

## EXAMPLE

### Efficiency versus Effectiveness: How Did Delta Airlines Deal with the Emergency at Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport?

Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson Airport is the busiest in the world, serving a quarter million passengers daily. So when an electrical fire blacked out the airport one Sunday afternoon before Christmas 2017, the potential for chaos was high. Over a long night without power, tens of thousands of passengers were stranded with no light, heat, or communications, and thousands of flights were canceled or diverted across the United States, disrupting travel for several days.

The blackout halted computer systems, escalators, baggage carousels, inter-terminal transportation, and even the automatic soap dispensers and toilets in the airport's restrooms. Passengers slept in the darkened airport overnight, unable to check social media, use travel apps, or recharge their phones, while employees gave out blankets, bottled water, and paper towels.

**Efficiency.** Three-quarters of the airport's traffic consists of Delta flights to and from more than 200 cities around the world.<sup>9</sup> Atlanta is Delta's hub and the location of its Operations and Customer Center, where 300 employees monitor local and global weather and air traffic. The Center had power during the



Passengers scrambling for help during the power outage at Hartsfield-Jackson Airport in Atlanta. Do you think more effective management might have prevented this accident? ©Jessica McGowan/Getty Images

blackout, and emergency staff arrived to help rebook passengers and cope with 400 additional flight cancellations made on Monday because the needed planes had not been able to land

the day before. Delta's staff also had to get its pilots and crews from Atlanta to the cities where they were needed next, but without unlawfully lengthening their shifts.

Delta distributed donated food at the terminal and reimbursed passengers for Atlanta hotel stays on Sunday night. Those who rebooked flights were given waivers to make the change. On Monday Delta was reporting progress. Gil West, Senior Executive Vice President and COO, said, "At the airport, Delta people . . . have been serving customers—from passing out refreshments to assisting customers with wheelchair support. Thanks to everyone's hard work, we're nearly back to normal at our biggest hub." By Tuesday the airline was reporting a nearly 90 percent on-time arrival rate at Atlanta, all passengers had been rebooked, and a dedicated phone line had opened to help reunite passengers with their luggage, most of which had already been delivered.<sup>10</sup>

**Effectiveness.** Passengers on one Delta flight spent six hours on the runway, consuming the plane's stores of food and drinks until they could disembark. "Under the circumstances it was well-managed," said one passenger, who praised Delta employees for doing their best to keep everyone calm and comfortable.<sup>11</sup>

Still, many who spent hours at the darkened airport wondering what happened felt Delta could have done more. Said one, "There was no one who could help us. There wasn't a single Delta employee who knew what was going on. They could have at least used a megaphone to say, 'This is what's happening.'"<sup>12</sup> Many others echoed these comments and said that despite a repeated recorded announcement that an emergency had occurred, no further information ever came.

#### YOUR CALL

The fire that caused the blackout was apparently an accident, partly attributed to aging equipment, a factor over which Delta may have little control though it is the airport's major lessee. Some, including a former U.S. Secretary of Transportation who was stranded, saw "no excuse" for the failure of the airport's backup power system.<sup>13</sup> Delta believes the outage and ripple effects may have cost it \$25 to \$50 million and said it would seek reimbursement. "I don't know whose responsibility it is between the airport and Georgia Power," said Delta's CEO Ed Bastian, "but we're going to have conversations with both of them."<sup>14</sup> Do you think Delta handled the airport emergency efficiently? Could the airline have been more effective from a passenger's point of view? How?