

MISSED Opportunity

There is an interesting piece of legislation working its way through the United States Congress as I write this. It is called the Aviation Safety Bill, written in response to the tragic crash near Buffalo, New York, of a Bombardier Q400 early this year that killed 50 people, an accident that revealed things about the airline industry that shocked a lot of people. The legislation targets a number of issues regarding data collection, reporting and training. Many of the proposed changes make sense, but there is one part of the bill that I believe seriously misses the mark.

That troubling part is a new requirement that a pilot must have an airline transport pilot (ATP) license and 1,500 hours of flight time before he or she can serve as a first officer on an air carrier aircraft, even one operated by a regional airline. To those who have become pilots in North America, this provision may not seem shocking; for quite a few years, it has taken that level of experience to get a job with a major airline anyway, and often with a regional. But this will not always be the case, and won't be in the future, and that's what worries me.

First, licenses and hours do not say much about pilot qualification and competencies. Regulators have never set the competency bar for entry to an airliner flight deck. The license just gets you in the door. The decision to let you enter the flight deck typically is made by a check airman, often using an entirely different set of standards than the regulator who issues the license.

The interesting problem is that those vital industry gate-keeping standards are largely invisible, and are subject to marketplace pressures. When the supply of qualified personnel dries up

during good times, economic pressures build and standards decline silently through hundreds of incremental decisions. Of course, in every company there are some great people who fight this deterioration, but sometimes they lose the fight.

The expansion of the global aviation industry has taken a hit in the last couple years, but it is a temporary condition. There are 2 billion people in school in the developing world that are going to find their way into the middle class and demand air transportation. When economic growth resumes, unemployed yet qualified aviation people will become rare, taking their portable skills to the places of highest demand, and highest pay. Soon, airlines will need to hire many more pilots than exist in the market, at least those with 1,500 hours. During the past 50-plus years, standards have had to be lowered when demand exceeded the supply of high-time pilots, and those standards have never really been tested.

The Aviation Safety Bill seeks to raise the bar for pilot proficiency, but it is pulling the wrong lever. Requiring an ATP for everybody in the right seat will not make the world safer. Regulations can't fix this one. The real lever that controls pilot competence is hidden from view and is controlled by the industry. Maybe we need to admit that now, so we can deal with it in the future.



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