

Event organizers champion inclusive flying for all ahead of AIX

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While air travel can be challenging for many passengers, for neurodiverse individuals and those with invisible disabilities, these challenges can be hugely amplified. As the term “neurodiversity” encompasses a wide range of neurological differences, including sensory sensitivities, cognitive differences and learning difficulties, barriers to air travel can manifest in numerous ways for these passengers.

According to data from The Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, up to 80 percent of disabled individuals are living with a non-visible disability. As such, this segment of passengers is by no means insignificant, and should be an essential consideration for airlines, aircraft interior designers and suppliers.

Encouragingly, recent innovations from organizations in the sector suggest that the aircraft interiors industry is shifting to acknowledge and better understand the needs of neurodiverse individuals and those with invisible disabilities. But what does development in this area actually look like? How effective has the innovation been at fostering a more inclusive passenger experience, and what factors are driving this change?

Understanding neurodiversity

According to Harvard Health, the neurodiversity movement was first acknowledged in the 1990s. In the following decades, the profile, understanding and awareness of neurodiversity has grown considerably in the public eye.

Despite this, the progress and acknowledgment of neurodiversity among airlines has lagged behind. When compared to the consideration and action taken for passengers with physical disabilities or limited mobility, neurodiversity has previously been considered an often-overlooked area of accessibility in aircraft interior design.

However, by employing thoughtful design, innovative use of technologies, and collaborative partnerships, airlines and the aircraft interiors industry can create a more inclusive and comfortable travel experience for all.

Antonio Ferrara, from [Aviators for Autism](#), and Natalie Rodriguez, of Natalie Rodriguez Luxury Design LLC., discuss the evolution in the aviation and aircraft interiors industries for neurodiverse individuals. Aviators for Autism is a non-profit organization focused on breaking down barriers and helping Autism and neurodiverse communities to thrive in all aspects of aviation.

Ferrara tells *PAX Tech*, “Much of the focus has been on airport and aviation environments but that is beginning to shift. The emphasis is shifting beyond physical accessibility to include sensory sensitivities, anxiety management and overall comfort for patrons and passengers. As the number of individuals diagnosed with autism and other invisible disabilities is growing, we have started to see a growing interest in features that promote a calmer inflight experience, such as enhanced noise reduction, adaptable lighting and intuitive cabin layouts to minimize sensory overwhelm.”

Recent industry innovations

While aircraft interiors may have traditionally overlooked the needs of neurodiverse passengers, recent industry innovations signal a positive shift. In recent years, there's been a growing recognition of these unique requirements. From a supplier perspective, [Muirhead](#) recently released its 2025 “Sensations” collection of leather seat covers – specifically designed with neurodivergent adults in mind. According to Muirhead, it worked closely with Scottish disability consultancy VIA ([Visible Inclusive Accessibility](#)), while also speaking directly with neurodiverse individuals to guide the design process.

When it comes to airlines, many are now actively implementing strategies to address neurodiverse needs. For example, in January 2025, Emirates announced it was set to be “the world’s first Autism Certified Airline.” This accolade is reported to be formally awarded by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards ([IBCCES](#)) in the coming months. In practice, over 30,000 staff will be undergoing specialized autism and sensory awareness training. The airline will also be introducing “sensory guides” and neurodiverse sensory products for passengers.

Similarly, at the end of 2024, [Alaska Airlines](#) also reported its improved practices for enhanced accessibility for travellers. The airline’s Disability Office recently teamed up with the Autism Society and port authorities to host a disability practice flight in Portland. The event gave guests with disabilities the chance to practice everything from navigating the airport to going through security

and even simulating a flight.

Though neurodiversity must be acknowledged as an independent area of concern for airlines, Rodriguez explains that addressing the needs of this group often aligns with the considerations for physical accessibility.

She says, “I have worked on aircraft interiors that incorporate accommodations for passengers with physical challenges, ensuring ease of movement and accessibility within the cabin. However, many of these principles—such as reducing physical strain, simplifying movement through the space and providing a stress-free environment—overlap with considerations for neurodivergent travellers.”

She adds, “One major area where aircraft interiors can support neurodivergent passengers is through advanced soundproofing, which helps control noise levels and create a more soothing environment. Further refinements in sound-dampening materials and customizable white noise or ambient soundscapes could enhance the experience even more.”

The move towards a truly inclusive onboard environment hinges on stakeholders from all sides of the industry coming together to acknowledge the challenges being faced and taking actionable steps to drive change. The importance of collaboration between designers, airlines and disability advocacy groups cannot be understated in creating truly accessible air travel for everyone, regardless of visible or invisible disabilities.

For more information on AIX 2025, which takes place from April 8 to 10 at the Hamburg Messe, visit <https://www.aircraftinteriorsexpo.com/en-gb.html>.