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**The new service relationship,  
key to the attractiveness of public passenger transport  
during the Covid-19 pandemic?**

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The quality of the customer service relationship could be a key factor in restoring the attractiveness of public transport operators in a period marked by a lasting deadly and anxiety-provoking pandemic. The unprecedented restriction of all travel, personal and professional, has challenged many common benchmarks in the passenger transport industry - and not just dominant business models.

**1 - A new service relationship to reassure both the professionals in contact with the public and those who travel in times of health crisis**

During times of strict confinement, the role of the "frontline workers" emerged as "essential". Formerly "invisible" staff in contact with the public (even if they traditionally enjoyed a generally positive image) are now hailed as "everyday heroes of the frontline". However, while they are respected for their courageous presenteeism whilst facing known and unknown health risks, these "everyday heroes" have probably not been asked to contribute as main players in the service relationship with the public. Indeed, various socio-organizational rigidities of companies in the sector hinder the responsiveness of the frontlines: the weight of procedures and operating methods, cumbersome hierarchical controls, strength of compartmentalization between professions, massification of passengers flows and monotony of activities, ambivalence in relations with the public, and collective functioning likely to overshadow the "primary task" requirements of these companies. In short, despite the technical feats carried out on a daily basis by players in the sector, there is often a large gap between what these companies think they are doing, what they say they are doing, and what they are actually doing.

However, to regain the public's trust, to reassure users and keep them coming back, and even to win new customers, companies in the sector should rely on public-facing staff. While any service relationship implies a co-construction of the service between the service provider and its users, in the case of passenger transport the behaviour of the "everyday heroes" is, and will continue to be, scrutinized by users.

If travellers perceive that professionals in contact with the public are comfortable despite the risks associated with the pandemic, then they will trust the professionalism of the service providers. Conversely, if they have the feeling that the frontline workers are left to fend for themselves, users will reinforce their mistrust of the safety conditions of public transport. Enclosed transport spaces, as well as situations of co-presence in which social distancing is difficult to respect, can generate feelings of worrying proximity. The media repeatedly stress the large proportion of regular public transport users who declare their intention to give up public transport, even after the health crisis has passed.

"A false opinion is a true fact": the scientific literature devoted to the coronavirus reports only one case of contagion linked to public transport (in a poorly ventilated Chinese bus, a single passenger infected about twenty other passengers<sup>1</sup>). A single case but a considerable impact ... This is why the challenge for companies in the sector is also to try to change "social images" which are actively circulating in the public, not confirmed by the facts, but widely shared and with a lasting dissuasive effect.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/article-abstract/2770172>

## 2 - The service relationship, a critical issue and, at the same time, a lever for socio-technical transformation of passenger transport companies

To fight against unfavourable stereotypes and to reassure the public, transport companies must, of course, rely on the excellence of their organization and their professional technical culture.

However, they must not forget to mobilize the collective intelligence and experience of their public-facing staff. This implies a significant acceleration in the modernization of the collective operations of the sector, still disinclined to listen to customers and staff in contact with the public.

Certainly, for several years the companies in the passenger transport industry have been familiarizing themselves with the intricacies of “customer experience”, as well as with the main facets of improving the quality of service. But to have had a significant impact, the pandemic arose too early for the sensitization of work communities to these approaches, still new to the sector.

However, the pandemic is turning upside down the previously established facts about mobility and now about “*demobility*” (that is the expected long hand failure to return to mobility seen before the pandemic), reinforcing the need for a human, professional presence, essential at all stages of the production of public transport, which means a human presence in support of all contact functions: information, sales, driving, traffic regulation, channelling of passenger flows, control, security, cleanliness, maintenance, etc.

The objective remains the same, whether it is formulated positively (convincing the public of the safety of public transport, succeeding in the new service relationship, taking environmental aspects into account, etc.) or negatively (stopping the drop in demand, fighting against heavy absenteeism and recurring conflict within companies in the sector, combating the harmful effects of atmospheric pollution and single-person car use, etc.): to find the means of new socio-technical dynamics, based both on customer expectations and the needs of public-facing staff. In this sense, the new service relationship is a critical issue in dealing with Covid and post-Covid mobility. At the same time, it represents a useful lever for socio-technical transformation of passenger transport companies.

To make my point, I rely on feedback from consulting interventions in support of passenger transport companies in Europe (Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden). The proposed paper is, moreover, an extension of my work on leading change in the transport sector.<sup>2 3 4 5</sup> I also use the many resources available online: institutional websites (UITP, UTP, OECD, European Commission, ITF, GART, AGIR, GERPISA, IDFM, OMNIL, IPR, McKinsey, etc.), and articles from the professional and general press. Finally, I refer to a mixed conceptual framework. Based on a psychosociology of clinical orientation (Elliot Jaques, Isabel Menzies-Lyth), my approach combines the contributions of the sociology of interaction (Erving Goffman, Isaac Joseph), of the sociology of social criticism (Axel Honneth, Hartmut Rosa), political philosophy (Pierre Rosanvallon, Nancy Fraser), political anthropology (Pierre Clastres, Etienne Tassin) and service marketing (Pierre Eiglier and Éric Langeard, Benoît Meyronin and Charles Ditandy).

This broad framework has a single goal: helping to identify “good practices” in social management during a pandemic and understanding why these practices can be part of the solutions to restore the attractiveness of public transport companies.

**Keywords:** *Health crisis, Covid-19, public transport, project management, support for change, resistance to change, service relationship*

<sup>2</sup>“Support for the insertion of new tools within passenger transport companies: Why? How? 'Or' What ? ”(Predit Research, 2014)<http://www.transformation.fr/pdf/etudes/jfRevah-accompagnement-insertion-nouveaux-outils-transport-voyageurs-2014.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>“Social management of personnel: a forgotten strategic dimension in the development of transport companies? »12th World Conference on Transport Research, Lisbon 2010, Group1: Institutional Performance and Strategic Change: <https://www.transformation.fr/pdf/etudes/wtcr-lisbon-jf-revah-english.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> “The bus driver Competence framework and strategic perspective - Lessons learned from the analysis of the functioning of European passenger transport companies” (Predit Research, 2007: [http://www.transformation.fr/pdf/etudes/transfo\\_jfr\\_Predit\\_Utp\\_etude\\_conducteurs\\_voyageurs\\_en\\_europe\\_5\\_fevrier\\_2007.pdf](http://www.transformation.fr/pdf/etudes/transfo_jfr_Predit_Utp_etude_conducteurs_voyageurs_en_europe_5_fevrier_2007.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> “The discourse of voluntary solitude - Social link and conflictuality in the public transport driving professions” (Predit Innovation Prize 1998: <http://www.transformation.fr/pdf/etudes/solitude.pdf> ; [https://www.transformation.fr/pdf/etudes/solitude\\_en.pdf](https://www.transformation.fr/pdf/etudes/solitude_en.pdf)