

BACK IN THE SADDLE: ADJUSTMENTS TO THE NEW REALITY OF WORK AT AMERICAN AIRLINES

Pilots at American Airlines (AA) are returning to flying after being out of the flight deck for extended periods. Crews now face additional COVID-19 protocols and policies that have changed the way they approach everyday work. **Bogomir Glavan** shares experience from recent interviews conducted with fellow AA pilots.

KEY POINTS

- Pilots coming off a lengthy leave of absence have personal techniques to regain their proficiency and knowledge base, as well as techniques to communicate a lack of recency to fellow crew members.
- Crews are spending more time engaging with flight attendants and other front-line workers to better understand how to support their work regarding the additional COVID-19 protocols in place.
- Mask compliance, enforcing that policy, and communicating while wearing masks are additional crew challenges.

AA's Learning and Improvement Team (LIT) resumed our 'Shop Talk' pilot discussions at the end of 2020. These are pilot-to-pilot conversations led by trained pilot facilitators. They last 30 minutes or more, reviewing recent experiences and everyday work on the line. Our focus areas for the start of 2021 concern recency with multiple pilots coming off leaves of absence and the operational impacts of COVID-19. This article will share some examples from these crew discussions and highlight how these front-line workers are adjusting and adapting to the new reality of work during the pandemic.

In total, 6,600 of our 14,000 AA pilots have taken some sort of multi-month leave during the pandemic. At the time of writing, flight hours flown are down roughly 50% from where they were before the pandemic. Pilots have taken advantage of multiple resources created by the pilot union and AA to prepare for returning to work. Most pilots have an established process to review mandatory callouts, procedures, and 'chair fly' more complex procedures like go-arounds or single-engine emergencies. In response to this concern, the LIT members asked the following questions to pilots:

- **How often do you fly?**
- **Were you on a leave of absence?**
- **How did you prepare for returning to work?**
- **Did your personal techniques make you feel ready?**

Here are three examples that pilot's shared of personal strategies for refreshing their knowledge base:

"When I do have a break of over a week, I review flows, single-engine profiles and other maneuvers. I created a sheet with limits, emergencies and profiles that I reference and review."

"I watch the flow guides in the online training section, then I review the flows with a cockpit mockup until they are natural again. I review systems and the maneuvers guide, with emphasis on emergency procedures."

"I look at big ticket items like engine failure procedures and call-outs, fight or flight responses a few days out. Now that I am going to some unfamiliar airports, I will sometimes look ahead to study the airport and company pages."

Pilots were then asked a follow-up question concerning whether they encountered anything unexpected on their first trip back. Pilots reported overall that nothing significant happened upon their return. Most seemed aware of their level of proficiency and made more deliberate efforts to communicate that to the other pilot.

One Captain (CA) remarked that with more task-saturation, he reverted to callouts from an aircraft he was qualified on previously.

"I actually had a goof up and found myself making some callouts from the 777 (previous aircraft). My First Officer (FO) asked 'what was that?' and I realized I had defaulted to primacy. I said 'max power', and not TOGA. My brain just went back to what it is most comfortable with."

The LIT group realized this return-to-work issue was a significant concern within the safety department and wanted to explore how pilots approached work differently when they had been away from the flight deck for an extended period of time. So, we asked pilots the following question:

- **How do you discuss your recency of experience with other crew members before departure?**

Most pilots agreed this was an area of concern but they also stated that it is openly discussed within the first few minutes of crew introductions at the gate or on the flight deck. Their answers showed a surprisingly candid tone:

"We all know that is an area of concern and not being around aviation for a while makes us rusty. We then become more alert."

"Yes, especially with the captains I see who come back from their time away – it comes up naturally during the crew intro

in preflight within the first 5 minutes. They state how long they have been out and we discuss what they prefer to do, I like to recommend I take the first leg as pilot flying and let them get the big picture back."

"I tell my FOs about my recency and concerns for proficiency. I tell them outright to speak up, it won't hurt my feelings. I find if I compliment them and keep things open it helps them feel more empowered to speak up later in the flight."

AA recently retired four aircraft types, leading many pilots to change equipment qualifications and operating aircraft with minimal experience. Two pilots below shared their mitigation strategies for addressing this with their crews.

"I brought up that I was new with the entire crew. There is always a lot of discussion as there are many of us that are low time and not flying regularly."

"I have spent the last few years flying international widebody, so the pace of domestic narrow body is challenging. I tell them if I forget something call me out on it."

As with all aspects of our world today, pilots explained it is hard to find any part of everyday work not impacted by the pandemic. The LIT group explored this theme by inquiring:

- **How have you changed your approach to your work during the COVID pandemic?**

Pilots described adapting, namely dealing with mask protocols and restricted communication, as well as needing more time for additional procedures and announcements. Their responses ranged from addressing mask usage to cleaning and physiological needs:

"I use cues from our introduction as to how the FO feels about the protocols and adjust my communication method based on that. For example, with mask usage in the flight deck, I see what the FO wants to do."

"I try and create a little extra space between others because I know some



are concerned and I want to set a good example, because I know a lot of people are watching us. I also have to adjust how I project my voice with the mask on to ensure I am heard. On that note, I also have to read people with more focus on eye movements and facial expressions since the mask covers up quite a bit to infer from."

"I spend more time with the briefings and getting to understand what the concerns are of the crew. I get there extra early now, at least an hour, so I can get set up. I need extra time now for the PAs and various items we need to cover for COVID protocols."

Dealing with stress is a core part of the pilot's skill set and thus they are well equipped to defuse many of these newer complex interactions. The last question explored their response to added complexity and interruptions.

- **How have the various restrictions and quarantine protocols affected your habit patterns at work?**

"I make the PA to the passengers personal so they know their compliance is of utmost importance and I need them to be safe for the Flight Attendants and crew to

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be able to operate best. I also add into the PA a quick summary of the technical info of the air recirculation and the filtering so they have some peace of mind. 'Breathe easy because we are going to have a great flight today!'"

"I just take my time and create an environment where my crew feels like they are not pushed."

As you can see, these are topics many of us have had on our minds lately and we are trying as a safety department to get a sense of their impacts. With thousands of pilots returning after an extended absence, our interviews have revealed that crews successfully mitigate the risk from a lack of recent flying experience by taking extra time to study and prepare before their first trip back. They also are forthcoming with other pilots about their time away to increase their peers' awareness and ability to be more effective monitors. The information and personal examples we gather from these Shop Talk sessions provide a unique and critical insight into the working conditions and challenges our pilots face. These qualitative data have been an invaluable complement to our flight deck observations in understanding the complexity of this COVID-19 operating environment.



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