

VIEW FROM THE COCKPIT

A survey of commercial and private pilots reveals what they think about safety.



The Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) distributed the “Aviation industry safety survey” in November 2003 to 5000 private and commercial pilots with current medicals throughout Australia.

The pilots were asked to answer a series of questions about their flying experiences in the 12 months before the survey. Information about their perceptions of the safety climate and common flying errors has already been published by the ATSB in two separate reports during 2004. But the results of the final part of the survey – what pilots think are the biggest threats to safety – have only recently been released.

The 1260 pilots who responded to this part of the aviation industry survey were grouped on the basis of the type of flying – regular public transport, charter, aerial work, and private operations – in which they were most often involved during the 12 months leading up to the survey. Some 29 per cent were working in regular public transport, just under 17 per cent were engaged in charter work, 27 per cent in aerial work and some 27 per cent in private operations.

The pilots were asked how often they had found the following conditions affected safety: lack of pilot skills, knowledge or experience; fatigue; alcohol, drugs or medication; medical conditions; or personal stress.

The results showed that pilots think that a lack of pilot skills, knowledge or experience – and to a lesser extent, fatigue and personal stress – have a greater detrimental effect on flight safety than alcohol, drugs or medication or medical conditions.

Skills, knowledge or experience were considered by about 40 per cent of pilots to have “sometimes” had a negative impact on safety.

Thirty-two per cent of all pilots said fatigue sometimes affected safety. In the regular public transport group 46 per cent said fatigue

sometimes had a negative impact.

Most pilots (77 per cent) said that alcohol, drugs and medication “never” negatively impacted on safety. About 66 per cent of respondents nominated medical conditions as having never negatively impacted on safety.

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Pilots were also asked how frequently they had found significant safety deficiencies in key areas over the past 12 months: air traffic control; meteorological information; aircraft maintenance; aircraft weight and balance; runways and runway facilities; aircraft airworthiness; aircraft to aircraft communications.

The results show that pilots considered “aircraft to aircraft communications” to be the most frequently experienced safety deficiency. “Aircraft maintenance” and “meteorological information” were identified as the next most important safety problems. The least significant factors rated by pilots were “aircraft airworthiness” and “aircraft weight and balance”. **Areas of concern:** Pilots were also asked an open-ended question about what they considered were the top three safety hazards that affected flight safety in Australia.

The top seven hazards identified by private pilots in order of priority were: training and experience, procedures and regulation, communication issues, airspace management, operational issues, maintenance and flight planning.

The top hazards for commercial pilots in order of priority were: airspace management,

organisational issues, training and experience, procedures and regulation, communication issues, maintenance and fitness for duty.

The researchers found that “commercial pressure” was the biggest organisational problem faced by commercial pilots, followed by “pilot attitude/safety culture”.

Pilots were also asked about their involvement in 13 incident types in the previous 12 months. Four per cent of respondents indicated they were involved in a violation of controlled airspace, and 9 per cent said they had failed to comply with ATC instructions.

Just over 5 per cent found themselves unsure of their position.

Wheels-up landings were experienced by 4.5 per cent of pilots; while a near collision with terrain, water or an obstacle in flight was cited by less than 1 per cent.

Irrespective of flight category some 16 per cent of pilots said they were involved in a near in-flight collision with another aircraft in the year prior to the survey.

Around 5.5 of respondents said they experienced fuel related problems, while less than 0.5 per cent indicated that they lost control in flight.

Finally, pilots were asked about the perceived level of safety in their flight category and any changes in safety over the year preceding the survey. Irrespective of flight category, about 59 per cent of pilots indicated that their flying category had been “safe” during the 12-month period preceding the survey; 65 per cent of pilots indicated that their flying category had remained “unchanged”.

The report, “ATSB Aviation Safety Survey – Pilots’ flying experiences”, Aviation Research Investigation Report B2003/0176, is available on the ATSB website (www.atsb.gov.au/research).