

# Istanbul Airport Sign Language Initiatives

## Guidance

<p><b>Purpose</b></p>	<p>The purpose of this document is to provide guidance and best practice examples for stakeholders aiming to introduce similar initiatives related to accessibility and assistance to persons with disabilities in an airport environment.</p> <p>The case study is not intended to endorse any technology or provider, but rather provide details of the key considerations as well as various implementation models which could be adopted.</p> <p>The intended audiences may include but are not limited to: Airports, Airlines, Technology Providers, and Regulatory Bodies.</p>
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<p><b>Scope of this Guidance</b></p>	<p>This guidance is provided as a source of information to help and support industry players to implement initiatives related to accessibility and assistance to persons with disabilities in and airport environment.</p>
<p><b>The Case Study Template</b></p>	<p>In some situations or jurisdictions, a prescribed case study template may be necessary that meets the local requirements of a particular business, organization, or regulatory body. For this guidance document, the following sections provide the general steps involved in developing a business case and/or case studies, including a brief explanation of their purpose, benefits, and considerations.</p>

# CASE STUDY

## BACKGROUND/BUSINESS NEEDS

At Istanbul Airport, we consider accessibility as one of our cornerstones. With this point of view, we have created different solutions and technologies for various disability groups under our umbrella brand "iGA Cares". The primary aim of this umbrella brand is to make sure that our guests with disabilities can enjoy the airport experience independently rather than being supported by someone else.

Designed based on our field trip experiences undertaken with different types of groups of persons with disabilities, iGA Cares consists of various services that are above the standard, such as the *Sunflower Lanyard*, the *Very Special Guest Card*, the *Special Passenger Service Point*, *Accessible Routes*, and *Loud Steps*.

The airport experience is known to be a stressful process as it includes many mandatory processes such as security, check in, and passport control and has many worrisome factors such as finding the gate and catching the flight. This is why it is very important to have the correct information before arriving at the airport and while at the airport. This is especially the case for individuals who have congenital hearing loss and who can only communicate using sign language, as they are unable to communicate at the airport when needed and will need someone to accompany them during their flight. At Istanbul Airport, we aim to create accessible solutions for these guests with hearing difficulties and to be ambassadors for cultural transformation.

Within the deaf community, almost the only way to communicate is through sign language, with unofficial data showing that there are 2.5 million deaf people in Türkiye. The literacy rate of this population is less than 5% as there is no verbal language learning. At iGA, we are working to translate all our information services into Turkish and international sign language.

We care about using and improving sign language applications such as:

**Video Call Centre.** We established the video call centre service so that our guests who communicate with sign language can obtain detailed information whenever they need it. Our guests can access the video call centre 24/7 via the [istairport.com](http://istairport.com) website and the Istanbul Airport mobile application and receive all information in their own language.

**Digital Information Kiosk.** The digital information kiosks offer video calls with our representatives at 23 points throughout the airport where our guests can receive live sign language support 24/7. The digital information kiosks offer services in sign language, as well as Turkish, English, and Chinese, to ensure that our guests with hearing loss can easily get responses to their questions at the most critical moments.

**Frequently Asked Questions.** Our website's FAQ section includes questions translated into Turkish and international sign language for guests who use sign language and wish to receive information before arriving at the airport.

**Accessible Communication.** In order to ensure greater accessibility, COVID warnings announced in the terminal during the pandemic were provided in Turkish and international sign language on the screens inside the terminal. Due to the importance of communication with sign language and to establish this culture, Turkish/international sign language has been added to iGA Cares videos so that videos promoting the services under the brand are also understandable for the deaf community.

### Awareness Studies

In 2021, Istanbul Airport organized a contest to select the airport's "special sign" in sign language in order to demonstrate to the deaf community how we have embraced the sign language culture. The [signofist.com](http://signofist.com) website was designed for this contest, which is open to the deaf community and having each page displaying Turkish/international sign language. A special committee was formed for the contest where 850 deaf and/or sign-language speakers made a suggestion for the special sign. Three signs were chosen by members of the committee and presented to the public for voting. The sign with the most votes was chosen on 23 September, World Sign Language Day. A deaf person won the airport's sign language contest.

## BENEFITS

One of the most important benefits of iGA Sign Language projects is that it facilitates the airport experience for people who are deaf. In an airport where a series of mandatory processes must be passed, where it is necessary to act quickly, and where getting information becomes crucial, these processes can be much more difficult for people with disabilities. Communicating, obtaining information, and tracking flight times are the most significant challenges for individuals who are deaf and whose only means of communication is sign language.

When it becomes possible to receive services with sign language through points such as a video call centre and digital information kiosk, flight processes become more comfortable and, most importantly, independent, as it removes the communication barriers for individuals who are deaf.

In addition to this, service and awareness activities that are designed to involve the deaf community, which is a disability group that has a different language and, therefore, a different culture, directly into its service culture, will lead other institutions as a pioneer in the field of accessibility. By making its services available to a large audience through sign language, it opens a new door for society's right to receive services, while providing employment for people who are deaf. Knowing and seeing that work and services are conducted in the native language in a workplace culture has again been a great insight into defending the rights of a society with a different language.

Airports are centres that are connected to many national and international organizations such as airlines, commercial areas, and government agencies. Therefore, through innovation and development at the airport, many large organizations can be reached directly, and a wider awareness can be achieved in that area. With the practices and awareness activities carried out in this respect, it has set an example and encouraged other institutions to include video call centres.

At Istanbul Airport, we have received the support of persons with disabilities during both the designing and testing stages. With our constant field trips, we not only test the services we have already introduced but we also work on new projects and applications by identifying our areas of development. We also include people with disabilities in the mystery shopper work that we carry out with an independent company. In our mystery shopper studies with customers who use sign language, we received feedback that the applications made them feel safe and that they could reach their flight gates independently.

Our practices become much more valuable with our employees' great effort. One of our employees won "The Most Hospitable Employee Award" at our airport by improving the experience of one of our guests. This guest had missed her flight and then she had suffered because she couldn't express herself to anybody. When she was referred to the digital assistance kiosk, our employee not only helped her communicate but also assisted her in purchasing a new airline ticket, reaching to the airport hotel, and catching her flight the next day. These experiences make our practices much more valuable.

## CONSTRAINTS

One of the biggest challenges that we had while implementing our sign language projects was that each country has its own sign language and the signs (words) in sign language change depending on the culture. Accordingly, just as the international language of the hearing audience was English, the international language of the deaf community was International Sign Language (ISL). However, ISL was not a language known among the global deaf community. At that point, we were uncertain as to whether we would reach our foreign guests directly, using ISL.

Sign language projects, which are among the most significant and influential projects under the iGA Cares brand, requires the correct and widespread use of another sub-language in the same country within the corporate culture. The point that our institution paid the most attention to was that the sign language interpreters we work with are CODA (Children of Deaf Adults). Since the native language of these interpreters is sign language, they created the new signs in accordance with the cultural aspects of the language while translating many aviation terms into sign language. Again, attention is paid to the fact that the personnel who provide live support through the kiosks are CODA or individuals who are deaf.

We have employed a large number of individuals from the community while developing sign language projects within our internal operations. During this process, one of our biggest challenges was holding interviews and the conversion of the mandatory orientation training into sign language after recruitment. At this point, we quickly implemented the buddy system. Our hearing CODA staff members who are employed within our organization accompanied our staff who is deaf or with hearing loss to complete the orientation process.

Of course, one of the aspects that strengthened this project was the fact that we did not develop the projects by ourselves. In order for the airport to be fully accessible, it was not enough for iGA to advocate for accessibility alone. Therefore, we invited our 32 shareholders to take action, and signed the Accessibility Declaration with all of them. This step accelerated the action of our stakeholders. Many of our stakeholders became pioneers with us in the employment of people who are deaf.

Turkish Airlines, which is the biggest airline company in the world, broadcast the video translated into sign language promoting our iGA Cares brand. It implemented the *Sunflower Lanyard* application, which enables invisible disability groups, whose arrival we pioneered in Türkiye, to be recognized at the airport and to benefit from the privileges.

## TECHNOLOGY, PROCESS, AND INFRASTRUCTURE REQUIRED

The most necessary technology for the implementation of sign language projects was the digital information kiosks that allow video calling. Cameras were selected and adjusted to easily capture all the movements of both the agent and the guest speaking in sign language.

Support for the video call centre was received from a web-based software. Again, the display system was set up in such a way that all actions of the agents were visible. A system in which a bright light flashes on the screen was designed so that agents with hearing disabilities serving on site could see the incoming call.

Support was received from professional agencies for national/international sign language videos added to iGA Cares videos, COVID-19 prevention videos, and frequently asked questions videos.

## LESSONS LEARNED

When we came together with foundations, associations, individuals who are deaf, and CODA individuals, we saw that there are many false facts and misconceptions about the deaf community. It was commonly believed that individuals who are deaf could read because they could see, but we have learned that the literacy rate among them is 5%. After seeing that individuals who are deaf cannot access written sources and that they always require interpreters who can hear and speak and know sign language, whereas global languages can be translated into other languages easily with translation technology tools, showed us that sign language is one of the main solutions that should be implemented in terms of accessibility.

As a result of our technological research, we learned that sign language translation systems and artificial intelligence are not technologically sufficient yet, and do not provide the required clarity especially from small hand gestures. For this reason, we decided it would be best to proceed with real interpreters.

During this process, we learned that the accessibility of the services, opportunities, and training we provide to our personnel is as important as the accessibility of the services offered, and we need to take into account our employees with disabilities when designing the services we provide to all of our personnel. If this becomes the most basic point of view, staff members who design/offer services for guests also design services with this awareness that prioritizes accessibility.

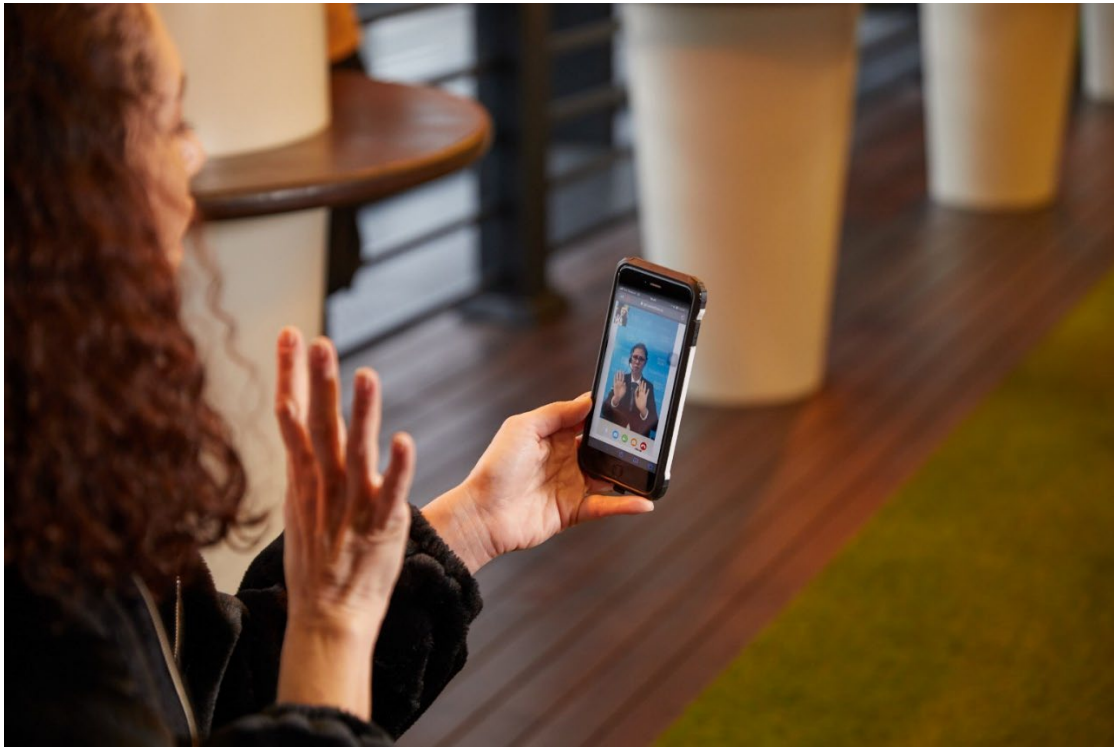
Therefore, we have seen that it is more important to start accessibility not with the services offered in the field, but with the personnel, their perspective, and their employment. We understood that in order for the accessibility culture and inclusive service design understanding to be fully established in an institution, all the necessary departments should receive basic and department-specific accessibility training for a vision that can consider accessibility in service production processes.



PICTURES, QUESTIONNAIRES, AND VIDEOS



Digital Information Kiosk



Video Call Centre

FAQ in Sign Language: <https://www.istairport.com/tr/bize-ulasin/sss>

Istanbul Airport is Looking for Its Own Sign in Sign Language Contest: [www.signofist.com](http://www.signofist.com)

iGA Cares Projects:

<https://youtu.be/tRoXpEpOY1o>

<https://youtu.be/oMQ1gEjuiw0>

iGA Cares Interviews:

<https://youtu.be/YCMGLx7-Frg>

<https://youtu.be/bHjB4DH6N7M>

[https://youtu.be/ObE2GC\\_svlc](https://youtu.be/ObE2GC_svlc)

[https://youtu.be/r\\_X1K4zroKM](https://youtu.be/r_X1K4zroKM)