

THE NEW Balance

There is some good news. At the recent Federal Aviation Administration International Aviation Safety Forum, the FAA threw its support behind safety management systems (SMS) in a big way. In his remarks, Acting Administrator Robert A. Sturgell reminded us of the challenges we face due to the growth of our system, as well as the high accident rates that persist in some parts of the world. He pointed to SMS as part of the solution, saying, "We all need to take a step up, and I'm including the United States of America in that group as well. The safety management system approach will let us do that."

That statement removed any lingering doubt about where the FAA stands on SMS. No longer are there any question marks about global SMS implementation. It is time to get serious.

But before we go too far, we must address a misconception about SMS that seems to be spreading. Increasingly, SMS is being used as an excuse to reduce the level of aviation expertise in our management and oversight systems. The misconceived logic is that since an SMS is about data and process, the system needs auditors and process managers, not necessarily aviation experts. It is easy to understand why chief financial officers and budget-strapped regulators would like to believe this. We are living in an industry that is rapidly outgrowing its intellectual capital, and aviation experience is at a premium.

This problem is real. I have talked to people from a number of major regulators who are implementing SMS. These people are beginning to believe that their aviation experience is limiting their career. They believe that their time in operations makes them look too "old school" to the people in power; the "process" folks get the promotions.

It is time to get back to reality. To produce at the extraordinary level expected of an SMS, it needs people who have real operational experience *and* the ability to manage data and processes. They must be able to observe a fleet's operations and identify negative trends before the trends become problems. It takes experience and insight to realize that a new rash of flap overspeed events probably has something to do with the new descent procedure that was introduced in the previous month. These professionals have to turn data into insight, and insight into practical action. That takes a combination of new skills and old wisdom. We all celebrate the ability of an SMS to look into the future and predict the next accident before it occurs, but this crystal ball ability comes with a price: It demands well-trained people with solid operational insight.

I don't want to be too negative. Regulating and managing safety with an SMS is far more efficient than the old methods of rules and compliance. Airlines and regulators who have implemented SMS have been able to do more with less. CFOs and government budget czars should be excited. But this doesn't mean that we can simply replace experienced professionals with auditors. As this industry continues to grow at a spectacular rate, we have to remember that.



A white, handwritten signature of William R. Voss, written in a cursive style, set against the orange background.

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