



// Suzie Calder, who's the senior person responsible for the system for safety management (the safety manager) at Rural Air Work, discussing SMS reporting and risk management with pilot Alex McHardy.

# WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SENIOR PERSON

You're joining the management team as a senior person – a long-held goal. It's your chance to have real, positive influence in the organisation. Here's some guidance on that.

## What is a senior person?

The term 'senior person' describes someone accountable for the safe outcome of an aviation activity.

Other authorities and other sectors use terms such as 'accountable executive', 'nominated post holder', and 'nominated person'. 'Senior person' means the same thing. You're a person specifically approved by the CAA to be held accountable for safety at the highest levels of the organisation.

## Staying on top of the role

In the same way an initial private pilot licence is regarded as a 'licence to learn', being accepted as a senior person means you have met the minimum requirements for acceptability. This is just the beginning of your journey.

As the Good Aviation Practice booklet, *How to be a senior person* says, "It would be a mistake for a newly appointed senior person to think they were now 'through the gate' and they can take their foot off the pedal. »

## MULTIPLE HATS

“As a senior person you’ve become an integral part of the management team,” says CAA flight operations inspector Neil Dodds, “but that also has to sit alongside any operational role you may also be carrying out.

“So you’re wearing multiple hats and it can become a bit of a balancing act. Being able to see your roles individually and independently is a good skill to gain.”

The CAA’s manager of security regulation, David Willing, says competing work priorities may draw someone away, or distract them, from what they need to be focussing on as a senior person.

“An ‘elsewhere focus’ potentially degrades skills and knowledge, because they’re not being used all the time,” he says.

“Your ability to fully understand what the big risks and key tasks are will help you plan, prioritise and communicate within your organisation.”



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» “It’s a role you should be able to grow into,” says CAA flight operations inspector Neil Dodds. “You need to keep up-to-date with changes in the civil aviation rules and how to comply with them, and with changes in your organisation’s exposition and other documentation.

“A good senior person is honest, professional and has a high degree of integrity,” says Neil. “The role requires persistent commitment to safety and/or security, to accountability, and to continual self-directed professional development.”

That includes attending user group meetings, participating in professional seminars, taking a full part in management discussions and decisions about safety, and mentoring younger or newer members of staff in what it means to have a safety and security culture.

It also involves communicating with the other senior persons in the organisation, and with the CAA, and having the assertiveness and courage to fight for safety or security measures when there are road blocks.

*How to be a senior person* concludes, “To retain the position, [a senior person needs to] constantly illustrate that they are positive, proactive, and constructive.”

“And senior persons,” says Neil, “may find themselves being an educator, auditor, assessor and systems manager all in the same day.”

A job for the work-shy, it is not.

## Accountability and responsibility

For leaders wanting to improve the performance of their safety management system, understanding the difference between accountability and responsibility is key. The terms are often used interchangeably, but they have distinct meanings that could prove crucial to the success of a business.

For example, a senior person may be *accountable* for airworthiness and may themselves accomplish all the tasks associated with that. Or they may delegate those tasks to someone else. That second person is *responsible* for getting those tasks done successfully, but the senior person is still accountable – can be held to account – for those tasks being done successfully. Responsibility can be shared or delegated, but accountability cannot.

Neil Richardson, a UK-based safety management specialist, says, “Accountability is a key element of effective leadership and is essentially about taking ownership to ensure responsibilities are met.

“Accepting that you can be ‘held to account’ helps avoid blame, builds trust and develops responsibility – which are positive assets to any operation.

“Accountability and responsibility are not mutually exclusive and can exist at all levels in the business. Any person with responsibilities can and should be held to account for their actions with *ultimate* accountability residing in the most senior position.”

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Seeing accountability as something you choose and a way to get directly involved with the success of your operation will help make your engagement with the CAA a positive experience.

## Part of the team

The manager of the CAA's monitoring and inspection team, Steve Kern, says it's important a part-time senior person is not 'siloed' from the rest of the management team.

"They have a critical contribution to make to the organisation's management of safety and must be included in key management meetings, risk management, and decision-making.

"Not only must the owner/chief executive recognise this, so must the senior person themselves. Unfortunately, we regularly come across part-time senior persons who've never been included in a management review, let alone other key management functions."

Jim Finlayson has been a senior person for a number of companies in the training manager role.

He says the main challenge is being visible and being involved in the overall company activities, not just the specialist senior person role.

"As a senior person, you have a responsibility to know what the company is doing. Particularly in an SMS context, you must be involved enough to be an active participant in the company decision-making, whichever position you hold. »

## IS TIME ON YOUR SIDE?

It's the nature of today's aviation world, that senior persons are increasingly not full-time, onsite employees of an operation.

Sometimes, particularly in smaller organisations, that's entirely appropriate. What's important is that the senior person, who may have several clients, can carry out the full responsibilities of the role, in spite of limited time physically at each organisation.

CAA flight operations inspector Neil Dodds says that even for someone whose senior person role is of a part-time nature, "The responsibility of the role sits with you for the period you hold that role.

"While there are duties you can reassign, you're ultimately accountable for those duties being completed."

The Good Aviation Practice booklet *How to be a senior person* says, "It's very hard to promote change, and to supervise and monitor the organisation completely from afar.

"So it's expected [the senior person] will exercise visible leadership and allocate an appropriate amount of time to onsite activities."

## THE SYSTEM RELIES ON YOU

A successful management system depends on the team of senior persons working together to measure and analyse the performance of the system.

"Think of this working together as a 'handshake' where the output of one senior person's efforts becomes the input to another person's efforts, ie, the linkage between one functional area and another," says Trevor Jellie, a technical specialist with CAA's monitoring and inspection unit.

"As a senior person you're not only accountable for your particular patch, you're also accountable for the 'handshake' that must occur with your fellow senior managers. Many threats to safe operation occur at these handshake boundaries. If these handshakes fail, the system will fail.

"As a senior person you must continually think at a systems level and look for threats to the operation as a whole, not just your particular area of responsibility."

## OBLIGATIONS TO HSWA

CAA monitoring and inspection technical specialist Trevor Jellie says if senior persons are meeting their CAA safety management system obligations, they'll also be meeting their obligations, in terms of accountability, to current health and safety legislation.

“The Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 and the safety management system required by Part 100 both require that staff, customers and the public are protected from harm.

“The expectation of accountability under HSWA is consistent with the ICAO framework for a safety management system.

“In this context, accountability means an obligation of a person to ensure a safety-related task is carried out as required, and to be ultimately answerable for this in accordance with agreed expectations.

“As a senior person, you must be accountable for your actions and hold others to account.”

## IF YOU'RE STRUGGLING

Reach out to others in the same role and ask how they handle situations. Organise regular catchups with other safety managers in your area. If you feel comfortable doing so, call the CAA to talk about an issue.

For a refresher, visit [aviation.govt.nz](http://aviation.govt.nz) and search for 'senior person' in the rules, and advisory circulars. Have a look at Advisory Circular AC100-1 *Safety Management*.

Read “The changing role of the senior person” in *Vector* Jan–Feb 2018, and other senior person articles in *Vector* Nov–Dec 2006, Jan–Feb 2012 and Mar–Apr 2012.

Download a copy of *How to be a senior person* and *How to be a safety manager* Good Aviation Practice booklets from [aviation.govt.nz](http://aviation.govt.nz) > safety > safety advice > Good Aviation Practice booklets.

# // Demand to be part of management meetings. You have a duty to keep them up-to-date, even if they don't ask. //

» “That means being often on site, being involved in company management and safety meetings, and having a voice.

“You must be an energetic, full-functioning member of company management.”

The ‘not-really-part-of-management’ attitude is common for maintenance controllers (the senior person responsible for the control and scheduling of maintenance), especially if they're also the maintenance provider. This is because they're often in an offsite workshop while the rest of management sits in the office at the operation's base.

CAA airworthiness inspector Robert van Asch says that physical separation potentially leads to a leadership and decision-making separation as well.

“The maintenance controller is just as responsible as the rest of the senior person muster to make sure they're included in discussions, decisions, policy-making and direction of safety in an organisation.

“But in this situation, sometimes when you talk to operators, they talk about ‘them’ – *their* senior person responsible for the control and direction of maintenance – and ‘us’ – the rest of management. And vice versa when you talk to an offsite maintenance controller.”

CAA flight examiner (engineering standards) Garry Hackett agrees any senior persons – including maintenance controllers and anyone not permanently on site – have an obligation to communicate fully with the rest of management.

“You know things the rest of them don't know. They don't have your skills or experience and your current awareness of what's happening with the airworthiness of their aircraft.

“Demand to be part of management meetings. You have a duty to keep them up-to-date, even if they don't ask.”

## Operator responsibilities

A technical specialist with the CAA's Security Regulation Unit, Mark Stephen, says the responsibility for a senior person doing their job properly lies as much with their company, as it does with the individual.

"I don't believe you can have a robust management system without picking up that you have a senior person who's struggling," Mark says.

Mark interviews senior person candidates for regulated air cargo agents (RACAs). He says the organisation is also responsible for putting someone up as a senior person candidate who's experienced in their field and enthusiastic about how they can contribute to the organisation.

"Senior person responsibilities should not be looked on simply as a box tick for an organisation to stay certificated.

"For instance, a demonstrably good senior person in a RACA will give confidence to their company and the CAA, that the checks and balances necessary for a secure supply chain of cargo are in place.

"While RACA quality assurance is ultimately about the security, and therefore safety, of passengers who're sharing the aircraft with cargo, it's also about the reputation of the RACA through whose hands that cargo has passed.

"The value of an energetic and conscientious senior person is of huge benefit to the organisation. It can't be underestimated."

The Good Aviation Practice booklet, *How to be a safety manager*, says a senior person is entitled to feel supported by their chief executive – themselves the senior person ultimately accountable for all aspects of the operation.

"You also have to have the right resources – and enough of them – and the authority to make decisions about safety that will be taken on by staff. That's largely the CEO's responsibility," says the booklet.

"The CEO must show the rest of the staff that they are committed to what the [senior person] is doing. That's not just a matter of saying they're committed. The CEO must also provide the resources needed for the [senior person] to do their job properly, and model, by their actions, that they are participating, supporting, and engaged with the safety [and security] programme." 

Comments or queries?

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# A BLACK BOX FOR GA

## EXPLAINING THE UNEXPLAINED



FENZ and DOC say aircraft carrying their personnel must now have a cockpit data recorder.

**I**n the last decade there have been seven deaths in four fatal accidents of aircraft carrying out operations for Fire and Emergency New Zealand and the Department of Conservation.

Some of those who've died have been workmates and friends of Richard 'Mac' McNamara who leads the aviation team at Fire and Emergency New Zealand. For him, doing whatever he can to improve aviation safety is personal.

"Too many crashes around the world," he says, "have no confirmed cause, and that's no longer acceptable."

So Mac, and his opposite number at the Department of Conservation, Aviation Risk Advisor Jeremy Feasey, have spearheaded the 1st November 2021 mandate that all aircraft transporting their staff must be equipped with a cockpit video, audio and data recorder. 

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