

Explorable | Season Two, Episode 10: Transcript of interview with Amanda Matlock, Ryan Wilson, Phoebe Lerner, and Ray Prentice of Alaska Airlines

Josh Loebner:

Explorable is a podcast about travel, disability, and inclusion. I'm Josh Loebner, Director of Strategy at Designsensory.

Toby Willis:

I'm co-host, Toby Willis, Senior Product Manager for Inclusive Technology and President of the Ability Inclusion Movement at Expedia Group. We're both blind.

Josh Loebner:

And we love everything travel.

Toby Willis:

This is Explorable.

Josh Loebner:

We interview experts, advocates and allies of tourism, destinations, and disability.

Toby Willis:

To make each journey more explorable.

Josh Loebner:

Hey, everybody. Welcome to The Explorable Podcast. Explorable is a podcast about disability and travel. Our goal is to connect with destinations, attractions, venues and so many other businesses and brands that want to welcome disability into their mix of travelers and tourists. Toby, how are you doing today?

Toby Willis:

Hey, I'm doing all right, Josh. Thanks for asking. Excited to dive into the topic we have today. I think it's top of all of our minds to get back out there and get to traveling again. One of my favorite aspects of travel is international travel, and one of the only ways to get there is by flying, so I am excited to talk about air travel today.

Josh Loebner:

Let's take a deep dive into Alaska Airlines. All right, everyone, here we go.

Amanda Matlock:

This is Amanda. I can go. Amanda Matlock, Principal Product Designer at Alaska, and I've been with Alaska for about 24 years. I have been in the eCommerce group for about 15 of those years. We had an agent that we would work with in our call center, and we would sit with him. He used a screen reader and accessible keyboard. So, we were working on our flight matrix, so basically, your flight results page. Another designer and I would go and sit with him on calls that he would take from the guests, and also just watch how he worked through it. Then would also get his opinion on how he works through that page because you could have to 20 or 30 flights listed on that page and how you work through that with somebody on the call that's trying to book a flight. That started my interest in this area, and then we progressed and started doing little things here and there. Then the Department of Transportation web accessibility air travel mandate came into play, and with a 2015 deadline and that really surfaced everything. The company invested in workshops and trainings and education, and it's been really great because we have a lot of buy-in. I also sit on our Disability Advisory Board. Learning so much from that community has just been absolutely amazing. It started out as grassroots, and now we have a guild and it's just really amazing to see the evolution that has occurred over time.

Ryan Wilson:

The space that I have been focusing on has been primarily the day of travel space, so we work on various platforms that our guests interact with through their journey. I'm Ryan Wilson, Senior Product Designer at Alaska Airlines.

Phoebe Larner:

Hi everyone, my name is Phoebe, and I am a Senior User Experience Researcher at Alaska Airlines. It's my job to help product teams understand what our users and guests need from the different digital products that we create. It involves a lot of talking to users to really understanding what they need and what they desire from our different products, so that they have a really great user experience with us as they're traveling.

Ryan Wilson:

A big part of what Phoebe and Amanda are doing within the organization is to generate awareness. If we were to think like if you're a group within a huge enterprise, how do you bring awareness to these principles of what it means to be accessible and what does it mean to be inclusive? A big part of what they're doing is to generate awareness, and in addition to that, educating everyone in the organization on these issues. Then the hope is that will lead to action. We have different mechanisms in place to take in

user feedback. We have our incredible research team that send out surveys, they do generative research, we interview guests. Then we have App Store reviews, we have other tools that can give us qualitative data on what's happening with our digital experiences. We're able to hear firsthand what are we doing well? What are we not doing well? Then in addition to that we have friends and family members that will come to us and be like, "Hey, this wasn't really accessible for me. I don't see all that well, and is there a way you can make the text more readable or the color a little more... provide a little more contrast?" We have a lot of those personal stories that fit into our work on a daily basis. My wife shares a similar condition as you do, which is retinitis pigmentosa. So, I have a personal shared experience of what it's like to navigate a world with less vision. It's been a learning and growing experience for me. Whatever we're doing in our processes that we consider others, and accessibility and inclusion is the right thing to do. It's the ethical thing to do.

Toby Willis:

Amanda, did you have anything to add around user stories?

Amanda Matlock:

One of the things that's really incredible is the Disability Advisory Board, and we have external members that are in our disability community. Learning from them and attending events and seeing from their perspective things that I don't see and learning through the knowledge of they share their stories of their travel journeys, they share the stories of the things that make it difficult in their travel. It's really an amazing opportunity to learn. Even though I worked at the airport for a short stint in my journey with Alaska, I didn't see from that perspective, and that's something that has really instilled with Alaska and then having this opportunity to really hear these stories. It's really all inspiring for me personally. It has changed the way I look at things, even following my grandma's journey right now, she's turning 90 tomorrow and I've watched her journey into using a walker now and having... She's just recently, last year, lost her eyesight and I see things in a different way than I probably wouldn't have seen before without this opportunity to learn from this community.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, that's great. It sounds like you all are really plugged into the disability community and listening to the community as things evolve. I want to talk a little bit about how you keep your finger on the pulse of what's changing with technology and how you work with your engineering teams to prioritize that work?

Amanda Matlock:

One of the great things, one of the milestones that I think is an amazing accomplishment is that we work in an agile environment, and part of our definition of done is that any story that you put out there, any new piece of code needs to meet accessibility requirements. We strive to say that, yes, we have this accessibility mandate. It's also the right thing to do, and plus just because you meet the mandate minimums, doesn't mean that it's a user-friendly experience. I love that we collaborate with our developers and go back and forth about, "Okay, this is usable in this way and it meets this criteria." But how could we make this experience even more user-friendly? That research in that journey leads to these amazing components that we're building in this new design system that we're working on. Any component that's reused that the designers and the developers pick up, we know that those meet our accessibility criteria. Plus, hopefully, go and usually go above and beyond.

Toby Willis:

I think engineering is key in implementing these changes to ensure compliance and usability. But really product is designing the experience. It's really important for us to be working as far left as we can in the life cycle. Because studies show that retrofitting accessibility issues on apps is about 7X as costly as simply designing for inclusion.

Josh Loebner:

We know that data and insights are important to Alaska Airlines, and it's not only important to be able to track business growth or flights on time. It really helps when it comes to the disabled traveler, and to make sure that disability is part of the data matrix. So, that disability information is just as relevant as other information when it comes to the travelers that fly and use Alaska Airlines. Can you share with us how that data connects with disability in your department, but also how maybe that information can also translate to insights for other departments? And how data really can drive success?

Phoebe Larner:

With accessibility and inclusion on the research that we've done, the share outs have gone to, the entire, have gone out to the entire department. It is an entire department invite that everyone's invited to and it's recorded. If you can't attend, you can always watch it later, and the report is also sent out later to everyone on the invite. My friends had some really great feedback from people who maybe aren't as close to the research that we were doing, but still attended the report and got a lot of value from it. Then, in addition, there are other avenues for our guests to provide feedback around the website and their travels. There's a survey that goes out to people after they've traveled with us and we really read all those comments and those get reported out to other people within the company.

Ryan Wilson:

We have a research program right within our department, and they do an incredible job doing generative research. Really trying to understand our guests needs and how can the business respond to those guests needs? You could think of breadth of that is very wide. That crosses a large part of when it comes to shopping, the day of travel, post travel, in flight, there's a lot to that. That qualitative data that we receive really does help our product teams think about how can we solve these problems, in addition to that, how do we prioritize them in the midst of all the other things that we have to work on? There's one story that I wanted to share where I think it was... I hadn't been at Alaska too long, maybe it was a year. But we were invited to go and take part in what... The flight attendants they go through a rigorous training program, and part of that training is what does it mean to be inclusive and how do we make travel a little less stressful and anxiety provoking for those that are disabled? In our group, who focus on the digital side, we're able to go and attend one of these training sessions and hear firsthand from people what it's like to travel with a disability. In addition to that, I know they changed this up, but I remember the session I was in, we were all asked to blindfold ourselves. We were put in pairs and one person was to blindfold themselves and navigate the entire ops building just with a blindfold on with a partner. To just get a feel of what is it like to go up and down the stairwell? What is it like going to rooms?" To now then the question is can you imagine being in an airport what that's like? It's just that lived experience that I think really does generate impetus to do what's right for our guests. On top of that, we have our research team to really gather those insights and help our product teams prioritize this work.

Toby Willis:

I think we all agree it's important that businesses focus on this opportunity. We can't categorically dismiss 20% of the world's population. It's not only the socially responsible thing to do, but it's clearly good for our businesses to be able to serve more customers and to remove friction for customers who are already serving. I just want to get into a little bit about how you three think about design. We find that a lot of our listeners who are new on their disability inclusion journey are daunted. I think if we start by saying that we don't have to make everything accessible to every user all the time, we just have to get started. Eventually that will come, not letting perfection be the enemy of good. How does Alaska approach inclusive design? What's your philosophy around solving for inclusion?

Ryan Wilson:

The word inclusion it's just now becoming popular in a sense. It's part of the conversation, the global conversation that's happening, and I find myself trying to really understand what that ultimately means. I actually was looking up all the different definitions because I think when people say inclusive or occlusion, they mean different things. For us, I think that's the biggest part. Where we're at right now, at least, in our department on the guest digital side is what does that mean? Then how do we include that into our processes? Then, ultimately, what does that output look like in the real world? That's why we have folks like Phoebe and Amanda and others that are really trying to dive into like, "Well, what does that mean? What does that look like in the design realm, in the product development realm?" You've brought up a great point, Toby, you don't want to categorically ignore 20 to 30% of the population. I agree 100% with you, I think there is business value to serving different communities. When you solve for one community, everyone will take advantage of that value. It really is a matter of learning what inclusion is, and then how do we adopt that into our processes?

Toby Willis:

It sounds like it's just a mindset for you all. It's just part of the way that you approach design, which I think is a sustainable and scalable approach.

Phoebe Lerner:

I can say. Also, I think that the concept of inclusion is a bit newer for Alaska than accessibility, so we are currently delving into that and figuring out what it means to be inclusive in terms of things such as socioeconomic status. I know that Amanda and I are both reading Building For Everyone by Annie Jean-Baptiste, and it's been just so helpful to get me more acquainted with the concept of inclusion and understanding what it means to be inclusive in design and research.

Josh Loebner:

We've just heard from an amazing trio at Alaska Airlines, but we've got more stories. We're welcoming Ray Prentice, Director of Customer Advocacy. What does customer advocacy really mean? Hopefully, he can unpack that for us and show its value at Alaska Airlines.

Ray Prentice:

Customer advocacy, advocates, my title, which is just awesome. It's pretty inclusive. It allows me to go many places within the organization just for customers who are giving us feedback. It also is an opportunity to help our employees that have questions or concerns that I can jump in and help with that as well. Primarily, there's a couple of things. Number one is just to be an advocate for all passengers, and I take it very

seriously. All means all passengers from an inclusion standpoint, and that includes individuals with disabilities. A big piece of what I do, supporting my organization and our employees, is number one just to consumer protection rags. I would add a big part of that as the Air Carrier Access Act and the implementing regulations related to the Department of Transportation. But you know the spirit of those regulations are to help ensure that passengers or individuals with disabilities can travel independently. We want people to fly via air, we want people to fly Alaska Airlines, and so a lot of that's related to just not only the letter of these regulations, but the spirit of the regulation as well. Honestly, it's the best part of my job, the accessibility inclusion part. I make sure that I make enough time in my job duties to make sure that I'm focusing on that and helping the company learn and grow. There's a lot of collaboration with regulators, with other airlines, with disability organizations, with the customers we serve, and just as importantly, the employees that I help serve as well. We listen, we fix problems, we chase opportunities, and I got to tell you, it's just the best job ever.

Toby Willis:

I bet it's super rewarding. I'm glad you mentioned the spirit of the regulations because I think regulations and guidelines are a floor. It doesn't stop us as travel professionals from going above and beyond that, and having that really customer centric focus in our business and our operations and everything we do. I think I often say if we get this right, for those of us who need it most, travelers with disabilities and accessibility needs, then it's going to be inherently more awesome for everybody. I'm curious, Ray, you and I are in Seattle and Alaska, I fly Alaska a great deal. I love it. I love the airline, love all that it stands for. We're going to get into that in the discussion today, but really I want to know about Ray. I want to know about you and what drives you? How did you get into this working in the inclusion space and advocacy space?

Ray Prentice:

I mentioned that I've been with Alaska for 32 years, and I started in our frequent-flyer program back in 1988. So, just came in with a customer focus, helping everybody with the frequent-flyer program. Then about 20 years ago, I was promoted to the position of Manager Consumer Affairs, so I'm talking about the clinical aspect of where I had gotten involved that job included accessibility and making sure we're complying. That was roughly 10 years into the Air Carrier Access Act, and when I came into it and just had to learn a ton about a very complex rule and how it fit and how we made sure that we accommodated people with disabilities, but we did it in accordance with the rules. I just saw that we were siloed as an organization. We all had a different understanding of what we thought the Air Carrier Access Act in the spirit of it was. We started internal board of internal policy makers just to get together, and we spent probably three years just trying to get a common understanding of what that meant. But that was the clinical

part of it, the emotional part was I went to a conference roughly 20 years ago down in Florida that was called Society for Advancement of Travel Hospitality. That was one of the big disability groups and meetings at the time. I met a lot of amazing people, including my really good friend, Eric Lipp from Open Doors Org, and it clicked. All of a sudden it's like, "Wow, clinically, I have a job responsibility, but I think I can really make a difference here, and my organization is so cool, and people are friendly service oriented. I think it can make a difference." What really got it clicking for me was in that personal experience, how important it is to connect personal events to motivate people to make a difference. My nephew, at the time, had, had a motorcycle accident and his first trip in his power chair, he went to fly on my airline and my niece called me and said, "Hey, we're flying today and his wheelchair didn't fit on the plane." They'd set up an accessible van, they'd done all this trip, and it took an amazing amount of courage for Barnaby to make that trip, and it started out really poorly. 15, 20 years later, I'm just as emotional about that event today as 15 years ago. That's the personal part on why I care about this.

Toby Willis:

Right, and that's such a beautiful story. I think connecting those personal stories to the issues that we discuss on the podcast here really helps people understand how important it is for us to get this right. How does the culture at Alaska Airlines facilitate your success in this space? It sounds like you started a while back working and trying to better include people with disabilities and accessibility needs. I'm guessing that you have a good culture around you to allow that to flourish and be as successful as we know it is.

Ray Prentice:

I feel it's like for Alaska Airlines, it's our secret sauce. We work really hard to find people that are born to serve. It's hardwired into their DNA, and now you think about it, what's probably one of the biggest challenge in terms of building a culture around making sure that you're listening and taking care of customers? You're particularly tuned to people with disabilities who are trying to travel. It's getting somebody who's just openly willing to listen and say, "Hey, Toby, how can we help you today?" I've been at Alaska, like I said, over 32 years and we have a ton of people like that. All of a sudden, now you're not having to teach people to be empathetic and to care, all you're having to do is use that DNA that's already there and to use our customer service culture and our framework to say, "Let's teach you a little bit about this particular group of customers that have slightly unique needs. Let's teach you about etiquette, about backgrounds on how we can help individuals." That's relatively easy. It's hard, but it's for a big group, but it's relatively easy when you've already accomplished that people want to do something and they're just willing you teach us how to do it and we're going to jump in on board.

That's what I love about Alaska Airlines and the culture there. I feel like it's our secret sauce. Then this added layer in terms of just tailoring to different demographics and groups. That takes work, but it's not insurmountable to do that.

Josh Loebner:

Culture is important to any corporation, and Alaska Airlines we've heard exemplifies what culture means. The human stories. Ray, tell us a little bit about some of those personal stories that have happened or that you've been a part of for everyone at Alaska Airlines to do more and to welcome disability into your corporate culture?

Ray Prentice:

I'd like to say this isn't about Ray Prentice, this is about me telling the story of these amazing people at Alaska Airlines because a lot of these ideas come from our employees that say, "I've got an idea. I want to do something." Then it's just supporting them. The first one is some of our flight attendants, one in particular wanted to create an event to help people who are blind or have low vision. Traveling, in many cases, with service animals to get an experience to try an airplane out. So, with Shirley's initiative, we created a blind, low vision event working with the Washington State Department of services of blind and the Guide Dogs for the Blind came out. In the first couple of years, we brought a 737 into our hangar and we had about 70 or 80 people come in and just get to come and touch the airplane, touch the engine, touch the wheels, get on the plane, go on the cockpit. Then we did a mock takeoff and we did the PA announcements and everybody got to play with the emergency equipment. The animals, the service animals got to practice getting underneath the seat. It was so cool. We had one family come off just really emotionally said, "I've been flying for years, but this is the first time I actually felt like I was flying in a plane." Because they got to touch the airplane and create this visual representation as opposed to just sitting in a set of seats. That was so cool, and all of our volunteers that volunteered for those events, we talked about secret sauce. If I was going to suggest to anybody else who's starting in this space, those moments created everybody at Alaska Airlines who volunteered for that event were permanently changed the way they view the world, and they view other human beings that are trying to go out and make trips and do things. It changed the world for them, and all of a sudden, you have these advocates now that volunteered for event and they're helping Alaska Airlines grow. We've had these events every year up until this COVID year, and we will continue to have them. Now, we have them on our cabin mockup bay, where we have five different mock-ups of our aircraft and we have these events and they're really amazing. People come in and they get to practice, and they get confidence. We do a number of events. That was just one. The other is we've been doing for about five years. These practice sessions out at the airports for individuals with intellectual developmental disabilities, including autism. We partner with

a number of organizations. Most of our events are with Arc and they're called Wings for Autism flights. So, we do between four to six a year to where families and individuals with autism, in particular, get to come out and just, or come to the airport, check-in and go through security, get on a plane. We'll actually drive around the airport with the plane. We create these experiences. The one experience I remember in particular is after a flight, we had a family come off a plane in tears, and we ran up to them and said, "Are you okay? Are you okay?" They said, "No, you don't understand, these are tears of joys." We have been driving to Texas from Seattle for our vacation for the past 15 years and never had the confidence to get on an airplane. Their young child was so happy. He actually exceeded their expectations, but the fact that they could do this in an environment where it was as stress-free as possible, they didn't have to pay for a ticket. We had a lot of support around them. It was amazing. A couple of other things we do, puppy events at a couple of our locations where guide dog organizations can come out and puppies in training get an opportunity to come out to the airport and get oriented to the airport as well. From a training perspective, we've been doing this for probably 15 years now, but every flight attendant initial training course, which is about five weeks long. There's a section, an experiential section every week on a different type of disability. I'll give you an example. One day somebody might be walking around blindfolded assisted with an attendant to get the feeling for what it would be like to not be able to see. Everybody spends a day in a wheelchair and you might consider that a little bit polarizing like, "How could you learn in one day?" The key part is whenever our employees who uses a power chair has muscular dystrophy, comes out and speaks with the entire class towards the end of the training session said, "Now, you spend a day in a wheelchair. I've spent most of my adult life in a wheelchair. Let's talk about how you felt and let's talk about how I feel." It's very rewarding, and actually, what we hear from the flight attendants is it's a recharge of the DNA culture at Alaska Airlines. They've been learning tactical aspects about where all the equipment is. But to come in and say, "This is the right thing to do, but it's really smart business sense to do it as well." To make sure that we have a lot of people buying tickets, everybody buying tickets on Alaska. That's the type of things that we do, and it's just part of our culture that we've been doing this for quite some time.

Toby Willis:

I love that you're creating future customers, right? Like the kids here are flying with their families. The story you told about the family who's been driving to Texas, and now they're flying with Alaska. This kid's going to grow up and continue to fly with Alaska. I think that's a good anecdote, and I'd like to know about how that scales. You have a Customer Advisory Board, so how are you hearing from a broad scope of customer experiences in order to apply this company-wide at scale?

Ray Prentice:

Toby, we have an Internal Disability Board that I'd mentioned we created probably 20 years ago. Our external board is a group of amazing people. We've created this board about four years ago, and these are industry experts in accessibility. They work for a number of large disability organizations many of them. They have disabilities themselves. The cool part about creating a board like this is you get instant credibility with your own organization. Because now it's not just Ray telling his stories over and over again and trying to cajole people. We get to bring these people in, who meet with our employees, but they also meet with our executive leadership. The cool thing I like about your podcast is it's business to business, is helping to educate why these are smart business decisions. We have our board meeting with our executive group and say, "This isn't only the right thing to do, let's talk about why this can really help you with your bottom line," and to create customers who are really loyal to Alaska Airlines and they keep coming back. That can be better served by an external board. If you pick the right people that are go-getters, they can help educate your own leadership as well. The other side benefit is we've had a number of sessions. We do this every October, which is a forum on disabilities, and we've just recently created, or we have a business resource group which are employees that are focused on accessibility. We had a number of people in our group, but we had this big forum. We did a great job at it. We had over 100 people who had signed in, and we got like 60 people joined our business resource group in that one session. Including one of our VPs in the HR group who just so happens to have a child with a disability, and she told us, she goes, "Before, I didn't know I could make a difference. I was just focused on my child. Now I know that I can make a difference." We have one of these advocates for life now who's going to be able to help us with our story.

Toby Willis:

How do you recruit for your Customer Advisory Board?

Ray Prentice:

We do that a number of ways. Like I mentioned, we work a lot with disability organizations, with the policies, procedures in collaboration with national level initiatives. That's one way we try to just get out and meet with the disability organizations themselves, and sometimes it's just through the customer relationship. We meet somebody who's very outspoken and we've got somebody in the queue that will be joining us when we do a rotation who's one of our... who flies us a lot and is going to be fantastic. We've intentionally kept the number relatively low like to about five people now. Because when you get together for meetings, if you have 15 or 20 people, it can be a little hard to have everybody have an opportunity to share.

Josh Loebner:

Do those five individuals represent different archetypes or is the blind community represented same as deaf or mobility?

Ray Prentice:

Yes, we have a member who's deaf and her two kids and her husband are deaf. We have a gentleman who works for United Spinal Association. We have most of the disability groups represented, and we have this amazing young man who uses a service animal who works for Guide Dogs for the Blind. We were rolling out some programs to actually, I guess, it was in this emotional support animals space to actually do more rigor and evaluation and emotional support of animals. We had a group here at Alaska Airlines that was going to be processing the forms and they weren't too enthusiastic about it, this new work. We brought Jake in, and Jake and his service animal, Farley. Within 15 minutes, they were totally on board. That's just an example of the power of having somebody who's articulate and cares and has a disability to say, "This is why this particular thing is important to me." That they were all on board after 15 minutes. They were not on board when I spoke to them for an hour, but 15 minutes with Jake and Farley, they were all in.

Josh Loebner:

Ray, these stories are wonderful. You're sharing so many positive opportunities, positive messages as to how... It's not just something altruistic, but it actually can benefit a business, it can benefit staff, it can benefit employees, and it can benefit travelers with disabilities and so many more. But for the airline industry or affiliate businesses, can you share maybe what are some things that you could share with them that they could learn from this process and maybe internalize and take on, on their own?

Ray Prentice:

I've learned this, and I've been told this by many people who've been in this space for years, who I respect a lot, and they said it can feel pretty daunting. And you may come in, like I did 20 years ago, just a rookie, didn't quite get it. The disability rules were complex. I didn't have the relationships. Didn't know where to get started. But you start to just build relationships with people inside and outside of your organization that have a connection, have a passion, or are in a position to make a difference, for example, policy makers and influencers inside and outside your organization. You can do this whether you're introverted or extroverted. If your heart's in the right place and you ask the right questions, you can make those connections and start to develop the relationships. My relationship with Eric Lipp has opened doors over the years, has been invaluable, and then he said, "Oh, I don't know the answer, but you go speak with John

over at this other organization, he can help you or she can help you." That's the type of thing, so start to build the relationships. Then the other thing I've heard repeatedly is if you don't feel like the accessibility flywheel, this huge, massive granite flywheel sitting there, and it's accessibility inclusion, and you don't feel like it's moving in your organization, then just start pushing one direction. Like I did with our internal board, we spent, like I said, we spent a couple of years just getting a common understanding. All of a sudden, we started pushing that flywheel slowly the right direction all the same way. All of a sudden, there was 10 people pushing instead of one. Now you start to work externally, and you start to make those connections, and they're pushing the same direction. Because everybody wants to help. I will tell you, in the airline industry, we are as competitive as you can imagine about working really hard to sell tickets on my airline. But when it comes to accessibility and inclusion, we all work together. We don't see this as a competitive thing. We're helping each other be successful. Just do one thing, make one program change. Hire one person with a disability, then hire another. Make one change and make another, and just get that flywheel moving. It can seem pretty daunting, and there are days where, honestly, I feel like, "Wow, am I making a difference?" Then you get these breakthroughs that really reinforced the fact. The best way to get energy. If you feel like you're getting depleted and you need your batteries recharged, go out and talk to your customers who are either having problems or having successes and talk to your employees. You will learn very quickly that you can make a material difference in how your organization moves forward. I felt that way.

Toby Willis:

More sage words have never been spoken, sir. I think it's just important to pick a slice and get started. We can't make everything accessible for every user all the time, but we just have to get started. A tiny breach and a big dam will eventually let all the water through. I love what you're saying about pushing on the flywheel, getting other people to help you push in that same direction. It's just beautiful, and I think it's a call to everyone listening. If you are a travel professional, just get started.

Ray Prentice:

One thing I did want to mention, just an example of that. I'd gone to a conference, we'd been looking, we'd done a lot of these experiential events for people with intellectual developmental disabilities, these airport practice sessions. But these events were filling up in like 45 minutes. You have an empty airplane, you post the event, 45 minutes later is full. That showed me there was really pent up demand for people who were really struggling to... they want to fly, and they're fearful about flying. At one of these conferences, we worked found somebody who was presenting in a technology summit on an app that they have that really is a set of social stories that help people prepare for their journey. We partnered with this organization called Infinity out of Chicago. It costs

money, right? All of a sudden, we went and you talked about that flywheel, the moment where you're going, "Wow, I don't know if we can make a difference." We went to get this going at Alaska Airlines to get the app created, and at the time, we had so many technology projects that were above the water line, and this was one that just wasn't going to stick because we had so much work to do here at Alaska Airlines. I reached out to a buddy and I said, "How much money you got in your budget?" It was getting towards the end of the year, and he goes, "Oh, I don't know." I said, "Well, could you cough up 10 grand because I'm going to cough up 10 grand and let's just get this sucker done right." We scrapped up enough money, and then we worked to partner with the app, and I had a friend at Alaska who does voiceover work. She did the voiceover work and we presented it to our IT and e-commerce groups and said, "What do you think about us creating an app that requires no IT resources. We will do all the work, we're going to pay for it, and we've got the voiceover work." And they sat there and they said, "Well, I can't think of a single reason to say no." We created this app, it's called Fly for All, and you will find in Apple and Android, you can just go and shop for it. Alaska, Fly for All. We've had over 20,000 downloads to date. The cool thing, Toby, you've mentioned about how you can make things scalable. We're going to continue to do these practice flights, but now we have something that we can promote to anybody who wants to fly. We intentionally made it inclusive, so if you've got a child that's going to fly as an unaccompanied minor, if you're a family with young children, or if you have a family member or you have an intellectual disability and you want to help prepare yourself for the trip, this app goes to everything from booking your ticket, to packing your bags, to coming to the airport, to going through checking in, security and getting on the airplane. It's just a set of social stories that can help people prepare stuff. We're really excited about it. I think we're the only carrier in the US that has such an app, and that's one example of people working together to get this done and super proud of it.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, that's an amazing outcome. I'm really proud of Alaska for taking that initiative.

Josh Loebner:

Ray, you've shared a lot of human stories, those individual and group stories that build culture when it comes to Alaska Airlines. But we also know that the business is built on data and insights. Can you tell us a little bit more about data and how it connects to your role and the business to really continue its growth?

Ray Prentice:

I think this can be a challenging area and something that is as you're looking at your own organization. Take a look at the data that's out there, and then start to dig a little bit

deeper and say, "Okay, he is accessibility and inclusion a part of that data set? Is it there?" You might have some basic stuff like how many employees self-disclose that they have disabilities. It's like an HR federal requirement, right? You might have things like how many people request wheelchair assistance each day? But how do you get to the granularity that you're not looking at outputs, like a broken wheelchair is an output. But what's the input? You start measuring the inputs, and Alaska Airlines has really transitioned a lot over the past 10 years into a very data-driven company. Now we have this unique opportunity because our operational leaders look every day at data, and they recap it every week and they work with our vendors and there's corrective actions, and we have a weekly operational performance leadership where all of our executive leaders meet every week to look at the data. Now we're working to create a data set that's got to fit with this new culture. When they're looking at data about accessibility, it's got to look and feel very similar and have the same, whether it's a Gantt chart or a heat map to show what's going on. If you fit that culture and it looks similar to the other data, then it's going to stick. That's what we're working on, now we're working on a dabbler dashboard with the key accessibility components. The successes and failures, so that our operational leaders, so when they're looking at their data every day, they can look at that and drill down into enough information for them to say, "Hey, this has got my attention and I'm going to follow this through." I'd say this is a work in progress for us, but we are making progress. It's something we've been working on for the last year or so.

Toby Willis:

Yeah, we all know this is the right thing to do, but our business leaders expect us to be able to track and report on outcomes, and that's okay. But it is a squishy space for data because when we make this better for one passenger who depends on it, it's incrementally better for other passengers who benefit from those improvements.

Ray Prentice:

That's right, Toby, and I think the question I would ask is, is this area of the business being measured to the same extent that other areas of the business are being measured? If it's not, why not? That would be the question, and then how do you get there? And make sure it's clean data, data that's measurable, observable, and something you can measure. Like, especially, if you're making a difference. Like if you make a program improvement, how cool would it be to say, "Yeah, we just reduced flight delays by X percent by doing this particular thing, or we increased guest satisfaction scores." If you don't have that experience or expertise, go find people, get them to volunteer at one of your events, and all of a sudden, you've got an advocate who thinks like a data person who's helping you. We've had that happen here at Alaska. All of a sudden, we have a right person on team accessibility that can help tell the story.

Josh Loebner:

Amanda Matlock, Phoebe Lerner, Ryan Wilson, and Ray Prentice, thanks so much from Explorable, and we'll see you next time.

Toby Willis:

Explorable is a Designsensory original production in collaboration with the TravelAbility Summit and produced by Brad Carpenter. Find out more about our production, podcast, and insights at designsensory.com/originals and travelabilitysummit.com. You can connect with Josh Loebner or myself, Toby Willis, on LinkedIn.