

## Insiders at Southwest reveal how the airline's service imploded

By Gregory Wallace, CNN

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A Salt Lake Police Officer and his K-9 partner inspect unclaimed bags at Southwest Airlines baggage claim at Salt Lake City International Airport Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022, in Salt Lake City. Rick Bowmer/AP

**CNN** — Ask Southwest Airlines employees about their company's technology, and one word keeps coming up: "antiquated."

While Southwest grew from a scrappy, Texas-based discount airline operating three planes into one of the nation's largest — union officials representing Southwest workers say the company did not keep pace with technology changes. And they say they've been raising concerns for years.

"We've been harping on them since 2015-ish every year," Mike Santoro, a captain and vice president of the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association, told CNN.

The result: A massive Christmas travel meltdown that scuttled holiday plans for hundreds of thousands of passengers. Nearly 16,000 flights canceled. Orphaned baggage piling up at airports and travelers told to give a shipping address.

Southwest is digging itself out of the mess and announced plans to "return to normal operations with minimal disruptions on Friday."

Leaders of multiple labor unions also told CNN that management briefed them about a more normal flight schedule heading into the holiday weekend.

But as extreme winter conditions swept much of the country last week — including important airports in Southwest's network — the airline's plan for "irregular operations" passed the breaking point, according to multiple people familiar with the situation.

They and the airline itself described an internal process that requires multiple departments to manually redesign the airline's schedule — a system that works "the vast majority of the time," Southwest said in a statement.

### Manual labor



Travelers make their way through Orlando International Airport on Wednesday, December 28, which saw 66 cancellations that day. Paul Hennessy/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

"The magnitude and scale of this disruption stressed our technology and processes, forcing a great deal of manual processing," Southwest said. "Our crews are showing up in every way throughout this challenge."

Other airlines managed to recover by early this week; at Southwest, the cancellations only increased.

While Southwest does have major connecting airports, much of its schedule involves planes and crews crisscrossing the country – a network that aviation watchers say is more vulnerable than legacy carriers' hub-and-spoke model that can contain a disruption to particular geographic regions.

When something goes wrong, the Southwest software – including the crew scheduling system tool – leaves much of the work of rebuilding that delicate network to be done manually.

"It can't see the best way to fix anything when flights are canceled," said Brian Brown, president of Transport Workers Union Local 550, representing Southwest dispatchers and meteorologists. "It requires a lot more human intervention and human eyesight or brainpower, and can only handle so much."

## Where are the crews? The planes?

'Completely melted down': Buttigieg reacts to Southwest Airlines chaos

03:15 - Source: [CNN](#)

The result is that airline officials "don't necessarily know where our crews are, where our planes are," Brown said.

Crew schedulers in another department are manually checking which pilots and flight attendants meet strict federal rules on work hours – rules meant to keep inflight safety professionals from excessive fatigue.

"You end up with thousands of crew members having to call in and their wait times were hours just to talk to someone," Brown said. Software enhancements would make the process more efficient, he added.

The manual work meant crew members who could be working were instead stuck in lengthy phone queues waiting for instructions or for a hotel assignment to get their federally mandated rest.

"The phone systems that the company uses is just not working," Lyn Montgomery, who represents Southwest flight attendants at TWU Local 556, told CNN.

"They're just not manned with enough manpower in order to give the scheduling changes to flight attendants and that's created a ripple effect that is creating chaos throughout the nation."

## Tech improvements have been spotty



Southwest Airlines planes are seen at Baltimore/Washington International Airport (BWI) on Wednesday after Southwest Airlines canceled thousands of flights Jim Lo Scalzo/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Southwest has made some software improvements. Last year, the airline connected its reservation system with major booking software used by corporate travelers. The

reservation system was overhauled in 2017 – a process overseen by current CEO Bob Jordan.

In recent years, the airline also introduced barcodes and scanners that replaced the pencil and paper method for counting checked baggage. But other tools remained rooted in 1990s technology, union officials said.

As the storm swept through, Southwest employees who load baggage, marshal planes into the gates, push back departing aircraft and remove ice from aircraft surfaces were racing to keep up in the frigid outdoor conditions.

“We’ve had experienced people who were trying to de-ice aircraft, and they were literally not able to,” said Randy Barnes, president of TWU 555. Some wind gusts were so dangerously strong that employees suspended from the air in bucket trucks were at risk of falling, and sprayed de-icing fluid was not reaching aircraft.

“They were trying to convey that to their local management team,” Barnes told CNN.

“They were saying you just can’t do it – it does not work.”

Brown said he and local union agents also advocated for special pay for employees working in these conditions and for opportunities to come inside for a break from the bitter cold.

## Video apology



Southwest CEO responds to backlash over cancellations

Jordan, who took the reins earlier this year and began at Southwest as a programmer, apologized in a video message and pledged “to double down on our already existing plans to upgrade systems for these extreme circumstances so that we never again face what’s happening right now.”

As the airline prepared to run a full schedule on Friday, Jordan wrote in an internal message to employees – that was obtained by CNN – that the airline is “in good shape.”

“We have all hands on deck and tested solutions in place to support the restored operation,” he wrote. “I’m confident, but I’m also cautious.”

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<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/29/business/southwest-cancellations-history-charts-dg/index.html>

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## How Southwest failed the holidays: Four charts explaining the cancellations

A blast of severe winter weather last week caused thousands of Southwest Airlines flight cancellations and spiraled into a complete meltdown of its flight system. In the days since, the carrier’s scramble to recover has been slow and, some passengers argue, largely unsuccessful. But experts say Southwest’s mess is actually the culmination of issues that have been building over several years.

Since Dec. 22, the beleaguered airline has canceled more than half of its typical flight schedule, and by late Wednesday about 87% of all canceled flights in the US were from Southwest alone, according to industry trackers FlightRadar24 and FlightAware.

The dire situation, which has exasperated passengers and caught the eye of government regulators, has magnified this week as other major airlines recovered from the extreme cold, ice and snow that gripped much of the United States over the holiday weekend. The company has apologized to its passengers and employees for the daily cancellations and reduced its capacity by roughly two thirds on Thursday, according to a CNN review of flight data.

#### Most airlines struggled last week. Southwest hasn't recovered.

Percentage of each airline's flights that were canceled

	Dec. 22	23	24	25	26	27	28
Alaska	3%	15%	13%	5%	4%	3%	1%
American	5%	25%	11%	1%	1%	2%	1%
Delta	6%	22%	19%	15%	9%	2%	0%
Frontier	14%	3%	2%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Southwest	17%	30%	35%	33%	66%	72%	63%
Spirit	3%	3%	3%	6%	6%	3%	0%
United	11%	21%	16%	8%	6%	3%	0%

Note: Percentages calculated by dividing each airline's average daily flights in December by the number of canceled flights. Figures rounded.

Source: FlightRadar24

Graphic: Matt Stiles, CNN

This week's meltdown is not the first time the company has found itself in this predicament. In October 2021, Southwest canceled more than 2,000 flights over a four-day period. While the airline blamed the crisis partly on bad weather in Florida, Southwest canceled flights for far longer than its competitors.

But much of Southwest's mess may be the result of long-term problems unrelated to the weather.

Chief among them are outdated internal processes and information technology.

Southwest's scheduling system hasn't changed much since the 1990s, according to Captain Casey Murray, president of the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association.

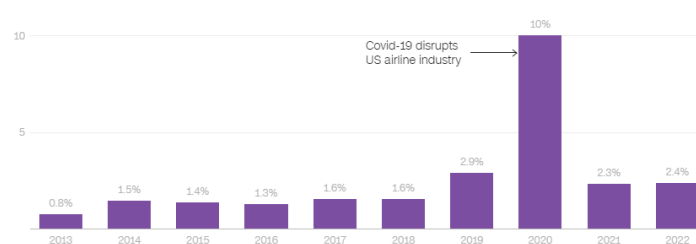
Southwest has also acknowledged the company's outdated infrastructure. "We've talked an awful lot about modernizing the operation, and the need to do that," CEO Bob Jordan told employees in a memo obtained by CNN.

Over the years, the airline's cancellation rate has crept up, tripling from 2013 to September 2022, the most recent data available from US Bureau of Transportation Statistics, which tracks the airlines' performance, and well before the recent crisis.

The bureau has only released data for 2022 through September. To ensure a fair comparison, CNN only analyzed the carrier's data from January to September in previous years.

#### Southwest's flight cancellation rate has tripled in the last decade

Share of flights cancelled, by year



Data for each year represent January to September, the most recent month available for 2022.

Source: US Bureau of Transportation Statistics

Graphic: Matt Stiles, CNN

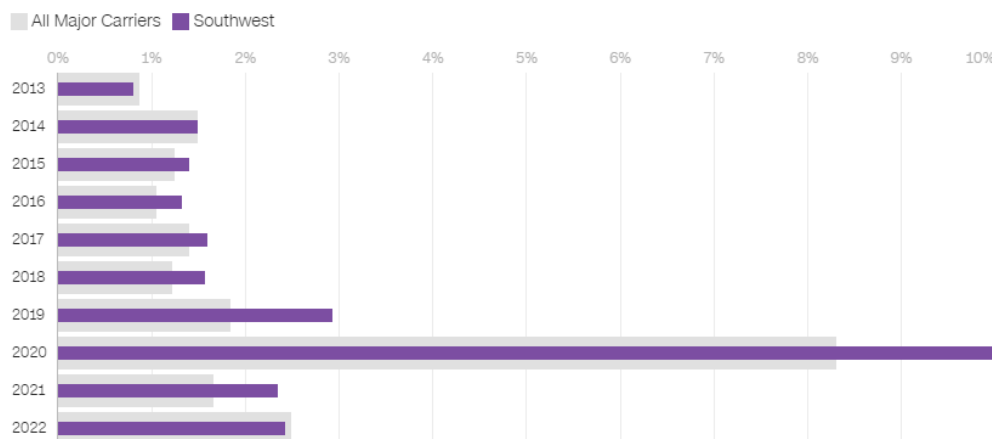
Cancellation rates among airlines fluctuate year-to-year, depending on weather and other factors, such as Covid-19, which resulted in a major industry-wide disruption in the early months of the pandemic in 2020.

But Southwest has consistently failed to perform as well as its competitors when it comes to cancellations, according to bureau data.

In several years over the last decade, the airline had higher cancellation rates compared to other major airlines, the data shows.

### Southwest has often experienced more cancellations than other major carriers

Percentage of Southwest flights cancelled vs. all other major carriers, by year



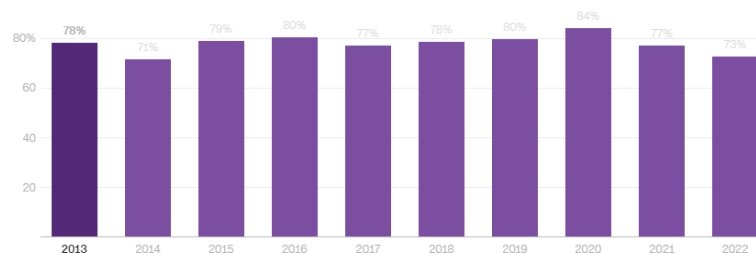
Major carriers as defined by US Bureau of Transportation Statistics; 2020 cancellations elevated because of the Covid-19 pandemic; Data for each year represent January to September, the most recent month available for 2022.

Source: US Bureau of Transportation Statistics  
Graphic: Matt Stiles, CNN

It's not just cancellations. Southwest has also seen its on-time percentage slide in recent years to the lowest point in a decade. Through September of 2022, well before the carrier's current struggles, only about 7 in 10 of its flights have arrived on time.

### Southwest Airlines' on-time percentage lowest in nearly a decade

Percentage of on-time arrivals, by year



Data for each year represent January to September, the most recent month available for 2022.

Source: US Bureau of Transportation Statistics  
Graphic: Matt Stiles, CNN