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Will your expense account cover airline fees?

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Another day, another dollar — or so it seems when it comes to airline fees.

The extra fees airlines began charging for checked bags three years ago are rapidly multiplying, tacked on to everything from flying standby to a hot meal.

Now as more corporate trekkers return to the air after many were grounded during the recession, companies are struggling to keep up with the array of charges while trying to determine what they'll pay for and what they won't.

"Airline fees are like death and taxes; just what can we do about them anyway?" says Ron Mazurek, a field service engineer based in Maricopa, Ariz. "Of course I have to accept them. I hate walking to job sites."

US Airways recently boosted its fee on overweight luggage from \$50 to \$90 for coach passengers who booked their flights after Feb. 1 for domestic and some international trips starting in March. The heaviest bags, weighing 71 pounds or more, will cost an extra \$175, up from \$100.

Airlines continue to charge extra for more space in coach. Delta recently announced that for another \$80 to \$160 one way, passengers flying internationally this summer will be able to buy seats that recline farther and have more legroom in a new premium section dubbed economy comfort.

"These fees are going to stay, and they will grow in importance for the airline industry, especially when we see fuel prices begin to creep up again," says Jay Sorensen, a consultant who is an expert on ancillary fees. "Airlines are unable to push through fare increases that match cost increases when the price of fuel is jumping up.. .. la carte fees work very well to fill that gap."

Getting accustomed to fees

Charges for what was once free or available on a first-come, first-serve basis are now part of the cost of doing business as companies ratchet up travel after dramatically cutting back the last two years.

American Express Global Business Travel estimates that the amount spent on business travel worldwide will increase 7.9% this year; it fell 8.8% in 2009.

One reason for the surge, some travel and business experts say, is a realization that not traveling ultimately may cost more than it saves.

A CareerBuilder.com survey taken at the end of 2010 found that 37% of companies that had cut back on corporate trips believed it had hurt their business. Now, more are getting back on the road but trying to take all those extra fees into account.

"Definitely we're seeing updates on policies and guidelines with some businesses," says Rosemary Haefner, vice president of human resources for CareerBuilder.com, an employment website. "Where companies are having a tricky time is, you can't always anticipate when an airline passes on a fee. And if there's a lot of travel at your organization, it will have significant impact on the budget."

It's a lack of clarity that is driving many businesses up a wall, says Kevin Mitchell, chairman of the Business Travel Coalition.

"It's the No. 1 concern," Mitchell says. "If you're a travel manager and looking at a \$125 fee lumped in as 'miscellaneous,' you don't know if that was for something like checked bags that was within policy compliance or whether it was an upgrade to business class."

Unlike fares, fee information is not universally available, so businesses can't compare them from carrier to carrier.

"Corporate travel managers aren't opposed to these fees, for the most part," Mitchell says. "The problem is they're hiding these fees and causing all kinds of havoc with managed travel."

Pay for this, not that

Mazurek says that with the economy still struggling, his company won't pay extra for in-flight Internet access or seats with more legroom, "but overweight bags are a natural part of doing business for us."

Kimberly Miles, a public relations manager based in Myrtle Beach, S.C., says she doesn't mind paying for extras on low-cost airlines, which offer less-expensive tickets.

"What bothers me," Miles says, "is when a regular carrier (tacks) ... on high baggage fees or seat-reserving fees when I'm already paying a high ticket price."

Ty Francis, a New York-based magazine publisher, decides what extras he'll spring for on a case-by-case basis.

"It depends on who's flying and where they're flying to," he says. The company may pay for extra legroom if a staffer is going from a plane to a meeting, he says, but probably not for an employee staying a night in a hotel before conducting business.

"Checked bags, that's a business expense," he says. "We can't help that. It's things that you could live without that we try and rationalize."