Management briefing

4 keys to effectively manage major airport disruptions

Swiftly respond to disruptions to maintain a high standard of operational efficiency and customer satisfaction
How do you remain in control when your airport can potentially be affected by so many elements?

Airport management is fraught with challenges. While some result in disruptions that can be anticipated, others will be unforeseen. In either case, airports and their staff are expected to not only cope with these disruptions but proactively resolve the resulting complications.

The worst time of year for an airport operator is winter. Cold weather brings snowy or icy conditions. You need to ensure emergency equipment is ready and available. You’ll also need to ensure you have the right staff with the necessary skills and qualifications to operate this equipment. Heavy traffic or snow conditions can delay passengers or staff trying to get to the airport.

During the summer months, airports see more flights and may hit full capacity. Airport staff members also want to take vacations during this time, making workforce scheduling more of a challenge.

Throughout the year, there are many elements which can potentially cause disruptions. Airport security is a constant concern worldwide – a single breach, however minor, can shut down an airport for hours. Travelers can pose problems when they don’t allocate enough time for clearance procedures or carry more baggage than they are allowed. A misplaced bag plus one delayed flight and a gate reassignment can easily add up to chaos.

Disruptions are frequent in day-to-day airport operations. However, airlines and passengers expect airport operators to keep everything under control and resolve all disruptions immediately. Passengers kept waiting anywhere for a long time in an airport will soon start buzzing – either verbally or on social media.
In the event of a disruption, you must react fast by getting the right staff to the right place on time. If you can’t reassign employees and resources quickly, customer satisfaction takes a nosedive. You can’t afford to have disgruntled staff, passengers, airline companies or service providers.

Revising plans cannot be done in isolation. Your workforce planning needs to take into account workforce agreements, labor regulations, key performance indicators (KPIs) as well as staff preferences. Otherwise, you risk penalties or even industrial action.

Can your current system cope with planning staff and resources for so many areas? You need to assess your current system and ask yourself if it enables you to respond quickly to disruptions. Without a broad view of the impact of all your decisions, you can never be sure that solving one problem won’t be creating another elsewhere.
How to satisfy everyone under your roof

To keep things running smoothly, you must juggle the needs and requirements of four groups:

- Airport employees
- Airlines
- Passengers
- Service providers (from security and catering to fueling and customs).

Scheduling airport employees calls for a planning solution that can incorporate all restrictions, labor rules, requirements, KPIs, staff working hour preferences and vacation requests – in addition to ensuring service level agreements (SLAs) are met.

It’s also important to control costs. Your plans must manage staff overtime and downtime profitably. Equally critical, your planning solution must flag penalties for failing to meet SLAs and monitor how well resources are being used.

Your planning solution also needs to provide responses to common disruptions such as those that stem from changes in flight times. Each flight requires services from across the airport divisions – security, check-in, gate staff, catering, cleaning. Any changes to arrival times or gate assignments will call for replanning. Thus, your system needs to help you by enabling your planner to visualize all possible solutions in order to pick the best one.

Regardless of whether those services are controlled by you directly or by a contractor, you need a plan with full and real-time visibility so that every service gets updates quickly, diminishing the impact of each disruption, and accelerating the return to normal operations.
4 keys to managing major disruptions

You can make huge improvements to your operational planning by:

1. Adopting flexible working patterns
2. Building staff-friendly plans
3. Focusing on your business goals
4. Using scenario planning to forecast and prepare for the unexpected.

1. Flexible work schedule patterns

Planning with flexible work patterns throughout the year helps you respond proactively to possible disruptions. You could build in buffers but you’d risk paying staff for being at work when they’re not needed.

With a planning system that allows for different working patterns over weeks and months, it’s much simpler to move resources around when disruptions occur. You can identify who can be assigned an extra shift without exceeding the working time restrictions. Your plan can help you minimize the impact of changes on individuals, departments, resource allocation and overtime budgets.

2. Make plans that factor in staff needs

You want your staff to do their best for you. Allowing them to provide input on how they want their work shifts and vacation schedules to be makes employees feel that you care for their needs and respect their lives outside of work.

A planning system that factors in staff preferences and the requirements of labor rules gives you an immediate, direct overview of the impact of roster changes. Choose a system that offers decision support, proposes optimized plans and also alerts planners when rules are violated.

Having a self-serve system offers a two-way communication medium between your planners and employees. Using this system, planners can highlight segments where they have shifts that need staff, thus reducing data input for the planning team. Employees also can use the system to indicate their work time preferences, enabling planners to identify who is available to work at any particular time.
3. Ensure that plans focus on business goals

KPIs shouldn’t be an afterthought or used as a final check. But when working to accommodate a disruption, it’s hard to balance passenger needs with optimizing for other business goals such as operational efficiency.

A planning system that automatically factors in KPIs lets your planner focus on the immediate task of moving staff to the right place, knowing that other business requirements have already been taken into account.

4. Plan ahead and prepare to respond to disruptions

A planning system can help you prepare for disruptions with scenario planning. Use what-if scenarios to allow your planners to see the effects when there are changes to employee or equipment availability.

Adding an optimizer that’s adapted for your specific business needs and constraints will empower planners further. They will be able to compare and evaluate plans, with the security of knowing the plans balance the demands of airlines, passengers, staff and service providers. Overall, your planners can be sure that in addition to controlling costs, their plans would be robust enough to effectively respond to disruptions.
When demand is impossible to predict precisely – even from minute to minute, since planes rarely land on time – your solution needs to work across:

**Time** – Giving you the long-term, mid-term, and short-term view, as well as the ability to adjust your plan on the day of operations.

**Functions** – Ensuring customer satisfaction, cost control and SLA compliance because your planners enjoy full visibility of how plans and changes affect the variety of airport functions, such as passenger services, ground staff, baggage handling, catering and security.

**Resources** – Providing an optimized plan for your workforce combined with the vehicles and other equipment they need to do their jobs.

Choosing a planning system, which works for your organization and employees as well as the airlines, service providers and passengers which use your airport, is critical to keeping everyone happy. You would be replacing multiple systems (which inevitably add complexity) with an integrated system with built-in flexibility to roster staff across departments. With a single integrated system, you would be able to see the impact of changes as they occur, and react quickly and effectively to disruptions.

What would make a planning solution optimal?
Be ready for anything

Regardless of the cause of the disruptions, choose a planning system that facilitates your response to the impact of unforeseen circumstances. It should let you choose which parameters to optimize, for example, allowing you to prioritize a return to normal operations above cost control. Choose a system that allows you to quickly create, select and implement optimized plans for fast recovery from any disruption.

For details on how the Quintiq solution can enhance your airport’s ability to swiftly adapt to changes while sustaining profitability, contact us or visit www.quintiq.com.