

Testimony Of  
Captain John Prater, President  
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Before The  
Subcommittee on Aviation Operations, Safety, and Security  
Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation  
United States Senate

June 17, 2009

Aviation Safety: The Role and Responsibility of Commercial  
Air Carriers and Employees

(:46:56) Thank you, Chairman Dorgan. We commend this Committee for calling this hearing to take a closer look at some of the critical issues affecting airline pilots and our charges. Many of these issues—pilot screening and hiring standards, training, and mentoring—were at the top of the agenda at the FAA’s “Call to Action” summit in which we participated on Monday.

While this meeting was a critical first step toward developing solutions to these problems, we encourage the FAA to take a more structured approach in working with the airlines and labor to establish an agreed-to implementation plan for all parties to adopt.

We have to look more at the system. In recent years, the major airlines have come to rely heavily on codeshare arrangements with so-called “regional” airlines to connect large, midsize, and small cities in the U.S., in Canada, and in Mexico to their international hubs. This has resulted in the exponential growth of the regional sector of the industry.

Still, the major carriers exert a great deal—almost total—pressure on the regional airlines to provide their service at the lowest possible price. They control ticket pricing and schedules, and they regularly move flying between their regional partners. This exacerbates breaking the chain of pilot experience. Couple that with 160 or more bankruptcies in the airline industry and airline pilots leaving the industry because there’s been no way to protect and retain that experience in the cockpit. We start over again and again.

Some major airlines even today are outsourcing their flying to regionals and laying off their own pilots, losing those decades of experience to the profession. These experienced pilots cannot afford to work for one of these so-called regional carriers as a newly hired first officer. As a result, many of the smaller regional carriers hire pilots near the FAA minimum standards and do not employ adequate screening processes during hiring that identify that “ideal” candidate.

As was brought out during the NTSB’s recent hearing on the tragic accident in Buffalo, many pilots who fly for regional airlines are not getting adequate training or enough rest. Airlines are requiring pilots to work longer days and more of them each month. Fleet and frequent base changes are forcing pilots to decide between commuting and possibly taking another pay cut to train on new equipment.

The consequences: the quality of airline pilot “careers” has been greatly diminished, and the severe erosion of benefits and quality of life are motivating experienced aviators to move to other professions.

Current training practices do not take into account the drastic change in pilot applicants’ experience. Instead, they assume that pilots are far more experienced than they may actually be. ALPA believes there must be a new focus on standardization and even on fundamental flying skills. To meet this challenge, airlines and other training providers must develop methodologies to train for that lack of experience and to train for judgment. Current training practices may also need to be adjusted to account for the source and the experience level of that new pilot entering into initial training at his or her airline.

ALPA also believes there should be more stringent academic requirements to obtain both commercial and airline transport pilot ratings in preparation to start a career as an airline pilot. The FAA should develop and implement a structured and rigorous ground school and testing procedures for pilots who want to qualify to fly for Part 121 airlines.

ALPA also recommends that airlines provide specific command and leadership training courses for new captains to instill in them the necessary skills and traits to be a real leader on the flight deck. Airlines should also implement mentoring programs for both captains and first officers as they first enter operations in their new crew positions to help them apply the knowledge and skills to line operations from their more experienced peers.

Flight experience and pilot capabilities cannot be measured by mere flight hours. We must remember that each and every pilot out there today has met the FAA standards has met and trained and exceeded standards of their airline who is responsible for certifying them.

Turning to another area of concern, for two decades you have heard me and my predecessors speak about the problem of pilot fatigue. It's time. We need to address those rules and we need to change them.

Other means to enhance safety and improve airline operations are data collection and analysis programs such as FOQA and ASAP. We need to share that information across the industry, and then modify our practices to make sure that the best practices by the entire family of airlines. In order to allow these programs to grow and make these reports more readily obtainable, additional legislative protections will be needed to limit the use of ASAP and FOQA data in civil liability cases and to ensure that the information is used to increase safety.

The best safety device on any airplane is a well-trained, well-rested, highly motivated pilot. A strong safety culture must be instilled and consistently reinforced from the highest levels within an airline and among its codeshare regional partners.

Thank you for the opportunity and I'll be happy to address your questions. (:52:45)

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