MaaS Conference 2020: challenges in Mobility becoming a Service for everyone

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Mobility-as-a-Service (MaaS) is all about transportation solutions that don't involve personal ownership. This concept sounds very promising, since our society is in desperate need of a solution that uses less cars and generates less emissions. You could argue that it is already happening, but during the MaaS Conference opening keynote, Pier Ebbinge (CEO of Transdev Netherlands), highlighted some challenges we still need to overcome.

The idea of not "owning", but "using" instead, is following a very healthy trend that encourages sharing instead of buying and owning. This means less stuff that you don't need and better usage of the available services around you. Let's face it, you don't really need to own a car (even if it's electric), you just need the possibility to commute. You love the fact that you can use it whenever you want, but in reality that is not really efficient; financially and – even more importantly – for the planet. Shared economy is gradually becoming a reality, but the utopian concept of MaaS is not quite there yet.

Rural areas

It turns out that MaaS has a lot of potential in and around cities, but in the more rural areas of the Netherlands, it is quite hard to warm people up to the idea of using the bus for their commute, instead of their car. Especially outside rush hours, it seems that most transportation companies are very busy transporting "warm air" from one place to another, says Eringa. This really showcases the tightrope that MaaS is currently balancing on; it needs to be available at all times and, at the same time, be profitable.

Outside of the cities, most people are brought up with the concept of driving a car. The first thing you did when you turned 18 was to get your driver's license. That freedom, availability and comfort is very difficult to beat for public transportation companies, like the bus. Especially when the bus stop is not around the corner and runs once every hour, it is not a great alternative. Nobody enjoys cycling for half an hour in poor weather to the nearest bus stop just to get on a bus to work. A possible solution is to have more buses that stop more frequently at more bus stops, but most buses in these areas are already empty most of the time, so that would not be a good investment.

Comfort

The other challenge is comfort. A MaaS solution should at least match the level of comfort of driving in your own car. The seats should be more comfortable in order to attract business commuters. The train is already doing a great job with its first-class options, but the bus simply does not offer that level of comfort. Nowadays, you can charge your phone on the bus, but the setting is still far from a possible remote workspace. Would buses attract more businesspeople if they were to offer more luxurious seats and more options for remote working? I think so.

Seamless traveling

Another element that has a big impact on the comfort level is the seamlessness of a commute or journey. Travelers tend to prefer a longer commute time over a short one, if it means they don't have to transfer. Transfers haven't reached the desired level of seamlessness yet, which means you often find yourself walking up and down the platform, staring at the information sign and waiting for your connecting train. The idea of comfortable hubs where you can meet, work or rest is very smart, but this type of travel is not a priority for most of us. Perhaps we should think of moving hubs that allow trains to run in parallel while enabling travelers to switch seats while on the move? This may not become reality anytime soon (if ever), but if the service feels easy, convenient and seamless, people might use it.

Payment

Another significant hurdle to overcome is having one form of payment for all of the connected services. Way back when we still used cash, we all relied on one and the same "credit system" that allowed us to access the bus or the train. Instead, now, you need to register for each individual transportation service, which makes them feel totally separate from each other, not adding to the MaaS concept anymore. Also, when we introduced memberships to our transportation services, things stopped being inclusive for a lot of people. Elderly people and tourists often don't understand how it works and at that point the service fails. The OV-chip card is getting there, but in order for it to be fully integrated in a MaaS concept, other services, like Uber, have to be connected as well.

Logistics-as-a-Service

The Achilles heel of MaaS is that it cannot run by itself and be profitable. It needs all of the other elements in the chain to connect in order to make it work. This applies to all transportation companies, but possibly also for logistic companies. Maybe the goal is not to offer Mobility-as-a-Service, but to think bigger and create Logistics-as-a-Service. Right now, we see an increase in food delivery services, all offering their own delivery service, and at the same time we let empty buses drive around half of the time. If it is possible for a delivery company to collaborate with a transportation company and deliver packages during off-peak hours using that same bus service, we could increase the efficiency of these services. In situations like this, creative thinking is paramount; "Why not let the bus driver deliver our meal boxes when he's not driving around passengers?" Eringa is wondering.

> *"We have to think wider than MaaS for the countryside. We have to be able to combine those empty buses with their own services."*
>
> *– Pier Eringa, CEO Transdev Netherlands*

In the end, we need to listen to what people want and need from their commute and start from there. Too often a trendy new service is launched, but, after six months of struggling, is shut down, mostly because it did not fulfill a user need. Therefore, empathy and taking user needs into account is an equally important part of a service as connecting it to other services, making onboarding easy and making it profitable by scaling up. When a service offers true relevance and

is a part of the chain, you can turn an idea into profit. That balance of all the elements is probably different for each initiative, but the starting point should always be the human perspective.