

Importance of Roster Planning: A Case of Cathay Pacific



Source: Unsplash (2022)

Background

Established in 1946, Cathay Pacific Airways is Hong Kong's flagship carrier, committed to delivering world-class services and premium flying experience to its customers (Cathay Pacific, n.d.). However, the airline recently faced widespread criticism after the cancellation of nearly 800 flights over Christmas and Lunar New Year periods, causing public outrage and government scrutiny (SCMP, 2024). In response, the Civil Aviation Department (CAD) urged Cathay Pacific to fulfill its duty of providing reliable passenger services and requested a comprehensive incident report (HKSAR, 2024).

In its report submitted to the CAD, Cathay Pacific attributed the large-scale cancellations to several factors, including internal planning issues and underestimation of pilot reserve requirements (The Standard, 2024). The airline acknowledged that while it was aware of the illegal restriction limiting pilots to 900 flying hours per year, it had not anticipated this becoming a significant operational challenge. As a result, pilot flying hours were not tracked with the level of detail now deemed necessary, leading to an unexpected shortage of available crew (RTHK, 2024).

Having reviewed the airline's incident report, the CAD further pointed out the airline's poor coordination among departments responsible for service planning and crew scheduling. The department also criticized Cathay's lack of experience and digital capabilities in forecasting crew resources. In its statement, the CAD emphasized that the airline must establish stronger corporate governance to ensure effective communication among departments and the regularity of services (The Standard, 2024).

Since then, Cathay has proposed various remedial measures. It formed a task force to review its organizational structure and operational planning process and committed to enhancing headcount planning to ensure sufficient crew for maintaining flight schedules (The Standard, 2024). In May 2024, the airline also introduced a prototype digital system to monitor reserve pilot availability (Hong Kong Free Press, 2024). To improve attendance during peak travel

periods, Cathay proposed offering a 15% or higher bonus to pilots flying during these times (The Standard, 2024).

Challenges

Some believed that labour shortage is the main reason behind the incident and have questioned that the follow-up measures proposed by Cathay Pacific will be able to effectively tackle the root cause of the problem. The adoption of the new digital manpower monitoring system will also enable the airline to further exploit its pilots by pushing their hours as close to the 900-hour limit as possible. Overworking the pilots will only result in fatigue and more people calling in sick in the future. It may even hinder aviation safety or trigger union strikes if the problem persists.

While the peak season bonus may incentivize better attendance, it may also pressure crew members to work when they would otherwise take needed rest, potentially impacting well-being. Furthermore, with Cathay Pacific's recent announcement of plans to add 30 new aircraft to its fleet (Cathay Pacific, 2024), the strain on current staffing could intensify if pilot recruitment efforts are not scaled up accordingly.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the potential risks and benefits of Cathay Pacific's new digital manpower monitoring system?
2. How can Cathay Pacific balance the need to increase pilot flying hours with concerns about pilot fatigue, safety, and employee well-being?
3. What innovative recruitment strategies could Cathay Pacific explore to attract more pilots in a competitive market?
4. Beyond staffing and bonuses, what other steps can Cathay Pacific take to improve roster planning and ensure schedule stability?

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Keywords

- Airline
- Roster Planning
- Crew Scheduling
- Pilot
- Labour Shortage
- Flight Cancellation

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