

Seniority issue could be expensive for Delta

By: AP Reporter
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Seniority issues could force Delta Air Lines to hire workers it doesn't need

ATLANTA (AP) -- Delta Air Lines may be in the costly position of hiring employees it ideally wouldn't need, spending precious cash the carrier wants to preserve in the uncertain economy.

That's because two key work groups haven't resolved seniority issues resulting from the combination of Delta and Northwest Airlines into the world's biggest airline operator.

Seniority determines schedules, vacations, work rules and the way employees bid for flights. Pilots have a merged seniority list and joint contract, but flight attendants and ground workers, such as baggage handlers and reservation agents, don't.

In April, Delta will begin flying its planes in Northwest markets and vice versa. This cross-fleeting is about using the right size aircraft on a specific route based on the demand in that market, and Delta has said one of the key benefits of its acquisition of Northwest was the flexibility to use each carrier's aircraft on the other's routes.

However, flight attendants from one carrier won't be able to work on the other's aircraft because of outstanding seniority and representation issues.

For example, a new international flight on a pre-merger Delta aircraft may require flight attendants who speak a particular language. If Delta attendants aren't available, the airline may need to hire people with that capability even if pre-merger Northwest flight attendants who spoke the language were available. And Delta wouldn't necessarily switch to a Northwest aircraft on that route because it may be inefficient to do so.

Delta currently can't estimate the cost, and experts won't speculate without wage data from the airline and the number of employees to be hired.

Passengers may not notice much right away, but eventually friction between workers could affect morale and, perhaps, hurt customer service.

Jerry Glass, a former US Airways executive who is now president of human resources and labor-management relations consulting firm F&H Solutions Group, said Delta wants to resolve seniority for business reasons, and customer service is a part of that.

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If there is a lengthy battle over seniority at Delta "there may be enhancements they want to make that may take them longer and there may be workarounds they may have to do to get that completed," Glass said.

Delta has publicly urged the two groups to resolve the integration of the seniority lists soon. Unions that represent the flight attendants, baggage handlers and reservation agents who worked for Northwest before the Oct. 29 buyout have resisted.