BLAMING THE AIRLINES FOR FLIGHT DELAYS – AND AN IDEA TO FIX THEM

News / Airlines

Who is to blame for flight delays? Airlines are happy to suggest that weather and the Air Traffic Control system are the primary culprits. There is another view on the topic voiced at the recent International Aviation Forecast Summit and the airlines are squarely in the crosshairs.

Image: AeroPortal Image Archive

For Captain Michael R. Baiada, CEO of ATH Group and a retired pilot, this fight has become something of a quixotic quest. He believes that the airlines have ceded too much control of their operations to the FAA and that the tide must roll back. Airlines should be the ones determining sequencing of planes, not the FAA. Airlines should be choosing flight speeds and paths, not the FAA. And airlines should ultimately take responsibility for the delays their aircraft incur. This is not necessarily a popular position and it is one which is a very, very hard sell in the current political and business environment. But there are also some shards of truth which cut through.

Among the considerations:

- Why is a flight considered “on time” when it is 14 minutes late? The counter to that argument, of course, is that the schedules will simply become more padded. But Baiada believes that the padding is exacerbating the problems, not solving them. Hiding the delays with schedule padding costs the carriers money and fixing the underlying problems would save those costs.
- Integration of processes within airlines is still lacking. Aircraft fleet connectivity is improving.

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> Planes can “phone home” with maintenance issues hours out from landing at a hub. It could even be done in the past using ACARS. And yet more often than not those repair requests are not being processed in real time. That results in additional delays which affect not only the broken aircraft but the rest of the fleet as well. That plane likely blocks a gate longer than it should have. Or causes delays in other aircraft because of missed take-off slots.

In Baiada’s world the FAA still operates to monitor and control aircraft spacing in the sky. It still handles safety-related issues. But it does not directly manage the “production line” of the airlines, which is the planes actually moving through the skies. NextGen is an incremental improvement, expected to cure only 20% of the current ATC limitations according to Baiada. It is insufficient to truly solve the problems.

A JetBlue Airbus A320 and a Silver Airways Saab 340B, taxiing in sequence for departure from runway 28

Then again, Baiada also believes that ATC isn’t really the problem anyways. Airlines can shave minutes off trip block times by flying a bit faster or getting more direct routings from ATC today. They can also shave those minutes by increasing turn time performance at the gate. Small things, like having ramp agents at the gate when the plane gets there 100% of the time, with the boarding bridge in position, catering at the ready and maintenance prepared with replacement parts based on advanced notification of troubles could very well save more time than more efficient ATC routings. As for the supposition that doing so may take more employees on the ground, Baiada isn’t buying it, “We have enough people. We need the systems to be married together in real-time. Isn’t that what “Big Data” is all about??”

Ultimately all of this comes into play. Arguing that a flight which arrives 14 minutes late is actually on time makes very little sense. Then again, most 14 minute delays don’t lead to missed connections or missed meetings. And there it no doubt that airlines need to better integrate data and operations. Most are working towards that goal, though it is unclear if the purpose is a better A:00 score – reducing soft costs from delayed and misconnecting passengers or delayed aircraft – or reducing hard costs of employee head count. And, at the end of the day, it is hard to convince airlines to invest a significant chunk of cash up front to meet some of these goals when it is not clear that all the other parties are going to play along.

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Not everyone agrees with Baiada’s view on this. Airlines in particular appear keen to have a scapegoat in the form of ATC to pin delays on. In that sense he is very much tilting at windmills, trying to convince the companies to invest in solving a problem that they do not wish to own. From that perspective it seems likely that this will be a story we continue to hear in the margins for some time to come.

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