

The reasons behind those frustrating flight delays, cancellations

Jacobson, Sheldon H . Chicago Tribune ; Chicago, Ill. [Chicago, Ill]. 12 July 2022: 8.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

We have entered the busy summer travel season. Since Memorial Day, there have been a slew of flight cancellations and delays that have disrupted business and leisure travelers, pushing everyone's patience to the brink. For example, U.S. airlines canceled more than 2,800 flights around the Memorial Day weekend. To help air travelers, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg asked airlines to act proactively by testing their flight schedules in advance so any necessary change in plans can be made. He has also threatened penalties against airlines for unacceptable performance.

Cancellations and delays have been attributed to weather, air traffic control and crew member staffing. Airport security checkpoints are also experiencing a slowdown as new computed tomography baggage scanners are being rolled out across the nation.

The problem with using a big stick to reduce flight disruptions is that the cause of the disruptions may be insensitive to the punishment. No airline wants flight cancellations and delays, which create operation disruptions and unhappy travelers.

Weather is beyond anyone's control and routinely disrupts flights when thunderstorms roll into an area around airports or through busy air corridors.

Air traffic control delays can be attributed to weather and airport volume limitations but also staff shortages. The environment has only been exacerbated by people missing time from work due to COVID-19.

Yet the root cause of the cancellations and delays may be traced back to more than two years ago.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, air travel plummeted. It reached a nadir on April 12, 2020, when just 87,534 people were screened at airport security checkpoints. Airlines were bleeding money, and layoffs of pilots, flight attendants and other support people were rampant and unprecedented. The results of a survey reported in early 2021 noted that more than one-half of the world's airline pilots were no longer flying.

The airlines are a service industry, and as such, people are needed to deliver their product. Parking airplanes and equipment that were not needed reduced every airline's fleet in 2020. Layoffs of highly trained people are not like turning off a spigot that can easily be turned back on. The dire financial environment demanded quick and draconian actions by the airlines.

As air travel rebounded, the airlines were in the precarious situation of returning equipment to operation. They also needed flight crews and flight attendants. The challenge has been ramping up all such processes as quickly as demand for air travel has rebounded.

This has created a fragile airline staff scheduling environment.

With limited staff available, any weather or air traffic control hiccup can percolate across the entire air system, with flight cancellations the only feasible response. Given that the Federal Aviation Administration places flight time limitations on pilots, once pilots reach their monthly quotas, they cannot fly until their duty clocks reset.

Moreover, with COVID-19 resulting in some flight crew members becoming unpredictably unavailable, a single crew member no-show can shut down a sequence of flights.

The combination of fewer pilots and flight attendants in the airlines' workforce, coupled with COVID-19 infections leading to missed shifts, means that flight cancellations are more probable when any schedule disruptions occur.

Until airlines are able to ramp up staff and create larger staffing buffers, the cancellations and delays will continue and are inevitable. This will be particularly true at the end of each month, when pilot quotas may have already been reached.

So what can travelers do? Some little things can make a difference.

Make it as easy as possible for the airlines to turn around their flights. When possible, check large bags rather than bring them onto flights as carry-on bags.

Refrain from taking out your frustration on the flight attendants. Your canceled flight may have also been the flight that takes them home for a brief stopover with their families. Instead, thank them for their hard work and efforts.

The summer travel season may be more turbulent than we would like. Airlines are working diligently to keep flights on tracks, and so threats of penalties serve no useful purpose.

With everyone's patience, understanding and cooperation, the outlook can only get brighter.

Sheldon H. Jacobson is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

CAPTION: Photo: Travelers pick up their baggage while arriving at Reagan Washington National Airport in Arlington, Virginia, on July 2. STEFANI REYNOLDS/GETTY-AFP

CREDIT: By Sheldon H. Jacobson

DETAILS

Subject:	Airline security; Flight attendants; Air travel; Pilots; Airline scheduling; COVID-19
Publication title:	Chicago Tribune; Chicago, Ill.
First page:	8
Publication year:	2022
Publication date:	Jul 12, 2022
Section:	News
Publisher:	Tribune Publishing Company, LLC
Place of publication:	Chicago, Ill.
Country of publication:	United States, Chicago, Ill.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--United States
ISSN:	10856706
Source type:	Newspaper
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2688014061

Document URL: <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/reasons-behind-those-frustrating-flight-delays/docview/2688014061/se-2?accountid=14553>

Copyright: Copyright Tribune Publishing Company, LLC Jul 12, 2022

Last updated: 2022-07-12

Database: Chicago Tribune

LINKS

[Check for FullText Availability](#)

Database copyright © 2022 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)