

CASE STUDY: O'CONNOR AIRLINES



Managing Safety

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– Safety manager, Andrew O'Connor

Mt Gambier based regional, O'Connor Airlines, is challenging the view that safety management is only applicable to large airlines.

James Ostinga

NATURAL-BORN OPTIMIST, ANDREW O'Connor, has had to teach himself to think the worst when it comes to aviation safety: "You have to start every day believing that an accident could happen. And if you keep reminding yourself of that then you don't go to work thinking that because you didn't have an accident yesterday or the day before, everything is okay. What you do is you say 'what's going to kill us today and what can we do to stop it?'"

Several years ago the O'Connor Airlines safety manager held the view that the airline was safe because it had never been involved in an accident. Then, in 1997, he discovered a book about airmanship and aviation safety management written by human factors specialist, Tony Kern. Overnight his approach to safety changed: "Instead of assuming 'we are safe', I started asking 'how safe are we and how can we improve?'"

It was the beginning of a process that would see the airline – which operates two Jetstream 32s – completely change the way it operates.

Safety management is a relatively new concept. It has been used by major airlines since the early '90s and has proved an effective method for identifying and combating safety hazards. There is a perception though that safety management programs are too expensive and too complicated for smaller companies. The experience of operators like O'Connor Airlines is proving that is not the case.

In 1998 O'Connor Airlines introduced confidential incident reporting and encouraged pilots to use the system to report any safety related events or issues. While the incident reports were required to include the name of the person submitting the report, management gave a guarantee that names would only be seen by the safety manager, who would de-identify the report immediately on receipt. Further, unless a report revealed that the submitter had knowingly broken the law, or committed a reckless act, that confidentiality would be protected at all costs.

At the same time a computer program was installed to allow the safety manager to record and assess safety hazards and the

actions that were being taken to address them. A safety resources library was also established, and courses were conducted for staff and management on airmanship and system safety.

The airline seemed to be doing everything right but was struggling to make the program work. Says O'Connor: "We made significant progress in lifting safety awareness and airmanship across the company, but we were having trouble making it function in a practical sense. We had established our reporting system, and through that were able to identify and address weaknesses in the way we were operating, but it was too *ad hoc* and sporadic."

And despite management's assurances that the reporting system would not be used against staff, participation in the program was low. Recalls pilot Chris Nelson, "Pilots are generally pretty sceptical about these things. There's a lot of people who don't trust the confidentiality of the CAIR system, for example, and I think people looked at this as the same thing. Eventually that changed – to the extent where people are now absolutely confident in the system – but it didn't happen overnight."

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Keen to keep the safety program alive, the company sponsored a visit to Australia by Tony Kern to look at their program and talk to other operators about the benefits of safety management.

"In terms of re-focusing and re-energising the program," says O'Connor, "it was like having the cavalry turn up."

Workshops: The arrival of Dr Tony Kern at the airline's Mount Gambier base sparked the beginning of a number of workshops between aircrew and management about the new program as well as specific operational issues identified in surveys and internal incident reports. Topics discussed included collision avoidance, teamwork, GPS, human error and inhibitors to airmanship.

"What emerged from that," explains O'Connor, "was a clear set of practical action steps where our people did real projects and shared learning and experiences with their





A number of confidential reports have resulted in changes to O'Connor's operations manual. The use of safety vests was formalised after several flight crews reported difficulty seeing dispatchers on overcast mornings.

ROB FOX

What is a safety program?

A safety program is essentially a coherent and integrated set of procedures for effectively managing the safety of your operation. It is more than just safe operating practices. It is a total management program.

The outcome of a safety program is an improvement in your company's ability to identify and track hazards and get something done about them before they do any harm. Regardless of the size of the operation, all safety programs have four general requirements.

1. Top management sets the safety standards.

Chief Executives or managers should:

- Specify the company's standards.
- Ensure that everyone knows the standards and accepts them.
- Make sure there is a system in place so that deviations from the standards are recognised and reported.

2. The company maintains its standards.

To maintain your standards, you need the support of your staff. This means:

- The right staff are involved in developing the standards.
- Responsibilities are made clear.

- All staff consistently work to the standards.

3. Hazards are reported in a timely manner.

You need an efficient and effective hazard reporting system. This means:

- All staff are encouraged to report hazards and safety concerns.
- Procedures are in place to track significant events, and detect unexplained increases in safety related events.
- There are processes to regularly review the effectiveness of your reporting system.

4. Action is taken to resolve hazards.

Once you have identified the hazard, you need to take action to defend your operation from the risk involved. You can do this in three ways:

- Eliminate the hazard completely – this is the most effective defence, but is sometimes not practical.
- Change your operational procedures to work around the hazard.
- Warn people about the hazard – by itself, this is the least effective action.

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colleagues. There was an energetic dialogue happening across the company about airmanship and standards, and it was making changes in a practical sense. Our pilots were assessing their airmanship performance after each flight and new procedures, like maintenance debriefs after each flight, were introduced. It was decided that for this to really work, we needed to move the system across the whole company."

Over the next 12 months the safety management program was adapted and incorporated into the airline's core processes. The program, now named OASIS (O'Connor Airlines Safety Integration System), integrated the Kern airmanship model and the principles of the BASI-developed safety management program, INDICATE, into a customised system of defensive shields covering all levels of the operation: management, maintenance and dispatch and flight operations.

Defences: By January 1999 the airline had established a working safety program which, according to staff and management, had created an entirely new safety culture within the organisation. Safety coordinators representing staff from aircrew, maintenance and dispatch had been appointed and safety information, gathered through

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confidential reports and regular discussion groups, was being entered into the OASIS database for evaluation and action.

De-identified reports were being circulated to staff and management for discussion and in many cases feedback from these reports was resulting in significant and beneficial changes to the company's operating procedures. Importantly, the airline also encouraged staff participation in OASIS by making performance in the program a prerequisite for promotion.

O'Connor Airlines' defensive shields now provided a multi-layered defence against potential hazards. At the organisational level, operational quality assurance and operational safety management shields offered a defence against latent hazards. At the frontline, safety defences were strengthened with manuals defining key competencies for maintenance, dispatch and flight crew personnel. And monitoring the defences was a comprehensive computer software program which allowed the organisation to capture, analyse and monitor hazards and to use that information to initiate and track safety improvements.

Safety awareness: Is O'Connor Airlines safe? A few years ago that question would have been answered solely on the basis of

the company's accident-free history. These days, a greater awareness about safety and safety management prompts a more considered response: "The safety program has forced us to realise that safety can't be measured in terms of adverse outcomes. If you've never had an accident it could mean you're very good but it could also mean you're just plain lucky. For us, being safe means hardening our safety defences against hazards and risks. And it also means understanding that the very moment you sit back and say 'we're safe', a hazard is likely to penetrate your defences and prove you wrong. It's our job to make sure that doesn't happen."

Cost versus safety: In its first year of operation the safety program incurred direct costs of around \$14,000. A proportion of that money was spent on initial research and development, training, and the purchase of resources like software, books and videos. The airline estimates the ongoing costs of maintaining OASIS will be confined to 0.4 per cent of annual revenue.

Too expensive? Not according to airline owner and chief pilot Leigh O'Connor: "Even if the cost was five times higher it would still be sustainable. We're never going to go out of business for delaying a flight by three hours, or overnighing our passengers in Adelaide, but we could be shut down tomorrow if we had an accident or a major non-compliance. So if the safety program has reduced the chance of that happening, and I think it has, then it's money well spent."

So why aren't safety programs more common at this level of the industry?

"I think people struggle with this stuff, not because they are reluctant or they're non-compliant, or they want to hurt people. They struggle with it because they don't know where to start, or they think it's beyond them, or they think it will cost too



JAMES OSTINGA

much or it's too much hassle. Our experience should tell people it's not too hard and it's not too expensive.

"More than cost, the main obstacle is getting senior management to make a commitment to the program, and to maintain that commitment by giving safety a clear and explicit priority over everything else the company does. It's not enough to just set it up and hope it will look after itself. You have to actively encourage participation in the program, you have to provide adequate resources – and by that I mean human resources and time, as well as money – and you have to be prepared to change the way you operate if you find out the way you've been doing things could have been done better."

O'Connor Airlines is currently working with the Aviation Safety Foundation Australia to make OASIS available, free of charge, to other operators. For more information about the program contact ASFA on (03) 9374 3734. For more information about INDICATE call the Bureau of Air Safety Investigation on 1800 020 616 or visit their web site at:

www.basi.gov.au/indicate/index.htm

James Ostinga is deputy editor of Flight Safety Australia.



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