

DRESSED FOR SKILL: SECURITY UNIFORM DESIGN



Gatwick airport security uniform
(Credit: Heathbrook Corporate Wear and Safety)

When introducing a new uniform, it might be tempting to opt for the cheapest or most convenient choice without really considering all the issues. **Alexandra James** discusses the psychological and practical impacts a well-designed uniform can have, both on the performance of security personnel and on the mindset of the passengers they are tasked with protecting.

An employee's uniform has the potential to speak volumes, not just about the organisation it represents but also about the person wearing it. A security officer's uniform should be a symbol of professionalism and a quick way for a passenger or other aviation worker to identify help when they need it. The enhancement or introduction of a uniform has even been shown to assist in building a sense of camaraderie among colleagues and to improve employee performance.

The effect clothing can have on the wearer, or 'enclothed cognition', has been well researched: participants in a study who wore a lab coat made half as many errors as those not wearing a lab-coat; students rated themselves as stronger and superior to other students when wearing a Superman T-shirt, and individuals who wore a hood during an experiment were more willing to administer electric shocks than those not wearing hoods.

The effect of a uniform on an employee's

performance, therefore, should not be underestimated but equally, the clothes that we wear can have a huge impact on other people's perceptions of us. Everything from the style, the colour, and even the condition of a uniform and how it is worn will give the basis for a subconscious assessment of how powerful, competent and professional the wearer is. A well-designed and well-maintained uniform can therefore inspire feelings of reassurance in law-abiding passengers, and may also serve as a deterrent when identified by potential criminals.

In fact, there are many examples of criminals and terrorists exploiting the sense of reassurance a uniform can instil, as well as the authority it confers upon the wearer:

"Pakistan has suffered from a lot of incidents of terrorism where the perpetrators used military/police uniforms to either ease their way to the outer cordons of secure installations or to wield an air of authority that initially masks their

intent," said Moiz Hashmi of the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority. "There are numerous independent entities working landside at any international airport. Each of these airport functionaries has often devised a set of uniforms for their employees, which may differ greatly from each other. The collective pool of uniforms seen at an airport becomes very large, thereby creating room for malefactors to misuse one of these outfits for penetrating initial layers of security or maybe even for undercover espionage."

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Therefore, not only should the design and maintenance of a uniform be carefully considered, but also the regulations surrounding uniform issuance, and education of employees to help ensure uniforms are not lost, stolen or otherwise obtained by those with malintent.

Balancing Authority with Customer Service...

An organisation's people are its greatest asset – if we think of the service they provide as our product then we could also think of the uniform they wear as our packaging. It has the ability to give consumers – or passengers – an idea of what the product is and the organisation's ethos and culture.

...On the Ground

A security screener's job first and foremost is to keep passengers safe and to ensure that they are compliant with aviation regulation. Having said that, with the increased use of technology at check-in, security screeners will often be the first aviation industry representatives that the passenger comes into contact with following their arrival at the airport – and first impressions count. Also, while security screeners are not selling anything per se, we do expect passengers to 'buy in' to the security process and mindset. In fact, research carried out in 2016 on behalf of the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority (CATSA) found that passengers value a certain level of customer service in a security setting, and that a welcoming atmosphere makes them more likely to trust and cooperate with officers.

"Small changes to a uniform can assist in achieving this balance between authority and customer service," says Nick Greenfield of Heathbrook Corporate Wear. "Maybe add epaulettes to a shirt, or select a friendlier colour."

In fact, the colour of a uniform has long been known to influence how the wearer is perceived. People wearing darker colours such as black, grey, brown and dark green are generally thought of as being strong and authoritative but also more aggressive. Those wearing light colours such as white and yellow have been found to give impressions of positivity and friendliness, but also of weakness. Interestingly, these findings were consistent across cultures and, perhaps even more interestingly, the colours of uniforms have actually been found to affect the behaviour of the wearer as well, with sports teams dressed in black kits or strips found to be

substantially more aggressive than teams dressed in lighter colours (one football team even started out wearing light blue but switched to black in the middle of the season and subsequently found their penalty rate increase).

One aviation security company that has been thinking a lot about uniforms and the first impressions they create is AviÖr (part of Öryggismiðstöðin, or 'Security Centre') in Iceland. AviÖr provides security services at Keflavík International Airport, and last year commenced working alongside Icelandic airlines Wow and Icelandair to introduce security interviews for all passengers on US-bound flights in accordance with the US Transportation Security Administration's Emergency Amendment.

The project introduced a new dynamic between the security provider and the travelling public, and they felt that the uniforms of the officers conducting interviews should reflect this new relationship: "The decision was made that interviewers would not wear the then regular black security outfit," said Jónas Helgason, who led the project. "We wanted them to look more business-like and for the attire to make passengers more comfortable when encountering our interviewers." The team therefore went from wearing black uniforms to blue suits with white shirts.

"From the outset, the decision was a big hit with our employees. They

"...screeners' waistbands should stretch to provide more comfort, and their shirts should have extra length to avoid them from becoming untucked at the back..."

felt, and looked smart whilst going about their daily duties and we immediately received positive feedback from passengers, the airlines and other airport employees." In fact, the change was so successful that AviÖr decided to revamp the uniforms of all of their security personnel, moving away from the all black uniforms to blue trousers, black dress shoes, a white shirt and a navy cardigan with the company's new logo on the sleeves. "So far, the change is a hit with the staff. They feel and look much better and more professional."

...In the Air

Finding the right balance between customer service and authority has proven to be a challenge for airlines, with many continuing to dress their female cabin crew in uniforms that do not reflect their roles as security and safety professionals (some airlines employ exclusively female cabin crew, but that is a discussion for another article).



Credit: The Logo Company

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In every issue of this journal, Air Watch highlights multiple instances of unruly passengers disobeying instructions and sexually assaulting crew. Sadly, for many members of cabin crew, having to deal with inappropriate sexual advances and harassment is a daily reality. Now, the author of this article is not about to suggest that a woman wearing revealing or tightly fitting clothing ‘deserves’ to be sexually harassed – we cannot make excuses for anyone who commits sexual assault. However, the way in which some airlines dress their crew is not helping to instill the sense of authority and discipline that is required to maintain order within a cabin at 30,000 feet. Many airlines over the years have been accused (by passengers) of dressing their crew in overly provocative uniforms, with one in particular recently being accused of subverting the culture and religion of their country with their uniform.

Let’s think about colour psychology again for a moment: many airlines incorporate their brand’s colours in their crew uniforms, ensuring that the company’s identity is

present throughout the passenger’s journey. However, colours that work well in advertising don’t always translate well into an aircraft cabin. For example, the colour red has been found to have a stimulating effect, and is associated with passion and excitement; just the kind of branding a company might want in the aisle of a supermarket, but not so much in the aisle of an aircraft. Over the last couple of years, a number of airlines and aircraft manufacturers have acknowledged the psychological effects of colour on passengers, and introduced coloured ambient lighting in the cabin in order to cultivate an atmosphere of calm. If colour psychology is being incorporated into the design of aircraft, why shouldn’t it be considered in cabin crews’ uniforms?

Practicality, Durability and Safety

As with any industry, there are numerous issues specific to the job that should be addressed when implementing a new uniform. Not least are safety and practicality considerations. “Security staff

aren't just sat behind desks,” says Nick Greenfield. “They are physically involved and need hard working clothes to match. It isn't an easy job and staff turnover is often high. Better uniform and footwear could make a big difference.”

For example, passenger pat-downs involve frequently bending down, so screeners’ waistbands should stretch to provide more comfort, and their shirts should have extra length to avoid them from becoming untucked at the back.

The less comfortable a particular movement is for a screener, the less effective they will be when performing that action. In fact, the areas around the ankles were identified to be frequently utilised by drug smugglers because screeners are known not to check them as thoroughly as the rest of the body. A small change to the uniform, such as the introduction of an elasticated waistband, can make repetitive actions like bending down less uncomfortable thereby reducing fatigue and improving performance.

Additionally, any clothing that poses a risk of strangulation, such as ties, scarves and lanyards should either be avoided or should be designed to come off easily using clips or Velcro. Any badges or insignias should also be embroidered or made of fabric rather than plastic or metal to avoid injury.

The choice of fabric is also important when choosing or designing a uniform; fabrics shouldn't pill (bobble) after a few washes, they should be breathable and they should not crease or wrinkle easily (ideally, they would also not need to be ironed). The environment that employees work in should be taken into consideration; if your staff are working outside in a hot, unconditioned location, then it makes sense to dress them in fabrics that do not show up sweat stains and that protect them from UV rays.



The Dyfed Powys police force in Wales announced in March 2017 that they were making the change to gender-neutral uniforms and on their Facebook page celebrated Transgender Day of Visibility.

It should go without saying that uniforms must also be appropriate for all employees, regardless of gender, age, size, etc. Some companies have different versions of a uniform for male and female employees, but many are now favouring gender-neutral uniforms or several versions of a uniform that are not gender specific (on a side note, this is a situation where the colour choice would be particularly important in order to maintain a single identity across all versions of the uniform). The Dyfed Powys police force in Wales, for example, announced in March last year that they were making the change to gender-neutral uniforms in order to project a more transgender-friendly image, both as an employer and within the community.

Finally, footwear: security personnel need shoes that thoroughly protect the feet, so toecaps are an essential feature. However, toecaps as well as lace eyelets need to be metal-free in order to avoid setting off metal detectors. They should also be extremely comfortable and should fit well to support staff on long shifts (in the UK, many people find that their feet are in between sizes, so try to find a brand that offers half sizes or European sizes to ensure a good fit).

Plain Clothed Security

In addition to highly visible, uniformed officers, there are also benefits to deploying unidentifiable, plain-clothed security personnel. As with designing uniforms, what a plain-clothed officer wears should be based on the environment of deployment, on duty objectives, and the safety issues mentioned above, i.e. items posing strangulation risks.

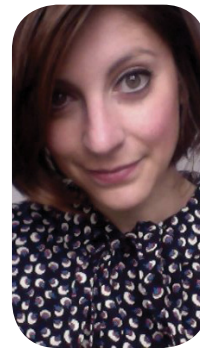
"We try our best to blend in with passengers, wearing what we ourselves would wear if we were travelling," says Jónas Helgason at AviÖr. "That means jeans, trainers, backpacks with airline tags. There are no radio earpieces visible as we communicate via smartphone since it's the one thing everybody uses and therefore raises no suspicion."

In other words, plainclothes officers should adopt the 'grey man principle'. However, sometimes it is necessary for plainclothes officers to quickly identify themselves. The last thing you need is a well-intentioned member of the public misreading a situation and jumping on you as you restrain someone. Some uniform and workwear providers, such as Heathbrook, are attempting to address this issue by introducing casual clothing that can be quickly turned into highly visible garments allowing quick identification in case of incident.

Conclusion

Designing a great uniform that represents the company's ethos and branding while helping employees to perform their jobs to the best of their abilities can be challenging. However, listening to your team and incorporating their needs in the design can go a long way to ensuring that whatever challenges your team faces, their uniform won't be one of them. ■

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