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Heading for the Exit: Flight Attendant Becomes Hero

It had happened a hundred times before. This time it happened in JFK Airport in New York on a plane that just landed from Pittsburgh. A passenger left her seat too soon, and opened up the storage compartment above her seat. The flight attendant, Steven Slater, then did what he always did. He calmly asked her to return to her seat until the airplane came to a complete stop. The passenger ignored him, and then Slater did what he always did. He calmly went to help her get seated again. The passenger verbally attacked Slater and wound up hitting him over the head with the oversized bag that she was wrestling out of the overhead bin. After this, Slater did something that no one else ever *did*. He returned to the intercom and let loose with an obscenity-laced invective directed at the woman. He then made a dramatic departure by pulling the trigger on the emergency inflatable exit chute, sliding off into retirement—but only after grabbing two beers from the beverage cart for the trip.

Perhaps the only thing more remarkable than Slater's outrageous escape was the public's reaction to it. Despite the unsafe and, in fact, illegal nature of Slater's act, he immediately became an American folk hero. Within two days of the event, over 180,000 people had joined Facebook pages devoted to him where they all shared fantasies about how they too would like to make dramatic exits from their own jobs. One of his fans, a former flight attendant from Queens, spoke for many when she stated, "Enough is enough—good for him."

The reaction of Slater and his fan base speaks volumes to both the difficult nature of the specific job of flight attendant, as well as the larger

collective mood of the American workforce. With respect to the flight attendant's job, this is an arduous task characterized by low pay, long hours, and demanding customers, some of whom are crying babies, drunks, or phobic to heights, crowds, or enclosed conditions. Within this charged context, they must enact strict safety and security procedures that have to be followed without exception or face disciplinary charges. In addition to the stressful nature of the work, Slater himself was struggling with work–family conflict, as he juggled his highly unpredictable work schedule with the demands of simultaneously trying to care for his dying mother.

Turning to the larger workforce, Steven Slater's frustration mirrored the mood of many American workers who were fed up with their current jobs and looking for the first opportunity to quit. Large-scale surveys of the American workforce documented that "feeling of loyalty to one's employer" hit an all-time low in 2009, and in 2010, the number of employees who voluntarily left their jobs surpassed the number of people involuntarily laid off for the first time since 2008. This spells future trouble for many employers, and as one HR executive noted, "We're trying to catch people even before they start looking for a new job, which will become even more important as the economy improves and more opportunities at competitors opens up." For many employers, however, this all may be too little, too late, and they may be unable to recapture the loyalty of all of these "Steven Slater wannabes."

SOURCES: D. Leonard, "Mad as Hell," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, August 16, 2010, pp. 5–6; A. Newman and R. Rivera, "Fed up Flight Attendant Makes Sliding Exit," *The New York Times*, August 9, 2010, pp. B1–B2; and J. Poniewozik, "Steven Slater, Road Warrior: JetBlue Mints a Folk Hero," *Time*, August 10, 2010, p. 34.