

Making public transport more accessible

Able-bodied people often take the ease of using public transport for granted, but it's a very different story for those with disabilities and extra needs. We spoke to Jay Shen, managing director at Transreport, about how the app is making a big difference.

When Jay Shen was preparing for a presentation as part of his PhD research into sensor technology, never could he have imagined that the day would end with an idea that would evolve into a startup with over 220,000 users and helping a sector that was desperately in need of innovation.

"While I was doing my presentation to the academic audience, there was a disabled gentleman that was really interested in my research," Jay told Maddynews UK. "After the event, he pulled me to one side to ask more questions.

"He started talking about having to go back home that night by train, which was a major headache for him. He's a wheelchair user with other complications and shared terrible stories about the many times he was stuck on the train.

"Every time he realised that he needed to use public transport, be it a train or to fly somewhere, his anxiety kicked in. Every time he got to train stations, he would worry whether there would be somebody there helping him to get on the train and when aboard, he would worry about whether there would be somewhere waiting to help him alight on the other side."

Jay went home that evening feeling inspired, and developed a prototype that very weekend of an app that allowed a disabled passenger to communicate their travel needs with another app used by train station staff. This idea would eventually evolve to become *Transreport*.

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Evolving the idea

Through a connection, Jay soon got a meeting with a train company that led to another with the firm's accessibility panel. The meeting was booked in for just 15 minutes so he could quickly demo his prototype – but it turned into a two-hour session.

“The panels' faces lit up and someone said that the app was going to change their life,” says Jay. “That was what really hit me and made me think, wow, this is something I really want to do.

“I went back and further developed the technology to make it a solid MVP version. We then started a trial with a different train company. Soon, the BBC heard about us and did a six-minute special programme on BBC Click back in 2017. After that, things exploded. Everybody started contacting us and that's how the project kicked off officially.”

COVID-19 had other ideas, though. When almost all ability to travel came to a crashing halt, Jay expected the project to end. Instead, the train industry used this as a window of opportunity to introduce new technology.

“We launched the staff app in September 2020 and immediately saw the benefit for operators in terms of processing times,” says Jay. “Before, bookings from disabled passengers would take the train company around 35 minutes to process each application, including answering the call, writing down the information, sending that email to a station and so on. Our product takes all of that hassle away and turns the process time into seconds.”

Jay and his team launched the passenger app six months later as a soft launch, giving panels and early adopters a chance to give feedback. And then, when more COVID restrictions were lifted in May 2021, Transreport did its public

launch.

“Since then, we have had double digit percentage growth every month,” says Jay. “We have a large user base of around 220,000 people. We see the passengers who are using our app on average travel four times more than disabled people not using our technology.”

To accommodate older users who requested an easy-to-navigate desktop version of the app’s functionalities, Transreport recently launched its website. Train operators like ScotRail even directly link through to the site for those passengers looking to book extra travel support.

2023 and beyond

Looking ahead, Jay acknowledges that accessibility support is a sector that will always need ongoing innovation. To address this, his team has created a two-year roadmap that will implement more features into the app to make sure that its technology is futureproofed – and the startup is even in the process of drafting another two years of plans on top of that.

Transreport has grown significantly in the years since launch and is now looking to scale to more countries and sectors.

“We have a lot of passengers asking about other travel settings for the app, so we’re currently in talks with airports and other forms of public transport,” says Jay. “If you look at the recent data of all the demographic segments, there is double-digit growth for the number of disabled passengers using trains and airports. That’s because in the UK, we’re an ageing population and as you grow older you will tend to need more mobility assistance.

“Only about 18% of disabled people were born with a disability. That means more than 80% of disabled acquired a disability somewhere later in their lives, either through injury or illness.

“Nobody knows what’s going to happen tomorrow, but one thing’s for sure is that we’re all going to grow old,” concludes Jay. “We want to ensure that the UK, Europe and the wider world has an infrastructure that is suitable for the future of society, and that’s our target for the next generation.”

Jay Shen is managing director at *Transreport*.

Transreport was the regional winner for London in the Super Connect for Good competition powered by global super connectors, Empact Ventures, for more information visit <https://empact.ventures>.

