

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON AVIATION WORKERS AND THE AVIATION SYSTEM

THE COVID-19 pandemic has affected aviation workers and the aviation system more than most could imagine, with a significant impact on wellbeing. **Captain Paul Cullen** follows up his article in *HindSight 30* with feedback on the results of a survey of over 2,000 safety-critical aviation workers.

Over a three-week period in August, an anonymous online survey was conducted, with the objectives of understanding and evaluating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on aviation workers and the aviation system, and to identify solutions in collaboration with stakeholders.

The key issues examined were

- the extent and speed of change
- the probable deterioration in morale and wellbeing of safety-critical staff, and
- the possible lack or delegation of safety oversight in the industry.

More than 2,000 safety-critical workers responded, with the largest number of responses from pilots (38%), cabin crew (19%), air traffic control (11%) and engineering (8%). The data are currently being analysed, but preliminary findings

have been published, with the following key indicators.

1. Those people who have lost their jobs or are experiencing mental health difficulties need immediate support.

High levels of anxiety were observed, with 36% of respondents indicating mild anxiety, 13% moderate and 11% severe. In fact, 18% of respondents met the threshold for moderate depression, with 7% moderately severe and 5% severe.

A clear correlation was found between suffering and age, with higher levels of suffering in younger participants. Over half of those working in the air traffic control sector reported that their wellbeing was negatively impacted by the pandemic, with 37% reporting a deterioration in their mental health.

When compared with data recorded in 2018 by this research group, an increase was observed in the number of pilots suffering with depression at all levels of severity, and this is in line with what is being observed in the general population.

2. Organisations and workers need to manage specific sources of stress and anxiety, and the specific impact of COVID-19.

Overall, 23% of respondents indicated that their company provided employee support to manage wellbeing since COVID, but less than a quarter of these respondents made use of the support.

Almost all respondents (97%) working in the ATC sector reported being financially affected by COVID-19, and 55% were worried about meeting financial obligations.

3. Roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in relation to managing wellbeing require rethinking and clarification.

We found that 78% of respondents indicated an unwillingness to disclose mental health issues to their employer. Extremely low numbers of respondents reported having ever discussed an issue with either peer support programmes (PSPs, 3%) or employee assistance programmes (EAPs, 2%). While 79% of ATC respondents would not disclose to their employer, 4% reported using Peer Support; this was the highest uptake of all staff groups.

4. Need for peer support programmes for all aviation workers.


Despite the low uptake of PSPs and EAPs, 68% of respondents indicated a willingness to seek help if needed. Furthermore, 70% were aware of a Peer Support Programme and 60% would use organisational support if provided. Encouragingly, 79% of ATC workers were aware of peer support programmes, while the responses suggest that such supports are almost non-existent in the engineering/maintenance sector.

5. Issues pertaining to wellbeing culture need to be addressed.

Wellbeing was not considered a priority for 80% of respondents.

6. There needs to be stronger regulatory pressure on the implementation of the currently deferred regulations in relation to the management of wellbeing and mental health of pilots, and also to extend this to cover all safety-critical workers.

A total of 69% of respondents felt that changes in morale were negatively impacting on worker engagement and 47% felt that motivation was deteriorating. Additionally, one in three respondents felt that safety oversight, both within their organisation and from the regulator had deteriorated during the pandemic. One in four respondents reported feeling that their competence to do their job safely had deteriorated.

The survey showed a variety of concerning impacts of the pandemic on mental wellbeing. In the coming weeks, a thorough analysis of all findings will be conducted and reported. The evidence will be disseminated to support: 1) a recovery roadmap and strategy; 2) organisational action; and, 3) a policy and regulatory approach. A further update will be published publicly in the future. 

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Captain Paul Cullen has been an airline pilot for over 20 years, with over 13,000 hours flying A320, A330 and B737. He has a particular interest in the mental resilience of pilots and is an accident investigator and researcher with the School of Psychology, Trinity College, Dublin.

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The Lived Experience Wellbeing Project is an independent research group based at the Centre for Innovative Human Systems, School of Psychology, Trinity College Dublin. The research team led by Dr Joan Cahill & Captain Paul Cullen examine the effects of work-related stress (WRS) on aviation worker wellbeing and the associated impact on performance and flight safety. Further, the research addresses solutions to WRS both an organisational and employee/worker self-management level. This includes tools to promote stress coping, wellbeing awareness and management and risk assessment for WRS/wellbeing. This research group, although independent, actively collaborates with aviation stakeholders – including the regulator and industry wellbeing and safety working groups.