

Accessibility Horror Story

Personal information

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Your horror story

A few years ago, I was looking for a job. I wanted a position more or less according to my studies. I had already entered a few selection processes and, usually, after clearing the first interviews with human resources, I was ruled out in later interviews with my potential bosses. Upon seeing me, one meter tall and a wheelchair user, they changed to patronizing ways and ended up offering me positions that didn't even require any studies.

For those of you who may be unfamiliar with disability policies, many countries have laws that require companies over a certain number of employees to hire a small percentage of people with disabilities (usually between a 1-2%). That is necessary because there's still much discrimination against disabled people, but, unfortunately, companies usually settle with offering low paying jobs to clear the law and don't really believe that true inclusion at all levels will, in fact, make them more successful.

Anyway, after a few of these rejections, frustration started to build and the pressing matter of getting a job made me apply for companies throughout the whole country and even abroad. A given day, I had an interview at 1pm near Madrid. At the time, I was living in Barcelona, 500km away, so I would take a bullet train early in the morning and then another local train to the town in the outskirts of the city. The interview was for a leading tech company. I had already cleared the first couple of steps online and it was time to meet the chief department in person.

That day I got to the bullet train station earlier than 8am, a bit more than 30 minutes before the departure of the train, as stated for those that request assistance. About 10 minutes to the departure time, station staff led me to the platform and a portable hydraulic lift helped me board the train. Said lifts are out of order quite often and most times they realize it when actually trying to board you, so I was relieved when everything worked smoothly, as being rush hour, the assistance crew was a bit undermanned if anything went wrong. Nothing of this would be necessary if newer trains had been built step-free, but maybe that's too much to ask...

Whatever, 2 hours and a half later, I got to Madrid, I bought tickets for the local train from a vending machine (another accessibility fight that I'm really used to) and changed platforms in the same station. So far so good.

It was 11am and the local train ride to my destination was less than 30 minutes long with a frequency of trains every 10-12 minutes, so apparently I had plenty of time, as the later walk to the company was less than 10 minutes. The only uncertainty was that not all trains serving the line were wheelchair accessible, according to the website every one in two, but actual schedules were not available until the same day. So much for planning...

That day, said website was not working and station panels didn't give any accessibility information either, so there was no way to check whether the following trains were accessible or not. I had a margin of nearly 90 minutes, so that was about 8 trains. It should have been enough, right? The first train passed, not accessible. A second one passed. Not accessible either.

On another platform, an accessible train stopped. It was going to my destination. They had changed platforms at the last minute and with the wheelchair I didn't have enough time to do the transfer. I also realized that not all cars were accessible. Only one and not even all doors at that car were. Again, only one. So out of the 15 or more doors to board, only one was accessible and the place it stopped was not marked on the platform, as all trains were different and the position of the accessible door also varied. So much for convenience...

I started fretting that maybe I had missed the accessible door of the first couple of trains. Observing other platforms, I saw that more or less accessible doors, marked by a blue wheelchair sign, stopped within a 30 meter range around the middle of the platform. I position myself there and waited again. As the fourth and fifth trains passed, I strained my eyes trying to locate the doors. People were gathering at the station, so pinpointing the sign between butts and legs was not an easy task either. If I hadn't missed it, they were not accessible.

My leeway had shrunk to barely 30 minutes. I decided to go to the information point to tell them the situation and ask if they knew about the next accessible train. So far, only 1 out of 5 had been accessible and that one had stopped at another platform. I was worried that while leaving the boarding area a train might pass, but I couldn't afford missing any more, so I preferred having specific information. Accessible taxis were not an option either, as waiting times went up to 30 minutes and by car the way was longer than by train and I would already be late for the interview. For the taxi option, I would have had to commit to it at the beginning, just as I arrived in Madrid. Now it was a no go.

After waiting for 5 minutes for someone to appear at the info point, they told me that they didn't know if the next trains would be accessible, as the website was down, but that one out of two should be. I insisted and they made a couple of phone calls. Theoretically, the next two would be. I went back to the platform. A lot of people were waiting. As the train began entering the station, I frantically started looking for the accessible door. The first

car went by, no door. The second, no door. Would the accessible door stop further behind where I wouldn't see it? I moved a bit and, just as I was going one way, I managed to see the blue wheelchair sign going the other way and stopping 20 meters away from me. People started rushing in and out of the train. I started going towards it, but I couldn't thread my way fast enough. It was impossible that the driver had seen me among so many people and with the accessible door being so many meters away from the head of the train, so the only option was for me to reach the door in time. Just as the platform cleared, the door shut and the train left. I missed it. It had not even been close.

I looked at the watch and my leeway was nearly gone. I decided to bet on the next accessible door stopping at the same place. I waited. Anxiety was bursting out my chest. The following train was getting late. With a 10 minute delay, the train finally appeared and the accessible door indeed stopped within 5 meters of my position. At last, I was able to board it.

I decided to spend the 25 minute trip, rechecking the route from the station to the company. The area was an industrial complex and street accessibility, as per my previous Google Street view investigation, left much to be desired. Uneven sidewalks, missing curb cuts and the likes. I was ready for it and memorized again the route with a small detour to avoid the worst parts. On the way to my destination, the train stopped at several theoretically accessible stations with either a huge gap or step, or both, to get off. So much for accessibility...

Luckily, when the time came, I was able to get off without much trouble. I rushed out of the station and wheeled as fast as I could to the company, jumping kerbs and riding on the road several times. As I got to the main entrance, there were a few steps, so I did a detour and entered through the parking lot. I got to the interview 5 minutes late. I was unnerved. They were already waiting for me. I tried to briefly explain, but I dreaded that no one unfamiliar with accessibility would believe such a surreal story.

The interview wasn't bad, they were not patronizing, so it might have been a nice place to work. Unfortunately, the initial situation had probably decided its outcome. Who would hire someone that was not even on time on their selection process? They didn't contact me again.

By chance, the next day I had an interview also in Madrid. That time I was early and, two months later, I was moving to live in the city. But that's another story...