

Catering operation changes reduce Atlanta departure delays

By [Michael Thomas](#), Corporate Communications

With Delta's laser focus on being the On-Time Machine, little time is left for flight delays.

So when catering lags in Atlanta began to result in delayed departures, teams from across the airline went to work, descending on the Domestic Flight Kitchen to do something that hadn't been done before.

Essentially, they started over.

Led by Andrew Hargrove, General Manager of Catering Operations and Logistics, with the expertise from the airline's Operations Analysis and Performance group, including Gary Adams and Chris Fay, Delta partnered with Gate Gourmet and the industrial engineers at Porsche Consulting to put in place fundamental process changes which drove dramatic performance improvements.

So much so that September saw the lowest number of ATL catering-driven delays on record down nearly 80 percent compared to the rest of the year, on a rate basis.

"Many of the ideas came directly from the frontline employees in the kitchen. We got their buy-in and worked together and that's why we expect these changes to be sustainable," Hargrove said. "You don't get improvements like that by maintaining the status quo."

They tore down office walls and other obstructions on the production floor which impeded workflow. An overhaul of the traffic flow now puts carts where they need to be when they need to be there, and visual cues keep management informed about the health of the operation 24/7.

The team also set up dedicated staging areas organized by flight and completely retooled the cart stocking process. What used to take nearly an hour now takes under 10 minutes.

And by the first of the year, when all of the improvements are put in practice, Delta's entire domestic catering operation in Atlanta will live under one roof, where currently it is housed in two separate buildings on opposite ends of the airfield.

Improvements like these not only mean more flights are departing fully catered and on time, it also drives cash savings which go directly to the bottom line from inventory reductions and increased labor productivity, not to mention not having aircraft sitting idle while waiting for catering.

"This is a win for our customers in the form of better on-time reliability as well as a win for our flight attendants and airport customer service agents," Hargrove said. "And now, caterer management has the bandwidth to really focus on quality and address the issues which our flight attendants have identified as opportunities onboard."

The redesign to the Domestic Flight Kitchen began in April—not a moment too soon. Even before the height of summer flight delays, Hargrove and his team knew the kitchen needed an adjustment. Delta's flight schedule in Atlanta by 2016 was already expected to eclipse the then working capacity of the kitchen.

"As mainline flights departing Atlanta continues to grow, we knew the kitchen was going to be stretched to meet the demand," he said. "By making wholesale adjustments to the facility and addressing a number of constraints and bottlenecks, we're able to meet Delta's future domestic catering needs out of Atlanta using the facilities we already have."

The lessons learned and enhancements made in Atlanta will probably show up at similar catering facilities across the system, Hargrove said. Delta hub locations and focus cities are all likely targets for 2016 and beyond.

