

STAYING ON TRACK

Javier Colado discusses the importance of keeping commuters informed in the event of a security incident

Travelling by rail is one of the safest and most popular forms of transport, with train journeys doubling over the last 20 years while other transport modes have declined in popularity. Rail now accounts for almost 2-billion journeys annually in Britain across all train operating companies according to the Office of Rail and Road.

The rail system in the UK, however, is constantly under the spotlight as network disruptions lead to cancellations and delays, causing frustration for passengers and an increase in compensation claims.

Statistics from the Department for Transport show that over half of all rail journeys made in England are to commute to and from work, so the necessity for trains to run on time is acute.

This puts greater pressure on our national rail network to work with the train companies to keep passengers informed, particularly if the efficiency of the system is likely to be impacted due to adverse weather, infrastructure damage, engineering work or criminal activity.

As more people travel by train, operators have an increased duty of care to ensure they are keeping not

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just passengers, but the 115,000+ people they employ, safe and informed about any emergency situation that arises and keeping their operations running smoothly.

Network Rail already has a process in place to deal with incidents that occur, providing information via its communication channels, which include station announcers, its own website, train crews and train company customer service teams. This information includes details on the problem or incident, the impact of this on the timetable, contingency plans and advice about alternative routes or transport options. This is reviewed every 20 minutes.

FURTHER AFIELD

In the Netherlands, Nederlandse Spoorwegen Reizigers (NSR) – the primary passenger rail service operator – uses dedicated technology to enhance its approach in a crisis situation. Like Network Rail, NSR supports passengers on a daily basis, especially during disruptions or emergency events. It aims to keep customers informed quickly and efficiently and to offer coffee or a recommendation for alternative transport if required.

However, it also operates a centralised platform, the NSR Control Centre, based on Everbridge technology, which allows it to collate intelligence and data across its entire rail network, which can then be disseminated to colleagues working across multiple disciplines. Customer service staff, operational managers and contact centre agents all have access to the NSR Control Centre, which provides them with real-time details on disruptions and emergencies and guidance to the impact this will have on passengers in specific stations or on specific trains.

SMS text alerts can be sent from the NSR Control Centre to the operational and customer-facing staff, even to the extent that volunteers can be asked to respond immediately if they are able to help when a train station is unmanned or a crisis situation occurs. Customer assistants can quickly share information and provide guidance and service to passengers. The system is also accessible to the NSR communications team, which then pushes information directly to passengers through the 'travellers app' and onto station monitors.

Dealing with everyday disruptions is an ongoing issue for any transport network, but with an increase in more serious events and emergencies, those overseeing the UK's railway system now need to put more stringent measures in place to ensure the safety of customers. In February passengers were adversely disrupted due to the widespread cancellation of rail services during the storms Dennis and Ciara. In December, travellers at Euston and Manchester Airport stations were evacuated after suspicious packages were reported, and in March 2019 staff were evacuated at Waterloo station in London and cordons erected to ensure passenger safety when another suspicious package was delivered to the mailroom.

We can't rely on public alerting because we currently have very limited means in the UK to communicate with the travelling public en masse when an incident of this nature occurs. This is likely to change if and when the UK Government announces that it is putting in place a public warning system – a move that it is obliged to do to meet with the European Electronic Communications Code (EECC). This is an EU directive, but despite the UK's exit from the European Union, the Government has committed to bidding by it and has acknowledged that a system will be in place by June 2022.

The purpose of a public alerting system on this scale will be to distribute messages quickly via mobile phones to everyone at risk in their own language, ideally within minutes of an emergency; contact people 'on the move', including visitors and those unfamiliar with local alert systems in place; and maximise communication reach, relevance and bi-directional response with people at a

LOCATION-BASED ALERTING ALLOWS MESSAGES TO BE DELIVERED TO PEOPLE IN AN AFFECTED AREA

specific location. It is additionally vital that those that receive the messages are able to respond so there is a two-way flow of communication.

While we wait for such a system to be rolled out, however, Network Rail and the train companies are obliged to provide their passengers and employees with the best possible communications during critical events.

As well as NSR in the Netherlands, multiple other authorities, organisations and emergency service providers in the UK and across the world have tackled this issue by building their own critical event management solutions using the Everbridge platform to keep commuters safe and operations running. One of the major benefits of the platform is that it is designed to provide support throughout the entire lifecycle of a major incident, allowing operational communications to be orchestrated efficiently across all relevant functions.

The successful management of emergencies comes from the control that a system like this delivers across a number of different phases:

PHASE 1 – VISUALISE AND ASSESS

When initiating an emergency response to an incident affecting rail infrastructure, stations, trains or passengers, the first step is to aggregate situational intelligence by collecting information from all the relevant data sources including station or train staff or engineers on the ground, CCTV cameras, calls to emergency services, social media posts and even visual data from on-the-scene smartphone users. The system then consolidates this data to generate a unified view or 'single pane of glass' of the entire situation. This delivers powerful visualisation and orchestration capabilities that enable emergencies and incidents to be managed quickly and efficiently.

PHASE 2 – LOCATE

To ensure those that are likely to be affected can be targeted with accurate safety information or guidance as to alternative routes of transport, the next step is to identify the issue and the area it affects. If this is in a station, passengers might need to be dispersed or evacuated, and station staff can be directed to where they are needed to ensure this happens smoothly and without panic. The critical event management platform has the ability to dynamically locate people using multiple methods so, if, for example, passengers have been asked to leave a train or a station, they can still be contacted if they are at risk or if they need to be given further instructions to ensure they are informed and can be kept safe.



PHASE 3 – ACT & COMMUNICATE

Once the situation has been assessed and those affected are located, action can be taken to manage and mitigate the emergency or incident. By leveraging an integrated system, response processes can be pre-defined by those in command via the platform. This can allow for both those with sight of the overall picture and those on the ground to instantly communicate and share relevant information to make vital decisions. Effective communication not only forms the basis of the successful management and mitigation of emergency events or problems that arise on the rail network, but can also avert an escalating crisis. Location-based alerting technology allows messages to be delivered to all people in an affected area giving them information about where to go, and asking them to respond to ensure the message has been received. To reach everyone affected, the information can be delivered via multiple contact paths, such as text, voice and email, and in stations it is

TRAVELLING BY RAIL NOW ACCOUNTS FOR ALMOST 2-BILLION JOURNEYS ANNUALLY IN BRITAIN

also possible to use digital signage and train information boards. Connectivity can be interrupted, particularly in crisis situations, so every channel of communication needs to be made available.

PHASE 4 – ANALYSE

Once an incident has been resolved, it is imperative that the train operator or Network Rail is able to take the time to analyse how communications with passengers were handled and assess incident time-to-resolution data for measuring and assessment. This information will provide the vital insight necessary to learn from emergency incidents and improve response times and resourcing for future events.

With the exponential increase in passenger rail travel and the growing range of safety and satisfaction challenges that rail transport providers face, the ability to rely on an integrated critical event management platform becomes more imperative. Train companies are expected to not only provide a reliable service, but to ensure passengers are safe at all points on their journey by keeping abreast of any threat or incident that might occur. The use of the right technology can deliver intelligence across the rail network and visualise any danger or disruption to passengers and staff. This then allows for a coordinated response based on reliable information and rapid, accurate communication to all those involved ●

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Public alerting systems quickly distribute messages via mobile phones to everyone at risk within minutes of an emergency happening

