



**MONEY SECTION**  
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## **Ticket-change fees irk business fliers 'to no end'**

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

One big airline has cut its ticket-change fee, and others may follow as the industry continues to restructure its pricing. But even at new lower rates, change fees continue to rankle business travelers.

"It's a rip-off — skyway robbery," airfare expert Tom Parsons says. Business travelers make the most changes, so they get hit the hardest, he says. (**Related chart:** [What airlines charge to change tickets](#))

Airlines defend the charges, saying they need to cover administrative costs and make up for revenue that could be lost from the change.

Delta Air Lines earlier this month cut its fee to \$50 from \$100 for non-refundable domestic tickets. The USA's No. 3 carrier made the change as part of a broader fare restructuring. Most airlines now charge \$50 or \$100 for changing a non-refundable domestic ticket and up to \$200 for changing an international ticket. Only discount giant Southwest among big domestic airlines imposes no change fee.

Carl DuBois, president of a consulting company in Reno, says he was assessed a ticket-change fee about a dozen times last year, usually after clients rescheduled meetings. "It's an issue that irritates business people to no end," DuBois says.

Some airfare experts contend that the change fees are a profit center for an airline. Airlines say otherwise. Hawaiian Airlines' spokesman Keoni Wagner says the fees cover the cost of changing a ticket and booking another passenger and the "potential lost revenue" of an unsold seat.

### **In the beginning**

Airlines also impose the fees, says travel author and airfare expert Theo Brandt-Sarif, to force business travelers, who generally need more flexibility, to buy a more expensive refundable ticket that doesn't carry a change fee.

Change fees date back to at least the 1970s when two now-defunct passenger airlines, Braniff International and World Airways, began using them for some types of tickets. Some of today's big airlines began implementing them in the 1980s, and the fee amount gradually increased. The amount hit three figures in 2001 when Continental raised its fee to \$100 from \$75.

Brandt-Sarif points out that on some foreign airlines a passenger who can't make a flight forfeits the amount paid for the ticket.

Most U.S. airlines charge a fee each time they are asked to change a ticket. A passenger who requests a change to both an outbound and a return flight will incur a single penalty. But if the passenger on two separate occasions requests an itinerary change, two fees are assessed.

### **Corporate clients get a break**

**Business travelers whose fares are paid under their employers' corporate contracts sometimes don't get hit with a change fee. That can save companies a lot of money. Michael Steiner, executive vice president of Ovation Corporate Travel, which manages travel for about 300 corporations, says its clients average three to four changes to every airline ticket.**

Changing a ticket at some of the newer discount carriers, such as JetBlue Airways, can cost less than at carriers with long histories. Gareth Edmondson-Jones, a spokesman for JetBlue, says his airline tries to keep the charge low — \$20 for an online change or \$25 with an airline representative.

"If your business meeting runs late, you shouldn't be stuck with a \$100 change fee and the difference in fare between the original ticket and the new one," he says.

Southwest charges nothing for a change, spokesman Ed Stewart says, because, "We don't nickel or dime our customers to death."

Russ Sharer, vice president of a telecommunications company in Santa Barbara, Calif., says he feels cheated because all the change fees he paid last year were for catching an earlier flight on the same day for which he was ticketed.

Some airlines say their change-fee policy is not ironclad. Passengers unable to make a flight because of severe weather, a medical problem or a flat tire may be spared the change fee, American Airlines spokesman Tim Wagner says. "We will work with people on a case-by-case basis," he says.

Business travel experts say all the different fees charged by airlines lead to consumer confusion. US Airways spokeswoman Amy Kudwa disagrees.

"We publicly communicate change fees to customers during the booking process, before the ticket purchase is completed," she says.

Parsons, who runs BestFares.com, a Web site offering airfare bargains to subscribers, says consumers should carefully consider each airline's ticket-change fee before they book a flight. If airlines are charging roughly the same fare, it doesn't make sense to book a carrier with an expensive ticket-change fee, he says.