

## In the air with Shannon Wandmaker transcript

Chantal Boyle:

Well, welcome to The Sunflower Conversations. I'm Chantal and joining me today on The Sunflower Conversations is my colleague Sandee Facy.

Sandee Facy:

Greetings from Melbourne.

Chantal Boyle:

Also Shannon, how are you Shannon?

Shannon Wandmaker:

I'm very well indeed. I'm very well indeed. Good to be here.

Chantal Boyle:

So Shannon is based in Brisbane, Australia. He's an aviation security and facilitation consultants and sits on the Queensland Accessible Transport Advisory Council. Shannon, can you tell me a little bit about your background and your experience which has led you to be on the advisory board?

Shannon Wandmaker:

Yeah, absolutely. So my background is about 20 odd years in aviation security and facilitation. So when the opportunity came up to join the Accessible Transport Advisory Council, I thought that I would have a fair bit to bring to the table in terms of knowledge and experience. The other part of my experience is an experience with disability. So in my family there's a long history of hemophilia. When they were putting together the Accessible Transport Advisory Council, what they were looking for was people with industry experience, I guess, as well as people with lived experiences. What you'll find when you sit around this council is you've got an incredibly rich pool of experience to draw from.

Shannon Wandmaker:

Queensland's one of the biggest states in Australia about five million people, I think in the state, about two million square KMs of land. So it makes it about two and a half times the size of Texas or about seven times the size of the UK. So it's a big, big bit of real estate, but the fact that we've got five million people as opposed to 60 million means you've got some real challenges when it comes to accessibility. So long, thin train route. There are very small towns and one or two large cities.

Shannon Wandmaker:

Primarily we advise Queensland Rail, Department of Transport and Main Roads who look after buses and the road networks and so on, technical specifications to do with accessibility of trains and how close the trains should be to the platform and that kind of thing. I'm more interested in the end-to-end journey. I'm more interested in how does someone get from

their home to where they need to get to and back again and how can we make that as seamless as possible? What I tend to do is take my aviation knowledge and try to apply it to different environments.

Chantal Boyle:

What kind of topics do you advise on with your specialty?

Shannon Wandmaker:

Yeah. That's the interesting thing. The vast majority of my career in air transport and my focus for a very long time has been security and facilitation and those two aspects go sort of hand in hand. I spend a lot of my time talking with governments around the world. I actually write training programs or talking about the challenge for people with disabilities in these spaces. So if it's the security space, then it's going to be specifically, usually at screening points. And these obviously can be challenges for people with disabilities in those areas again, the end-to-end journey. So what happens when I leave the house? What do I need to do to get to the airport through the airport, onto the aircraft and out the other side?

Sandee Facy:

So what are some of the things that airlines and airports need to consider to be inclusive for a passenger with non-visible disabilities?

Shannon Wandmaker:

Yeah. No, it's a great question and it's something that airlines and airports are constantly thinking about not just because there are international obligations around that in terms of facilitation, but because it's in their best interest to be as inclusive as possible. One of the things that we talk about in the Accessible Transport Council is 20% of tourists who come to Queensland have some kind of disability hidden or otherwise. It's a massive part of the tourism market and therefore it will be a massive part of the... One in five people who go through an airport to get on an aircraft, they're going to have some form of disability. So it's a hugely important question to address.

Shannon Wandmaker:

Airlines and airports in particular, focus on the fact that an airport is a really busy, often overcrowded place. It's overwhelming, it's confusing, it's stressful, it's unfamiliar to people a lot of the time, and they do spend a lot of time thinking about that. You'll find that airports think a lot about wayfinding and making it as simple as possible to get from the taxi or from the bus or however you got to the airport to check-in through screening and out.

Shannon Wandmaker:

The other thing that sometimes I think gets lost as we charge towards new technologies, and anybody who's traveled over the last 10 or 15 years will know, back in the day you would interact with people a lot more. You'd have a conversation with the check-in agent. You'd have a conversation with the security officer. You'd have a conversation with customs immigration people, et cetera, et cetera and as technologies come in, that started to fall away.

Shannon Wandmaker:

So you can check-in online, which is great a lot of the time for a lot of people, or you can check-in at the airport using a booth, you don't have to talk to anyone. You can go through security oftentimes without really interacting with people. You've got automated gate passes to get through immigration, et cetera, et cetera. And I remember, because I lived in London years ago, you could go through Heathrow Terminal 5 and basically not speak to anybody.

Shannon Wandmaker:

But for people who need that support or are confused or are stressed or upset or just need something else, that becomes a real challenge because there's nobody you can just talk to. Back in the day you would mention to the checking agent, "Oh, look, I'm going to need some assistance here." And that was an easy conversation to have because you were already having a conversation with them and nowadays you've got to seek out someone to talk to and I think that can be a real challenge.

Shannon Wandmaker:

And then the other thing tied exactly to that is airports are focused on development of apps almost to replace that human interaction. So looking at again, whether it's around wayfinding or providing more information about the environment, this is where you're going to find bathrooms, this is where you're going to find medical assistance if you need it, this is where you can find whatever it is. A lot of very sophisticated airports now have apps that you can sort of interact with. So those are some of the things that the airlines and the airports focus on.

Shannon Wandmaker:

And from an airline point of view, it's easy for flight crew and cabin crew and so on to forget that this is stressful for some people. Again, I think the statistics are that one in four people who get on a plane don't want to be on that plane. They don't like flying. They don't like anything about it. So if you are someone who has a hidden disability, PTSD or something, which is going to get triggered by stressful environments or claustrophobic environments or whatever it is.

Chantal Boyle:

I honestly didn't realize that it was one in four people. That is really high.

Shannon Wandmaker:

So if you combine that, if you say one in five people getting on that plane have got some kind of disability, one in four people don't want to be there in the first place, and it may be that those two don't intersect. You might have someone who's got a physical disability who loves flying, as long as they get the support they need for their mobility, the being on the plane doesn't matter. If you've got someone with autism who loves flying, that's not going to be as much of an issue. I've got friends who've got children who are on the autism spectrum. They love flying, it is not a problem to get on the plane, but it's where those two intersect where I think it can be a real challenge.

Shannon Wandmaker:

And I saw that British Airways most recently became involved in the Sunflower program. And that to me makes a lot of sense because in particular British Airways, but any airline to sort of acknowledge that there's going to be challenges here and we spend a lot of time training our staff on dealing with all manner of emergencies and situations. And this is another piece of our training to make sure as many people as possible are as comfortable as possible during that journey.

Chantal Boyle:

Because it's a safety issue, isn't it?

Shannon Wandmaker:

So one of the things that people often get upset about with physical disability, so people in wheelchairs, for example, and I've heard stories told by people in wheelchairs who've turned up to an airport to be told, no, you can't fly in this aircraft because we've already got two people in wheelchairs and you didn't tell us that you were coming and so we didn't plan for it. And on its face, it's like that's terrible and it should be allowed and it should be facilitated, but there are a whole bunch of really rigid safety aspects to aviation which simply can't be gotten around. So for example, you need to be able to get every single person off an aircraft within 90 seconds. That's the-

Chantal Boyle:

Really?

Shannon Wandmaker:

Yeah, that's the safety rule. So when the A380 first came into service and A380 can take up about 800 people, depending on how you configure it, Airbus had to prove through demonstration that they could get every single person off that aircraft in 90 seconds. Now you can't do that if half those people are in wheelchairs, but you can do it if four of them are or six of them are or whatever it is.

Shannon Wandmaker:

It's also very much a safety issue if you've got someone who is not happy to be on the aircraft, has a hidden disability that triggers something within them. They panic, they get stressed, they do something they wouldn't otherwise do. And then suddenly you've got a situation where people around them are feeling threatened or feeling scared and you're right, that causes all manner of issues to do with the safety of the aircraft. And it in fact, spills into the security part, which is of course the other part of my role.

Shannon Wandmaker:

We have debates within the security space about people with mental health issues who do something to endanger the security of the aircraft. Is that what we would consider a terrorist incident or is there another way of categorizing that? Because from a strict security point of view, regardless of your motivations, if you jump up and try and smash your way into the cockpit, that's a security problem and that's a terrorist incident. But at the end of

the day, the idea around aviation is that, broadly speaking, the amount of aircraft that take off is the same amount of aircraft that land. So regardless-

Chantal Boyle:

I see.

Shannon Wandmaker:

Yeah. So regardless of how and why and when, you want to make sure that no person feels that they need to sort of create an incident on board an aircraft.

Sandee Facy:

And I can totally agree with you as well on the part about preparing the passenger for flying, being able to give them a sense of, like you said, wayfinding and preparation, it can ease the anxiety and the nerves when they have some sort of idea of what to expect. So do you have any best in practice examples?

Shannon Wandmaker:

One from an aviation point of view, I guess, is if you look at Singapore Airport. Singapore Airport is consistently ranked the best airport in the world for a variety of very good reasons, but they do a few things really, really well. The wayfinding is very, very good through Singapore, but they do really simple things like it's carpeted. Now you might not think, who cares? It's carpeted, it's got tiles, it makes it harder for me to drag my bag. It's quieter. So you don't have all the noise and the echoing and what have you, and to that end, they don't make announcements either.

Shannon Wandmaker:

So there's boards everywhere to show you where you need to be and when the flights are and so on, but there's no constant noise of talking and the clattering of feet on tiles and so on, but they spend a lot of time thinking about how to make the environment comfortable for everybody. Airports are stressful and noisy, how can we bring that down and make it calmer and quieter? So it's those kind of sometimes really simple things. In Denmark in the security checkpoint, when they designed that they designed it almost as if they were designing like a concert hall and they spent a lot of time thinking about how can we reduce the noise? Same thing. So security points are noisy, chaotic places, and people get very stressed. So they've designed it with, however well they've set up their ceilings and walls where that noise is basically sucked away.

Shannon Wandmaker:

If you go back the accessible transport, the Queensland examples, not only does Queensland have an accessible transport council, on each individual major project in Queensland transport project, they have separate sort of advisory forums where they really get into the weeds of, we're about to buy 400 new trains, what do they need to have? How are we going to make the bathroom successful? How are they going to keep them close to the platform? All of those things. We're about to put on a light rail down in the Gold Coast. So there'll be a whole little forum set up doing a really great job at trying to make transport

accessible to as many people as they possibly can. And not just because we've got the Olympic games coming up in 10 years, but even before that they were doing that.

Shannon Wandmaker:

And so I think that's a really good example where all the way back at the design phase you are trying to incorporate whether it's things that allow for people with physical disability to get access, but even again, whether it's wayfinding the design of train terminals and so on to make it as calm as possible, as stress free as possible, as easy to navigate as possible so that anybody with any kind of disability hidden or otherwise feels that they can enter that space and be comfortable in that space.

Speaker 3:

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Chantal Boyle:

I think when you are able to start with the design process that means that your whole journey, I would imagine, is thinking about accessibility from the get go. So you said the one in Denmark has been designed with the audio effect in mind, but most settings will have to retrofit, won't they? They've been there for a long time.

Shannon Wandmaker:

Yeah. And whether that's an airport or a train station or whatever it is, that's a big problem. So in Queensland, there's 150 train stations, I think just in the Southeast Queensland corner. Some of those were designed in the '50s when accessibility meant someone carried the guy with the wheelchair up the stairs. There was just no consideration for accessibility whatsoever. There's a train station a couple of kilometers from my house, which is going through a retrofitting process, hugely expensive. And the Queensland government is committed to doing this 150 times, retrofitting these stations, putting in decent size elevators. And you're absolutely right, if you can get it right at the start, then you solve all these problems.

Chantal Boyle:

You mentioned earlier on about the development of apps within airports so that people can plan their journey before they arrive. One of the issues is the heavy reliance on technology not everybody is computer literate and finds operating one really challenging and a barrier. When you are making your advice within the airport environment, do you take those considerations into account?

Shannon Wandmaker:

Yep. All the apps in the world are great, but sometimes it is literally people on the ground. [inaudible 00:16:24].

Chantal Boyle:

Yeah. I had an experience on the tube. The other night I went into Central London and on the way back, the Northern line has a new spur. So it has a couple of new stations which go

off that way and I hadn't clocked that. So basically I ended up in the wrong spot. And I can't tell you how stressful it was to actually get to where I wanted to be because the announcements were not loud enough for me to hear and there weren't any staff. I felt really stressed by that.

Chantal Boyle:

I mean, I would've figured it out eventually, but I was thinking, I'm going to have to come out of the tube. I'm going to have to order a taxi because I cannot fathom what platform I'm supposed to be on or how I even get to that platform. So wayfinding and people on the ground, I completely understand that. You just want to ask a human being a question who can give you a direct answer to get you to where you need to be.

Shannon Wandmaker:

And it goes back to what we were talking about a little bit before, which is as the technology evolves, people get pulled out of the equation, especially in airport environments and so on, but the human interaction I don't think can ever be really replicated. So to your example about not being able to find someone, I had the opposite example where I was just pottering around with my two boys. I've got very young kids and they decided they wanted to catch a train and just wandered down into the bowels of the place. All I was looking for was a train to take me out a couple of stations and then come back.

Shannon Wandmaker:

And there was a guy there and he worked for the Queensland Rail and I had a conversation with him. It took 15 seconds for him to go, what you need to do, platform two, that'll take you out to such and such a station, turn around and come back. Great. Maybe there's an app that could have told me that or maybe I could have worked it out, but I wouldn't have worked it out in 15 seconds. I hope there's always a balance between, there's new technology and innovation and new things, but there's also Bill and Jane and Steve and John still there in some capacity.

Chantal Boyle:

So what advice would you give to a person with a health condition who's traveling thinking about an airport journey, for example?

Shannon Wandmaker:

You're the one with the health condition. So you are the one who's best placed to know what you need, would be my first thought on this. To some extent it's about planning ahead or not to some extent, a lot of it is about planning ahead. So if that you are going to want more time, you're going to need potentially access to particular medical facilities, you want to have a conversation with someone before your journey. Do that planning ahead in advance. Most airports of any note and certainly most airlines, they've got pretty sophisticated websites, they've got contact centers and so on.

Shannon Wandmaker:

And I think we did touch on this earlier about the idea that if you know what's coming, it's a lot easier to deal with. If you just front up at an airport, you've never been to one before

and you've got a ticket in one hand and a bag and the other, it can be stressful. Don't be afraid to talk to people, whoever they are, they live and breathe the airport and aviation. So you're unlikely to ask them a question that they don't know the answer to.

Shannon Wandmaker:

I guess the other bit is to prepare for the unexpected a little bit. So if you are someone who gets stressed out by things not going exactly as they should and you've got things in a particular order, that will probably happen about 80% of the time in an airport and on the airline, but things get delayed, flights get cancelled, things get moved around, the gate gets changed sometimes. In aviation you've got to sort of roll with it, I think. So that's an important one as well, as much as you can.

Chantal Boyle:

Do all airlines have assistance? We call it assistance here. So if I have additional needs I can pre-book somebody to meet me with a buggy or help me with my bags?

Shannon Wandmaker:

Yeah. So they will. Let them know in advance. Absolutely critical. If you have advised in advance, whether it's a physical limitation, it doesn't have to be a physical limitation, it could be obviously any kind of hidden disability. If you are concerned, if it's the first time you've flying or the first time you've been through that airport, let someone know beforehand. They will let you know where to go, who will meet you. And depending on what your need is, that person could take you right from kerbside all the way through to the aircraft and be your support right the way through. Or it might just be you need assistance until you get to dropping off your bags and from then on you'll be fine, whatever it is, 99% of airlines and airports will have that facility available.

Chantal Boyle:

And how much of a support is the Sunflower when traveling?

Shannon Wandmaker:

I think it's a really, really, great initiative. As someone who lives and breathes aviation, it didn't surprise me that this was first picked up at Gatwick Airport and has sort of come through that process because I think people in aviation understand that it's a confusing environment, that it's a stressful environment, that people don't do this all the time. Having sort of a recognizable image, someone can look around and go that person. They might not be able to solve my problem, but they're going to be sympathetic and understanding and empathetic to the need and they're going to be able to help me through whatever the issue is.

Shannon Wandmaker:

So certainly in aviation, I think it's hugely useful, but then even in other transport modes, the challenges are the same. What you're trying to do is get from where you are to where you need to be. It doesn't matter whether you're going to spend 24 hours in an aircraft or five minutes on a bus, the concept is the same. I think it's hugely useful. And as that comes into the land transport space in Australia, for example, because it's not so much here yet, I



look forward to seeing that more often because I think that there's an enormous amount of value again, in that person to person support. And we touched on it already a couple of times. Technology tends to have the focus and everyone thinks that everything can be sold by technology, but that human to human interaction and the ability to actually reach out to someone and say, I need some help, I don't think that can be replaced.

Chantal Boyle:

Shannon, thank you so much for giving up what would be your evening and Sandee Facy to join us on The Sunflower Conversations. I cannot believe that the statistic is so high of one in four people on an airplane has some feeling of not wanting to be there. So there's clearly a lot of work that can be done to make those passengers feel supported, secure, and confident. As more airlines, you mentioned BA have come on board, we have a couple of other airlines as Air New Zealand and others that I can't say, as more come on board, I think it will make the traveling experience for our customers with non-visible disabilities much more pleasant and yes, let's get it rolled out on land in Australia too.

Speaker 4:

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