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Flight attendant's job: Harder than it used to be?

Flight attendants, including JetBlue's now-famous Steven Slater, often deal with annoyed or irate passengers. But the climate in which they work is more stressful than it used to be, experts say.

Flight attendants deal with annoyed or irate passengers on a regular basis. But the climate in which they work is more stressful than it used to be, experts say.

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By *Matt Rocheleau*, Contributor / August 11, 2010

Whatever caused JetBlue flight attendant Steven Slater to make perhaps the most memorable "departure" in airplane history is no doubt more complicated than an unpleasant run-in with a passenger.

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After all, flight attendants deal with annoyed or irate passengers on a regular basis. Attendants are, for better or for worse, often a passenger's first human contact with anyone from the airline – and depending on how the passenger's whole airport experience has gone, that contact can be pleasant or raw.

The challenge now is that the climate surrounding the job of flight attendant has become more stressful than it used to be, say some flight attendants and those who study their careers.

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"Our jobs have changed so much over the past 10 years," writes 20-year veteran flight attendant John Safkow of Castro Valley, Calif., in an e-mail. "I never used to feel it was a 'job'. Never felt as if I was going to work. Now, it's a job. I just want to get the hours in and go home."

Mr. Safkow, who writes online under the name "Martha Stewardess" and requested that the name of the airline he works for not be published, is one of dozens of flight attendants who blog – and sometimes vent – about their in-flight experiences.

Before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he writes, airlines were profitable and spent money trying to make passengers more comfortable.

"Passengers and crews were happy. We had great trips with wonderful layovers," writes Safkow. "Now, the carriers have cut back and continue to cut corners and costs. And now the services have been 'unbundled' and fees added. At the same time, airlines have eliminated so many of the features that passengers expect. Our work schedules are worse too. We're doing more for less."

While rude or uncooperative passengers can boost the stress level, "incessant uncertainty" is at the root of what makes flight attendants' jobs difficult, says an e-mail from Bobbie Sullivan, an occupational health psychologist based in Hawaii, who has researched the lives of flight attendants and writes about her studies on www.AircrewHealth.com and www.AircrewBuzz.com.

Job insecurity, especially in this economy; irregular work schedules; substantial time away from home and family; and fatigue from long hours and short breaks are among the challenges, she says.

The mean annual wage for attendants is $43,350, just below the average for all US occupations $43,460, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

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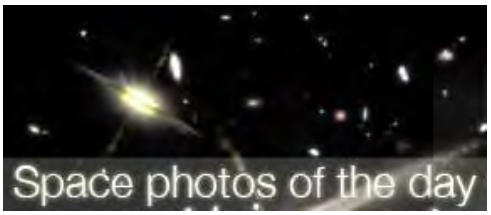

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After an altercation with a passenger, JetBlue flight attendant Steve Slater quit his job on the spot and made a heroic (albeit possibly criminal) slide from an exit hatch. Yes, passengers can be incredibly obnoxious. Here's a list of what annoys flight attendants most.

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