



Focus
TRAVEL

Delta agents in a coordination center overlook Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. The airline operates nearly 1,000 flights per day at the hub.

PHOTOS: RICH ADDICKS, THE NEW YORK TIMES

ON TIME, MORE OFTEN

With all the headaches of travel, you might not have noticed: The percentage of flights leaving and arriving on time is way up.

By JAD MOUAWAD
THE NEW YORK TIMES |
FROM ATLANTA

Next time you dawdle at the duty-free store or an airport bar, thinking you have a few more minutes until your flight is set to go, know this: The plane's doors might already have closed.

There is a lot to complain about in air travel, particularly during the holiday season, with seats and overhead bins filled to capacity and the airlines charging fees for everything from a few inches of extra leg room to a bite to eat. But there is a nugget of good news: The percentage of flights leaving, and arriving, on time has improved significantly in recent years.

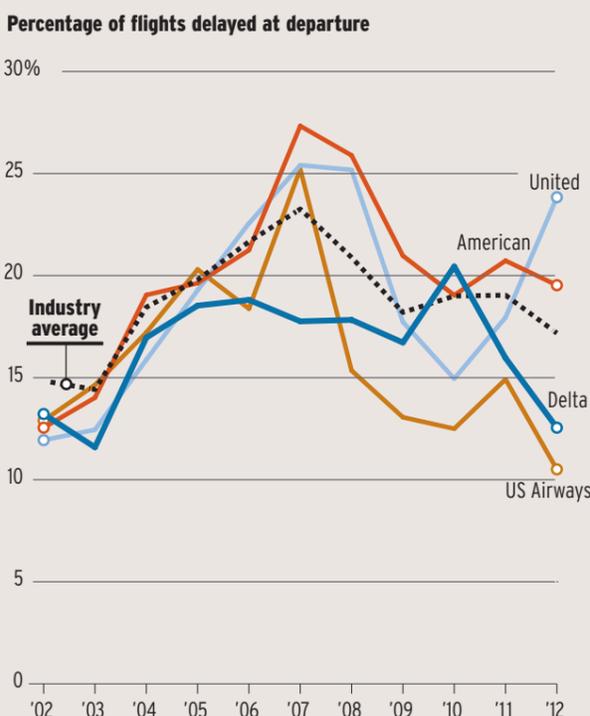
WHAT ARE THE FACTORS IN AIRLINES' ON-TIME PERFORMANCE?

The improvement is partly the result of the airlines flying fewer flights. But it is also because some airlines are focusing more on getting their planes out of the gate on schedule.

John Fechushak, Delta Air Lines' director of operations in Atlanta, compared the daily task to "putting together a puzzle with different pieces every day."

FEWER DELAYED FLIGHTS

By focusing on departing on time — something known in the industry as D plus zero — airlines have managed to reduce the number of delayed flights in recent years. But these improvements mask some wide discrepancies among carriers.



2012 is through September. Figures for individual airlines do not include their subsidiary regional carriers. These are included in the industry average.

Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics

The New York Times

HOW ONE AIRLINE DOES IT

"We need to run our airline like a European train service," said Dave Holtz, who oversees a NASA-like mission control center as Delta's vice president for operations control.

In the center, 270 people match aircraft with crews, draw flight plans and review maintenance checks, and keep an eye on passengers who missed their connections and need to be rebooked. If a flight is running late, controllers here can ask the pilot to speed up the flight to try to land on time depending on a host of variables: How many passengers will miss their connection? Can they be rebooked quickly? Is a gate available?

A snapshot of on-time performance across the carrier's domestic and global operations is displayed on giant screens. One day two weeks ago, 225 Delta flights had landed in Atlanta by noon, and 228 had taken off. Of those, 80 percent left at the scheduled time, 89 percent within five minutes, and 94 percent within 15 minutes.

The airline has reviewed dozens of procedures since 2011, particularly those in the critical 30 to 45 minutes that precede each flight.

Pilot checklists have been modified to allow pilots to focus on the most critical tasks just before flight. The carrier has also looked for ways to speed passenger boarding, a process that takes longer now as people carry more bags aboard. Delta agents often walk up and down the boarding ramp, offering to check carry-on bags that passengers will probably struggle to store.



A customer checks her bag with a Delta employee on a boarding ramp, where the company has installed baggage computers, at the airport in Atlanta.

WHY IT MATTERS

For the average air traveler, it really all comes down to one thing: wasting as little time as possible sitting around the airport and, more important, not missing a connecting flight. With all aspects of air travel becoming more costly and with options dwindling, being on time is the least travelers can ask for. And for now, it looks like the industry is providing it.

Here is a sampling of what Delta, for instance, looks at each day: How many minutes did it take for a plane to reach its gate after landing? Was the cabin door opened within three minutes? How soon were bags loaded in the hold? Did boarding start 35 minutes before takeoff? Were the cabin doors closed three minutes early?

So far this year, 83 percent of all flights took off within 15 minutes of schedule, the highest level since 2003, according to the U.S. Transportation Department, which compiled figures through September. But that average belies a wide range of airline performances.

Hawaiian Airlines, helped by good weather for much of the year, topped the rankings, with 95 percent of flights leaving on time. At US Airways, 89 percent of departures were on time in that period, while Delta had 87 percent.

On-time statistics also vary widely by time of the year, with the worst months in August and January, when summer

storms, holiday travel or winter weather cause more disruptions. Events throw off the airlines' performances: Statistics will be skewed for October by Hurricane Sandy, which shut down air travel through much of the East Coast. United is struggling with its merger with Continental Airlines and had major computer problems this year.

WHAT ARE INCENTIVES FOR GETTING OUT ON TIME?

Airlines now operate schedules that leave little wiggle room. Airplanes typically fly to several places every day, so any delayed flights, especially early in the day, can cascade through the system and cause headaches to flight planners all day.

Airlines have long padded flight times to make up for congestion or delays at the airport. Even so, passengers still expect their flight to take off and land at the time printed on their ticket.

The government considers a flight to be on time if it takes off or lands within 15 min-

utes of its scheduled time. Airlines focus on on-time departures, known as "D plus zero" in the industry.

WHERE ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES?

The challenge of departing on time is particularly acute at major hubs such as Atlanta, where gates are always being used and where Delta operates nearly 1,000 flights a day. Perched in a tower overlooking the airport, more than a dozen agents at Delta's coordination center get a panoramic view of the airport, its terminals and the five parallel runways.

This is where the final choreography is orchestrated among ramp agents, fueling vehicles, catering trucks, cabin cleanup and lavatory servicing, flight attendants and pilots, maintenance, flight operations, and air traffic control.

"Some days it comes together very easily," Fechushak, the Delta operations chief, said. "Some days, it's more challenging."