

What can the travel industry teach us about self directed support?

I would hazard a guess that the majority of you reading this have flown on a 'low-cost' airline, booked a hotel online or researched your destination using the internet. Over the last fifteen years or so there have been huge changes in the travel industry as a result of deregulation of the airlines, the rise of the internet and the subsequent development of new business models to take advantage of this.

But what has this got to do with self directed support?

A common question in Adult Services departments is what will happen to the market once people are given greater choice and control, and in particular how will suppliers respond? The truthful answer is that the market moves in mysterious ways and it is very difficult to predict. However as we hope to demonstrate here the travel industry provides some useful indicators as to what could happen as a result of the personalisation agenda.

How might suppliers react?

If you are flying with a low-cost airline like easyJet or Ryanair there are a number of factors that affect the cost of your flight.

- One factor in the cost of your flight is the time you want to fly. For example, it is much cheaper for me to fly to Glasgow at 11p.m. on a Tuesday than it is at 9a.m. on a Monday.
- Another factor in the cost of my ticket is when I book. If I buy my ticket six months ahead I can pretty much guarantee that my flight will be cheaper than if I book it six days before.
- Further factors that influence the cost of your flight include if you want to take extra bags, if you want 'speedy' boarding and if you want a cup of tea mid-flight.

Could we see this being repeated in the social care market? Could getting my dinner delivered at 6pm cost more than at 4pm? Will individuals be prepared to have dinner later or earlier if it means they can spend money on other things? Will I be able to get a cheaper service if I can book well in advance and will I have to pay more for the 'extras' that some suppliers include in their prices?

At the other end of the scale there are a number of high-end airlines like Emirates or Qatar Airways. They provide a much more personalised, luxury service if you are prepared to pay for it. However what is interesting about these airlines is that their initial development has been dependent on very favourable trading conditions in their home countries; something that has caused consternation amongst some of their rivals.

Could we see a high end service for those who are prepared to pay extra, or could we even see wealthy local authorities creating an environment where suppliers can provide more for your money?

The impact of the internet

In the past anyone booking a holiday would visit their travel agent, probably in the local High Street, and book a package holiday. They would get flights, hotels and maybe a hire car as part of one package with very little flexibility over when they flew or which hotel they stayed in.

Now we have a situation with holidaymakers making their own arrangements through websites and traditional travel agents having to react to this. People have a much wider choice over when they fly, who they fly with, where they stay and how long they are away for. In many ways this change reflects the change from traditional supply of social services to the new self directed support approach.

But how has this change taken place?

The low cost airline business model is based around cutting expenditure, and a key part of this is using the internet to bypass travel agents and reduce administrative costs. There are also websites like Expedia or Lastminute which act as online brokers, supplying services from wide range of hotels; airlines and car hire companies as well as pretty much anything else you could ask for from a holiday.

The internet could do the same for social care services, with Expedia-style websites presenting a catalogue of services that can be accessed directly. These could also feature service provider ratings by users, reviews of their services and intelligent marketing which highlights services that other providers with similar purchasing patterns have bought. On the one hand this should reduce prices, but on the other, will those without access to the internet be disadvantaged as a result?

There is a further analogy as brokers are likely to have a very similar role to these websites in the world of self directed support. We could see specialist brokers such as the airline sites which focus on one area or wider-ranging brokers who have a more general understanding of a much broader range of services.

Self directed support is about providing service users with choice and control, but more importantly it is about providing improved outcomes. The travel industry has, intentionally or not, created impressive social outcomes by opening up travel to a wider audience and in the process literally broadening people's horizons by increasing their ability to visit new places and cultures, and bringing people together by making trips to visit relatives and friends abroad more accessible. The question now is whether self directed support can do the same?