



# GROUND SUPPORT SCHEDULING GETS SMART ABOUT PERFORMANCE

**"BY QUICKLY FILLING SHIFTS ... WE GET PLANES INTO THE AIR MORE EFFICIENTLY."**

**- Brian Wemple, director of Planning and Support, Piedmont Airlines, Inc.**

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Recent headlines from the world of ground support, show airlines adopting: RFID capabilities to speed up the identification of bags; new technologies for washing and deicing aircraft; and, high-tech baggage loading belts to reduce, or even eliminate, injuries. In spite of this, airlines have largely overlooked how automated shift management for below-wing staff can affect key performance indicators (KPIs) like on-time performance, safety and employee morale.

KPIs from British Airways, for example, include measuring how many of its flights "are prepared for departure at three minutes before the scheduled or planned departure time," which relies on baggage agents, ramp agents, toilet and water services, runway services, cargo handling and ticket desk staff, among others, to make happen. But airline industry insiders say a move to automated shift management has lagged behind other technology adoption because the inadequacies with mostly paper-based systems -- while frustrating for managers and workers -- is not always a top priority for the airline.

Under the wing of the typical air carrier, staffing is a daily, often hourly, challenge for local management teams across dozens of sites, each handling ground crew scheduling, shift bidding and trading in their own way. Ramp agents say it's not uncommon for an approval policy for a shift trade to vary by location with time allotted for responses ranging from 30 minutes to two days. To be fair, some airlines have automated their shift management process. And while it's an improvement over a wholly paper-based process, users say these systems don't go far enough.

#### **FRUSTRATION FROM THE GROUND UP**

"We have a scheduling app, but it only posts our schedule two weeks out," says a baggage handler working at a non-mainline station. "And there are messages in the app from guys asking, 'Would a supervisor please approve my swap?'"

When ground staff get time off, some say taking advantage of flight benefits poses risks because of the way their scheduling systems work. For instance, if a ramp agent is stranded due to weather, she could still lose her flight benefits for missing her shift. She, in fact, may get someone to take her shift; but if a supervisor doesn't approve the request in time, she's liable.

Managers responsible for scheduling also relay concerns about paper-based systems or automated programs with shortcomings. They say gaining consistent reporting and a common employee roster is extremely difficult. They don't truly know whether their airline is deploying equipment and people optimally for day-of-operations. While software at many airlines will take day-of-flight schedules and generate work assigned to employees, without a common platform for shifts, there's no way to automatically bring in data for employees on duty.

#### **ARCOS ROSTERAPPS: THE SOLUTION FOR SMARTER SHIFT MANAGEMENT**

"Better ground-staff scheduling can positively impact on-time performance, employee morale and safety," notes an analyst at one of the major U.S. airlines. "An automated system to handle complex rules around shift-swaps, take into account seniority for the best bid-line and ensure following departmental policy, that's the key."

For those reasons, Envoy and Piedmont Airlines, Inc. have implemented ARCOS RosterApps, a workforce management solution that automates shift management and tracking time and attendance for thousands of ground staff. ARCOS RosterApps gives managers a centralized, automated way to track overtime and schedule workers months in advance; update policies; and, comply with changing regulations and avoid fines from scheduling workers without the proper skills. With ARCOS RosterApps managers see overtime requests in real-time, so they can compare requests against



available budgets. With an air carrier's labor rules and policies loaded in RosterApps, the system automatically approves (or denies) many trade requests without involving a supervisor.

### CONTRIBUTING TO ON-TIME PERFORMANCE

According to Piedmont, the Planning and Support group uses RosterApps to regularly analyze a current bid for a station by looking at coverage hours and comparing future flight schedules and plane requirements by overlaying the two and seeing the variance. If they note a discrepancy, they alert operations and suggest a new bid. This shifts coverage, so the station isn't understaffed.

An analyst for a major airline says, "Scheduling can absolutely affect on-time performance, so you want to make sure to have enough heads to run operations for your flight."

"We're always understaffed," says a ramp agent for a major airline. "There can be delays if we only have one person trained to break-ride the plane, and he's needed in two places. In a perfect world, we'd all be cross-trained." Wemple of Piedmont remarks, "By quickly filling shifts with the right people and equipment on the tarmac, we get planes into the air more efficiently."

### KEEPING AN EYE ON SAFETY

Air travel can be hazardous on the ground if equipment, such as jet bridges, isn't properly operated and maintained. With RosterApps, there's a view into not only who's requesting and working a shift but also the person's skills making the request (e.g., running a tug for pushback). Workers on the ramp should be cross-trained in many areas. But ramp agents say the reality is it's hard to retain people. So with new workers, they're often fully trained on a few jobs and gradually receive more skills as time progresses.

"If you're a ramp agent, you should be able to drive equipment and pushback," says a ramp agent at a non-hub airport. "But if you can't, then you're just throwing bags."

To account for these situations, RosterApps looks at who's scheduled by skill set. If a worker is jet bridge-qualified, someone who is not qualified can't pick up that person's shift. That simple but important backstop, said one mainline airline employee could prevent a delay, fine or possibly an accident.

### BOOSTING EMPLOYEE MORALE

"RosterApps really helps morale," says an administrator at an air carrier using the system. "As someone requesting a shift, you only see the ones you're qualified to pick up. You can do this from home, and there is an audit trail and email

confirmation, which is 100-percent better than paperwork. RosterApps increases happiness in the C suite because we're cutting out wasted time; managers are happier because they're saving a boat-load of time."

Piedmont's Wemple says verifying that the right people are in the right place is practically instantaneous. Previously, it could take his local managers a couple of hours to check every time. And, he says, the management of the employees' schedule is now in the hands of the employee.

There's also flexibility with RosterApps because the platform can accommodate multiple accounts ranging from ground operations to maintenance, or technical operations. In these scenarios, there may be different departmental policies including seniority and the exact number of accrual hours required for a bid. A day-trade policy at an airport may be different than a technician's in another working group. But RosterApps handles the different rules to meet workers at the point of need. In some cases, RosterApps can handle up to 80 percent of requests without ever involving a manager.

### FREING MANAGERS FOR STRATEGIC WORK, MAKING DECISIONS IMPARTIALLY, IMMEDIATELY

According to Travis Denny, customer and application support analyst for ARCOS, RosterApps enables airline planners to analyze schedules (and see potential shortfalls or overages in staffing and skills) months in advance. To show how RosterApps trims workload, Denny analyzed a hub airport, which ran approximately 31,500 trade requests during a 30-day period. During that same month, the hub's managers received a total of roughly 2,500 PTO requests. With its prior paper-based system, Denny assumed roughly three minutes for a manager to evaluate each trade request, and another five minutes per PTO request at this hub. RosterApps saved 1,603 hours over 30 days, which managers would have processed by hand; that's decades of time saved when annualized across multiple hubs.

"And once RosterApps starts enforcing workplace rules automatically all the time, the airlines often see their rules need editing," remarks Denny. "One of the regional carriers had a rule dealing with how frequently someone could work a double-double. With RosterApps enforcing the rule as written, the airline said, 'We need to loosen up the rule.'"

"It's not fire and forget, but fire and maintain a minimum level of maintenance for review and approval," adds Denny. "RosterApps handles requests impartially, immediately and without favoritism and questions."

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