

In Praise of **Good Instructors**

Following the CAA's eye-opening Dual Flight Training Review of 2014, the key to avoiding such accidents in the future may be valuing more highly the job flight instructors do.

In 2014 it was safer to fly solo than with an instructor. That was the bald finding of an investigation into a spike of dual lesson accidents over that year.

The investigators examined the logbooks of the instructors involved in those accidents. They found that when the instructors themselves were students, they were poorly supervised by their chief flying instructor and senior instructors. There was inadequate management of their training programme, and record keeping was below par.

The instructors had also received far too little tuition in preparation for their type ratings.

With the airlines on a recruitment drive, and the probability they will draw their new pilots from the pool of the most experienced and capable instructors, the CAA is concerned the number of dual training accidents may rise.

"It usually does," says Bill MacGregor, CAA's Principal Aviation Examiner, and one of the Flight Training Review investigators.

"When airlines recruit, shortly afterward there's a rise in such accidents. Then, as that new generation of instructors becomes more experienced, the accident rate falls again. Then the whole cycle begins again with the next round of airline recruitment."

That's why Bill and other senior CAA staff are working with industry to try to create a circuit-breaker.

It Begins with Governance and Management...

"Instructing is the very heart of the aviation industry," says Bill, "but it's not often regarded like that."

Marc Brogan, CAA Flight Examiner, recalls witnessing a conversation between a commercial pilot and his former instructor, where the CPL asked her, "When are you going to do some real flying?" She replied, "You get to do commercial flying only because I taught you so well."

"Instructors are professionals," says Bill. "Not just in the sense of being paid and not amateur, but in the sense of possessing specialist skills, of being highly competent, of complying to technical and ethical standards, of working with integrity."

Marc, himself an A-cat, says a good instructor is a real 'teacher'.

"Teachers inspire, motivate, and excite their students. We're all reliant on them doing their job well for the future of aviation safety in New Zealand."

Bill thinks it would be great to see more organisations value those qualities more highly.

"It's not rocket science that people who feel valued by their employer are going to take more pride in what they do, and have a commitment to doing it well," says Bill.

One way is ensuring that instructors are remunerated fairly, acknowledging the critical role they play in aviation safety as professional aviators.

"If training organisations do it right," says Bill, "they'll have a much better product to sell."

"A 'race to the bottom' is no good for safety, or, in the end, for business," he says.

Bill says treating instructors poorly incurs costs that may not be obvious, such as those associated with high staff churn.

"It takes thousands of dollars to recruit and train someone new and get them to an effective standard. If organisations can encourage their instructors to stay, it will, in the end, save them money."

Even if an organisation cannot increase what they pay an instructor, they can show they value instructing work in other ways: putting a professional development plan into practice, taking an interest in the instructor's career, encouraging them to add to their skill set, acknowledging good work, and having a transparent pathway of promotion.

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The benefits of such professional development would be two-fold: the instructor would feel excited and motivated by their organisation taking such an interest in them, and they would become a better instructor.

Jeremy Anderson, Chief Flying Instructor with Nelson Aviation College, and recipient of the 2014 CAA Flight Instructor Award, explains, "Continuous training is the key to a good instructor and this should extend beyond our C-cats."

"I think that, at times, organisations assume that once an instructor passes a B-cat flight test, no further training is required. That's not the case. B-cats have more privileges and therefore more responsibility, which means they should, in some ways, have more training and supervision than an experienced C-cat. The same applies to new A-cats. Nobody knows everything."

Bill emphasises there are some great training schools throughout New Zealand.

"They treat their instructors with the respect and encouragement they deserve, and while the sirens' song of airline jobs will always be a temptation, those schools have fewer problems retaining their staff."

Marc Brogan says holding on to staff is key to muting the rise in accidents after an airline recruiting drive.

"If organisations can retain at least some of their more experienced staff for just a few months longer, even a year, it will have a significant downstream effect on the accident rate."

...But it Relies on Good Instructors

Bill and Marc have taken their 'Aviators as Professionals' presentation around New Zealand over the last six months.

Their chief concern is the lack of instructors coming on stream at a time when experienced ones are moving on to the airlines.

"We're going to have some very inexperienced people entering the instructing pool," says Marc. "That in itself raises the risk of dual flight accidents happening.

"But if those instructors are conscious about continually raising their game, and about 'being professional', that alone will help to mute any spike in the accident rate.

"We need people with not just great flying skills, but with the talent and desire to pass those on; people with superior airmanship; people wanting, not just to conform to standards, but to surpass them; and people with a commitment to their current organisation and its students, even if their end goal is a job with the airlines.

"We need only one generation of instructors working with integrity, and dedication to their students' progress, for that instructing culture to be handed down from then on.

"And any good instructor will tell you," says Bill, "there's huge reward in doing it well." ■