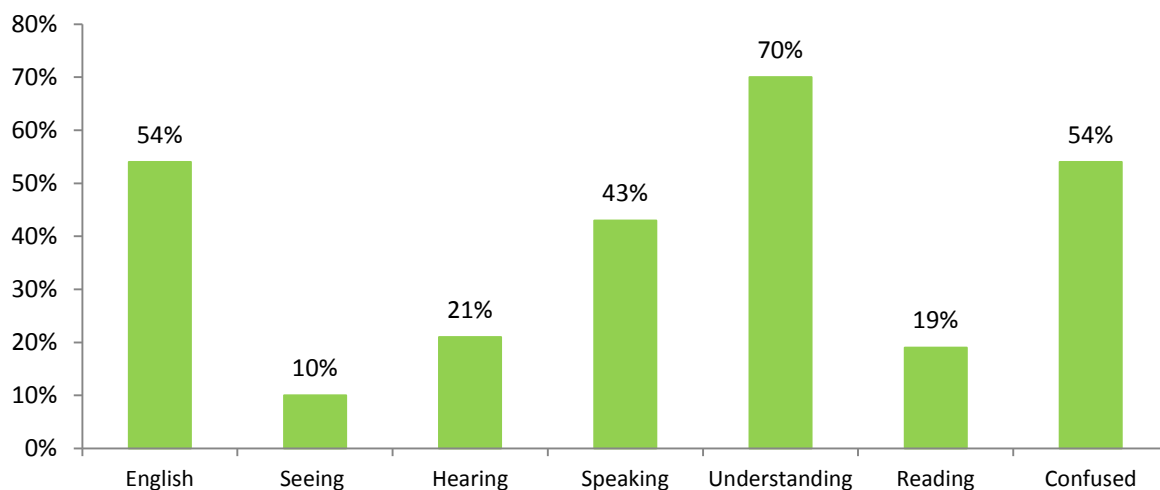


Figure 2. The proportion of conductors that reported difficulty communicating with individuals with different communication difficulties.

Somewhat similarly customer service staff found it most difficult to communicate with people who had difficulty understanding (57%) followed by people who did not speak English (53%), people who had difficulty speaking (46%) and people who were confused (38%). In comparison, booking office staff found it most difficult to communicate with people who did not speak English (69%) followed by people who had difficulty speaking or understanding (45%) and people who were confused (41%). Call centre staff found people

with hearing and speaking problems (84% and 64% respectively) the most difficult groups to communicate with (see appendix tables).

Given that staff found it harder to communicate with some groups than others, and the differences among staff in terms of the group they found most difficult, this suggests that any future training about communication should be both tailored to different occupational groups and consider the different knowledge, skills and strategies required to effectively communicate with particular sub groups of people with communication difficulties.

Staff Approach and Communication Strategies

Relying on common sense. In the interviews and focus groups, staff gave many examples of their role in helping customers and were very aware of some of the difficulties customers might experience. They took seriously the part of their job that is as one conductor said to “*care for my customers*”.

Staff appeared to rely on their experience and common sense to accommodate customers’ communication difficulties (e.g. using gesture, pen and paper). They had limited knowledge or experience of any specialist off-the-shelf communication aids, and few train or route specific aids have been developed that might assist them. Some staff indicated time pressures limited their performance “*we don’t get time to look at our notes*”. Although some conductors talked about using their train books to note who needed help, it appeared that neither conductors nor customer service staff carried a consistent set of information or tools to assist in communication.

The survey asked what was most useful in helping staff to respond to the needs of people with communication difficulties. Conductors, customer service officers and booking office staff all reported that written information provided by customers about their wants was most useful. They also found other strategies useful such as written communication about a person’s communication difficulties, alerting V/Line to their needs prior to the journey, and indicating to the staff member that they needed help (see appendix tables).

Identifying who needs help. Staff seemed very willing to provide assistance to people with communication difficulties but have problems identifying who needs help when it is not immediately obvious or the person does not ask for help. For example, one conductor talked about introducing himself to someone who was blind and had a dog, and another said that people in wheelchairs were always known to him. Several pointed out that they had no means to easily identify a person with cognitive, speech or hearing problems.

Staff, particularly conductors and customer service staff, used their experience to judge who might need help by approaching customers on the platform who looked confused and scanning customers on the train. As one conductor put it he always started a journey by “*taking the temperature of the train*” to identify who was likely to need assistance.

As discussed above, staff find it most helpful when customers provide information about their needs, and are keen that customers with communication difficulties identify themselves. Staff in the focus groups discussed possible easy non-stigmatising ways that customers who needed help could be easily identified. For example, by allocating particular seating spaces or points on platforms, similar to those for people with a physical disability, where people could go if they chose to be identified as needing help. Other suggestions were making available templates for individuals to construct travel cards to be used for identification if necessary with key information about their means of communication and travel needs.

Staff suggested that customers were sometimes unaware of the conductor as a point of contact for help on the train, and the role they can play for example, in phoning ahead to ensure a person is met at their destination by a staff member. This suggests that raising the awareness of people with disabilities about the type of support available from conductors and other key staff at various points in their journey might be a useful strategy.

Disability organisations play an important role in supporting people with intellectual disability to become familiar with V/ Line services and providing ‘travel training’ on certain routes. There has been little outreach to disability organisations by V/Line or in the same vein little effort by staff from disability organisations to engage with V/Line. This means that disability support staff are unaware of the type of help that may be available to people with an intellectual disability, such as Travellers Aid, and do not fully understand the role that the conductor has on the train as a point of contact for help in providing backup support. In turn this may mean they are not making people with communication difficulties who they support sufficiently aware of how to ask for help and maximise assistance from V/Line staff. More regular liaison with disability service organisations and public educational opportunities such as ‘open trains or stations’ that introduce people with disabilities to the workings of V/Line may be ways of assisting people with communication difficulties to better understand the system.

What Might Help Improve V/Line's Communication Accessibility?

Staff and people with communication difficulties made a wide range of suggestions to improve communication accessibility. These included:

- changes to infrastructure such as signage;
- changes to operations such as more consistent use of the same platforms for a destination;
- improvement to staff communication skills;
- development and introduction across the system of communication aids;
- community education that would better equip customers and the public to be more proactive in asking for help and/or providing help; and
- various identification or locational strategies to help identify customers who may need help.

Practical examples of these suggestions are:

- providing access to the internet by conductors so queries can be answered directly;
- training for staff in communication strategies, use of aids, and the diversity of people with disabilities;
- some form of identification for people that may require help but whose disability is not overt;
- a help point on each platform and train;
- revisions to signage;
- simplified timetable information; and
- design of robust aids with universal images that can be carried by conductors and other staff that can be used to support communication about frequently asked questions, such as 'where do you want to go' 'where does this train go' etc., and which visually display the route of the train.

The survey asked staff about the perceived usefulness of a range of potential communication aids designed to assist interactions with people with communication difficulties. These were:

- Infrastructure on trains or platforms - such as help points where people who require help can go to identify themselves.
- Touchscreens with pictures/photos of train stations and or main towns that can help staff to explain to customers about the train system.

- Aids carried by a conductor or customer service staff: iPad with pictures of stations and illustrations of common situations such as delays or use of buses in place of a train.
- Aids carried by a conductor or customer service staff: apps on a smartphone with pictures of stations and illustrations of common situations, such as delays or the use of buses in place of a train.
- Aids carried by a conductor or customer service staff: Set of cards with common questions in large print
- Aids carried by a conductor or customer service staff: Set of cards with names and photos of all stations on each route.

The survey findings showed that staff rated more highly ideas about changes to infrastructure, use of touchscreens, and use of iPad or smartphone apps compared to use of question or photo cards. This reflected the views of staff in the focus groups that were reluctant to think about carrying extra printed materials with them on the train or platform.

Travellers Aid is an important source of support for people with disabilities who use public transport. V/Line staff are both aware of its services and rely on it to provide back up support for them, getting people to and from platforms at Southern Cross and providing another source of information about the transport system. It was noted that this service is only available at Southern Cross stations and various suggestions were made about the value of extending it to other major stations such as Geelong.

Summary and Conclusions

Although many customers with communication difficulties were satisfied with the service they received from V/Line, some difficulties with communication accessibility were identified by both staff and customers. The survey identified generally positive attitudes towards people with a disability by front line staff and a degree of comfort in their interactions with this group. Staff used their experience and common sense to adapt their style of communication in order to respond to the diverse needs of the varied group of people who have communication difficulties. However front line staff have not been proactive by carrying a consistent set of information to assist their communication with customers, and V/Line as a customer service organisation has not taken advantage of some of the increasingly available and effective high and low tech aids for communication.

Identifying when and if a person requires some form of assistance was a challenge experienced by many staff. Many felt the onus should be on customers to ask for help or come equipped with a way of communicating their needs. On the other hand, some customers with communication difficulties did not want to be regarded any differently from other customers, some were unaware of the nature of help that might be available, and others would appreciate an offer of help rather than having to ask for help. Each individual with communication difficulties has their own preferences, and the responsibility for good communication might best be seen as shared by everyone, customers, staff and the general public. Education that equips customers to know the type of assistance that might be available and who to seek it from may be just as important as equipping those that might be in a position to provide it with the right attitude and skills to do so. It is recommended that:

- V/Line develop and trial a variety of communication tools which are particularly tailored to its system, such as images of destinations, pictorial or diagrammatic representation of routes, and multi-modal batteries of commonly asked questions and answers. The trial might involve a range of different formats, electronic and hard copy for use by staff as well as downloadable tools that might be used by customers to prepare for their journey.
- V/Line develops outreach education programs to better equip the general public to provide assistance and communicate with people with communication difficulties.
- V/Line develops a more targeted outreach education program for disability service organisations that provide support and/or travel training to people with communication difficulties. This would enable disability support staff to be more effective in their various support and training roles by raising their awareness of how the V/Line system operates and where assistance might be sought by people with communication difficulties.
- V/Line undertakes regular foundation and refresher training programs in communication skills for front line staff, and these programs are tailored to each of the V/Line front line occupational groups and include training about the diversity of people with communication difficulties, and approaches to communication.

The second strand of communication accessibility relates more to infrastructure, such as signage or announcements, and printed or on line information. At present there is considerable inconsistency across the V/Line system, and in particular customers with communication difficulties struggle where reliance is placed solely on one form of communication, written or spoken, and the absence of information about routes and destinations on some platforms, or inside and outside trains. Similarly if written information

is available in only one form, it is likely to be inaccessible to some people with communication difficulties who have low literacy or not understand complex language or concepts. Using multiple methods and a variety of forms and formats to convey information to customers at all points on their journey is one way to make V/Line services more accessible to people with communication difficulties.

It is recommended that:

- V/Line revises signage across the system so that it is simpler and clearer, and particular attention is given to signage about train destinations both on platforms and inside trains.
- V/Line extends the use of digital displays on trains and the use of SMS to advise delays, and changes to routes and schedules.
- V/Line produce printed and online information in multiple formats, and develop Easy English versions of key documents.

Appendix

Table 1: Summary of Interviews and Focus Groups

	People with Communication Difficulties	V Line Staff	Travellers Aid	Total
Focus Groups		1 x 4 People (Customer Service Staff and Conductors; 3 Male, 1 Female)		
	1 x 5 People (4 Male, 1 Female)			
	1 x 4 People (3 Male, 1 Female)	1 x 3 People (Customer Service Staff and Conductors; 2 Male, 1 Female)	N/A	5 (20 People)
Individual Interviews	12 People	11 People (Call Centre Staff; 4 Male)	2 People	25 People

Table 2: Survey Sample Demographics

Demographic Factor	Frequency n=161	%
Occupation		
<i>Conductors</i>	37	23
<i>Customer service staff</i>	39	24
<i>Booking office staff</i>	29	18
<i>Call centre staff</i>	6	4
<i>Other</i>	50	31
Total	161	100
Gender		
<i>Male</i>	122	76
<i>Female</i>	39	24
Age		
<i>Average</i>	44 years	
<i>Range</i>	20 – 66	
Tenure*		
<i>< 1 year</i>	19	12
<i>1-4 years</i>	45	28
<i>5-15 years</i>	55	34
<i>> 15 years</i>	42	26
Experience of People with Disability		
<i>Yes</i>	116	72
<i>No</i>	45	28

Note. *Described as the length of time holding a V-Line position that involves working with customers.

Table 3: Prior Experience of People with Disability either in Your Family or Work by Occupation

Occupation	Yes %	No %
Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	78	22
Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	74	26
Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	62	38
Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	67	33
Total (<i>n</i> = 111)	72	28

Table 4: Type of Communication Training Undertaken by V-Line Occupation

Occupation	Communication Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	81	19	78	22	57	43
Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	54	46	31	69	18	82
Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	59	41	28	72	17	83
Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	50	50	33	67	17	83
Total (<i>n</i> = 111)	64	36	46	54	31	69

Table 5: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty with English by Training Type

People who have Difficulty with English	Type of Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication Disability	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
Not Difficult (Easy)	10	8	12	7	13	8
A Little Difficult	37	30	37	32	31	36
Somewhat Difficult	45	50	41	52	44	45
Very Difficult	9	13	10	10	9	8
No Experience	-	-	-	-	2	3

Table 6: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Seeing by Training Type

People who have Difficulty Seeing	Communication Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
Not Difficult (Easy)	54	35	50	39	58	38
A Little Difficult	31	40	36	33	27	37
Somewhat Difficult	9	13	8	10	9	10
Very Difficult	4	5	5	4	4	4
No Experience	3	8	2	13	2	11

Table 7: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Hearing by Training Type

	Communication Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
People who have difficulty hearing						
Not Difficult (Easy)	18	18	19	17	20	16
A Little Difficult	51	43	53	42	62	41
Somewhat Difficult	23	25	19	24	13	25
Very Difficult	9	8	8	8	2	10
No Experience	0	8	2	9	2	8

Table 8: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Speaking by Training Type

	Communication Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
People who have Difficulty Speaking						
Not Difficult (Easy)	10	13	10	10	18	7
A Little Difficult	40	33	42	32	51	30
Somewhat Difficult	32	30	30	30	16	35
Very Difficult	13	18	16	14	13	16
No Experience	6	8	3	13	2	12

Table 9: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Understanding What You are Saying by Training Type

	Communication Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
People who have Difficulty Understanding What You are Saying						
Not Difficult (Easy)	10	8	11	7	16	6
A Little Difficult	30	30	30	35	33	33
Somewhat Difficult	49	33	45	35	42	38
Very Difficult	10	23	13	17	9	17
No Experience	1	8	2	6	0	6

Table 10: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Reading by Training Type

	Communication Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
People who have Difficulty Reading						
Not Difficult (Easy)	39	40	36	35	31	37
A Little Difficult	34	28	42	27	42	29
Somewhat Difficult	18	15	17	18	22	16
Very Difficult	3	5	0	5	2	3
No Experience	6	13	5	16	2	15

Table 11: Ease of Communicating with People who Seem to be Generally Confused by Training Type

People who Seem to be Generally Confused	Communication Training					
	General: Public		General: Disability		Specific: Communication	
	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %	Yes %	No %
Not Difficult (Easy)	7	5	6	4	11	3
A Little Difficult	45	50	41	50	44	47
Somewhat Difficult	35	25	38	27	31	31
Very Difficult	11	18	14	14	13	15
No Experience	1	3	2	5	0	5

Table 12: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty with English by Occupation

People who have Difficulty with English	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111) %
Not Difficult (Easy)	16	8	3	0	9
A Little Difficult	30	41	28	50	34
Somewhat Difficult	38	49	55	50	47
Very Difficult	16	3	14	0	10
No Experience	0	0	0	0	0

Table 13: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty with Seeing by Occupation

People who have Difficulty with Seeing	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111) %
Not Difficult (Easy)	57	41	41	50	47
A Little Difficult	32	38	31	33	34
Somewhat Difficult	5	8	21	0	10
Very Difficult	5	3	3	17	5
No Experience	0	10	3	0	5

Table 14: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Hearing by Occupation

People who have Difficulty Hearing	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111) %
Not Difficult (Easy)	22	15	21	0	18
A Little Difficult	57	49	41	17	48
Somewhat Difficult	16	28	17	67	23
Very Difficult	5	3	17	17	8
No Experience	0	5	3	0	3

Table 15: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Speaking by Occupation

	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111)
People who have Difficulty Speaking					%
Not Difficult (Easy)	19	5	10	0	11
A Little Difficult	38	38	38	17	37
Somewhat Difficult	35	31	28	33	32
Very Difficult	8	15	17	33	14
No Experience	0	10	7	17	6

Table 16: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Understanding What You are Saying by Occupation

	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111)
People who have Difficulty Understanding What You are Saying					%
Not Difficult (Easy)	11	8	3	33	9
A Little Difficult	19	31	45	17	30
Somewhat Difficult	51	49	31	17	43
Very Difficult	19	8	14	33	14
No Experience	0	5	7	0	4

Table 17: Ease of Communicating with People who have Difficulty Reading by Occupation

	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111)
People who have Difficulty with English					%
Not Difficult (Easy)	38	33	52	33	40
A Little Difficult	38	33	21	33	32
Somewhat Difficult	16	18	17	17	17
Very Difficult	3	5	3	0	4
No Experience	5	10	7	17	8

Table 18: Ease of Communicating with People who Seem to be Generally Confused by Occupation

	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111)
People who Seem to be Generally Confused					%
Not Difficult (Easy)	8	8	3	0	6
A Little Difficult	38	49	55	50	47
Somewhat Difficult	35	28	31	33	32
Very Difficult	19	10	10	17	14
No Experience	0	5	0	0	2

Table 19: Usefulness of Communication Board/Book/Card Used by People with Communication Difficulties by V/Line Staffs' Occupation

Communication Board / Book /Card	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (n = 37)	Customer Service Officers (n = 39)	Booking Office Staff (n = 29)	Call Centre Staff (n = 6)	All 4 Jobs (n = 111) %
Not Useful	3	3	0	17	3
A Little Useful	11	5	0	0	5
Somewhat Useful	11	15	17	0	14
Very Useful	70	49	62	33	59
No Experience	5	28	21	50	20

Table 20: Usefulness of People Indicating that They Need Help by V/Line Staffs' Occupation

Indicated to You They Needed Help Communicating	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (n = 37)	Customer Service Officers (n = 39)	Booking Office Staff (n = 29)	Call Centre Staff (n = 6)	All 4 Jobs (n = 111) %
Not Useful	0	3	0	0	1
A Little Useful	11	10	3	33	10
Somewhat Useful	22	21	34	0	23
Very Useful	57	49	45	50	50
No Experience	11	18	17	17	15

Table 21: Usefulness of Person with Difficulties Showing Written Information about Communication by V/Line Staff' Occupation

Showed You Something that had Written Information about their Communication Difficulty	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (n = 37)	Customer Service Officers (n = 39)	Booking Office Staff (n = 29)	Call Centre Staff (n = 6)	All 4 Jobs (n = 111) %
Not Useful	0	3	0	33	3
A Little Useful	5	3	0	0	3
Somewhat Useful	5	5	21	0	9
Very Useful	84	77	55	17	70
No Experience	5	13	24	50	15

Table 22: Usefulness of Person with Communication Difficulties Showing Written Information about What They Wanted by V/Line Staffs' Occupation

Showed You Written Information about What They Wanted	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111) %
Not Useful	0	3	0	17	2
A Little Useful	8	0	0	0	3
Somewhat Useful	8	5	10	17	8
Very Useful	84	87	83	0	80
No Experience	0	5	7	67	7

Table 23: Usefulness of Person with Communication Difficulties Pointing and Using Gestures to Show What They Wanted by V/Line Staffs' Occupation

Pointed and Used Gesture to Show You What They Wanted	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111) %
Not Useful	0	0	0	17	1
A Little Useful	11	13	10	0	11
Somewhat Useful	41	28	31	17	32
Very Useful	43	54	55	0	48
No Experience	5	5	3	67	8

Table 24: Usefulness of Person with Communication Difficulties Alerting V/Line about Their Needs Prior to Their Journey by V/Line Staffs' Occupation

Had Alerted V-Line about Their Needs Prior to Their Journey	Occupation				Total
	Conductors (<i>n</i> = 37)	Customer Service Officers (<i>n</i> = 39)	Booking Office Staff (<i>n</i> = 29)	Call Centre Staff (<i>n</i> = 6)	All 4 Jobs (<i>n</i> = 111) %
Not Useful	3	5	7	17	5
A Little Useful	5	5	3	0	5
Somewhat Useful	8	13	21	0	13
Very Useful	59	51	38	50	50
No Experience	24	26	31	33	27

