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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.

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Flight attendants can be scheduled as many as 14 hours a day, with somewhat greater maximums for international flying, the BLS says. Attendants are typically away from their home base about one-third of the time, flying between 65 to 90 hours a month and spending another 50 hours a month on the ground writing reports, waiting for planes to arrive, and preparing planes for flight.

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The wide world of air travel

"Full-time flight attendants experienced a much higher than average work-related injury and illness rate," according to the BLS. "In addition, medical problems can arise from irregular sleeping and eating patterns, dealing with stressful passengers, working in a pressurized environment, and breathing recycled air."

Though employment of flight attendants is expected to grow by about 8 percent over the next decade – the average rate anticipated for most occupations – the attendant job market is likely to remain competitive for a profession where the average tenure is 16 years and rising, says the BLS.

While the number of unruly passenger reports filed to the Federal Aviation Administration has decreased in recent years, "a new study by the International Air Transport Association found an increase in instances of disgruntled passengers and violence on planes, with the chief cause being passengers who refuse to obey safety orders," according to The New York Times.

Like Safkow, most flight attendants do not expect that every passenger will be polite.

"[Passengers] are frustrated and have no one else to take it out on. We have no way of knowing what each passenger is going through or just experienced before boarding. Some are afraid to fly, and others intoxicated," he writes.

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"For many flyers, we are their first contact with a human representing the airline," wrote in an e-mail. "They've booked and purchased on the web. Checked in on-line or at a kiosk in the terminal. Waited in lines, dragged themselves through security, only to wait at the gate. Some are frustrated beyond reason. Others are just plain angry. They want to unload on someone, and that would be your flight attendant trapped with you inside this metal tube flying very fast at 34,000 feet."

Of all an airline's front-line employees, flight attendants have the most face time with customers.

"If nothing else," writes Ms. Sullivan, "that extends the opportunity to vent their frustrations on these poor workers, who likely had nothing to do with late departures, lost bags, fees, schedule disruptions, and such. Nor do flight attendants have any control over such things."

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