

NEWS STORY

Translation of article appearing in Fyens Stiftstidende (Danish newspaper), 20 March 2010

Aircraft in slow motion

Airlines are losing a fortune, because they don't get passengers on board as fast as they could. An Australian engineer believes he has the answer, but nobody seems interested in his invention. Although only a five-minute time saving for the individual passengers, it represents billions, not millions, of dollars more profit per year for airlines and thus ultimately their customers.

Huge savings can be made if the airlines get passengers on board faster and thus take off faster, which is, after all, how aircraft make money for their shareholders. Most airlines choose to board passengers from back to front, which is actually one of the slowest of many ways to fill a plane. For example, it is faster just to let the passengers go on board in random order.

The magic carpet

Researchers - both individuals and firms commissioned by the airlines - have devised ingenious ways to get as many people as possible on board in the shortest time, but Australian engineer Rob Wallace is unimpressed. He has invented a "Flying Carpet" which, according to his studies, can fill the aircraft much faster without having to bully passengers. However, not one company has shown interest in his patented invention, even though it is quite cheap.

Everybody wins

"It is difficult for an individual to penetrate the airlines" he says, continuing, "There are no losers. Airlines can make better use of their aircraft, airports save space because aircraft spend less time at the gate, and passengers don't miss connections since their flights are more likely to arrive on time."

Time is money

Rob Wallace has calculated the cost of slow boarding, which incidentally is a growing problem because passengers take more and more cabin baggage. His starting point is about six billion boardings of commercial aircraft per year. Saving just one minute per passenger equates to 100,000,000 hours. And if one hour is worth \$20, the cost is \$2,000,000,000 dollars (2 billion dollars).

Fewer planes

But the biggest prize goes to the airlines, which can reduce their fleet size. As an example Rob mentions Southwest Airlines in USA. If their Boeing 737s can make eight flights per day instead of their normal average of seven, their fleet of 536 Boeing 737s could be reduced to 7/8ths, thereby saving aircraft purchase costs of \$4 billion. Not bad.

Most gains on short trips

It is mainly on short flights, for example, Copenhagen to Oslo, Stockholm, Berlin, London, Paris, etc., that gains can be made by faster boarding. These flights, typically one to two hours, are very common in Europe and America.

For these boarding time is proportionately more than for longhaul stretches where the plane stands at the gate for several hours.

Stiftstidende has talked to a dozen airlines flying from Copenhagen, who say almost unanimously that they are concerned about on boarding times, believing that filling the aircraft from the rear is the logical way. But studies, both computer simulation and "field trials", with real passengers at Los Angeles International Airport, show something else.

By Søren Thorup
thorup@fyens.dk