The Role of the Aircraft Dispatcher

The profession of Aircraft Dispatcher is often the most misunderstood profession in aviation. A dispatcher is not an Air Traffic Controller. A dispatcher is not Ramp Control either. This article sheds light on the vital role of the aircraft dispatcher. Consider the following scenario:

A person taking a trip on an airliner is used to the familiar scenes of the airport. The passenger is greeted by a ticket agent who checks a bag, tags it, and puts on a moving belt. Somewhere in the innards of the terminal, baggage handlers heft those bags onto a baggage cart, and a ramp worker drives a “train” of baggage carts to a waiting airplane. Our passenger checks in, moves past the security checkpoint, and waits by the gate for the agent to board the flight. Outside, the ramp is bustling with activity. From the terminal windows, the passenger can see that the airplane is being fueled, a mechanic is changing the nosewheel landing light bulb, and ramp workers are busy loading bags onto a motorized, inclined belt that feeds the belly of the airplane. The crew shows up, in their smart uniforms, and proceed down the jetbridge to prepare the airplane for flight. In a few minutes, it is time to board, and our passenger will look forward to a relaxing flight and the excitement of another adventure.

What is not visible to the average traveler is the important behind the scenes action. How much fuel, exactly, is being put on board the airplane? How are all those baggage and cargo containers arranged? Does it matter in what order they are loaded? What is the weather at our destination? Was it necessary to change out the landing light right now? How is the Captain so sure that our flight to Miami today will take “two hours and thirty-seven minutes at 38,000 feet”? Last week it took me only an hour and 57 minutes at 41,000 feet on the way up from Miami! How does anyone know this anyway?

All this figuring is the job of the Aircraft Dispatcher, the heart of an airline operation. He or she has Operational Control of an airline flight, which means the dispatcher oversees planning, authorizing (dispatching), delaying, or cancelling a flight. The dispatcher shares responsibility of the safety of the flight with the Captain, the Pilot in Command (PIC). The dispatcher is the Co-Captain, the Air Boss on the ground. The dispatch office is known by many names, Dispatch, Network Operations Control (NOC), System Operations Control (SOC), Flight Control, and in the case of NASA, Mission Control. Much attention is paid to the pilots and flight attendants, but the real hero is the quarterback of this whole team effort, the aircraft dispatcher.

The dispatch profession came into being in 1938 in response to the horrendous accident rate of our nation’s fledgling airlines. The Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) saw fit to require airmail and passenger flights to be aided by a professional on the ground, like the railroads did. Someone who could keep track of the flights, and who would have access to weather and technical information (Krause, n.d.). The Dispatcher could so help the Captain negotiate his or her way through weather or deal with an inflight emergency. The Dispatcher today is considered a vital member of the crew and the most important resource for the flight crew. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requires that the Dispatcher exercise Operational Control and share the authority and responsibility with the airline Captain. It is the Dispatcher’s job to create the flight plan for every airline flight. Flight planning includes analyzing the weather at the departure airport and destination. In case of inclement weather at the destination, the dispatcher pre-plans an alternate airport and calculates the fuel to get there. The Dispatcher also precisely calculates weight and balance and is certain that the airliner will have sufficient runway to land and stop safely in snow-covered LaGuardia airport, because he or she calculated all this beforehand. The Dispatch team maintains control of all the flights and is in constant contact with the PIC of each of his or her aircraft by way of radio, satellite communications, or a form of aviation texting called Aircraft Communication Addressing and Reporting System (ACARS). To earn this privilege, a Dispatcher must pass stringent training and testing requirements very much like those of the airline Captain. A dispatcher is an airline employee, and like all airline employees, enjoys free pass privileges. However, a dispatcher may ride the “jumpseat”, not just on his or her own airline, but on the competitor’s airline as well, and is at the front of the line, regardless of how long the “standby list” is. Dispatchers have priority when it comes to riding the jumpseat, as an extra Captain is always welcomed on the flight deck, no matter whose airline they are riding on.

Industry leaders such as Boeing predict that the demand for pilots, mechanics, dispatchers and airline personnel will pick up rapidly. In the USA alone, the forecast numbers are for 569,000 pilots and technicians. Worldwide, that number is 2,069,000 in commercial airlines and 319,000 in corporate aviation. In addition to an increased demand for air travel and the rising affluence of populations in China, Latin America, and the Middle East, many pilots, dispatchers, and aviaiton professionals are or have retired. Proportional to the urgent need for pilots is a corresponding ratio of dispatchers. The current slowdown due to the Coronavirus is temporary and represents economic cycles common in our economic environment and reflected in the airline industry. Like the industry after 9/11/2001 and he Great Recession of 2007-2008, the airline industry has always bounced back to robust demand. The current stand down brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to use your time productively and be prepared to meet the market for dispatchers when the economy comes roaring back to life as it will certainly do!

Aviation is a living, breathing, and constantly evolving profession, full of opportunities for those who are willing to go for it. I started my airline career at Pan American World Airways in 1985 as a Reservations Agent making $5 an hour. I saw an ad in the Airport Press for the Pan American Dispatch Academy and went for my certificate, hoping to increase my salary to pay for flying lessons at Republic Airport in Farmingdale. The economy went into recession in 1992 after Desert Storm, and Pan American went out of business. I worked as an Operations agent for Aeromexico then as a dispatcher for Iberia, under contract with DynAir (now Swissport). All the while I earned my private, commercial, and instructor licenses. My aviation career took off with my spot as a copilot on the Beechcraft 1900 Super D at US Airways Express. Then to AirTran on as a copilot on the Boeing (McDonnell Douglas) 717, then an upgrade to captain on the 737. AirTran was purchased by Southwest, and now I fly the same 737 with a different paint scheme. The job is still as fun as it was on the first day, and when I’m not flying the line, I’m out instructing student pilots in Cessnas and Pipers. Aviation is in our blood, and Dispatching is an opportunity to line up your career to take off!

There are several avenues to take to earn an Aircraft Dispatchers Certificate. Those with prior civilian or military experience as flight followers, Air Traffic Control, or crewmembers can take the tests outright. For the rest of us, we must enroll in an FAA-approved Dispatcher Certification course (Code of Federal Regulations 65.57). There are many options, with prices ranging from $4,500.00 for the six-week course to some courses costing $7000 for the same Aircraft Dispatcher Certificate.

If you are looking for affordable, professional dispatcher training, Global Aviation Training Academy (GATA) is the way to go. GATA is conveniently located at the Islip Airport at 2221 Smithtown Avenue, Ronkonkoma, NY. The facility is walking distance from the Long Island Railroad Ronkonkoma station, with convenient connections to Jamaica Station (near JFK) and Woodside (near LGA). GATA offers the course either as full-time (6 weeks) or part-time (12 weeks) in morning, afternoon, and night schedules to suit your needs. GATA has a very experienced staff of captains and dispatchers from corporate aviaiton and scheduled airlines. Our multi-lingual, multi-cultural staff has successfully certificated dispatchers for over 25 years in the USA and around the world, and we have experience working in many countries (the training is conducted in English). In addition to training dispatchers, GATA offers type-specific training courses for several models of corporate aircraft, a Certified Flight Instructor Academy, as well as Private Pilot, Instrument Pilot, and Commercial Pilot test preparation ground schools.

Call GATA at 516-341-6381, [success@globalaviationtrainingacademy.com](mailto:success@globalaviationtrainingacademy.com), and schedule a place now at New York’s only Dispatch Academy. Visit us at [www.globalaviationtrainingacademy.com](http://www.globalaviationtrainingacademy.com). We will offer 8 courses in 2021. Our January class starts on the 4th and spots are filling up!

**Frequently Asked Questions**

1. ***What are the requirements to earn a dispatcher license?*** To take the class, a person must be 21 years of age. To earn an Aircraft Dispatcher certificate, a person must be 23 years of age, and speak, read and understand the English language.
2. ***What are the requirements to take the course?*** A high school diploma is not required, but to be competitive for any dispatch jobs, a high school diploma (or GED) is required. A college degree only adds to your competitiveness.
3. ***Is this an Accredited Course?*** Global Aviation Training Academy is not an accredited agency of the Board of Regents or any other academic organization. The FAA Aircraft Dispatcher Certificate is issued by the Government of the United States under the Authority of the Federal Aviation Administration. It carries the same authority and privilege as any other FAA airman certificate, such as a pilot’s license.
4. ***Are there scholarships or payment plans available?*** GATA offers scholarships and delayed payment plans.
5. ***How much does a Dispatcher earn?*** The salary of a Dispatcher varies by airline and by level of experience. Entry-level dispatchers may earn $42,000 to $60,000 at the regional airlines. Dispatchers for major airlines make in excess of $150,000 base salary.(Source: Avjobs.com)
6. ***Are there online classes offered?*** Right now, GATA does not offer online classes. Aircraft Dispatch is a very demanding, precise profession. Interaction with your willing mentors and facilitators at GATA is the best way to master the material.
7. ***I already have my Private and/or Instrument Ratings. Does this qualify me for a discount?*** The pilot certificates will certainly help you in mastering the course, as you already have mastered these aspects of aviation. Having a dispatcher license will help you as you further your aviation career towards your instructor, and airline pilot training!
8. ***What aviation experience may I credit toward my Dispatcher Rating?*** The Code of Federal Regulations (14 CFR 65.57) specifies the following requirements:

**65.57   Experience or training requirements.**

An applicant for an aircraft dispatcher certificate must present documentary evidence satisfactory to the Administrator that he or she has the experience prescribed in paragraph (a) of this section or has accomplished the training described in paragraph (b) of this section as follows:

(a) A total of at least 2 years experience in the 3 years before the date of application, in any one or in any combination of the following areas:

(1) In military aircraft operations as a (i) Pilot;(ii) Flight navigator; or (iii) Meteorologist.

(2) In aircraft operations conducted under part 121 of this chapter as—

(i) An assistant in dispatching air carrier aircraft, under the direct supervision of a dispatcher certificated under this subpart;

(ii) A pilot; (iii) A flight engineer; or (iv) A meteorologist.

(3) In aircraft operations as— (i) An Air Traffic Controller; or (ii) A Flight Service Specialist.

(4) In aircraft operations, performing other duties that the Administrator finds provide equivalent experience.

(b) A **statement of graduation** issued or revalidated in accordance with §65.70(b) of this part, showing that the person has **successfully completed an approved aircraft dispatcher course**.

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