

The Position of Aircraft Dispatcher

An Aircraft Dispatcher is a licensed airman certificated by the Federal Aviation Administration. He/She has undergone extensive training to have earned the coveted Aircraft Dispatcher's certificate having taken and passed both an extensive oral examination and the comprehensive Dispatch ADX test, administered by the Federal Aviation Administration. These tests are equivalent to the same Air Transport Pilot (ATP) written and oral examinations that an airline captain must successfully complete.

He/She participates in frequent and detailed recurrent training courses covering aircraft systems, company operations policy, meteorology and Federal Air Regulations as required by the FAA.

The dispatcher is responsible for economics, passenger service and operational control of day-to-day flight operations. He/She originates and disseminates flight information to others in his/her company including stations and reservations. This is the source of information provided to the traveling public.

Background

Commercial flying is one of the safest ways to travel. Partial credit for aviation safety can be attributed to the Congress, which enacts the laws, and to the federal agencies that enforce the safety regulations. Also sharing the credit for aviation safety are the air carriers and the people who work for them. An airline is a team effort, even though the team may number in excess of 25,000 members. The goal of every airline is safe, efficient, economical operation and it takes the full effort of every employee to reach that goal.

A large part of the airline team effort is played by the Aircraft Dispatchers, sometimes referred to as Flight Operations Officers or Flight Superintendents. They are little known outside their scope of operations, primarily because they do not come in contact with the public. The dispatch office, usually located in an administration building or a hangar, is far removed from ticket counters and boarding gates. Often the dispatchers do not have face-to-face contact with the crews they are dispatching since they may be in different cities. The dispatch office is the coordinating center for the collection of all available information on which plans and decisions are based for the most efficient operational control of company aircraft. The office is customarily located where management can enter and check the current status of the airline.

Through a network of computers, fax machines, telephones, radios, maps, and charts, the dispatchers direct the "operational control" of the airline.

In the earlier days of aviation the dispatcher would double as a station manager, chief mechanic, radio operator, or meteorologist. Today the dispatcher is a highly skilled specialist. Scheduled airlines are required by regulation to have a licensed Aircraft Dispatcher controlling each flight.

The licensing of dispatchers by the Federal Government started in 1938, although some airlines had been using "Dispatchers" before that time. Following a series of air tragedies, Congress,

realizing that planning and surveillance were necessary to safe flight, ruled that standards of competency must be established for the people who control the nation's air carriers.

Along with the responsibility for safety, the dispatcher must make instant and correct decisions. It is in this area that judgment becomes all-important. Dispatchers draw on years of experience in making decisions. They work in shifts, rotating their days off, enabling the dispatch office to operate 24 hours a day.

From airline to airline, the job of dispatching commercial aircraft varies greatly. But whatever the procedures followed, the goals are always the same; safe, economical, and efficient operation.

The Job

Operational Control, also known as Flight Control, is the exercise of authority over initiating, conducting, or terminating a flight.

An Aircraft Dispatcher is an individual holding a valid Aircraft Dispatcher certificate issued by the Administrator who exercises responsibility with the pilot-in-command for the operational control of each flight. An Aircraft Dispatcher is not required to hold any flying certificates as this is a ground position.

Dispatchers play a vital role in airline safety and are crucial to airline economy and efficiency. Often they are little known outside the industry. The job is complex, skilled, often rewarding, and sometimes frustrating.

The following is an example of the typical tour of duty for a dispatcher with a large airline:

Arriving for duty, the incoming dispatcher must first be briefed by the dispatcher going off shift. This indoctrination period may take fifteen to forty-five minutes, depending on the weather and operating problems, such as "mechanicals", which are inoperative items on the aircraft. To insure smoothness in transition, the incoming dispatcher first goes to a computer or bulletin file to review operations notices, company policy memoranda and NOTAMS. The latter are notices to airmen issued daily by the Federal Aviation Administration. They contain all reports of irregularities or failures of navigational aids and air traffic services, as well as information on airport runway repairs, snow plowing and other abnormal conditions. The dispatcher then reviews the latest weather charts at their desk, on a TV monitor, or at the weather counter, where information on fronts, winds aloft, forecasts, pressure tendencies, temperatures, and weather hazards is displayed. Particular attention is devoted to areas of severe weather, such as thunderstorms which may necessitate circumnavigation, and airport weather reports with terminal forecasts which may affect operations. On many carriers there will be a meteorologist available to aid in the briefing, but in some cases the dispatcher will brief himself, relying on his extensive training in this subject. Regardless of whether or not there is a meteorologist, the dispatcher is responsible for the safety and legality of flight and must make the critical decisions for all weather conditions.

The next step is to review the fuel and alternate airport requirements of flights already in the air or preparing to depart. He/She reviews not only the flights in his/her area, but also those released by dispatchers in adjacent sectors, which will transit his area. If the dispatcher is not satisfied that everything is in order, he/she will demand amendments before assuming control. Emphasis is centered on the irregular, not on the routine. Are all aircraft on time? Which flights might have operational problems that could cause delays? Are weather conditions above the legal minimums and what is the trend? Which runways are restricted and could adversely affect fuel loads and gross weights, or perhaps even cause an en-route fuel stop to be added? Are air traffic delays adding to operating problems? Once the dispatcher has answered these and other questions, he/she reviews and reissues an Area Dispatch Plan, which is a form of advice to personnel in reservations and out in the stations indicating what they can expect in on-time operations for the next eight hours. This information is then disseminated to the passengers.

A dispatch office is the center of operations control information, which is one reason why most of them are located close to management offices. Information flow must be two-way and the dispatcher frequently checks with outlying stations and flights in the air to update flight information.

The following is an outline of the position and responsibilities of the Aircraft Dispatcher.

Briefing and Releasing

So far, the incoming dispatcher has been preparing to release the day's flights. A "Dispatch Release" is a message or document prepared for each flight controlling the gross weight, the minimum fuel load, the type of operation, the legal mechanicals, the alternate airports if required, and other details. The Dispatch Release is the authorization for a flight to operate. The release must be signed by the Aircraft Dispatcher and Pilot-in-Command and implies a shared responsibility for the initiation, continuation, diversion, and termination of an airline flight. This shared responsibility is based upon considerations of safety, passenger comfort, scheduled operation, and economics. No flight may operate without the two required signatures. Either person may refuse to let the flight operate, but neither one by himself can cause the flight to operate. The release is not written and forgotten, but frequently reviewed and amended during periods of significant weather or anytime conditions affecting its validity change while the flight is en-route.

Since weather is not an exact science, re-dispatching and amending the release are sometimes necessary. The pilots depend on the dispatcher as the "Crew member on the ground" to provide them with updates on any changes in the weather or status of navigational facilities after the flight becomes airborne, in addition to the briefing received before the flight departs. For example, if the forecast weather at an intended alternate falls below minimums, the dispatcher will contact the Captain and amend the Dispatch Release to include a legal substitute. At the termination of a flight the crew must be debriefed of information relative to operating conditions. The dispatcher must also keep in touch with air traffic control facilities operated by the government and in some cases file amended flight plans.

Up to this point we have been speaking of routine operations. What happens during an emergency? In any dispatch office the personnel are supplied with a small library of operating manuals, technical books and bulletins, airport and approach charts, FAA operations specifications excerpts, and aircraft performance data. Foremost in the dispatcher's mind is safety. Every precaution is taken to insure the safe arrival of the passengers at their intended destination. Flights are followed by dispatchers and air traffic control to assure prompt action in the event of an emergency. During an emergency the dispatcher is prepared to act accordingly using his knowledge of alternate and refueling airports, navigational facilities, and performance limits.

The dispatcher will contact the appropriate agency and, if necessary, government rescue personnel. He will relate the status of the flight in danger and keep them up-to-date on any new developments. By doing the ground work for the pilots, the dispatcher frees the crew to concentrate on the problem. In the event an emergency arises and the dispatcher cannot contact the aircraft" he will declare an emergency and take whatever action he deems necessary.

Information is provided by a battery of computers, fax machines, telephones, teletypes, verbal reports from assistants and other operations personnel. Although these machines are extremely useful, the final decisions depend on the human judgment of the dispatcher. Therefore, experience and training determine the caliber of the person filling the position.