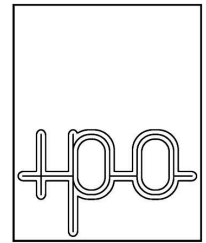




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Austrian Cockpit Association releases new, alarming study on pilot fatigue

A survey carried out among 422 airline pilots in Austria reveals that pilot fatigue is a reality in the cockpit, already today. 85% of pilots report that they have been on duty while being too tired for safe operations, and a third have even fallen asleep involuntarily. There is evidence on other fatigue related threats to safety, caused by the degradation of human performance with increasing fatigue. If duty time regulations continue to push beyond their natural capabilities, the fatigue related risk for safety will increase more than gradually.

For years, European regulations on flight and duty time limitations for pilots and cabin crew have allowed duties in excess of the limits deemed safe by scientists. Alarmed by polls showing Scandinavian pilots to be exhausted to the point where they involuntarily fell asleep while on flight duty, ACA has commissioned a survey to show if a similar problem exists in Austria. **The study was undertaken by Dr. Alois Farthofer of the Institute for Personnel and Organizational Development at the Johannes Kepler University of Linz, Austria.** It was not designed to gather new insight into the mechanism of fatigue but rather to confirm the existing evidence of fatigue and fatigue related problems.

Unfortunately the results are as alarming as those of the preceding Scandinavian studies. 44% of pilots perceive the current regulations to be a medium to severe safety risk while another 33% see only a small risk. Top problems related to the duty time regulation are fatigue while on flight duty (35%) and excessive duty times (23%). Barely 12% of respondents don't see any major problems with the current regulations. When invited to give individual comments, the top answers were changes between early and late reports, "earlies" followed by night flights and excessive night duties.

85% of pilots reported that they have already been on the flight deck while actually being too fatigued for flight duty, with two thirds having experienced that condition more than once. When exceeding a certain level of fatigue, the human body will simply take the sleep it needs, even when one tries to stay awake. One third of pilots reported that they have fallen asleep at the controls without prior coordination with the other pilot (under a "controlled napping" procedure). Nearly one half of those affected reported more than one such event.

Fatigue is a hazard to flight operations well before the point of nodding off. It is well established in scientific literature that fatigue results in physical, mental and emotional impairments. Among these are slowed reaction times, microsleeps, impaired judgment or reasoning, decreased attention, reduced concentration, reduced task achievement, heightened emotional sensitivity, etc.

So it does not surprise, that a quarter of the respondents report mistakes due to fatigue, e.g. wrong setting of switches, using wrong data for performance calculations, misunderstanding or even missing air traffic control instructions. Fortunately almost no incidents have so far resulted from these mistakes, with 95% answering in the negative.

Almost all participants experience sleep problems caused by irregular shift patterns, with more than 50% considering these to be safety relevant.

While the current EASA regulatory task excludes health and social aspects, three quarters have experienced during the last 12 months one or more symptoms of burnout such as emotional or physical exhaustion as a result of chronic overload. Other health problems include back pain, headaches and digestive problems. Nearly one third of pilots (29 %) have reported unfit to fly – due to fatigue – at least once during the preceding 2 years while another third (37 %) has called in sick.

While opinions about improvement or deterioration of working conditions in the past two years are balanced, 81% expect conditions to deteriorate over the next 12 months, with one half expecting a significant deterioration.

Summing up, the results show that the problems identified through scientific research are confirmed by pilots' experience in day-to-day flight operations. Without guidance pilots have identified as major problems some of those topics currently subject to diverging views in the EASA rulemaking group. **Excessive flight duties – especially during night time – and a rostering system ignoring the natural biological sleep rhythms and pilots' abilities to adapt to them, are a threat to flight safety. If airlines prevail with their demands for lax EU flight time limitation rules, pilots will be pushed beyond their fatigue related limits on task performance even further. As a consequence it can be expected, that safety problems will increase more than gradually.**

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