

SAFETY IN Bad Times

There are a couple of tough questions that keep coming up during every stop I make. One of the toughest is whether safety is going to suffer as a result of the economic downturn, and what we can do about it. Here are some of the best answers I can come up with.

This year is not off to a good start. The trend lines for accident rates are flattening out, and may even be starting to rise. In addition, North America and Europe have suffered seven air carrier major accidents since August. It is too soon to assume we are entering a "dark age" for safety, but recent events cannot be ignored.

On a more positive note, I'll point out that we have empirical proof that economic stress does not have to result in a decline in safety. The period following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, despite most of the airlines in the United States filing for bankruptcy protection at least once, was the safest in U.S. commercial aviation history. Here is how I explain it:

First, I have to credit the extraordinary tenacity and professional integrity of the people on the line who ran the system every day while watching their dreams of prosperity and retirement slip away. Second, many carriers, especially the big ones, really caught on to the idea that predictive safety systems and protected reporting systems were good for the bottom line as well as good for safety.

Next, I have to point out that the regulators did some things that worked. This was the era when risk-based surveillance really took hold. The regulators had enough access to information about the operators to make informed decisions about who needed more attention and who needed less. The regulators didn't go soft; they just got smarter. When an operator failed to get the safety message, these gatekeepers were able to focus on the at-risk

operators until they either got it right or went out of business.

Can we expect the same positive scenario around the world now that we have an even deeper recession? That depends on a lot of variables, so let me offer a short checklist to consider your risk:

- Do you have an experienced and dedicated workforce that can stay professional in spite of economic distractions?
- Does your airline really understand that proactive safety and reporting systems are essential to its business?
- Do you have a competent and capable regulatory authority that can intelligently target risks?
- Can your regulator act without fear of political interference and be able to present grounding as a credible threat?
- Is the relationship between the regulator and the industry open, effective and appropriate, or is it a game of hide and seek?

History tells us that a strong operator sometimes can stay safe without a strong regulator, but if your experience shows a weakness in both, we could be in for a rough year.



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