



## Paper tigers – Paper airlines

The air transport industry is not only heavily regulated at a national level but must also adhere to international laws and regulations. These regulations are frequently updated when and if the authorities or industry finds it necessary. As Licensed Aircraft Engineers we often support strict regulations because it lends us the support on which to uphold a high level of safety.

Statistics now show that failures within the maintenance environment as the cause, or part cause, for incidents and accidents are increasing. In the majority of cases its an individual or organisational malfunction that lies behind the incident.

So, there are a lot of regulations but how does industry follow them?

Furthermore, how do the authorities ensure that regulations are being followed?

Are regulations in fact nothing more than paper tigers in the struggle against unsafe aircraft operations?

In these times of enormous economic pressure being placed on maintenance providers, **frontline personnel** are often confronted with the impossible challenge of maintaining the highest standards with minimum resources. This is then often further complicated with the additional burden of an operator or management applying pressure in the hope that they will ignore the regulations in order to meet some imposed deadline or target.

Frontline personnel can, for example, be the engineer saying that "this damage is way out of limits" or "this stabilizer trim has failed several times in flight yet was only tested without fault on the ground. I think we should replace the stab trim motor but we have no stock in stores". The engineer is then placed under enormous pressure from the operator, who themselves may be in economic difficulties, having 180 passengers waiting in the departure hall.

Frontline personnel can also be the pilot at an outstation with no maintenance engineers available but a technical problem with their aircraft. The commander has full responsibility to judge if they should fly or not. If a baggage cart hit the aircraft causing a buckle or dent in the fuselage skin, the commander may well think it's ok from his perspective. The commander may well contact their maintenance control centre to obtain a second judgement. Based on such a phone call both the commander and the maintenance control centre decide that its only a small dent/buckle and anyway it would just cause a lot of problems, a heavy delay and extra

expenses to transport an engineer to the outstation to make a proper judgement. Once the aircraft returns to home base, the technical department discovers that two stringers are broken behind the skin and that the dent/buckle is way out of limits. The aircraft had flown with the integrity of its structure severely weakened!

Both the above scenarios actually happened.

There are also examples of operators that never write any discrepancies in the aircraft technical log. Instead, they have a separate log system with “post-it” notes in the office. If they had behaved in the correct manner and entered the faults in the technical log the aircraft would be grounded. It is also a well known phenomenon that for years now, technical problems only appear on the last leg of the day, which is inevitably to a base where maintenance can be performed! Despite this being a well known fact, no one has been able to explain how this is possible without saying that the regulations are being neglected. This is a balancing act with an extremely thin line deciding between safe and unsafe operations.

### **What to do?**

Of course these criticisms must also be directed at us as maintenance engineers. We should of course evaluate the options available to us including our own possibilities to set limits. However, some employers do not appreciate any kind of limits at all.

Therefore the regulatory and auditing bodies should be focussing attention on giving frontline aircraft safety professionals, such as maintenance engineers and pilots, their full support in maintaining the required high levels of safety. It is not acceptable to look the other way and do nothing about that part of the industry which employs low safety levels as a cost saving business idea. These operators also have all the manuals and quality systems as approved by the aviation authorities but how do they comply with them?

For the sake of public transport safety and also to support competition on equal terms, it is time to give aviation professionals the support and higher status that is required within the industry. Furthermore it is time to replace the paper tigers with authorities that have real “bite”.

Leave the bureaucratic level for a while and start from the hangar floor!

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