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Josh Barro (00:00):

This is Josh Barro, and this is Very Serious, the podcast.

You've probably seen news reports this year about airline meltdowns, or maybe you've experienced one yourself. Major airlines canceling large fractions of their schedules, especially on big travel weekends, because they don't have enough staff to operate all the flights they've scheduled. It's been a real mess, especially because so many people want to fly. Air travel volumes are almost all the way back to pre-pandemic levels. And with fewer flights scheduled, that means really full planes and fewer options for rebooking customers when [00:00:30] flights get canceled.

Of course, good luck finding a human to talk to about those rebookings. It can now take hours to get someone on the phone at an airline, even if you're an elite frequent flyer. Meanwhile, airfares are through the roof and customers are putting up with higher prices and lower reliability because they really, really, really want to fly. So, why is this happening and what can be done to fix it? I have an expert on the airline industry here today to talk with me about that. Brian Sumers is editor-at-large at Skift, a travel industry publication. Hi, Brian.

Brian Sumers:

Hi, Josh. Thanks for having me.

Josh Barro:

So, what's the scope [00:01:00] of these meltdowns? How much more unreliable has air travel gotten?

Brian Sumers:

It's gotten a lot more unreliable. People used to love to complain about airline travel. I always thought that they were overreacting because something bad happened to them.

But right now, these issues are structural. The air traffic control system in the United States is not in great shape, especially on the East Coast and in Florida. And then, there are the things that you mentioned. Understaffing. There's a bit of a pilot shortage right now. And you have all these people that [00:01:30] want to fly at exactly the same time. The best way to fix this would be to fly fewer flights, but you do that and prices go up and passengers will be upset that way, as well.

Josh Barro:

So, very often when we have these meltdowns, the first thing that the airlines will point to is weather. That there was some weather event and it caused delays and it dominoed through the schedule and caused this trouble. And my understanding is that, very often, that is true, but the thing is that these other factors that we're talking about here have made airline systems more sensitive to weather, basically [00:02:00] because things are more strained. When you have a weather event that causes delays, that interferes with an airline schedule, that basically has larger knock-on effects, leads to more cancellations, than it would if the whole system were in a healthier place. Right?

Brian Sumers:

Yeah, you're exactly right. As a journalist, especially this summer, when I hear airlines cry about weather, I call BS. In the United States, it snows in the winter and you have thunderstorms [inaudible 00:02:27] in the summer. Airlines, [00:02:30] they plan ahead for these sorts of things. They put slack in the schedule. They have reserve crews. A thunderstorm in Dallas-Fort Worth shouldn't cripple your operation for days. The only way that we should see real problems in the summer is if there are multiple hurricanes, one after another, and airlines literally have to move planes away from Houston and then back into it. There's no slack in the system right now, and that's the problem. It's not weather itself.

Josh Barro:

So, why isn't there slack in the system? Because we had, [00:03:00] back in 2020, one of the big pieces of the legislative response to COVID was a lot of subsidy money for airlines. And part of what that money was supposed to go for was so that they wouldn't do mass layoffs. So they would keep staff on the payroll so that when they had to start things back up, do exactly what we're seeing right now, when people really want to travel again, that the staff would be available and the airline would be able to operate as it used to. So, that didn't happen? Where are all the people who are supposed to be working at the airlines so that there would be enough crews to manage the schedules that they've put out?

Brian Sumers:

Well, Josh, [00:03:30] you've heard of the Great Resignation, right? It's happened in all different types of industries. It's wonderful when the government says, "You guys can have a job during the worst economic crisis in the history of airlines," but people who had other things they wanted to do for a living, they just got up and quit. Or they took early retirement. I mean, for about a year, year-and-a-half, working for an airline was like the worst job that you could possibly have.

Most people, they don't want to get paid to do [00:04:00] absolutely nothing. So we saw a lot of people at airlines whose jobs, they were taken care of, but they just said, "You know what? I want to go do something else." You also had pilots who stayed at airlines, but they had to be retrained. Right? So, if they retire your airplane, Delta retired all its 777, so those pilots need to get retrained. And then, the pilots that were on the airplane, they need to get retrained to do something else. It's a real mess out there. So, it's great that the government did what it did, [00:04:30] but that wasn't a panacea.

Josh Barro:

And so, it's not just that people didn't enjoy sitting around and not working, right? A lot of these jobs at airlines, you have some sort of base pay. But you're relying on that there will be business so that you get overtime or various other things. Is that right? So that even if you kept your job, the fact that the airline wasn't operating as normal, I assume that means you wouldn't have made as much money as you would have if the airline had been running a fully normal operation.

Brian Sumers:

No, you probably wouldn't make as much money as you would otherwise, but you did see a lot of people literally... [00:05:00] They got to stay home and get a paycheck. So if you didn't mind that way of working, it was okay. You heard a lot of pilots and flight attendants say, "I barely flew this month. It was great." And other people said, "This is ridiculous." Josh, I mean, I think you're relatively plugged into these circles as a frequent traveler. The number of Titanic memes I got from airline employees in 2020 was outrageous. I don't know. Did you see the one about... They were the band on the Titanic and they just kept playing as [00:05:30] nobody showed up at the airport. People got depressed. Literally depressed. People work in airlines because they love aviation and planes weren't flying. Planes were getting parked, and they didn't want to do it anymore.

Josh Barro:

So, are those people coming back? On Delta's website, for example, they say that they have more than 75,000 employees. Back in 2019, they had 91,000 employees. And I assume that's typical across the industry, right? The head counts are still significantly lower than they were pre-pandemic?

Brian Sumers:

Generally speaking, yes. Some airlines have bulked [00:06:00] up a little bit more than others. Delta's problem is not necessarily the number of employees they have. You might have heard Ed Bastian, Delta's CEO, give this quote on an earnings call, that he probably shouldn't have because his employees were listening, about a "juniority" benefit. So, Delta did its best to get rid of many of its older, more expensive employees and replace them with relatively green employees, and that's probably part of the reason that Delta is having some trouble [00:06:30] right now. But, hey, "juniority." If you're an investor, maybe you like hearing that.

Josh Barro:

Well, I mean, this is what Gary Leff is on about. He's an airline blogger. And he basically says that Delta used to have a superior operation compared to these other airlines, but they lost a lot of management employees who actually knew a lot about how to run an airline, how to do the operations aspects of how you move planes around and that sort of thing. And he attributes some of the meltdown to that. That it's not just a lack of physical resources and staffing. It's a lack of management knowhow to operate through [00:07:00] challenging situations with as little disruption as possible to the network.

Brian Sumers:

I think you're exactly right. Delta, during the pandemic, lost its chief operating officer Gil West. He was a god in the industry. Nobody is exactly sure how he did what he did. But Delta a few years ago, trademarked that phrase, the "On-Time Machine." They hardly ever canceled flights. And that's another guy, Gil West. I don't know exactly what was in his head when he left Delta. But these guys had built this airline into probably the best [00:07:30] operating airline in the world. And then, one day, it all falls to pieces of the pandemic. And Gil says, "You know what? I'm going to go to General Motors right now. I don't want to do the airline industry anymore." And that happened to a lot of people. There's been a big brain drain at headquarters.

Josh Barro:

So, what are airlines doing about this right now? There must be a short-term and a long-term approach to this, right? In the short-term, you have too many flights scheduled and you need to cut back the schedule. And we're seeing some of that. I mean, United at Newark, for example, has taken a whole bunch of [00:08:00] its scheduled flights off the boards for the summer because otherwise it's going to face these sorts of meltdowns at its Newark hub. So, I assume in the short-term, it's matching what you're promising to fly to what your actual capabilities are. And then, in the medium to long-term, it's about increasing those capabilities. Hiring people. Whether it's that you need to buy more planes or take them out of storage or train pilots on different kinds of aircraft. In the medium to long-term, you need to upgrade the operation so it can fly more. And in the meantime, you need to fly less. Is that approximately the approach?

Brian Sumers:

[00:08:30] Yeah. I was going to tell you that the approach is more whining and waiting, but you have it pretty much right. This summer, a few airlines have taken flights out of the schedule. Delta has been pretty aggressive about that. They took flights out of the schedule last month for the summer. But I think a lot of what the industry is doing is waiting until Labor Day. You have this like basically two-and-a-half month period where you have all this pent-up demand, your kids are out of school, and you want to fly right now.

And you just don't want to fly anytime. You want to fly like on a Thursday, Friday, or Sunday. And the system can't handle that. Labor Day is when the kids are all back in school in this country. And usually, business travelers come back. But as you know, nobody, including airlines, is sure whether business travelers are going to come back in

September, at least en masse. So the system should have some time to breathe. And then, I also talked about the blame game. The whining. Airlines are really trying to pin this on air traffic control as best as [00:09:30] they can.

Josh Barro:

To what extent is that true? You said the air traffic control system is over-strained. How much of the blame lies with air traffic control?

Brian Sumers:

I think a lot of it is true. The FAA air traffic control system, especially on the East Coast, in Florida, and the Northeast seems to be understaffed. And when planes go through this Jacksonville, Florida center for approach, and then any airport in the Northeast, things seem to get slowed down a little bit.

Josh Barro:

What does that mean in literal terms? It's basically like they can't process as many landings [00:10:00] and takeoffs as they ought to be able to in a given period, so they put you in a holding pattern or they have a ground stop, so planes can't take off for the airport because they're under capacity. What does it look like?

Brian Sumers:

Yeah, that's pretty much it. We've all been on these airplanes, right, where the pilot says, "We're all ready to go, but JFK won't release us for 45 minutes so we're just going to sit and wait here." That's an annoyance if you're on the plane, but it's much worse when you're three flights later that day and you have like a 9:00 PM departure out of Los Angeles. It's a beautiful day in LA. You're going to Salt Lake City. It's beautiful there. And you have no idea why your airplane was delayed eight hours earlier because it couldn't get out [inaudible 00:10:40] out of New York.

Josh Barro:

I was really struck a few days ago. There was a terrible set of delays at the airport in Austin, and it was because they had to close the local control tower in Austin to do a deep cleaning related to COVID. And the airport announces this and it's like, "Is it 2020? We think that it's a matter of fomites?" I mean, I assume that there had been [00:11:00] some COVID cases in the control tower and they don't want to have to have a whole bunch of staff out simultaneously for COVID. How much is direct COVID effect still mattering in the system, whether through air traffic control or that airlines are having more employees out because of waves of COVID? Is that still a significant driver of these delays?

Brian Sumers:

Yeah, it is still a significant driver. I felt the same way you did when I saw the Austin news, like, "What are they doing?" But remember, you have unions involved there as well, and [00:11:30] they want their people taken care of, so-

Josh Barro:

I thought Ronald Reagan broke the air traffic controller union. We had a whole thing about that 40 years ago.

Brian Sumers:

Yeah. Well, they're back now. But, look, airline employees are still getting sick. I was talking to an executive from a low-cost carrier in the United States last week, and he said, "There are days where we look at the schedule for the next day and we say, 'We got it. We are not going to cancel or delay any flights. Our staffing is perfect.' And then, you wake up the next morning and six pilots call in sick," and this is a relatively small airline, "and [00:12:00] it doesn't work the way you've intended it." So people are still getting COVID and they have to leave the operation for several days when that happens.

Josh Barro:

You mentioned that that was a US carrier. Are we seeing similar pictures around the globe? I mean, I saw the news reports in Europe about the Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam having all sorts of trouble. The locus of that seemed to be the airport rather than the airlines. That they were having trouble with baggage handling and security and they had incredibly long lines because of that. Is the situation in Europe better or

[00:12:30] worse than in the US in terms of the air travel system functioning like it's supposed to?

Brian Sumers:

I would say that amazingly, it's probably worse in Europe. We have all these complaints in the United States and they're all legitimate, but security tends to work pretty well in the United States. I mean, we see pockets of big lines. Baggage claim is working okay. The airport itself is working okay. In Europe, the airports themselves seem to just be completely melting down.

Josh Barro:

And why is that?

Brian Sumers:

[00:13:00] That may be a labor question more than an airline question, but I think somehow in the US, we kept most of our airport employees and in Europe, there have been some complaints by airline CEOs that people who worked at the airport, they decided that they wanted to have another job. I mean, this is somewhat related, but those jobs on the ramp, lugging bags and things like that, not a whole lot of fun. And if you can go out and do something else, maybe you do that [00:13:30] instead.

Josh Barro:

So, you mentioned that it's sort of a sprint to Labor Day in terms of how much pain people can deal with until we get to that. And then, I assume the idea is we have travel volumes in the US sort of north of 90% of what they were pre-pandemic. You still have significantly depressed business travel, which I assume means that leisure travel is probably more than 100% of pre-pandemic levels?

Brian Sumers:

Yeah, it's about that.

Josh Barro:

And so, that means that through the winter, when the mix goes back more toward [00:14:00] business travel, this will be less of an issue. And then, hopefully by the time we get around to Memorial Day of next year, the airlines will have fixed their operations to a point where next summer will be less painful than this summer?

Brian Sumers:

I hope that next summer will be less painful than this summer. I'm not overly optimistic. Summer's always hard for US airlines. They barely keep it together generally. It's like Thanksgiving Day every day out there.

Josh Barro:

And so, why don't they just cut the schedules back more to a point where this stuff becomes manageable again? I [00:14:30] mean, I assume that you could reduce the flight schedule enough to the point where you would again have the level of slack in the system that you were used to.

Brian Sumers:

Yeah. I spoke to somebody about this last week, Josh, and some of this goes back to what we were talking about before. People were working at airline headquarters in April 2020, and they saw more cash going out the door every day than coming in. They didn't know if they'd have to file for bankruptcy. They didn't know if they would be there in the next week. And now, you get [00:15:00] to June 2022. You have the opposite problem. You put a flight on sale on your website, and the thing sells out within days. You've never seen demand so good. You run a business. You're telling me that you're going to artificially sell less product when business is so good because you might have a problem in July? I mean, all these airline executives, they thought, in good faith, they thought, "I think we can do this. [00:15:30] I think we can pull it off this summer." It turns out that they didn't. It didn't work out. But it's hard to fault them for trying to sell every ticket that they can.

Josh Barro:

That must be a balancing thing, right? Because not only do you have expenses associated with when you cancel people's flights and you have to find ways to re-accommodate them somewhere else, but people get really upset when you sold them a ticket for a flight that you don't operate, especially if they get clued into exactly what happened. And they know that it's not just bad luck and bad weather; that it's actually that the airlines [00:16:00] knowingly overextended themselves because demand was so high, knowing that they were going to inconvenience a lot more people than they normally do, and at higher prices than normal, where you have these higher airfares. You'd think customers might get really upset. That could be damaging to their brands.

Again, I go back especially to thinking about Delta, because Delta's business strategy for over a decade has basically been... They achieve a higher fare-per-mile than United and American. And they have a less generous rewards [00:16:30] program in SkyMiles, which they achieve. And they brag about this on earnings calls, that they have better brand loyalty than the other airlines because they provide a product that people are happier with. And in particular, because they have a reputation for having this more reliable operation that is less likely to cancel your flight and less likely to arrive late.

And so, if you go through... I mean, last weekend, as we tape this toward the end of June, Delta canceled 8% of its mainline flights on the weekend, the weather was not particularly bad that weekend. You would think that some people will [00:17:00] be on those flights, they'll get canceled. And they'll say, why am I paying a fair premium to fly Delta when they're not providing the superior operation that had been at the core of their brand proposition? I would assume that people at Delta headquarters in Atlanta are worried about that.

Brian Sumers:

I would hope that they're terrified. I think you have it exactly right. Before the pandemic, Delta was far and ahead above the pack. Not just of US airlines, but of global airlines. People used to say, "Oh, I only fly non-US carriers." 2019, that was ridiculous. Delta was the best in the world. [00:17:30] They're not anymore. And the person who is enjoying this the most is United Airlines CEO, Scott Kirby, because United... People may or may not be noticing this, but it is making a move up market. And it wants to be known as the most premium US carrier. And every time Delta makes a mistake, United is trying to capitalize on it.

Josh Barro:

That's interesting because United had sort of the opposite strategy, where they were building up these fortress hubs in the middle of the country and trying to have more roots on which they were the [00:18:00] only non-stop operator and able to charge for that. I wrote a piece, actually mostly about American, back in 2018 for New York magazine about American trying to move up and build this better brand reputation, and it wasn't exactly working. Whereas United had a strategy that was like, "Well, our customers are captive for other reasons. We don't need to convince them that we're the most premium carrier." So, what does it mean now if they're trying to do that? Is that just about operations and trying to be more on time and fewer cancellations? Or is that something about product and service on the airplane? Because [00:18:30] employees on Delta are really friendly. The least friendly mainline airline employees that I encounter in the United States are on United, and I feel like that's a really hard cultural thing to change.

Brian Sumers:

Yeah. United's been changing the culture over the last five years. And it's interesting what you say about American and United, because the big difference there is the guy who was making that premium move at American was Scott Kirby when he was the president of American. He gets fired in 2016. He comes to United. At about that time, American moves down-market. They won't admit it, but they've gone down market. And United goes to be a premium airline. You mentioned Delta being friendlier. I mean, of course they're friendlier because they have non-union flight attendants, primarily based in the South. United's based in Chicago. They have union flight attendants who've been through two bankruptcies. They get a little bit salty sometimes.

Josh Barro:

I don't know. I mean, Southwest is all... Maybe because Southwest has never gone through a bankruptcy, but Southwest is a fully union operation and I think there's a real culture of friendliness there. So I don't think it has to be just [00:19:30] about whether you're union.

Brian Sumers:

Okay. But the United employees had been through a lot with the two bankruptcies pretty much back to back and giving up pay. But over the last five years, United employees have been a lot happier, generally, coming to work and they seem to be a bit nicer. Have you flown United recently, Josh?

Josh Barro:

Yeah. I flew United in March most recently.

Brian Sumers:

Did you think there were any better?

Josh Barro:

No. No. And also, the [00:20:00] airport operation is just a huge... I was checking in in business class at Newark, and it was a complete nightmare in the terminal there in a way that you wouldn't even see with coach check-in at Delta. No. Because I ski, and basically if you're trying to fly to the Mountain West in the US, you're captive to United. United has a way better schedule to most ski destinations than American or Delta.

And so, it's always sort of... I mean, obviously a first world problem here, but I'm grumbling, "Oh, I have to fly United again because I have to get to Bozeman or whatever." And [00:20:30] yeah, no, I have not noticed that change. I mean, obviously this is a handful of flights. You're going to get a range of experiences on any airline. But, no, I have not personally noticed that change. Actually, I made United Silver, despite thinking of myself as someone who does not fly United just because of certain schedule things that forced me to fly United. So I am technically an elite flyer there, if we're counting.

Brian Sumers:

Well, I will give you that Newark is a mess. United knows that Newark is a mess. They generally [00:21:00] blame their competition airlines for that. They say the competition in Newark is over-scheduling the airport and it's not United's fault. But it's a really rough place to fly out of.

Josh Barro:

Are the airlines learning anything new from this experience of having to rapidly shrink and then expand again in the pandemic that we should expect the operations to be different, or maybe even better, once we've gotten to a new stabilized condition post pandemic? Or is this really just a matter of getting back to the way things worked as of 2019?

Brian Sumers:

Yeah, I don't think [00:21:30] the airline industry will ever be exactly the way it was in 2019. I just think airlines... I mean, how can I put this delicately? Because it's not exactly true, but they don't quite know what they're doing. They've never been through this. They've never gone from parking airplanes. This is so much worse than 9/11. Parking airplanes for years and trying to get the operation back running again. Sometimes I think that the greatest thing for travelers, and we don't see it right now, is more about [00:22:00] premium leisure. Travelers like you and me, Josh, who are going skiing or going on vacation. Airlines are respecting us again.

In 2019, you had to work for like a private equity firm, a Hollywood studio, or a major multinational law firm to get respect on an airplane. You had to spend $10,000 on your ticket. And now, airlines are just happy that you have frequent-flyer status. They're happy that you've bought up to premium economy [00:22:30] or cheap business class. And so, travelers like me, like you, we're getting respect again. And I think that might stay the case, especially as fewer of those big-pocketed corporations are traveling.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. So, I think one change we're likely to see is a permanent reduction in the quantity of business travel. There are certain meetings that businesses figured out during the pandemic did not actually have to be conducted in-person. They're saving a ton of money and a ton of time by not traveling for them. And so, one of the things that I'd heard people positing [00:23:00] maybe 18 months ago about what airlines would do would be that the long haul aircraft that are flying from the US to Europe or Asia or whatever, that there would be permanently less demand for business class, or at least less demand at a price where it makes sense for the airline to offer so much business class. You can sell business class round-trip tickets to Europe to high-end leisure travelers for $3,000 round trip or that sort of thing.

But when you're trying to price them at $8,000 round trip, that was really for captive business travelers who are not paying the bill for [00:23:30] their own travel. And so, if you have a permanent shift where there's more leisure and less business travel, then maybe you want more seats at a lower price on the airplane, or more seats that take up less space on the airplane. Are they doing that? Are they ripping out business class seats from planes? Is there a sense from the airlines that they're going to be wanting to fly a different mix because there's going to be more leisure travel?

Brian Sumers:

Well, first off, I'm always wary of using the P-word: permanent.

Josh Barro:

Right.

Brian Sumers:

Because you never [00:24:00] know what cycles are going to happen and what's going to change. Second, generally speaking, airlines have not messed with the seating on board. And one of the reasons for that is... Here's a fun acronym for you, but LOPA. Do you know what a LOPA is?

Josh Barro:

No. What is that?

Brian Sumers:

It's a Layout Of Passenger Accommodations. And so, essentially, when you change your seating capacity on the airplane, it's like renovating your house or something. You don't just go on and pluck out seats. It's like a [00:24:30] big deal, and you have to get the airplane certified and has to go out of service. And so, airlines are very wary of changing their LOPA if they don't know what the future is going to bring. One interesting thing is... You know Breeze Airways? It's David Neeleman's new airline.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. David Neeleman founded JetBlue.

Brian Sumers:

Exactly. And so, David fashions himself as an innovator, and he's found some sort of a way on his Airbus A220s where he says [00:25:00] he can basically rip out the seating configuration overnight.

Josh Barro:

For people who don't know, an A220 is a plane that's smaller than a 737 and larger than a regional jet. Is that a fair description of it? A normal configuration of an A220 might have a hundred seats?

Brian Sumers:

Or a little bit more.

Josh Barro:

Yeah.

Brian Sumers:

But a very fuel-efficient, brand-new airplane. David is very excited about it.

Josh Barro:

And so, I assume since this is an A220, we're talking about a domestic-type business class. These are not lay flat seats?

Brian Sumers:

That's right. [00:25:30] Domestic business class.

Josh Barro:

And so, it's larger seats and smaller seats, but the planes, if you have an A330 flying to Europe, I assume those interior build outs are more complicated and more difficult to change, right? Because those business class seats are significantly sized machines.

Brian Sumers:

Exactly. I mean, I'm sure there's people listening to this saying, "That's ridiculous. They should be able to do it overnight in two days." They just don't. They can't.

Josh Barro:

One other trend that we saw back in 2021, as air travel was really coming back, was that airlines were coming up with weird [00:26:00] routes to fly, because initially it was really just leisure coming back. And so, you would get Minneapolis to Maine or other routes that you would think would not have a ton of demand, but were really aimed at summer travelers going to this specific destination. Am I right? That stuff has all gone away because the airlines just don't have enough planes and they're trying to add stuff on normal route rather than flying new, unusual things.

Brian Sumers:

Yeah. Domestically, a lot of that stuff has gone away and airlines are going with what [00:26:30] has already worked. But long haul, it's a little bit different. You no longer need all those flights to Frankfurt or Munich for the business customers. And you do see airlines playing around a little bit. United is doing Washington DC to Amman, Jordan. They're doing Washington D.C. to Accra. This is not a US airline, but Air Canada is going to be doing Vancouver to Bangkok. And nobody's ever thought that North America to Bangkok could ever make any money. [00:27:00] You can do it on the airplane. But that's Air Canada saying, "We can barely fly to Tokyo. We can barely fly to Hong Kong. The places we used to fly. Let's try Bangkok. Let's see how it goes."

Josh Barro:

And so, that's two things, right? It's one, you have some of these countries in East Asia that still have significant entry requirement difficulties. And then, also I assume that Tokyo and Hong Kong were business-heavy destinations. A lot of people flying to Bangkok presumably are flying there for leisure reasons, to go to some sort of resort. Right?

Brian Sumers:

[00:27:30] Right. It's hard to believe you could ever make as much money flying Vancouver to Bangkok, but they're going to give it a shot.

Josh Barro:

If you're booking travel this summer and you want to make sure that your flight is actually going to take off, what's your strategy around not getting caught up in these meltdowns and the cancellations that result from them?

Brian Sumers:

Well, Josh, I'm going to give you my real strategy. It's not a strategy that I ever give on television or to the general public [00:28:00] because people will laugh at me.

Josh Barro:

Okay.

Brian Sumers:

But I suspect that the podcast listeners here can afford to do this, and it works. There are no change fees anymore in the United States. I always buy two tickets. I buy one ticket on one airline, one ticket on the other airline, spaced about two hours apart. And if my flight on Southwest is delayed, as it was a couple weeks ago out of Chicago, I flew United instead. And what's the worst thing that happens? You have $150, $200 [00:28:30] travel credit that you're going to use a month later. It works.

Josh Barro:

Are a lot of people doing that? I mean, I imagine if that became a widespread practice, that would really screw up the airlines' planning, because you end up canceling one of those tickets at the last minute. Which you were allowed to do under the fare rules. I'm not saying that you're breaking any sort of rule. But I assume that if this is a widespread practice, that must make it hard for airlines to figure out how many tickets to sell, who's actually going to show up for a flight.

Brian Sumers:

Well, you mentioned Gary Leff, the blogger, earlier.

Josh Barro:

Yeah.

Brian Sumers:

I mean, people like me and Gary Leff will do this. But one [00:29:00] thing that I've learned in my decade-plus covering airlines is that Americans are really, really cheap. So think about how many people are actually doing this. It's relatively few of us super users. And as you say, I follow the rules.

Josh Barro:

And so, what if people don't want to buy multiple tickets? Where do you get your highest odds of the schedule being flown as planned?

Brian Sumers:

Look, a lot of the stuff that you read is generally true about when to fly. The department of transportation [00:29:30] put out its April travel report, looks back about two months, and it tells you what flights were on time and what flights weren't on time. And you can see that flights that leave between, say, six in the morning and nine in the morning are on time so much more often than flights later in the day. Delays, they just add up, and that's kind of what happens. I also recommend that people fly nonstop as best as they can, even if it costs a little bit more money. And then, I tell this to people on the West [00:30:00] Coast, because I'm in Los Angeles. Our weather is a lot better on the West Coast. We have a lot fewer air traffic control delays. And if you can stay West, you are a lot more likely to not be delayed.

Josh Barro:

And then, what should people do when delays and cancellations happen? Because I know a lot of people have this very frustrating experience where their flight is canceled and they get automatically rebooked on something that's completely inappropriate. It's two days later, or the schedule doesn't make any sense, or something [00:30:30] like that. And then, they want to change it, but they call in and it's two-and-a-half hours to get somebody on the phone. Actually, I had an experience with JetBlue a few months ago, where literally the wait time to get a call back was eight hours, and my flight was in eight hours.

So that was not going to work. I ended up actually... I couldn't get the schedule change that I wanted over the internet, but I canceled my JetBlue ticket and I bought a ticket, I think, on American. And that was an approach that worked for me. But a lot of people, I think the cancellations happen [00:31:00] and they feel like they can't get the assistance that they actually need from the airline. So, what do you do in that sort of situation?

Brian Sumers:

Josh, before we go any further, I just want to say: You know that JetBlue is like the worst airline in the world right now?

Josh Barro:

I did not know that. What's so terrible about JetBlue right now?

Brian Sumers:

So, these new numbers came out today as we're speaking. In April, JetBlue canceled 9% of its flights, which is just an extraordinary number.

Josh Barro:

Wow.

Brian Sumers:

It's usually like 0.5%. And only 53% of its flights [00:31:30] were on time. And again, I say this in all my podcasts, I'm West Coast based. I do not understand the East Coast love affair with JetBlue. They are demonstrably not a reliable airline.

Josh Barro:

It's a nice soft product. I flew Mint for the first time a few months ago, and it was a really lovely business class experience. And their coach has more leg room and I think has good customer service. My revealed preference is I don't fly JetBlue a lot, but when I do, I'm happy when I'm on the plane. [00:32:00] Obviously canceling 9% of your flights in a month is pathetic.

Brian Sumers:

No. To get back to your question, I would not recommend standing in line at airports. If you're an elite frequent-flyer, like I am, like you probably are, it might be okay to call the 800 number. But if we're talking about a step forward that a bunch of airlines, not all airlines have made, but a bunch of them have made over the last five years, their mobile apps are a lot better. And availability is dynamic. [00:32:30] So, you may be rebooked on a flight two days later, but if you refresh the app, oh, I don't know, a hundred times over three hours as I've been known to do, you will see one seat pop up. And then, it'll go. One seat pop up, and it'll go. And you can grab it yourself just as well as any agent can do on the phone. So whenever possible, just do it yourself. Do it on the app. Don't waste your time.

Josh Barro:

Yeah. This is one thing I will say for United, which I generally don't have a lot of [00:33:00] positive opinions about. Their app is excellent, especially in these situations. I've had more ability to handle things for myself through the United app than I have found on other airlines when things go wrong. Finally, what's the situation right now with loyalty? Is the value that you get as a customer from keeping most of your business with one airline and achieving a fairly high tier in the airline's loyalty program, is that paying off more or less these days? [00:33:30] I mean, the flights are so filled, so …one thing that I'm seeing is it's paying off less in the terms of free upgrades.

But customer service is more important than ever because of the unreliability. Is it really especially important right now to be someone that the airline takes seriously? Because, I mean, I know for Delta, I'm platinum so I'm three tiers up there, it can still be quite a long time for me to get an agent on the phone at Delta. I don't know how long it takes to get an agent if you have no status with the airline whatsoever. Because I've had experiences where I call there and it's going to be [00:34:00] more than two hours to get a call back. Is there a real value in being a literal high-value customer to the airline?

Brian Sumers:

Josh, I think you understand this better than anybody who's ever asked me questions, so thank you. Yeah, there is a lot of value. I would argue there's more value with being a loyal frequent-flyer now than ever before. We all wanted our upgrades. That was kind of a stupid thing, right? Delta CEO Ed Bastian used to say, "How ridiculous is it that we have the most valuable [00:34:30] space on the plane and we're giving it [to] like 70% of our customers for free?" So once you've gotten out of the idea that you're going to get upgraded for free, just know that when you are an elite frequent flyer, and I'm a 1K on United, they treat you like a human being.

They answer my calls within a few minutes, generally. And there's like little nice things. I don't know what you're getting on Delta, but when I fly on United, I get a free beer and a free snack box, which is a nice [00:35:00] treat. And I think airlines are generally getting better at just thanking travelers for flying them. Perhaps this airline has me wrapped around their finger. They probably do. But the other day, I entered the United Club and they said, "Thank you, Brian, for being a 1K." I was a cog in the machine three years ago. Nobody cared about me.

Josh Barro:

They always say that on Delta. They've done that on Delta forever.

Brian Sumers:

Okay. But maybe that's just about United getting better, [00:35:30] but I just think you're [inaudible 00:35:33]-

Josh Barro:

I find that a little awkward, actually. I don't know. Because airline status culture is ridiculous, the amount of emotional investment that people put into their customer relationship with a company. This was with hotels, but when I wrote about, back in

2015, when Marriot announced it was buying Starwood, I interviewed a manager at a Starwood property. Because you had all these Starwood customers, like the hundred-nights-a- [00:36:00] year, "I have a personal ambassador from Starwood," and all these garment-rending quotes from them about how distressed they were, and no one at the company will talk to them about the merger, and, "My ambassador didn't tell me about the merger before it got announced." Literally one of them complained to me about that, even though, like the SEC, you're not allowed to just go tell people that you're about to announce a merger.

But anyway, I spoke with a manager from a Starwood property and he was like, "Well, I'm excited about the merger, because Marriott seems to set more reasonable expectations among its elite customers who do not think that the world belongs to them because they stay [00:36:30] in hotels all the time." So, I mean, I feel frankly a little bit self-conscious when someone says to me, "Josh, thank you for being a Platinum Medallion." It's like reminding me of the ridiculousness that I put any emotional investment in this, even though I did in fact do so. But it is a demonstration from them that they are taking it seriously, even if we might be taking it too seriously.

Brian Sumers:

You're right. It is a ridiculous ecosystem, and I'm embarrassed that I take it so seriously. But it is nice to know that, generally, [00:37:00] this summer I can feel reasonably comfortable about flying and knowing that the airline is going to take care of me.

Josh Barro:

Why don't we leave that there? That's been really informative and I hope that's useful for people as they steel themselves to go to the airport this summer and hope that their flight actually takes off. Thanks, Brian.

Brian Sumers:

Thank you, Josh.

Josh Barro:

Brian Sumers again is editor-at-large at Skift, a travel industry publication. We'll have links to his columns in the episode notes at joshbarro.com. And while you're there, you can also leave a comment in the discussion thread for this episode. [00:37:30] You can even make fun of us for putting so much emotional investment in our relationships with the airlines and hotels that we stay in. Or you can agree with us about that. Whatever. You can also sign up for the Very Serious newsletter. I very much encourage you to do that. It's at joshbarro.com.

Very Serious is created by me, Josh Barro, and by Sara Fay.

Jennifer Swiatek mixed this episode. Our music is by Joshua Moshier. I'm Josh Barro. This is Very Serious and I'll be back next week.