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AIR PILOTS - COMMERCIAL AIR TRANSPORT SAFETY BRIEFING NOTE 04

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THE SLOW RETURN TO AVIATION NORMALITY

The Context

The massive reduction in airline passenger flight operations has been in stark contrast to the level of activity in cargo and on-demand passenger transport which have generally seen sustained or increased levels of operation. Although a relatively small number of passenger aircraft have been redeployed to carry only cargo, the consequences for a very large number of pilots have been either only intermittent flights or no flying at all for an extended period. Regulatory alleviations due to difficulty accessing full flight simulators have meant that sometimes even pilots who have continued to fly have been so enabled with a diminished level of recurrent training in which validation of continued proficiency has sometimes been compromised. 'Skill fade' can affect anyone, even instructors/trainers. Anyone returning to regular flying may find that a successful cautious restart may be followed by a tendency to overconfidence with consistent competence regained only after several months. And remember that there may be an urge to demonstrate that one is still as good as one was!

These circumstances have resulted in significant challenges for both aircraft operators and professional pilots. Although the most obvious potential direct consequence is the effect of lack of recency on both pilot proficiency and actual performance, the return to normal is going to see pilots at all stages of their recovery sharing the same airspace. The fact that air traffic controllers are in a comparable position means that passively maintaining situational awareness of other area traffic whilst also remaining focused on the navigation and energy state of one's own aircraft will be wise. Even before a flight begins, considerable indirect consequences for flight crew can be expected to arise from both out of practice and newly recruited ground service personnel involved in aircraft loading and even maintenance support may take time to return to its usual consistency. Pilots need to remember that the unintentional acts or omissions of others on the ground as well as in the air can affect their operational safety without them necessarily being aware of it in advance.

At this point, we normally include reference to an independently investigated event which illustrates the Safety Issue we have chosen to highlight but in this case, whilst some related investigations are in progress, none with potentially useful messages have yet been published.

Discussion

Management of operational flight safety is ultimately the responsibility of the pilot in command and the support provided by their second in command. Success in both roles depends on judgement and proficiency and on overall performance. It depends on self awareness of any personal vulnerabilities and on managing the risks which each licence holder is responsible for whilst aware that others who make vital contributions to flight safety may be just as affected by similar personal vulnerabilities and a lack of recent, or in some cases any, significant experience in their roles. The personal consequences of uncertainty, disruption and financial hardship over the pandemic period can be expected to have had a significant effect on the resilience of some pilots who may or may not recognise this themselves. Whilst the proficiency of air traffic controllers and aircraft maintenance engineers is subject to direct regulatory control through licensing not dissimilar to the pilot licensing regime, it is worth remembering that in many jurisdictions, airside ground handling is not.

The relative ease with which individual pilots are able to get back to normal is likely to vary in an unpredictable way. Operators need to recognise that re-validating pilots' licence privileges may not be as straightforward as they imagined. Regardless of levels of experience, it is already clear that some

pilots are finding it difficult to demonstrate proficiency without being provided with additional recurrent training first. Even pilots who have been able to keep busy during the downturn need to be aware that an approved reduction in the provision of recurrent training may have affected their own ability to perform competently on return to normality. Finally, even though return of aircraft to service after extended parking will be preceded by appropriate airworthiness checks, in service challenges on that aircraft may be more prevalent than under normal utilisation.

The fact that the return to normal is proving to be slow, intermittent and hugely variable regionally means that the risk-mitigation opportunities suggested may be valid for a longer period than foreseen. Judging when greater than usual caution is no longer necessary may be challenging.

Safety Recommendations

To Aircraft Operators

Please review the following specific suggestions after strategically recognising that whilst a temporary loss of operational productivity at such a difficult time may have costs, maintaining operational safety is crucial - an avoidable accident would be a financial and reputational disaster.

- Consider running a general operational safety campaign to help both pilots and operational support staff appreciate their shared challenge whilst also emphasising that the operator understands that maintaining safety standards during the slow return is a priority.
- Recognise without discrimination that the simulator time which each returning pilot will need before they are able to demonstrate the required proficiency is likely to extend over a wider range than normal.
- Provide on line technical and operational refreshers and unmonitored self assessment tests.
- During return-to-flying training, place special emphasis on the importance of the need for effective monitoring (and if necessary challenge and even intervention) on the flight deck. There is a heightened need to explicitly recognise the potential for significant authority gradients to compromise the effectiveness of monitoring in both directions and available training scenarios should support the demonstration of proficiency in this respect.
- Consider not re-qualifying all pilots for special category airports, areas, or types of flight.
- A focus on On-Time Performance need not necessarily be relaxed but consideration should be given to modest temporary increases in block times, turnaround times and reporting times.
- Try to avoid roster instability, duties which are close to the applicable maximum FDP, duties which begin soon after the applicable minimum rest period, reduced report times and calling out standby crews on an 'as soon as you can' basis.
- Ensure that any pilot who assesses themselves temporarily unfit to operate is fairly treated. Any problematic return to flying may invite observational oversight by a supernumerary pilot.
- Discourage visual approaches or acceptance of any challenging offers of reduced track miles. Encourage maximum automation use subject to demonstrated manual handling proficiency.
- Ensure that operating standards events detected by flight data monitoring or other means are subject to a whole-crew approach and significant events reviewed for general applicability.

To Pilots

- Strive to achieve strict compliance with all Standard Operating Procedures.
- Actively avoid distraction during pre departure preparations and proactively brief cabin and ground crew accordingly.
- Make a special effort to brief effectively concentrating on key points and recognising any 'recency gradient' as well as the usual experience gradient. A more extensive general briefing prior to the first flight of a duty is preferable and can avoid excessively long in-flight briefings.
- Whilst there will be plenty to talk about, a real effort should be made to avoid operationally non-pertinent conversation unless the cruise is long enough to accommodate it.
- A crew should consider jointly reviewing those normal and non-normal procedures which begin with memory actions before the first flight of a duty day.
- As individuals, seek to be honest with yourself about any effect which personal matters arising from the restart may have on your own performance which you and the pilots you fly with would normally take for granted. Any such awareness should result in communication with your fellow pilot so that you can both understand the possible effect on collective operational capability. Of course, if you suspect in advance that your frame of mind renders you unfit to operate, this should be declared at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Great care should be taken to ensure that both pilots are comfortable with the operational pace of a flight as determined by the capability of the slowest pilot on the flight deck.
- Finally, do be especially diligent in monitoring the actions of the other pilot on the flight deck and be ready to challenge in order to ensure operating standards are maintained.