



EMPLOYING ABILITIES
AT WORK

A WORLD OF WORK THAT WORKS FOR ALL:

Accessible Airline Travel for People with Disabilities



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SHRM and SHRM Foundation have a shared vision of a world of work that works for all.



SHRM is a member-driven catalyst for creating better workplaces where people and businesses thrive together. As the trusted authority on all things work, SHRM is the foremost expert, researcher, advocate, and thought leader on issues and innovations impacting today's evolving workplaces. With nearly 340,000 members in 180 countries, SHRM touches the lives of more than 362 million workers and their families globally. As the nonprofit affiliate of SHRM, SHRM Foundation empowers HR as a force for social good. In the face of complex challenges within the world of work, SHRM Foundation believes that HR holds a unique position to lead change. The organization mobilizes and equips HR to ensure the prosperity and thriving of talent and workplaces. SHRM Foundation provides evidence-based strategies, learning resources, and actionable tools to increase the knowledge and capacity of talent management strategies in workplaces.

Employing Abilities at Work is part of our commitment to offer education and resources to build inclusive workplaces for employees with disabilities. By widening the aperture of knowledge and strategy beyond accommodations and compliance, workplaces can leverage talent with disabilities and create an inclusive workplace that supports the hiring and professional development of these workers.

This paper is intended to educate HR stakeholders on an issue that many of them have observational or incidental knowledge of but should be more cognizant of for the sake of their employees who use wheelchairs, as the issue has a significant impact on their personal well-being, productivity, and professional development. Accessible airline travel is good for business because it connects employees with disabilities to a global economic workforce, bolsters productivity, and ensures efficiency.

"People with disabilities are talent in the workplace, and we believe that travel should be an opportunity for all employees to develop their careers, rather than a barrier to achievement."

—Jessica Rafuse, Director of Accessibility Strategic Partnerships and Policy at Microsoft

In the **2023-24 SHRM State of the Workplace Report**, managing change was a recurring theme, and concerns about labor shortages were a top challenge mentioned by employers. Looking ahead, 62% of HR departments plan to recruit from more diverse and underutilized talent pools, such as people with disabilities. Leveraging untapped talent to address persistent labor challenges is increasingly being recognized as a valid hiring strategy, but employers are also thinking more strategically about workforce management and prioritizing support for their existing workforce as well. According to HR professionals, their top three priorities are maintaining employee morale and engagement; retaining top talent; and finding and recruiting talent with the necessary skills. Having a respectful workplace culture was also cited as an important component of employee morale and engagement. Organizations are continuously attempting to distinguish themselves from peer organizations for top-tier talent amid an ever-tight labor market. As of May 2024, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported just **under 8.2 million job openings and a 3.6% hire rate**. Individuals with disabilities represent an ever-growing talent pipeline.

Employing individuals with disabilities isn't just the 'right' thing to do; it's strategic. **Disability:IN's 2024 Disability Equality Index Report** states that inclusive businesses realize 1.6 times more revenue, two times more economic profit, and 2.6 times more net income than their peers. According to Forbes, recruitment and retention is also impacted by authentic inclusion and diversity efforts, with **95% of candidates** comparing such efforts by employers when choosing between similar jobs. A 2017 report by the United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific estimated that adopting disability-inclusive employment policies could **raise GDP by 1% to 7%**.

Despite these findings, as of June 2024, **24.5% of eligible people with disabilities were employed, compared to 68.5% of eligible nondisabled people**, according to the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. Workers with disabilities tend to have **higher rates of unemployment** (7.2%) when compared to workers without disabilities (3.5%).



According to the Centers for Disease Control, **approximately one in four adults (25.7%)** in the U.S., or **61 million** people, report living with at least one disability; in China, that number is **85 million**. Around the world, disability prevalence is estimated at **1.3 billion people**. The number of individuals with disabilities is only projected to increase over the next several generations, in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic's widespread negative health effects. Between 2019 and 2023, there was a **10% increase** in the number of civilian noninstitutionalized individuals ages 16 to 64 who identified as having a disability.

This upward trend is also reflected in the **percentage** of new hires who are self-identifying as disabled during onboarding, which is higher than self-identification rates for current employees in several countries. Overall, **employment rates** for working-age women and men with disabilities hit record highs in 2023 in the U.S. In the U.K., there are **5.53 million people with disabilities** in the workforce.

"One of my biggest what-ifs comes from my decision not to fly early in my career. I passed up career opportunities in Hawaii and California, as well as chances to attend conferences and conventions, all because I chose not to fly. I often wonder how different things might have been if I could have traveled freely and confidently, without worrying about damage to my complex wheelchair."

—Theo Braddy, Executive Director, National Council on Independent Living

Business Travel for Employees with Disabilities

It's estimated that **12.2% of U.S. adults have a mobility disability**. Of this number, an estimated **5.5 million Americans use wheelchairs** (encompassing manual wheelchairs, power wheelchairs, and scooters). Yet, a 2022 report found that the 10 largest U.S. airlines lost, damaged, or destroyed **1.62% of wheelchairs and scooters**, or approximately **1,008 wheelchairs each month**. This damage not only causes harm to wheelchair users' dignity and independence, but also curtails their workforce participation and productivity.

“1,008 wheelchairs are reported lost, damaged, or destroyed each month.”

Business travel is part and parcel for many in the global workforce, including those with disabilities. In 2022, business travel accounted for **12% of U.S. air travel**. Recent data reflects a distinct rebound in business travel since the start of the pandemic. According to a survey of 100 global corporate travel managers, 2023 travel budgets

were projected at **98% of 2019 levels** on average. The global business travel market hit **\$1.1 trillion** in 2023 and is projected to reach \$1.9 trillion by 2032. Americans alone are reported to make more than **405 million long-distance business trips** per year, with the average traveler making **6.8 trips annually**.

Business travel is part and parcel for many in the global workforce. According to a 2019 survey of corporate travel managers, **90.6% agreed that business travel is vital for company growth**. The latest **Business Travel Index Outlook** projects that travel spending “is now expected to both surpass its pre-pandemic spending level of \$1.4 trillion in 2024 and grow to nearly \$1.8 trillion by 2027.” This rebound is seen for both domestic and international travel, as more and more companies maintain footprints in China, Japan, Germany, the U.K., and Latin America. Despite pandemic-era adjustments that accommodated remote business dealings, it is evident that both the rate of business travel and corporate expenditures on such travel are on the rise.



The ROI of Business Travel

This investment of time and capital isn't without returns. It's estimated that businesses see an **average return of between \$10 and \$14.99 of revenue per dollar** spent on corporate travel. Conversely, inaccessible airline travel poses a significant threat to the recruitment, retention, and performance of employees with disabilities. Damage to durable mobility equipment poses what can amount to an insurmountable barrier to completion of one's job, and thus, opportunities for career advancement. Lost productivity squeezes the bottom line for small and midsize companies, while large corporations are forced to absorb the cost of upfront equipment repairs, alternative colleague coverage, and intangible expenses that are not recognized by the airlines. All along, business travelers who use wheelchairs are left feeling demoralized and dependent, their resilience for future travel critically impacted.

Inaccessibility of Commercial Airline Travel Today

Damage of personal durable medical equipment by commercial airlines poses a significant threat to the sustainability of business travel for professionals with disabilities. In 2023, **11,527 wheelchairs and scooters were damaged or destroyed by commercial airlines**, a number thought to be **significantly underrepresentative** due to the administrative onus of filing a claim that is placed upon the wheelchair user. Each instance of damage represents a significant threat to a traveler's independence, dignity, mobility, and independence.

Travelers who use wheelchairs also face threats to their physical safety when flying commercially.

Airline and airport staff are tasked with providing hands-on assistance to passengers as they board, deplane, and navigate the airport. Non-ambulatory wheelchair users are required to transfer into a designated "aisle chair" in order to board and deplane the aircraft. This is done with the assistance of airline staff or contract workers and involves anywhere from minor to significant direct physical contact, depending upon the individual's needs. In numerous occasions, this onerous, invasive practice has led to travelers being dropped or injured. **In 2019, paralyzed veteran Charles Brown spent three months in the hospital with a fractured tailbone after airline contractors dropped him onto the jetway.**

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“People with disabilities will not be able to effectively compete for jobs, vacation with their families, or seek needed medical care until safe and dignified air travel is guaranteed for all passengers with disabilities.”

—Heather Ansley, Chief Policy Officer, Paralyzed Veterans of America

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Another barrier to accessible air travel is the lack of accessible restrooms on most commercial planes. As of 2019, only **4.5% of the top eight U.S. airlines' single-aisle aircraft** had an accessible restroom. In July 2023, U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg **announced a new rule** requiring new single-aisle planes with at least 125 seats to have accessible lavatories. The requirement for at least one accessible lavatory will apply to planes ordered 10 years or delivered 12 years after the rule takes effect this fall, except for future models of planes, which will have to comply within one year. However, there is no requirement that current planes be retrofitted, nor that smaller regional planes with fewer than 125 seats comply.

The inaccessibility of air travel is impacting disabled consumers' choices. A 2024 **survey by The Century Foundation** found that about 70% of travelers with disabilities "passed up on airline travel in the previous years due to accessibility concerns." Reasons included concerns about the handling of their wheelchairs, the inability to access a restroom on the aircraft, and the perceived inadequate training of airline staff and contract workers. For business travelers with mobility disabilities, the decision to forgo flying is not always straightforward. The Bureau of Transportation Statistics estimates that **26% of business trips span 250 miles or more**. Constraints of time, distance, and convenience lead many people to prefer air travel. Alternative modes such as car or rail are often impractical or even impossible in a fast-paced, global economy.



The Hard Costs for Business

Although large corporations have an advantage and can be nimble when inaccessibility and inconvenience arise, there is still a business expense. According to a [2015 report](#), “Business trips booked less than a week from the date of travel made up 27% of all airline tickets booked.” The shorter the notice, the steeper the fare. When mobility equipment is damaged, curtailing a disabled professional’s trip, an organization needs to act fast. Coverage needs to be secured and travel rebooked. The cost of wheelchair repairs or short-term rentals is often absorbed by the company while bureaucratic reimbursement processes unfold. For resource-rich companies, this unexpected expense can be absorbed but still puts undue pressure on budgets. These same costs can prove too burdensome for many small and midsize companies, resulting in exponentially higher productivity loss.



Representation: Leadership Gap



An inability to reliably and safely travel is one factor contributing to the lack of people with disabilities in leadership roles. Leadership advancement is contingent upon a number of intangibles, including one-on-one interaction with the C-suite, development of a professional brand, and strong communication skills. When an employee with a disability is unable to travel to be in person with their team, these leadership accelerators are significantly chilled. Due to the lack of disabled representation in the C-suite, it can be difficult for people with disabilities in middle management to discuss their unique barriers to career development. According to a [report by the Valuable 500](#), **while 30% of white-collar professionals in the U.S. have a disability, only 3% of leaders would speak openly about their disability or role as a caregiver.** An otherwise global, fast-paced corporate environment is significantly reduced for employees with disabilities who are forced to unfairly weigh the risk of damage to body or independence with their professional aspirations.

Legislative and Regulatory Considerations

Airline travel crosses domestic and international boundaries and is subject to a regulatory landscape that is only increasing in complexity. HR professionals need to be aware of the changing dynamics and integrate them into their policies and procedures.

Americans with Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990 and revised by the Department of Justice in 2010. It prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in such activities as employment, telecommunications, and access to businesses serving the public. While transit is covered under the ADA, protection for airline passengers is limited to movement through the Transportation Security Administration process, as well as boarding and deplaning.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs conducted by federal agencies, in programs receiving federal financial assistance, in federal employment, and in the employment of federal contractors. Commercial airlines are the beneficiaries of federal funding and therefore must adhere to provisions of the Rehabilitation Act.

Air Carrier Access Act

The Air Carrier Access Act (ACAA) of 1986 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by domestic or international air carriers. [Section 382.13](#) of the act's Department of Transportation (DOT) rule says a commercial carrier "must modify ... policies, practices, and facilities when needed to provide nondiscriminatory service to a particular individual with a disability." Airlines may not refuse transport on the basis of disability, limit the number of people with disabilities on any given flight, require a traveler with a disability to fly with a companion, or keep anyone out of a specific seat. Airlines are required to provide assistance with boarding, deplaning, and making connections, and they may not charge for providing accommodations. However, airlines are not required to make modifications that would "constitute an undue burden" or fundamentally alter a program. What has been referred to as a "[regulatory stalemate](#)" has thus ensued as travelers cite protections under the law and commercial airliners argue disordinate onus.



2024 DOT Rulemaking

In February 2024, the **DOT announced a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM)** with the intent of strengthening the ACAA. This proposed rule would represent the largest expansion of rights for airline passengers with disabilities since 2008. The NPRM outlined 11 regulatory provisions, including:

- Mandating enhanced training for airline employees and contract workers who physically assist passengers with disabilities and handle passengers' wheelchairs.
- Setting new standards for prompt, safe, and dignified assistance.
- Requiring airlines to provide prompt repair and replacement of damaged equipment.
- Requiring airlines to notify passengers when their wheelchairs or scooters have been loaded and unloaded.

Though final rule language, including details on enforcement mechanics, has yet to be announced, the open comment period closed on June 12, 2024, signaling another checkpoint in the rulemaking process.

Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization Act of 2024

On May 16, President Joe Biden signed the Federal Aviation Administration Reauthorization Act of 2024, extending FAA authorities and funding through 2028. The law, which showed bipartisan support, represents one of the most significant efforts by Congress to protect the rights and dignity of travelers with disabilities in over a decade. Provisions impacting air travel for passengers with disabilities include:

- A new airport accessibility grant program to help airports make facilities more accessible.
- Requirement that the FAA to study aircraft evacuation and an expert panel to evaluate gaps in current standards and procedures and make recommendations. The FAA must initiate a rulemaking on recommendations the FAA Administrator deems appropriate.
- The MOBILE Act, which requires air carriers and foreign carriers to publish information related to powered wheelchairs including the dimensions of aircraft cargo holds, to issue refunds if passengers cannot fly due to their wheelchairs no longer fitting in the cargo hold, and to take actions toward making in-flight wheelchair seating available.
- Requirement that the Secretary of Transportation establish an optional Known Service Animal Travel Pilot Program.
- Requirement that airlines provide information on their websites regarding the rights and responsibilities of both airlines and passengers about the availability of on-board wheelchairs.
- Requirement that the Secretary of Transportation issue regulations that ensure custom-facing websites, applications, and kiosks of an airport, foreign air carrier, or domestic air carrier are accessible.
- Requirement that the DOT publish an annual report on how quickly, effectively, and efficiently consumer complaints related to traveling with a disability are received, addressed, and resolved.
- Ability for passengers with disabilities to request seating to accommodate disability-related needs, such as being close to a restroom, being seated with a companion or assistant, or providing more legroom.
- Required training for airline personnel on safely storing wheelchairs and scooters to avoid leaving flyers with disabilities with damaged or broken mobile assistance.

International Context

U.K.

Air travel for passengers with disabilities—or “passengers with reduced mobility” (PRMs), as is common parlance in the U.K.—are regulated by Parliament’s Civil Aviation Regulations of 2007. These regulations are a transposition of 1107/2006, a European Union Law stating, “Disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility, whether caused by disability, age, or any other factor, should have opportunities for air travel comparable to those of other citizens.” PRMs have a right to special assistance support throughout their journey, including moving through the airport, boarding, and deplaning. Unfortunately, the law does not provide any recompense for those with disabilities whose rights are violated while traveling on British airlines. Further, limited compensation is available for those whose durable medical equipment is damaged or destroyed. According to a limit set by the [Montreal Convention](#), passengers whose equipment has been mishandled may only be compensated a maximum of around 1,150 pounds (\$1,513).

Canada

The Canada Transportation Act, whose regulations are developed and administered by the Canadian Transportation Agency (CTA), [includes protections](#) for air travelers with disabilities flying on Canadian commercial air carriers that use aircraft with 30 or more passenger seats. Part VII of the Air Transportation Regulations ensures that services are provided to passengers with disabilities and that these services are communicated to the passenger in a written format in advance of travel. Assistance must be available throughout the entirety of a traveler’s experience, from the time that they check in at the departure airport to the time they deplane at their destination. Regulation also guarantees that mobility and technical aids be carried as priority baggage at no extra cost. As is the case with American carriers, Canadian carriers are responsible for the cost of repairs or replacement in the event that durable medical equipment is damaged. Failure to provide adequate services or, in the event of loss or damage, to replace mobility devices expediently, can result in fines by the CTA. In January 2024, Air Canada was fined CA\$97,500 (approximately \$72,294 US) for “severe violations of the Accessible Transportation for Persons with Disabilities Regulations.”

The U.K.-based advocacy organization Rights on Flights launched in March 2023 with the goal of “combating accessibility and safety barriers for disabled travelers.” Within a year, [Rights on Flights](#) submitted a draft solution to Parliament, titled the [Assisted Air Travel Act](#). The proposed legislation reflects many tenets echoed by disability-rights activists around the globe, including the need for accessible restrooms on commercial airlines, cabin stowage of passengers’ mobility devices, and increased penalties for airlines that damage mobility equipment.



Canada’s commercial airline ridership is smaller than that of the U.S., Western Europe, and Asia: Together, Canadian air carriers transported over [63.7 million passengers](#) in 2022. While any instance of inaccessibility or damage to equipment is inexcusable, Canadian airlines seem to be serving passengers with disabilities slightly more equitably than those elsewhere. Since 2018, only [16 wheelchairs](#) have been reported damaged. In response to a number of access violations by Air Canada, Transport Minister Pablo Rodriguez met with airline officials in November 2023 to demand [short-term and long-term](#) plans to ensure dignified, safe treatment of both passengers and equipment. Air Canada responded by presenting a [three-year accessibility plan](#) with measures including the implementation of annual, recurring training for its employees and establishment of a customer accessibility director role. Many Canadians with disabilities [remain skeptical](#) about the airline’s plan.

Asia

Some of Asia's largest major commercial airlines—including China Southern Airlines, IndiGo, and Air China—have additional requirements for passengers with disabilities.

To travel alone, these passengers must be able to independently fasten and unfasten their seat belt, put on and take off a life jacket, put on an oxygen mask, and move to an emergency exit if needed. If a passenger is unable to meet any of these prerequisites, they are required to fly with a “**Safety Assistant**”—defined as “any able-bodied person who assists the customer with disability to exit the aircraft in case of an emergency evacuation, and can establish communication with cabin crew for the purpose of the required safety briefing.” Right of refusal lies with the airline. In February 2024, **a physically disabled woman was refused boarding** on a China Southern Airlines flight on the grounds that she was not traveling with a Safety Assistant, despite having informed the airline of her travel arrangements two weeks in advance.

While limited data is available on the prevalence of passengers with disabilities on Asian-based carriers, there is ample data to support the rise in total passenger numbers. South Korean carriers, including Korean Air and Asiana Airlines, saw a **29% increase in ridership** during the first six months of 2024 compared to the first six months of 2023.

Aviation Sector Response

As a known issue in the aviation industry, accessibility-focused products and design have been presented and discussed at industry conferences. Delta Flight Products (DFP), a wholly owned subsidiary of Delta Air Lines, has debuted design elements that allow customers to remain in their own wheelchairs and use accessible lavatories. Designs for both first-class and economy-class seats are considered to allow for passenger-neutral designs and do not take away seats or associated revenue onboard. These flight products were developed in conjunction

with international organizations, given the global nature of air travel and associated regulations. In the U.K., the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) works with industry stakeholders to encourage and drive improvement, but it also produces airport accessibility reports on waiting times experienced by people with disabilities and mobility issues. This dialogue, along with accountability, takes into account the aviation industry's continued recovery from the pandemic but also the CAA's enforcement powers to remedy concerns.



Conclusion

The data included in this report is limited by the onus of a bureaucratic reporting system. Data is only as good as the ease with which it is collected. **It is widely believed that the 1,008-mobility-devices-per-month number is significantly underestimated, reflecting only those instances in which an impacted individual reported damage.** Scratches to wheelchair frames, broken spokes, torn backrests, and other damage are measured against the challenges required to file a claim. Also, there is no aggregated data related to expenses that business take on as a result of these issues.

Accessible airline travel provides an unfettered opportunity for talent with disabilities to travel without unjust burden, allowing them and their employers to optimize their professional trajectories. Eliminating damage to scooters and wheelchairs alone would negate the pull for professionals away from their careers, as well as the business strain that corporations absorb in the form of lost productivity when employees' mobility is thwarted.

Improved accessibility of commercial air travel would prove a net positive for corporate productivity, profitability, and organizational equity. Disability is ubiquitous, and businesses that promote inclusive practices to recruit, retain, and advance employees with disabilities will gain a competitive edge.

About SHRM Foundation

SHRM Foundation empowers Human Resources as a force for social good. As the nonprofit arm of SHRM, the world's largest HR professional society, the Foundation believes that HR holds a unique position to lead change in the face of complex challenges within the world of work. The organization mobilizes and equips HR to ensure the prosperity and thriving of talent and workplaces. The Foundation works by widening pathways to work for more skills-first candidates and more kinds of talent; tackling societal challenges, with a current focus on workplace mental health and wellness; and strengthening the HR field with even more diversity, growth, and readiness to address these needs. SHRM Foundation works with SHRM, courageous partners, and bold investors to generate awareness, action, and impact to build a world of work that works for all. Discover more at [SHRMFoundation.org](https://www.shrmfoundation.org).

Industry leaders and policymakers can recognize that there is a business case for accessible airline travel and that regulatory practices that change across geopolitical boundaries are burdensome. Ensuring all employees are part of a world of work that works for all includes making airline travel truly accessible so that all talent can meaningfully engage in work and provide sustained, reliable value to their organizations. Ensuring an inclusive global marketplace is good for business, and accessible airline travel is a strategy that supports talent mobility in every sense of the word.

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“People with disabilities are a vital part of the workforce, contributing unique skills and experiences that enhance creativity and foster a sense of belonging. However, the lack of reliable and accessible transportation in both public and private sectors can act as a barrier, limiting their full engagement in the workplace and community. It is essential for us to unite and advocate for improved accessibility in all modes of transportation.”

—Victor Calise, Director, Global Accessibility Center of Excellence, Belonging at Walmart

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About Microsoft

Microsoft creates platforms and tools powered by AI to deliver innovative solutions that meet the evolving needs of our customers. The technology company is committed to making AI available broadly and doing so responsibly, with a mission to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more.

We would like to thank Emily Voorde for her expertise and written efforts. Emily is the founder and CEO of INTO Strategies, an accessibility consultancy that brings people with disabilities into moments, movements, and campaigns. She is an educator and disability rights activist based in South Bend, Ind.