

Delayed or canceled flights regardless if caused by a strike or weather, is one of the biggest annoyances for travelers. Besides Vielfliegertreff or Flyertalk you regularly read experience of passengers in the media about flight irregularities that lead to an Odyssey and given a runaround.

Oliver M. (flyertalk.com) and Ralf S. (vielfliegertreff.de) talked to Maike Tron and Ulrich Richter at the start of Winter 2013/14 about the processes around irregularities at Lufthansa.

Lets say my flight is cancelled- what options do I have to rebook? During major incidents like bad weather or strike the telephone lines and ticket counters are especially overloaded.

Beside the classic options at the ticket counter and the call center we have recently expanded our self-service options with respect to irregularities.

When an irregularity occurs it is now displayed if you open your booking via the 'my bookings' function on lufthansa.com. For simple connections (typically direct flights) you are offered the option to rebook your flight in the online check-in system based on the availabilities and directly check-in for the alternative flight.

At our service centers or ticket desks there are of course more alternatives available to rebook you, but in many cases, especially on regional flights, the option to rebook online is a great alternative.

Furthermore we offer the online option to convert your flight ticket into a railway ticket for canceled domestic flights. This ticket can be downloaded and printed out or sent as a mobile version to your smartphone. This means you aren't required to go to the airport ticket desk anymore to have a rail voucher issued.

What options do I have during irregularities with Germanwings, who work with a different reservation system?

With Germanwings we have to identify the type of ticket the passenger has and where they are located:

At the airport the passengers should go to the Germanwings ticket desk. There passengers can rebook with or without a ticket.

The Germanwings call center can rebook passengers with or without a ticket onto another flight.

A third option is online rebooking, is which available during serious disruptions. Here ticketless passengers can rebook themselves onto another Germanwings flight.

If re-booking onto another Germanwings flight is not feasible, it is possible for Germanwings to re-route on LH via the Lufthansa reservation system. However, in such case the passenger needs to go to a Lufthansa ticket desk to get the ticket (re)issued.

If it is not possible to rebook onto an alternative Germanwings flight or an alternative operated by another Lufthansa group carrier, the Germanwings airport ticket office has the option to issue a flight interruption manifest (FIM) as a replacement ticket on flights operated by select other airlines, with whom they have recently negotiated agreements.

Reverse question: does Lufthansa now have the ability to rebook onto Germanwings?

We have had mutual agreements in place for quite a while now that allow re-bookings from Lufthansa onto Germanwings.

What is the origin of the apparently quite different handling of irregularities within the Lufthansa group? According to various reports re-bookings by Swiss during irregularities, even onto other airlines, can be done over the phone without issues, but Lufthansa can't do it.

In principle, all airlines inside the Lufthansa group (LH, OS, LX, SN) have a uniform process in place for handling re-bookings during irregularities. There are clear instructions as to the order in which alternatives should be checked -- first a rebooking onto an alternative flight by the original carrier, followed by alternatives within the Lufthansa group. If that is not an option, flights operated by our partners within the Star Alliance are considered, and then as a last resort, other airlines outside our alliances.

In this way the passengers on Lufthansa should get a comparable service in case of a rebooking, like on Swiss. Particularly in the case of a cancellation, the use of outside airlines is on the list of valid options, as long as there are no alternatives available within the Lufthansa group. This option is also available via our telephone service centers.

However, it is important to differentiate if the irregularity occurs within 24 hours from departure, or a rather long term irregularity that is determined more than 24 hours before departure. The conventions in the airline business require that other airlines first agree to re-bookings that occur more than 24 hours before departure. In such cases a so-called "Reprotection Agreement" needs to be negotiated with these airlines. Here in many cases the rebooking onto other airlines outside of the Star Alliance is not easily possible.

The customer experiences seem to be different: even some loyal elite customers describe the call center as 'useless'.

We have realized for a while now that the handling of irregularities must be improved, and we have started a number of improvement initiatives. Besides the above-mentioned options in the self-service area, we also started an empowerment initiative for the HON hotline that allows the agents to provide a solution-oriented service. The goal is to solve any problems to the satisfaction of the passenger during the first contact.

What is the situation with award tickets? Frequent fliers often have the impression that the call center refuses to help and a rebooking is practically possible only at the airport. Often the issue is that the call center only offers an alternative flight that has award seats available, none of which are usually available at short notice.

In principle the call center should have the same authority as an employee at the station. The provisions for re-bookings in case of irregularities are that they can rebook into the same class of service irrespective of booking class. This is generally also valid for award tickets. Why award tickets cause such issues could be because customers who don't have status end up at the wrong call center due to the division of work between Lufthansa and Miles & More. We will discuss this point further internally, since our standard is to offer the same alternatives in case of award tickets as for regular revenue tickets, that is, to offer the customer a viable alternative.

According to some experience reports of rebooking to other airlines the passengers are required to contact the ticket desk at the airport for a reissue of the ticket. Why can't the call center reissue the ticket so one can directly check-in online and avoid the runaround at the airport?

Generally a rebooking is a two-stage process. At first the new flights are reserved and then the actual issue or reissue of the ticket takes place. The 'service center' sends the booking internally to our 'fulfillment center', which takes over ticketing.

Especially during major flight irregularities we reach our capacity limits. We are currently working to better automate the issue and re-issue of tickets. The system is already being tested in 15 select markets. We want to roll out this system in approximately mid 2014, which gives us the capability to allow more tickets to be automatically re-issued.

Why does Lufthansa announce delays that are known in advance only after the scheduled time of departure? Elite customers would prefer to wait in the lounge instead of standing around at the gate.

First of all we need to consider the reason for the delay. We differentiate between slot delays, technical delays, rotation delays, among others, which we normally communicate only if the delay is more than 30 minutes, for example via SMS text and email.

Slot delays are often not predictable. Here we try to get the aircraft ready for departure regardless of the delay, so the captain can apply for the release of the slot and perhaps get a better slot. This is only possible once all passengers are on board.

Rotation delays are similar: especially in hubs we have the leverage to reduce delays in rotation or compensate them. However for outstations we enter such delays in the system and try to communicate them.

During technical delays the time window to fix the problem is often initially uncertain. However we are now

trying to communicate the time window in which the technical team can provide an update as the delay in the system.

We will gladly take up the idea that there is a demand to communicate even shorter delays.

The communication of delays via SMS text messages, as long as they are entered in the system, seems to have been well established now. However the text requires you to be at the airport at the original check-in deadline. Why is it not possible to arrive at the airport a little later when the delay is already announced?

The text was already altered to say that the passengers should be at the airport in time: if you are traveling with hand luggage only this may give you some flexibility.

Regarding check-in at the airport, as well as online or mobile, the original check in deadlines still need to be observed. At outstations we normally have fixed service hours with the handling agents, after which the individual employees may have to serve customers of other airlines.

We will be glad to internally look into the feasibility of providing a later check-in in case of delays.

I which situations can I expect a direct transfer in case of delay so that I can still reach my connecting flight?

We work with limited resources with our direct transfers (HON direct service and ramp direct service), which are distributed on a demand basis. It is difficult to make a binding statement when you can expect a direct transfer or not.

Generally the HON direct service has a fulfillment ratio of 99%. This means that in principle every HON will reach his connecting flight when the connecting time drops into the window between 20 and 45 minutes. In the very rare cases that we may have a shortage, HONs with a long-haul connection will have priority over HONs with a regional connecting flight, which may have alternative flights available within a short time span.

The regular Ramp Direct Service is similar. The trigger is a breach of the minimum connecting time and passengers are selected by a number of criteria. Besides an assessment of the chance to still reach the connecting flight, the number of passengers with an identical connecting flight, the elite status, and the factor if alternative options are available the same day play a role. Again here long-haul connecting flights have priority over regional flights.

Due to the night curfew in Frankfurt, often you don't wait for passengers on delayed connecting flights anymore. Wouldn't it be reasonable to offer a waiver to rebook onto earlier feeder flights when you have days with expected delays?

You are correct that late night departures from Frankfurt can no longer wait for connecting passengers, since the DFS continues to strictly implement the night-time curfew.

For feeders with a high frequency it is certainly advisable, as far as your time permits, to book an earlier feeder flight in order to have a buffer for any possible delays.

A standing waiver to allow the rebooking of passengers onto earlier flights doesn't exist. The night curfew is well known by now, and the customer decides to choose a certain connecting flight and the conditions of the ticket. Only if there is concrete danger of missing the connection the station may decide to rebook and waive the charges. In all other cases the original fare conditions of the ticket apply.

How are you dealing with the issues that arise with respect to Fraport: in the past you had regularly had shortages for example with deicing.

You are correct that there is room for improvement at Frankfurt Airport. Together with Fraport we have jointly developed a number of measures to address the problems: we want to become better together.