

Nation

'Distraction' led pilots to fly too far

Use of laptops blamed; airline calls actions grounds for firing

By Alan Levin
USA TODAY

Two Northwest Airlines pilots used laptop computers in the cockpit and didn't pay attention to their duties as they flew past their Minneapolis destination last week, according to federal regulators and airline officials.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) said Monday that the two veteran pilots told investigators that they flew for 78 minutes without speaking to controllers because they became so engrossed in a new computer program that arranges pilot schedules.

"Both (pilots) stated there was a distraction in the cockpit," the NTSB said in a statement. "The pilots said there was a concentrated period of discussion where they did not monitor the airplane or calls from (controllers)."

Delta Air Lines, which bought Northwest a year ago and is in the final stages of merging the two carriers, issued a statement saying the pilots' actions were "strictly against the airline's flight deck policies and violations of that policy will result in termination."

The airline announcement stopped short of saying that they had been fired.



Source: flightaware.com USA TODAY

The two pilots were suspended from the airline after Wednesday night's incident.

The Federal Aviation Administration has sent letters to the two pilots telling them they were under investigation for possible revocation of

their licenses. Federal regulations require pilots flying at high altitudes to maintain contact with controllers.

Northwest Flight 188 from San Diego to Minneapolis flew for hundreds of miles as controllers desperately tried to radio the Airbus A320 and Delta sent text messages to the cockpit.

The jet flew into Wisconsin, about 150 miles past Minneapolis, before turning back to land.

As the plane flew at an altitude of 37,000 feet, a flight attendant called on the jet's intercom system to ask when it would arrive, the NTSB said. Capt. Timothy Cheney, 53, told investigators that only then did he look at his cockpit display and realize he had flown past Minneapolis.

Cheney, who has worked at the airline since 1985, has logged about 20,000 hours at the controls. Co-pilot Richard Cole, 54, was hired in 1997 and has logged about 11,000 hours, the NTSB said.

The pilots said that they had not been asleep and that they had not been in a heated argument. The pilots had 19 hours off duty in San Diego before reporting to work Wednesday afternoon.

Being out of contact for so long is highly unusual, but cockpit distractions have been known to cause pilot errors and accidents.

"Having two laptops and thinking hard about a computer program could be very distracting," said Ben Beriman, an airline pilot and former NTSB investigator.