

STAR 023

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Peer Support Programmes

Background

In 2015, an EASA-led Task Force identified six recommendations for operators to observe regarding their Flight Crew in an event where such individuals required support during a suspected (mental) health issue etc. One of the recommendations was for operators to develop and implement Peer Support Programmes (PSP) for Flight Crew, along with the requirement to strengthen internal reporting systems.

The six recommendations were addressed to the European Commission on 16 July 2015 and related to the aircrew rules (Regulation (EU) No 1178/2011), as well as the air operations (Air OPS) rules (Regulation (EU) No 965/2012). On 9 December 2016 EASA published their Opinion 14/2016, which only proposed changes to the Air OPS implementing rules (IRs). Regarding PSPs, EASA decided to limit this recommendation to just Flight Crew as it was felt widening the scope to capture all safety personnel (e.g. Cabin Crew, Maintenance and Ground Personnel) would be too ambitious a task to undertake for smaller operators with limited resources.

However, operators should take note that the regulation does not restrict them from extending their PSP to other safety critical personnel. In addition, EASA are keen to promote the option of sub-contracting PSPs to third party organisations for smaller operators.

Why should an operator provide a Peer Support Programme ?

A properly run PSP is an efficient tool designed to address a number of safety concerns regarding crew fitness. However, a badly conceived / implemented PSP will have little effect, or can even do harm. It is therefore crucial that operators ensure resources be invested well and wisely in both an effective and properly conceived programme.

With pilots working and interacting with one-another as part of a crew whilst performing procedural duties, relationships with peers are easier to establish. The forming of such 'peer' relationships between pilots enables both an early and clearer understanding of issues, that other employees within the organisation may not have the required level of understanding. Such peer relationships form an important and fundamental part of the structure of the PSP, in that there is a well-defined understanding on the work environment and associated pressures of the individual concerned. Additionally, because of the light administrative set-up, the voluntary nature of the PSP, and the (often) voluntary support provided by external experts mean that PSPs are very cost efficient, especially for operators with limited resources.

Ideally, operators should provide a PSP that allows Pilots to 'self-report' as this will afford them the opportunity to have whatever their problem is identified and properly addressed in a timelier manner. This format will also allow for a majority of problems to be resolved within the constraints of the PSP and without the need for the employer to be involved. The benefit of this format of PSP is that typically a pilot will be able to return to his/her flying duties without the need for discriminatory or punitive action from the operator. Additionally, such a fair system will promote acceptance within the operator's pilot workforce and ultimately encourage other pilots to self-report their problems, regardless of what these



may be.

However, it is important for all operators to note that PSP's present significant challenges. For such programmes to be effective, mutual trust between pilots and the hierarchical structures within the operator is necessary. For example, mental health issues must not be stigmatised, and all associated concerns raised should be handled confidentially and appropriately. Operators must therefore foster the development of these systems by integrating them into the daily way of working.

Aeromedical Specialist Role in Peer Support Programme

PSPs overall effectiveness can be supplemented by the inclusion of an Aeromedical Specialist, who are able to provide a clearer statistical understanding behind mental health issues. Statistics show that 27% (1) of the adult EU population (aged 18-65) suffers at least one mental disorder per year, including substance abuse, depression and anxiety.

Several important factors determine the role of the Aeromedical Specialist in a PSP, including:

- The provision of accurate and timely medical advice and guidance
- Contributing to the effort to determine flight safety risks
- Liaison and discussion with various consultants, including legal, addiction, regulatory etc.
- Ensuring that ethical rules and aspects are maintained

An important factor for the Aeromedical specialist is the need to maintain Doctor/Patient confidentiality, something that can be problematic when flight safety risks are identified. The breaching of confidentiality is only possible in cases where relief of flight duties is not sufficient to ensure safety as there is an immediate danger to either the individual and/or others, or a significant risk to public safety. Such cases must be clearly defined within the scope of the PSP management team, and every effort should be made to obtain the consent of the pilot concerned.

(1) Figure provided by European Society of Aerospace Medicine.

Aviation Psychologist Role in Peer Support Programme

Although aviation psychology is a specific domain within the practice of psychology, it is not a precise science and is instead a highly varied field. Individuals trained as Aviation Psychologists may work behind the scenes with engineers to assist with the design of the flight deck and cabin areas of an aircraft, or as part of an operator's pilot selection process.

An Aviation Psychologist will utilise his/her expertise in human behavior to evaluate potential pilots for psychological health by screening for various mental health issues like depression, bipolar disorder, different anxiety disorders and personality disorders. Additionally they will devise training programmes for pilots, flight attendants and other personnel as well, including maintenance crews and air traffic controllers. The training programmes for flight crew specifically focus on promoting strategies to enhance attention, perception, memory and communication.

It is important to understand that PSP's are not specialist mental health care, and therefore should not replace existing occupational health programmes. In addition, to encourage pilot confidence and trust in the program, it should not be misinterpreted as a Flight Operations Management tool. All Pilot PSP's should be pilot driven, and the involvement of Aviation Psychologist should be utilised as a supportive role only.



Recommendations

- With EASA proposing a 24-month transition period for the creation of PSPs, the advice is for operators not to wait until the regulation is mandated, but instead start the process as soon as possible.
- Operators should ensure that their resources be invested well and wisely in both an effective and properly conceived PSP.
- Operators should ideally provide a PSP that allows Pilots to 'self-report' allowing them the opportunity to have whatever their problem identified and properly addressed in a timelier manner.
- A PSP should not replace an existing occupational health program as it is not deemed specialist mental health care.

References and Further Information

European Pilot Peer Support Initiative (EPPSI): EPPSI is a not-for profit body designed to facilitate communication between stakeholders and interested parties engaged or planning to get engaged in Peer Support Programmes:

<http://eppsi.eu/>

EASA Opinion 14/2016: This Opinion addresses the safety issues identified by the EASA-led Germanwings Task Force on the accident of the Germanwings Flight 9525:

<https://www.easa.europa.eu/document-library/opinions/opinion-142016>

Anti-Skid Groep: This organisation in the Netherlands is open to all KLM pilots and now expanded to embrace other Dutch operators. Hosted in collaboration between the Dutch Pilot Association (VNV) and supported by KLM:

<https://www.antiskid.nl/>

Stiftung Mayday: Provide a 24/7 hotline for the initial contact, followed by specially trained peers and psychological/medical experts offering support for pilots, crew members and their families:

<http://www.stiftung-mayday.de/>

European Association for Aviation Psychology (EAAP): An association promoting the study of psychology and the scientific pursuit of applied psychology in the aviation industry:

<http://www.eaap.net/>

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