

1. Rationale

1.1 Commercial airline pilots are responsible for the safe carriage of thousands of people every day and the demand for air travel is predicted to double over the next 20 years. The aviation industry must invest in the wellbeing of their workforce to meet this demand and ensure safety is not compromised. It is very important that the application of psychology and the use of qualified psychologists is an integral part of that investment.

1.2. The physical wellbeing of commercial pilots is systematically verified—they must pass a medical based on ICAO standards and recommended practices and have yearly check-ups, However, mental health is not so easily established. The prevention and identification of mental health conditions before they lead to a crisis can be achieved if airlines implement high quality psychological monitoring and support and, where needed, assessment by qualified practitioners.

2. Background

2.1 Aviation personnel work in a unique environment and endure a range of stressors that may place them at increased risk of developing mental health issues. The incidence of mental health conditions in aviation workers is difficult to determine as pilots are reluctant to disclose problems for fear of losing their licence to fly. Regulatory body records suggest mental health conditions are second only to cardiovascular disease as a reason for loss of licence, so the application of psychology and use of qualified psychologists should be an integral part of the aviation industry's investment in the wellbeing of their staff.

2.2 Airlines and aviation operators should bring in policies for the psychological upskilling of the wider aviation workforce to promote its optimum wellbeing. They should insist on high-quality psychological assessment throughout a pilot's career, while pilots should be encouraged to understand their own mental health.

2.3 The association of the world's airlines, IATA, believes that the approach to reducing mental health risk needs to be multi-layered. That multi-layered approach includes pre-screening in the hiring stage and a number of ongoing monitoring opportunities, some structured, some ad-hoc. Various support mechanisms, from medical assistance to peer networks, should underpin the strategy. The relevance of peer networks is that sometimes we are not the first individuals to notice we have a problem and having trained peers is a valuable way of detecting early signs of mental health issues.

2.4 IATA affirms that self-reporting or colleague intervention is paramount to any successful initiative to combat mental health issues. According to IATA, the crux of the matter is creating a non-punitive environment that encourages self-reporting without unnecessary recrimination. Excluding pilots with a history of mental health issues from flying has a potentially detrimental effect on overall safety, as there is evidence this will further stigmatise mental health and drive the issue underground with pilots flying untreated or unmonitored.

2.5 The international standards and recommended practices in our aviation industry start from the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO), a UN-affiliated body with 192 member states. ICAO's Manual of Civil Aviation Medicine, published in 2012, suggests that medical reviews should include questions about "psychiatric disorders or inappropriate use of psychoactive substances". The manual lays out questions for medical examiners to ask on a variety of subjects, including depression, anxiety and use of alcohol and drugs.

2.6 Mental health issues have always been a risk factor of concern to civil aviation regulators all over the globe. In December 2016, ICAO issued a working paper to convene a task force that is charged with analysis of recent aviation accidents in which a mental health condition was cited as a “causal factor.” This action came as a result of several high-profile losses of air carrier flights in which a flight crew member was later identified as possibly suffering from depression or a related mental health state. Notable among these accidents are Germanwings Flight 9525 in 2015 and Malaysia Flight 370 that disappeared over the Indian Ocean in 2014 and other incidents that occurred within the last 10 years or so.

3. Objectives

This course aims to enhance the capacity and understanding in the aviation professional community among aviation medical examiners and psychologists on how to identify and address mental issues that impact the performance of aviation personnel. It fits well with the Foundation’s role of championing the cause of aviation safety in Africa. The Foundation's sole purpose is to provide impartial, independent, expert safety guidance and resources for the African aviation industry and that is what this course constitutes in the area of aviation medicine and aviation mental health. This course is the launch edition of this new program for the Foundation and is the first of its kind below the Sahara.

4. Instructor



Course instructor Erik Lely started his career in psychology with a masters of psychology from the Radboud University of Nijmegen in the Netherlands. From there, his career included a stint at the Centre for Man in Aviation where he was responsible for the selection and training of Royal Netherlands Air Force pilots with an emphasis on delivering crew resource management and leadership training courses. He was also involved with individual coaching of pilots. During his career he was trained at among others the famous University of Southern California in aircraft accident investigation and underwent training in aeromedical psychology at the United States Army School of Aviation Medicine.

5. Target audience

The target audience includes Chiefs flight operation, cabin crew managers, aviation medical examiners, psychologists, psychology students, human resource managers, crew chiefs, safety managers, government safety inspectors & aircraft dispatchers. The maximum number of course participants is 15 (9 registrations already in) on top of which the Foundation team will be with 3 people (instructor, facilitator and student assistant). Where the venue would allow, we may consider having 3 University of Rwanda staff/students as observers.

6. Key topics on the course include:

- International best practices on aviation mental health
- The work and personal lives of pilots and cabin crew
- Specific mental health risks associated with aviation
- Risk factors in personal life
- Aviation mental health & pilot licensing requirements
- Common mental health problems among aircrew
- Psychological assessment and reporting
- Overview of psychology of human factors and air safety and disaster support



A joint non-profit undertaking by:



A daily schedule will be produced shortly and handed out to the participants.

7. Venue & budgetary issues

The AviAssist Foundation is the only independent, non-profit organisation that exists to champion the cause of aviation safety in Africa. It often partners with national institutions in the country for the provision of venues. That way, it can keep the costs low and the courses accessible for African professionals. In Rwanda, the activities are deployed under the umbrella of the Foundation's first AviAssist Safety Promotion Centre (ASPC). ASPC-Rwanda founding partners include Rwanda Civil Aviation Authority, RwandAir, University of Tourism, Technology and Business Studies and the aviation academy of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. Ad-hoc and structural expansion of the partnership will be a common instrument to realise the ASPC's ambitions.

The Foundation will raise modest registration fees from the beneficiaries (participants). Funding for this launch edition of the course also comes from the Netherlands Ministry of Infrastructure with further support from KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, Amsterdam Airport Schiphol and RwandAir.

The combined funding allow the foundation to pay the expenses related to the instructor, course materials and the provision of teas & coffees as well as simple low budget lunches at the venue for the participants and the facilitator team.