THE CENTRE FOR AVIATION PSYCHOLOGY

The Pilot and the Pandemic

One pilot shares their personal and professional survival plan and invites you to add insights, tips and advice.

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Why I wrote this article...

I was recently asked whether being a pilot was still a good profession to join. For the first time in career, I found myself stumped.

Each profession has been devastated by this crisis in its own unique way, let alone the human suffering it is leaving in its wake. As line pilots, we are experiencing this first hand and seeing profound changes taking place, most of which we have no influence or control over. Survival, rather than flourishing, has become the aspiration for many of today's aircrew. Not only does this have serious and obvious implications for safety in our industry, more broadly it is also a sad state of affairs for such a crucial and well regarded profession.

No pilot just falls into commercial aviation and certainly no pilot remains in it through indifference. For most of us it has been an expensive pursuit of a childhood dream that has provided as much reward as the sacrifice it has demanded. To witness, in a few short months, a largely secure and in-demand profession transform into one in which many of my colleagues now regret joining and several others experiencing great anguish, including myself, I have found particularly hard to bear.

I wrote this article in part, to document what is happening to our profession in 2020. Having survived previous crises (e.g., 9/11; SARS; 2008), this Pandemic stands in a league of its own and I wanted to personally document its game changing impact. As a pilot I have often felt like a number and a commodity and I have found writing this document puts a human side on a crises that is often characterised by numbers. It helps me make sense of what I am experiencing and my reactions to it. To see it written down makes it feel acknowledged, witnessed, and somehow 'on the record'.

I also wrote this document to chart a personal survival plan to help me re-establish some degree of control over my circumstances. I wanted to share these insights (and survival tips, where they exist) with others in the hope that is will be of use to them, in whatever way.

I recognise my views and experiences are those of a single pilot, more fortunate than many. I hope some of my colleagues will identify with what they read below and find solace and help in seeing their experiences acknowledged. Others will have more to add, either through their insights, or more helpfully, tips or advice on surviving this pandemic. As economic uncertainty is likely to stay for a while we all need a way of surviving this, irrespective of whether you are flying through it or sitting it out on the ground.

If you have something to contribute, it would be good to hear it. I intend to update this document, should the response justify it. You can contact me, confidentially, at articles@centreforaviationpsychology.com and share thoughts and advice.

Pilot. Anon

INTRODUCTION

As pilots, most of us have experienced returning to work feeling rusty at some point in our careers, but never has it been more likely that our flight deck colleague may also be rusty. Worryingly just as our skills are fading, professional workload is increasing due to additional COVID-19 operational requirements.

Further exacerbating matters, a myriad of hidden problems related to the coronavirus crisis are causing additional distress and distraction. As airlines rebuild their flying programs, this article proposes to raise awareness of the psychological and psychosocial factors that may now influence our behaviour and capacity. Due to the specific nature of our experiences and personalities, solving these problems requires individualised understanding so it would be imprudent to propose more than generalised solutions in this article. However it is felt that if pilots are conversant with the implications of these issues and the support available, negative consequences should be mitigable.

The "Deal" has changed

It is self evident that the norms and expectations of a profession (and company) I joined several years ago is very different to the one I find myself in today. Admittedly, that was true 6 months ago but, not in the way it is now. While most of the expectations were unwritten, they were such givens you could take them to the bank. Literally.

Then. The deal was: in return for the demanding and expensive training, the rigours of the profession and frequent assessment, you will get relative employment security and opportunity, reasonable reward, and the prospect of solid career progression. With the mantra 'pilot shortage' ringing in my ears, I had confidence in my future and planned accordingly. As long as I did my bit by keeping healthy, staying out of trouble and keeping my skills up to date, I could expect good things to come my way when my seniority number came up.

Now. Little is a given. It feels like the rules are being rewritten, what I can now reasonably expect from my profession is up in the air. Consequently, the expectations I now have of my profession (and company) are increasingly transactional and based more on trepidation than hope these days.

Like all pilots, I am having to re-evaluate what I can reasonably expect of my profession (and company). I have to figure out what the new 'deal' is and whether I can adapt to it, challenge it, or walk away from it. As much as I regret it, things are different and like most pilots over the past few months, I have been taking stock.

Employment issues

We can all see what is happening in the wider economy and know that aviation is one of the industries most affected. Most airlines are scrambling to maintain various levels of viability and are down-sizing, restructuring, implementing cost-saving measures or a combination of all three. Put simply, this means jobs.

No one is immune to this threat, and especially not pilots. Industrial or contractual issues lend themselves freely to contentious debate. We have all seen opinions proffered when the cockpit should be sterile and down-route arguments create animosities lasting longer than the evening itself.

It is unlikely that paired pilots will see airline cost-saving proposals similarly because pilots flying together are rarely matched in age, length of service or flying experience. Even two pilots following similar career paths ten years apart may well view COVID-19 mitigation measures differently due to their dissimilar financial circumstances, professional vulnerability and expectations for the future. Junior pilots may encourage senior pilots to retire early or at least reduce their working hours, thus saving junior pilots from redundancy. Senior pilots might suggest that junior pilots could more easily replace their lower salaries outside the airline business. Neither position is conducive to a harmonious flight deck and we are seeing peer pressure develop as a significant issue.

As pilots, we are not always good at placing ourselves in the shoes of others and are sometimes quick to use cognitive shortcuts in analysing the motivations of others.

Superimposed on potential flight deck tensions, pilots may have developed strong and differing feelings towards their employer due to cost saving measures and the manner in which they are achieved and communicated. Justifiably, we see ourselves as different to other airline workers due to the specificity of our training and scarcity of comparable employment opportunities. We tend to view redundancies as significantly worse for us due to a difficulty in seeing the transferability of our skills to non-flying roles.

While some airlines are making pilots redundant, with or without options to return when the market improves, other airlines are implementing permanent payroll reductions and lifestyle curtailments under threat of redundancy with limited prospect of reinstatement when profitability returns. Many pilots view this as the reality of economic survival, while others suspect opportunism. This may cause a diminution of focus and occupational goodwill. In summary, the current environment is ripe for strident opinion, off-the cuff remarks, conflict, unintended offence and distraction.

Personal Finance Concerns

Understandably, the consequence of employment insecurity is anxiety over personal finances. If other household income is jeopardised, distress levels may rise further.

Pilots' concerns may be categorised into three types:

1) loss of income due to redundancy or enforced part-time;
2) adverse changes to terms and conditions;
3) continuous reduction in professional status.

Often pilots most vulnerable to lay-offs are the newest, lowest paid, most debt-laden and least experienced. They are least likely to have built up sufficient reserves and contingency planning than more established pilots may have achieved. For many, this is their first experience of a downturn - and the worst one at that. Moving back in with your parents or being financially dependent on others is an all too frequent and humbling experience for this demographic. An airline career snuffed out in its infancy can be experienced as an unrecoverable blow.

Equally, if a well-established senior pilot is laid off, the financial and emotional crisis can be no less severe. Senior pilots often support multiple dependents including children, parents and members of other households. They are more likely than junior pilots to be cohabiting with or caring for parents who may be shielding or have other health complications. Should they be made redundant, their prospects of finding further piloting employment may be lower, diminishing their prospects of regaining earning potential in the remaining time. Senior pilots now work longer and harder than anticipated and sometimes worry about doing so safely.

Pilots like rules and dislike rule changes, especially if they feel unfairly disadvantaged by them. The fear and anger generated by these economic concerns significantly elevates the risk of distraction on the flight deck.

Being Made Redundant

Few pilots are fortunate enough to have a career uninterrupted by temporary or permanent job loss. Those of us who have been through this before know that you do eventually come out the other end, either within aviation or re-inventing ourselves in a temporary or permanent role external to flying. As with all frightening events, it is easier to contain the anxiety by planning for the possibility or should it occur unexpectedly, face the experience directly. Stop all non-essential financial out-goings. Speak to lenders about your situation and restructure loan repayments if necessary. It is not in their interest for their loan to you to turn bad. Pilots are resourceful and resilient and this does not change with employment status.

A recent article by executive headhunter [Arpad Szakal, MRAeS](#) provides a long list of inherent, perhaps inconspicuous but transferrable skills possessed by pilots. It cannot be overstated how important it is to remain positive, focused, resourceful and to treat redundancy as an opportunity.

Follow the tips below and also those contained in the section entitled *Peer Support and Other Helpful Resources*.

The following is not an exhaustive list but could serve as a useful starting point.

1. A two-pronged approach to regaining employment, one piloting and one non-piloting is advisable. This will mean at least two CVs, registering with recruitment agencies and updating the LinkedIn profile

2. With respect to non-piloting work, friends, family and colleagues know us best. Perhaps text or email them to arrange a time to talk about their recommendations for non-flying work

3. If necessary, establish a realistic timeframe for working in a non-flying role

4. Make a list of interests, hobbies and things you enjoy. Make a list of your own values, the enjoyable and less enjoyable aspects of your flying job and then compare these lists with the Szakal transferable skills article above

5. Speak to other pilots who are in your position and ascertain the steps they are taking

6. Once you have established some ideas about future employment, start comparing job requirements with Szakal's transferable skills and start speaking the language of your chosen sector(s)

7. Find people already in the sector and request informational interviews with them regardless of their position. Networking is the key. People like to hire people they know or are introduced to them

8. While you may not be feeling it all the time, develop a positive narrative around your circumstances and the opportunities it presents. It is easier to be drawn to (and employ) those who seem to be making the best out of a bad situation.

Survivor Guilt

Some pilots may be working or returning to work experiencing degrees of survivor guilt. It can originate from two different sources:

Firstly, from a health perspective, some COVID-19 survivors become overwhelmed by a sense that, through good fortune alone, they have survived when others did not.

Secondly, from an employment perspective, survivors of organisational downsizing can feel tremendous guilt for having survived the redundancy. Pilots avoiding redundancy, unpaid furlough or other compulsory measures may experience contradictory feelings of relief and delight in not being laid off, while simultaneously experiencing anger and disappointment on behalf of those who have not been so fortunate. If a pilot's friend has been laid off, these feelings may be further intensified. What do you say to someone who has lost their job and you have kept yours? Or to someone has kept theirs and you haven't?

All pilots are susceptible, especially if they voted to make colleagues redundant as part of cost-saving measures. As pilots, we would do well to remember that our customary "How are you?" at the briefing table is unlikely to reveal most of the issues discussed in this article. Notwithstanding a pilot's reluctance or inability to discuss potentially performance limiting stressors at the briefing stage, for now we must assume that any of them may be present all the time.

Skill Fade

Most airline training departments have implemented online training sessions and testing in order to keep their infrequently flying pilots engaged with the manuals. However the degree to which pilots are willing to participate in these programs is variable so we must now suspect our colleague on the flight deck could be less resourceful than previously.

Additionally during this crisis, many airlines have preferred a programme of maintaining absolute minimum recency among many pilots rather than allowing the recency of some to expire. But mere legality of recency does not a proficient pilot make.

In the sparsely populated skies of lockdown, safety levels have been largely maintained but as we return to busier times, we will enter a critical period where all the issues addressed will become particularly relevant. Returning to work will certainly not be a simple matter of turning up a few minutes before report time and expecting everything to go swimmingly. Pilots must comprehensively plan a back to work study regime to re-familiarise with aircraft and company procedures.

Home Dynamics

Most pilots have reported positive effects in their home life due to the flight cancellations. Ability to obtain regular sleep, catch up on deferred household projects and re-connect with loved ones have benefited many.

Interestingly, pilots have found themselves unprepared for family members and friends unloading their problems onto them, assuming that we must be enjoying life continuously at home. Some have discovered that work-induced micro-separations actually sustained their relationship and that recently enforced permanent proximity has prompted them to reconsider the future.

Relationships have suffered from issues as diverse as concerns about a partner working in healthcare, home-schooling, 24 hour childcare, delayed healthcare treatments, social distancing, shielding, quarantining, financial worries, lack of socialising, online etiquette, illness and bereavement.

Some pilots have had to accept the likelihood of a sleep disorder, previously unnoticed due to irregular work patterns. Others have described symptoms of imposter syndrome, struggling to identify as a pilot as they become just another person stuck at home. People prone to stress, anxiety or depression have reported a worsening of the condition during lockdown although others have experienced an improvement. Pilots in need of psychiatric or psychological treatment may postpone it if redundancy selection criteria are vague.

Personal Space

Attitudes to physical distancing and face covering vary widely in the population and are a significant source of anxiety for people emerging from lockdown and returning to work. In parts of the United States, wearing a face mask has become politicised and we all have a perspective on social distancing and what safe practice really means.

The removal of lockdown restrictions creates potential for conflict for the general public and also between crew members. As pilots, we are generally protective of our health and considerate of the rights of others. However before coming to work, it is worth reflecting how our workplace may have changed since the crisis began and how we might choose to protect ourselves.

Is it useful to rehearse how we will advocate or manage physical distancing? Will we adopt a different approach to catering, flight-deck access, pre-flight briefings or down-route socialising? If possible, calling the other pilot before meeting at report time could align expectations. Discussions about face-masks, flight deck cleaning, physical distancing and skill fade can reduce uncertainty and create an open environment.

Returning to work, we must respect the rights of others to protect themselves. Even if we believe a colleague to be "over the top", it is important to recognise that we have not had their experiences. They may be protecting a vulnerable family member and are terrified about working. Some pilots may wish to scrupulously sterilise everything within reach or avoid others down-route. Being patient and supporting them is important because with another throw of the dice, that person could easily have been you.

Equally, you may have colleagues who dismiss, make light of, or encroach on your social distance and safety practices. Anticipating these scenarios and how you can best to respond to them in a non-confrontational manner, removes much of the anxiety.

Self-confidence

For some pilots the net effect of these issues is a depletion in confidence. For others, a sense of gallows humour may descend as a mask covering their real feelings, or they reckon that despite everything, they will just muddle through as before, promoting a sense of overconfidence and even complacency. Neither scenario is ideal because both are likely to promote sub-optimal performance under stress.

In abnormal situations, self-awareness of skill fade can cause either unnecessarily hesitant or overly impetuous reactions. If the airline has implied that operational performance could be included in redundancy assessment criteria, consequential anxiety may diminish capabilities still further. During line operations, failure to adhere to normal standards should be noticed by the other pilot and debriefed accordingly. Regardless of the industrial situation, failure to do so is not kind and diminishes flight safety.

Recurrent simulator checks can cause high levels of apprehension for many pilots under normal circumstances. However, due to the extended nature of lockdown, many pilots have undergone a recurrent check feeling rusty and this has further increased anxiety. Learning capability diminishes in these circumstances as the pilot simply wants to 'get through the check'. This intensifies as several airlines are rumoured to be considering training performance in redundancy assessment criteria.

Much has been written about self-confidence and its effect on successful task completion but in the space available here, suffice to say, that focus on the process, learning and re-establishment of appropriate levels of confidence, rather than the outcome, is preferable.

Operational Safety / Distraction Management

The previous paragraphs outlined several sources of distraction affecting the safety of flight operations. However even a healthy and happy pilot could be rendered less so if the threat of redundancy is hanging over them.

Furthermore if pilots fear that absence records will be considered in selection criteria, they may be tempted to fly when unfit. Pilots may become concerned that the very act of 'calling in sick' during a downturn could draw unwanted attention. The years of work educating pilots to put their hand up if feeling stressed, anxious or depressed may be rapidly unravelled. Even though most airlines have assured pilots that due to their unique fitness requirements, absence records will not be used in redundancy selection, depending on how the pilot feels towards their employer, even the most confident could be troubled.

The key to avoidance of distraction on the flight deck is adherence to well written SOPs. Easier said than done, but pilots can prepare for intermittent flying through mental rehearsal (armchair flying), running through both normal and non-normal procedures. Participation in company provided online training and monitoring manual revisions help preserve proficiency.

A fundamental underpin of distraction management is the 'sterile cockpit' rule. Whatever the airline's rule is, either pilot should feel enabled to request a more restrictive application given the circumstances. Always remember that schedule regularity comes second to safety, so if either crew member feels rushed, verbalise this and create time to rebuild situational awareness.
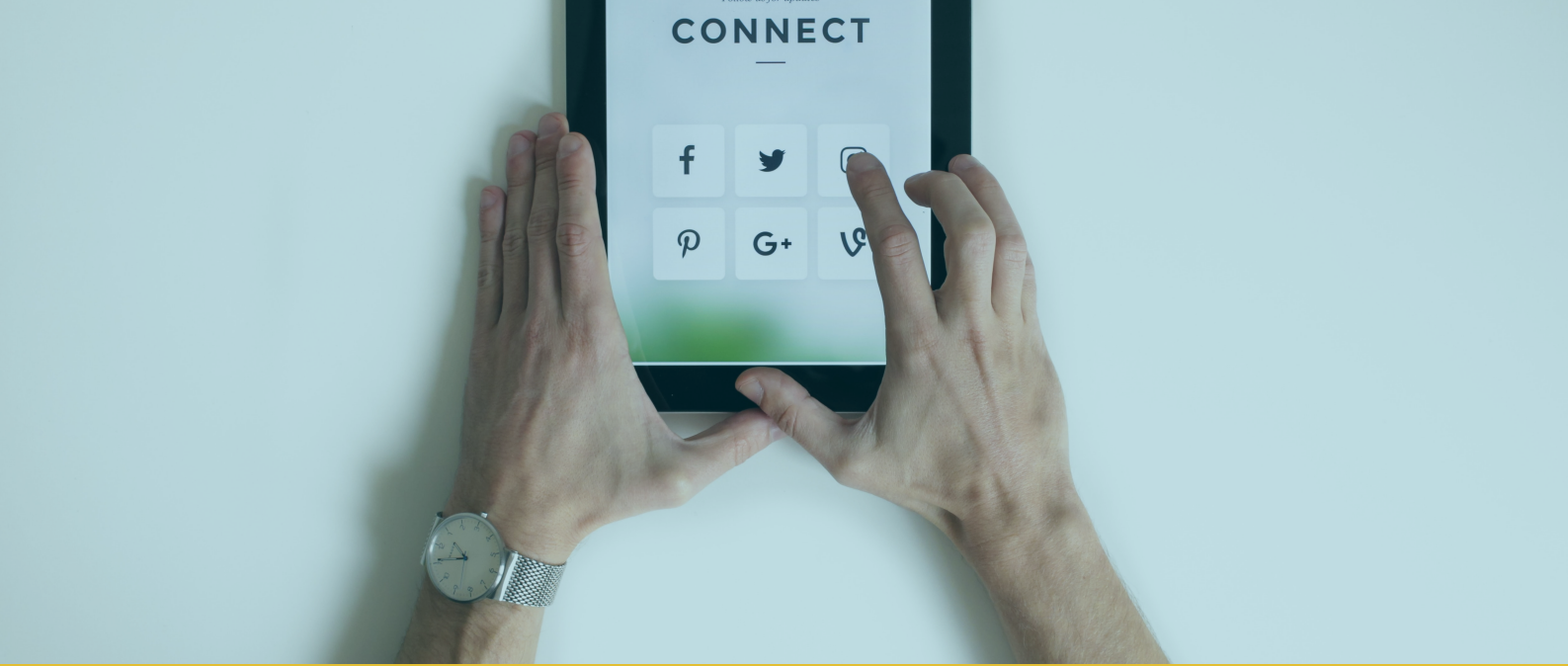
Social Support

Social support such as WhatsApp groups and online forums have helped create communities that would not otherwise exist. They help satisfy people's need for belonging while simultaneously providing news and support. Pilots cannot ignore these benefits during the coronavirus downturn and it is has been a vital source of reassurance, camaraderie and information for most of us.

However, we also know that certain groups and forums can coalesce into echo chambers of negativity, rumour and gossip. We have all seen what happens when these groups turn toxic - either acrimony towards each other, group pile-ons towards a dissenting or provocative voice, or fermenting conspiracies and paranoia as the moderate voices disengage.

We would do well to remember the concept of 'negativity bias' (negative effects have a greater impact on psychological state than positive effects, despite being of the same intensity) and limit our news sources to those based on fact. To be blunt: don't become *that* keyboard warrior we all know who has lost perspective and balance.

We should also know that smartphones trigger dopamine release. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter synthesised by neurons in the brain and is central to stimulating the reward system. Unfortunately, to achieve the same effect over time, the level of stimulus must be increased. Many people now practice regular 24 hour dopamine fasting, which prevents the use of social media and smart phones among other things. Its purpose is to reset the brain's reward system and could well benefit pilots during this crisis.

Peer Support and Other Helpful Resources

Several factors have been highlighted that may cause capacity buckets to be brimming even before arrival at work. Pilots pride themselves on their ability to put life's problems to one side before strapping in but these are highly unusual times. Psychologists have proven that mood and emotion can directly affect decision making and cognitive functioning.

Many pilots have reported unexpected and unpreventable mood changes during lockdown. Techniques to combat them should to be personalised but some generalised guidance may be appropriate. Pilots are well known for their resilience and most are happy to set about solving their own problems, given the opportunity. So vast is the array of resources available to pilots, finding the appropriate ones can prove challenging.

During a period of reduced flying or indeed anytime, if stress, anxiety or low mood are causing problems, the following ideas may help.

- Look after your sleep, exercise, diet and alcohol intake . Lockdown habits are hard to break

- Every evening, compose a schedule for the next day

- Establish short and long term projects: work vs. non-work, physical vs. intellectually stimulating, leisure based vs chores

- Maintain social contact with friends and family

- If you have never tried mindfulness, this is certainly the right time. Popular smartphone apps such as Headspace, Calm, Balance or Smiling Mind all offer slightly different introductions to a form of self-help that is becoming increasingly accepted in traditional medicine and psychology.

- Should these resources seem inadequate, please contact your company Employee Assistance Program or preferably, your Peer Support Program. The latter can be most useful in helping a pilot decide whether medical support is necessary and how best to procure it.

It is now more important than ever to be sensitive to our own and our colleague's state of mind. Look for the small clues from first report to the end of the trip. Listening properly takes practice but we are each other's guardians. If you hear information or emotion that makes you think "Yikes", don't be shy about recommending your peer support program. If you feel unable to do this, strongly consider contacting peer support on your colleague's behalf. You will be able to speak entirely confidentially and will rest easily knowing you have done the right thing.

Conclusion: Survival Plan

Having articulated the above, I feel I have been able to grasp and get my head around something that seems indescribable and insurmountable. This has enabled me to develop a personal survival plan that has restored a degree of personal control in an industry and set of circumstances in which I feel largely powerless. I have found it helpful to build my plan in the following ways:

Personal Survival

- How am I really holding up? On a physical, psychological, interpersonal, and financial level what is my actual, current status? It took a few honest conversations with those closest to me to get an accurate picture of how I am managing the current circumstances.
- What do I need to do to shore up my strengths and addressing those areas I am not doing so well in?
- What have I learned from this crisis about myself, those that I care about and how I spend my time, thoughts and energies?
- What am I going to do about this now, tomorrow, next week and next month?

Professional Survival

- How am I going manage my professional competency as a pilot?
- What is going to help me stay current, motivated and confident in my skills, where opportunities to do so are either limited or unclear?
- How am I going to manage my next Sim, my next line check?
- What is going to be like going back to work full-time? What personal and safety threats do I envisage? What am I looking forward to ?

Employment Survival

- What are the realistic prospects of loosing my job/ getting it back/ getting another?
- All things being equal, how much do I really want to continue being a pilot?
- What are my strengths, weakness/blindspots, options and threats - now and in the mid term?
- What is my Plan B and Plan C - one to stay in the industry, the other if I have to/want to leave it?
- How do I make myself more employable within the industry/ beyond it?

I genuinely hope this article has been as much benefit to someone else as it has been to me. If this the case, I would love to hear your thoughts and opinions.

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