Let us lift your business!
Vaculex vacuum lifters are in operation in more than 60 airports worldwide. The benefits users report include reduced injuries, improved working environment and increased efficiency.

Vaculex BaggageLift™ is an innovative way to take control of the baggage.
LIFE CAN be tough as a baggage handler: long hours, heavy loads and working in all weather conditions. However, while other areas of the airport are bombarded with new technology, baggage handling still relies on good old-fashioned brute strength.

All of which is bad news for the health of workers. Workplace injuries are common and a majority of workers say they live with ongoing pain caused by their work. They need help from technology and now they are beginning to get it as operators successfully start to incorporate lifting aids into the workplace.

In our lead article, we hear from David Collins, Sales and Marketing Director at Vaculex, one of the leading providers of vacuum powered lifting aids for airports. He talks about their technology and the key benefits they can offer to airports.

We’ll then look at the health and safety issues confronting the industry. Several studies show that workplace injury is a severe threat for baggage handlers. Until now, adoption has been far from widespread, but a more practical approach to innovation and implementation is sparking change. James Butler will then look at some of the key lifting technologies coming to market and attempt to quantify the benefits they can bring. Jo Roth focuses on the key issues which will determine how they are introduced into an airport. This has been a particular weakness in the past. Understanding how to get the most out of the technology is almost important as what the system can do.

Finally, we’ll take a look to the future. Baggage handling is an important feature of aviation and with passenger numbers set to grow, its importance is likely to increase. Bringing technology into the baggage handling system is crucial – both for the health of workers and for productivity.

Tom Cropper
Editor

Tom Cropper has produced articles and reports on various aspects of global business over the past 15 years. He has also worked as a copywriter for some of the largest corporations in the world, including ING, KPMG and the World Wildlife Fund.

Efficient Work, significantly reduced strain injuries and an easier workload. These are some of the words that, the baggage handlers at Heathrow Terminal 2 have used to describe the way that Vaculex’s vacuum lifting solutions have made their work easier.

Vaculex is a world-leading manufacturer of lifting equipment based on vacuum technology. Made to a Swedish design, Vaculex has supplied the airport industry for more than ten years with flexible, top-quality equipment, reducing the high number of injuries associated with manual handling of baggage. Today, Vaculex BaggageLift handling solutions are installed in 60 airports across the world, boasting thousands of satisfied users who work with the equipment every day.

Vaculex products were installed at Heathrow Terminal 2 in 2013. Before Vaculex, we had a lot of problems with injuries due to the heavy lifting here at Heathrow. The guys mainly hurt their lower backs. Thanks to the Vaculex solutions, the work is much more efficient and my staff don’t suffer from back problems anymore. The solutions are also very easy to learn and use. The staff can just pick it up from the safety unit and use it right away with minimal training. The Vaculex BaggageLifts are efficient and reliable – simply fantastic equipment” says Martin Bell, Training Officer at Menzies in Terminal 2.

Understanding the Customer’s Needs

In addition to making the baggage handler’s job easier, several studies also show increased productivity in the baggage halls of airports where Vaculex solutions are installed. These products have been developed in close cooperation with the industry and baggage handlers so that the latest technology is used to address efficiency, productivity and safety concerns. Vaculex solutions have also been shown to reduce sick leave, lower staff turnover and improve staff utilisation creating genuine economic returns from the investment. For Steven Higgins, Key Account Manager at Vaculex, it is the customer’s needs that are most important when building customer relations:
“Baggage is such an important thing for the passenger. And with the Vaculex solutions we really can improve the handling.”

Daren Constant – Baggage Handler Manager, ASIG

“We can design a solution adapted to the challenges at each airport and the infrastructure in the baggage hall. The more we know about the environment, the easier it is to find the right solutions. After customers have installed our equipment, they are usually surprised by how much they can reduce injuries. Our goal is to make our customers’ work physically easier.”

Andy Aldridge, Technical Adviser at Heathrow Airport, also confirms Vaculex’s great work in understanding the customer’s needs:

“Vaculex focuses on the customers’ goals and pays special attention to the end-user’s needs, specifically those of the baggage handlers. They work to develop the optimal solution and ensure that the correct training packages are delivered with the devices for both the operators and the maintainers.”

The Vaculex training programmes include e-learning, practical training, participation and follow-up. They also have a special after-sales team that works closely with all customers and partners to ensure a high degree of operational – raising levels of satisfaction, safety and efficiency.

A Real Benefit for Everyone

Sam Streak is another baggage handler and a team leader for ASIG at Heathrow Terminal 2. His daily role is to offload and load baggage into containers. Sam also trains his colleagues on using the Vaculex equipment safely – a crucial part of his job. Sam has now worked with the vacuum solutions for 18 months and he sees many benefits from it:

“As a baggage handler, you face a lot of serious challenges during the workday. Infrastructure at the unit is one problem – the strain on the body is another. With the Vaculex solutions, we are able to reduce the strain on the body and handle baggage in a more efficient way. The equipment is easy to use and it works with any bag. The staff enjoy working with the Vaculex solutions and, for me, it is easy to do the training when you see the benefits of using it.”

The reduction in the number of injuries thanks to the Vaculex BaggageLift is also confirmed by an independent ergonomic analysis that shows that the load on the body is reduced by more than 80% without negatively affecting productivity. In many cases Vaculex customers have seen productivity rise.

Safer Staff with Manual Handling Devices

Sam Streak’s manager and colleague Darren Constant (ASIG) has worked in the airport industry for over 18 years, mostly in the ‘baggage world’ but also in passenger service. This allows him to see what the new technology can really do for the baggage handlers’ workday and the passengers checking in their bags. The baggage handler unit has really started to see changes and developments thanks to the Vaculex solutions observes Darren:

“When a passenger checks in a bag, it is really important to us that the same bag goes with that person. Baggage is such a key thing for the passenger. And with the Vaculex solutions we really can improve what we do. For me, the most important thing is that the staff are safe in their daily work. The introduction of manual handling devices is the way forward.”

How Does It Work?

The BaggageLift is supplied complete with a fully integrated baggage suction foot, a universal joint, an angle adapter and a 360-degree swivel. This allows a wide variety of baggage to be handled safely – whatever the shape or size of the bag. And with the Low Head Room equipment, Vaculex also provides unique and flexible solutions where ceiling height, and narrow and confined areas with limited available working space are issues.

“The flexibility means that we can overcome many of the physical constraints that occur in the airport baggage hall. The most important thing is that whatever the solution, the baggage handler gets equipment that is easy to use and, above all, safe. Show us your terminal and we will help you find the best solution,” says Steven Higgins at Vaculex.
Lifting the Load: Baggage Handling in the 21st Century

Tom Cropper, Editor

Passenger numbers are growing and so too is the load being placed on baggage handlers. Finding ways to lighten the load is a major concern for aviation companies.

The handling of baggage in modern aviation is a minor logistical miracle. Transferring thousands of bags each day across hundreds of different flights and ensuring they reach the right place (mostly) unharmed is a major operation. While technology has taken a lead in many areas of the aviation industry, baggage handling still comes down to a very human element – the poor old baggage handler. Over the next few years the number of bags they will expect to handle will shoot up dramatically and this is having a severe impact on their health.

Tough Times

Baggage handlers undergo enormous strains. The average weight of checked in bags is 32lbs, according to a report, and can reach up to 70lbs. Depending on what technology an airport has in place, handlers may be forced to lift bags from conveyors to screening machines and to loaders several times during each process. With thousands of bags being processed through check-in every shift, it’s small wonder that work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WMSD) represent a major health concern for baggage handlers. The dangers go further than that. The US Occupational Health and Safety Administration highlighted a number of key risks including lifting baggage, incorrectly balanced loads, cramped and confined spaces and repetitive strains from long shifts.

Research from the British Medical Journal found that approximately 66% of baggage handlers suffer from pain in the lower back because of work related activities and the problem is only likely to get worse1. IATA’s latest long term passenger forecasts point to a huge increase in passenger numbers over the next few decades. By 2024, 70 million people could be travelling by air an annual growth of 4% and double the 3.6bn who are thought to have travelled in 2019. That’s a lot of bags and an enormous potential strain on baggage handlers.

The health issues make this a pressing issue for airport operators. Under the law, they are responsible for the health and wellbeing of their workers. If they sustain an injury as a result of their work, there is a chance they may be able to claim personal injury compensation. It’s one reason why employer liability insurance firms are doing such good business with airport operators.

More than that, there are simple operational issues to consider. Injuries lead to time off work, staffing shortages and a drop in productivity levels. Installing new technologies not only helps with employees’ wellbeing, but it also accelerates the loading process leading to a number of critical operational improvements right the way down the line.

Changing Ways

The industry is making moves to change. There have been attempts from the operators, governments and campaign groups to address the issue. These include new technology, educational programmes and working practices which reduce the severity of impact on the health of baggage handlers.

Airports are updating their systems and introducing more mechanical aids to lighten the load. These are helpful, but they might not always be available, or practical. For example, while automatic loading systems are available for many larger aircraft, narrow loading aircraft may still require workers to load by hand in cramped conditions. For all the developments in technology, much of the heavy duty work still has to be done by hand. Workers will have to face some or all of the risks highlighted by the US Occupational Health Administration at the ramp. The loads have prompted a number of campaigns to ease the strain. For example, in 2009 the European Transport Workers’ Association launched its “Stop Injuries, Pack Less” campaign aimed at raising awareness of the issue among passengers2. The campaign aimed to encourage reductions in the overall weight limits of check-in luggage.

An example of the challenge can be seen at Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport. Until recently staff loaded luggage by hand which exposed them to various health related risks. The inspection of social affairs and employment found that the health directive was being exceeded and that Schiphol should reduce heavier lifting and carrying activities.

New Technologies

There are technologies to do this. Vacuum lifting devices reduce the strain of lifting bags onto conveyor belts; mechanical lifting aids help with loading, while the airport is investing in education and training to improve working practices. Automatic loading systems can also make use of conveyor belts to ferry luggage from one part of the airport to another. These measures have helped reduce the amount of loads being lifted by hand.

Working practices can also be a factor. Educating workers about optimal lifting techniques and incorporating training and safe lifting practices into the company process will reduce the number of injuries and lower the operators’ exposure to personal injury compensation claims. Governments around the world have issued guidelines on safe practices. By familiarising themselves with the content of these guidelines, airport operators can ensure they are in compliance and reduce the risk of staff loss.

There has been progress. The amount of technological aids available to baggage staff has increased, as have training and education. Modern airports now involve less manual lifting and carriage, but at the same time the traffic coming through airports is increasing rapidly. This creates challenges for airports across the scale. In terms of baggage handlers, the goal is to process successfully these loads without putting an unbearable strain on their health. Doing so not only represents an operational improvement or a way of avoiding costly personal injury claims; it’s a way of facilitating the entire process, of processing more bags in a shorter space of time. Success in this means real revenue improvements for the airport.
Lifting Aids: Saving Time and Improving Health

James Butler, Staff Writer

How mechanical lifting aids are finally coming of age and improving the health of workers.

A new generation of mechanical lifting aids is doing what previous generations have failed to do – delivering workable solutions which alleviate strain on workers and are practical for everyday use.

In an industry in which technological innovation sits at the forefront, baggage handling remains relatively in the stone-age. On the surface, passengers may be presented with a myriad of new mechanical aids to make life easier, but for the handlers behind the scenes work has relied on a lot of manual lifting – at least until now. A new generation of mechanical lifting aids is doing what previous generations have failed to do – delivering workable solutions which alleviate strain on workers and are practical for everyday use. However, the industry has been burned before, which is why innovations must prove themselves before customers will choose to buy.

What Can Go Wrong?

For a vivid illustration of what happens when technology goes wrong, we only have to look at Denver International Airport. In the early 2000s its operators planned a facility which was to be the envy of the world – a hub larger than Heathrow and incorporating one of the largest automated baggage handling systems in the world. Approximately 4,000 carts would travel along 21 miles of track delivering thousands of bags for over 20 airlines. It was an enormous project and it fell flat on its face. Poor planning and a failure to acknowledge the true complexity of the system led to delays, excess cost and embarrassing poor performance in which bags were crushed and carts crashed into one another. When the airport opened eventually, it was with a much scaled down version of the original system.

This is an extreme example of the pitfalls involved with a system which does not perform in the real world, but there have been countless others. For operators to make an informed decision, they need to be able to see tangible benefits.

A recent report from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) aimed to do that: it analysed the health risks faced by baggage handlers and analysed two systems to see how they worked. They were:

1. A Vacuum lifting assist device: An operator pushes and pulls a controller, which uses suction technology to lift the bag in the air. For some bags which are impractical, a hook mechanism can replace the suction. The test was run with three different weights 25ibs, 40lbs and 50lbs.

2. Automatic baggage: A conveyor system which transports baggage from the screening area to the outbound conveyor. Unlike most systems in which the conveyor belt connects both ends, this attaches to only one end of the hall at a time. When enough bags have been loaded from the screening area the system can then be moved to the outbound conveyor. Although this system does need to be pushed, the operational force is much lower and the posture of the operator much better. Both systems performed well. The pushing force needed to operate the automatic conveyor was approximately 80% of manual lifting while posture resulted in a 44% reduction in the compressive force of the lower back.

The vacuum system saw even better results. When working with bag weights of 20lbs, 30lbs and 40lbs, the pushing force was reduced to 2.7lbs, 4lbs and 2lbs respectively – a 90% reduction in hand force. The system also improved posture and resulted in a 63% measured reduction in compressive force in the lower back.

Of these, it is perhaps the vacuum system which has most potential. It has already shown promising performance in those airports where it has been trialled and used. At Osnabruck Airport, for example, vacuum lifting aids were introduced a few years ago. Klaus Stender, who is responsible for baggage handling at Osnabruck Airport said: “Many of our workers have suffered slipped discs and after three, six, nine, twelve months we are able to integrate them back into normal working processes again without any loss in performance. This is a major advantage of the system. Colleagues suffering from other illnesses are also able to work here without any problems. … We are no longer forced to let employees go for health reasons – but we can keep them instead.”

In addition, these systems make it possible for older people and less physically able individuals to work in baggage handling. This is crucially important. Increased passenger volume means airports have to up their workforce. As with other areas of aviation, though, there is a shortage of capable and willing individuals. The risks for a baggage handling company are serious. In 2014, Monarch Airlines terminated a contract with baggage handling contractor Swissport after a shortage of handling staff led to severe delays at Gatwick”. The impact on the reputation of both Gatwick and Swissport from the delays was substantial.

Lifting aids such as the Vacuum system enable companies to widen the talent pool from which they can recruit – allowing them to recruit older individuals – and also improve staff retention.

Human Behaviour

All the statistics present a clear picture – using manual handling aids can reduce the risk of musculoskeletal disorders and long term pain. However, the industry has found the real driving force is coming through convenience. People might acknowledge long term issues, but for the most part they work on a short term basis. If it’s easier to lift a bag from one location to another, rather than train to use a bulky and complicated piece of equipment, they will do it. Airport operators can change practices and institute rulings on baggage handling methods, but the only way to truly ensure compliance is to provide handlers with a convenient, intuitive mechanism they are happy to use every day.

This is what the technologies discussed in this article do – or aim to do. The clear benefit of these aids is that they are easier to use than manual lifting, free up staff for other jobs and deliver productivity improvements resulting in faster loading times. At the same time, they have a measurably beneficial effect on the weight of loads workers can carry and their posture during work. They are, then, the system for the future and, as more case studies emerge, airport operators are increasingly incorporating them as part of their systems.
How Lifting Aids are Gaining Popularity

Jo Roth, Staff Writer

Lifting technologies are only just now beginning to realise their potential. Here’s how airport operators can get the best out of the systems.

October, 2015, and in Munich the Inter Airport international conference is underway. Among the ground breaking technologies being demonstrated are a range of new lifting aids - everything from automated systems, to loading tables and much more. However, while these technologies attract a great deal of attention, they have struggled to gain widespread acceptance.

Part of the reason for the attitude of airports is that the major benefits of lifting aids lie in the health and safety benefits they deliver to workers. While that is undoubtedly important, it doesn’t translate into operational improvements which can directly contribute to an airport’s bottom line performance. Any lifting system represents a substantial capital investment and profit margins are tight. Despite booming numbers, air fares have been falling for the past ten years and more. A Justice Department investigation in 2015 found that airlines in the US had fallen by 5%, compared with the same period twelve months previously. It predicted fares to reach a five-year low. Inevitably, airports will be increasingly careful in committing to significant expenditure.

To increase sales, developers may need to highlight not only health and safety improvements, but also productivity. That is happening; manufacturing companies are promoting their productivity gains more heavily and a number of studies are drawing links between the use of lifting aids and improved output.

Buyers also need to take account of the cost savings lifting aids can deliver. A report from the Health and Safety Executive in the UK highlights a number of case studies in which manual handling injuries represented a significant cost to companies. One case study highlights a firm which lost 374 working days in staff absence due to injuries. This cost approximately £24,000 in wages paid to absent workers. The introduction of handling aids, together with training, reduced days lost to 74 and the overall cost to £5,000. Add to this, the potential for personal injury claims from employees, and airports can gain significant savings through the introduction of lifting technology.

Obstacles to Growth

The biggest obstacle has been the complexity of products, the sporadic nature of their implementation and the reluctance of staff to make use of them. At Heathrow Airport, lifting aids have been used in the past, but struggled to have the required impact. New products or machinery had been extremely costly and were too often complicated to operate. A failure to implement them in a way which truly worked in harness with the airport staff, meant luggage handlers all too often stopped using the equipment. The result was a costly system which, effectively, was left to stand idle – a waste of time and effort.

In 2012, Heathrow began trials of a new system designed to eliminate lifting, where bags were transferred from the baggage chute into a container. A simple design allows the handler to position the lifting device at the end of the chute and simply slide it across onto the loader. The airport learned from past experience and instituted an extensive trial process which allowed the product to be fine-tuned and adjusted. One of the big developments, then, is coming in the interaction between the supplier and user. A one size fits all solution may not necessarily be suitable in every situation. Airports need to work closely with a supplier to ensure a product works well in the specific location.

Complexity has also been an issue. Although prolonged lifting does indeed lead to health issues, that won’t always intrude on a worker’s mind during their regular day. The temptation will always be to use the process which is simplest. So, if a baggage handling system is complicated to operate, eventually handlers will choose simply to use their hands.

The solution lies in staff training and product design. Those systems which are proving successful are those which are deliberately designed with ease of use in mind. The simpler they are to operate, the more likely it is that handlers will use them.

A Unified System

Another lesson to learn from Heathrow, is that baggage handling is an increasingly large and complicated operation. Handlers will need to manage bags at multiple points in the journey. Past systems have been sporadic in terms of where lifting aids are located. So, while there may be an option in one area, there might be no similar system elsewhere. Airport operators need to step back and look at the system in its entirety in order to minimise the amount of physical work each handler needs to undertake.

Today, the technology is evolving to suit. Developers are coming up with a range of systems to reduce handling at every step of the process including vacuum lifting devices, automated baggage carrying systems and lifting tables. Products are also being introduced into previously hard to reach areas such as aircraft holds.

Although previous experiences might count against the industry, the market is evolving quickly to deliver the type of solutions required. Equally, though, the needs of airport operators are changing. An aging population means a young fit workforce is harder to come by. Increased traffic means the number of bags passing through airport terminals is growing rapidly. Tougher health and safety regulations heighten the pressure on operators to mind the health and wellbeing of staff, as well as improve the efficiencies of their baggage handling facilities. Also, passengers are becoming more demanding. Research suggests that passengers see baggage handling as a major contributing factor in airport performance. Any incremental improvement can give an airport an important competitive edge.

The challenge, then, is to incorporate these new systems more effectively. Doing this requires a more interactive approach between the seller and buyer. Systems need the flexibility to adapt to different situations and to integrate more effectively with the way in which users work. In the past, the emphasis might have been too much on what the technology can do, rather than how it works and how individuals work. The next generation of products, therefore, is much more people-centric, designed with the needs of the user in mind.
Baggage Handling –
Lift into the Future

Tom Cropper, Editor

Lifting aids are truly making a difference on worker health and loading times, as the next generation of technologies starts to prove itself.

THE FUTURE is a difficult place for baggage handlers. They will be asked to deal with more bags in less time. At the same time the workforce is getting older, and attracting young, healthy workers into the profession is becoming more difficult. Passengers are becoming more demanding – they expect a faster turnaround and a much lower risk of lost baggage. To help them meet all these challenges, technology and working practices need to change.

On the customer side, aviation companies are already bringing in a host of changes, including permanent bag tags, home printed tags, automated baggage drop and collect & delivery services. All these changes are driven by a recognition of the value passengers place on prompt and reliable services. Today, the majority of passengers have more than one international airport to choose from – as well as a host of airlines. Every incremental change goes a long way towards improving customer retention.

Behind the scenes, though, it’s a different story. For all the technological innovations taking place elsewhere, much of the heavy work is still done manually. Lifting aids have been used sporadically, but transforming these innovations into an integrated, unified system that workers actually use, has been a different challenge altogether – but that is beginning to change.

A similar system was also a part of Amsterdam Schiphol’s recent project. The scheme was planned in reaction to an expected baggage volume of 70 million in the years running up to 2015 and was incorporated in 2011 as part of a cargo on demand project. Bags from check in are first buffered in a storage facility before a robot takes over loading ramp carts, which are then taken to the aircraft. The design is primarily aimed at replacing the muscle power of the workforce and freeing them up to concentrate on other, more complicated tasks.

Going Where Lifting Has Never Gone Before

A major obstacle to development has often been simple practicalities. Narrow bodied aircraft can require staff to work in cramped, tight conditions. Using lifting aids could be seen as impractical, which leaves handlers coping with traditional ramp based loading systems. However, there are moves to change this. A study from the HSE in the UK found that staff involved in loading operations for some narrow based aircraft were at a significant increased risk of injury. The report analysed a number of options for reducing the risks including limiting the maximum weight of hold bags. This, it found, may reduce the risk of injury but would not bring down significantly the average weight of bags carried. Greater promise, though, lies in the use of mechanical aids including ground support systems, in-hold devices and a combination of both.

Unit load devices have long been used to speed up the loading of wide bodied aircraft, but there’s a different challenge for narrow bodied aircraft where bags are often transferred by hand. Extending aids for use with smaller aircraft is the next frontier for loading devices and can play a role in reducing injuries.

Convenient Use

All these developments represent significant improvements for the industry, but they can achieve little if they are not used. The human element is crucial. Training employees to lift more safely can reduce the chances of long term serious injury. Operators are taking a more proactive approach to training staff in order to reduce the amount of time they have to take off and improving staff retention.

Likewise, the next generation of technologies will also have to bear in mind the way in which the systems are used. Convenience is becoming a big issue. Past products have failed because they are either too complex to operate or because handling the bags manually represents the simplest option. In most cases staff will opt for the quickest and easiest route, abstract concerns of long term health and safety fade into the background. To be truly effective, new devices have to be at least as quick and easy to operate as manual handling.

A big leap forward comes with devices such as vacuum lifting aids. These use suction to pluck the bags from a conveyor and transfer them onto a waiting cart without the operator having to lift any load at all. Because this system can be used intuitively with relatively little instruction, it does not intrude on the operator’s daily routine allowing him or her to lift the bags in much the same way as they always have.

Implementation is another area of concern. Automatic baggage systems are on the rise as operators seek to come as much as possible of the transfer without human interaction.

The technological challenge comes in screening and assessing the destination of each bag to eliminate, or at least minimise, the risk of error. New systems must also be integrated with existing infrastructure, which means the partnership between the airport and developer is of critical importance. In other words, it’s about much more than what the technology can do – it’s also about how it works in each and every situation.

The challenges, therefore, are as much in the implementation as the design. The aviation industry is moving into a future marked by rapidly increasing passenger numbers, greater workload, slimmer profit margins and greater efficiency demands. The workforce of the future is likely to be older – finding employees relies on developing lifting technologies which make it easier for more people to work in the industry. Last but not least, systems being deployed on workers will need to be future-proofed.

In other words, they will have to cater to the demands not only of today but also tomorrow’s market.
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