



WHO ‘DOES’ SMS AT YOUR PLACE?

The safety manager may be the initial go-to of a safety management system, but everyone needs to be responsible for its success.



“**T**o be honest, it was a bit overwhelming.” That was Alex Turnbull’s first reaction when he began coming to terms with safety management systems.

Alex is one of six pilots at Air Milford, and the company’s safety manager.

Fortunately his sense that there was just too much to establishing an SMS didn’t last long.

“After studying the ‘how to do an SMS’ stuff for a while, I realised we were doing most of it already.”

Although Air Milford is an SMS Group One operation, it’s more like a Group Two organisation in size. Specialising in scenic trips around the Milford and Queenstown regions, the Part 125 organisation has 12 employees and five aircraft.

“Being smaller, and already having a robust QA system in place, definitely made the move to SMS easier,” says Alex.

Initially it was Alex who was tasked with drafting what he thought was needed.

“I took that to management, and importantly, could show them from a practical point of view, how straightforward I believed the transition to SMS would be.

“Up until then, it would be fair to say, they didn’t relish the idea of SMS, but once they realised it was basically what we were doing already, they bought into it.”

British SMS specialist Neil Richardson says the development of a safety management system must begin at the top.

“Management needs to lead the way, to ‘show willing’ so a genuine safety culture develops – that means across the entire organisation and includes external stakeholders.

“If the safety manager is the only one advocating the safety message and trying to make decisions, then it is less likely to succeed.”

With management and senior staff on board, Alex then brought in the wider staff.

“It was important that I could reassure them that SMS wasn’t going to be that unfamiliar to them.

“Because we’re such a small operation, everyone has multiple roles – the accountant can sometimes be out on the apron loading and unloading planes – so everyone could have input into what our SMS would ultimately look like.”

In some ways, Alex says, SMS is almost not on Air Milford’s conscious radar.

“It’s so much a part of our day-to-day activity, we don’t always think about it explicitly. It’s not something that’s special or put on top of what we do ‘for safety.’”

Neil Richardson says the role of safety manager should be that of trusted advisor, not sole operational decision-maker.

“It’s senior leaders who need to satisfy themselves that ‘risk owners’ are making sound decisions about lowering that risk to as low as reasonably practicable.

“And other staff, who sometimes know what the real issues are, or who are best placed to help, should also have a place at the SMS table.

“It’s not always just the safety manager and leadership with the bright ideas.”

Alex says the biggest difference between the previous QA system and SMS is that safety decisions are discussed, communicated and documented in a more structured way.

“Although even a very minor incident would never go unexamined, we wouldn’t always formally document how we were going to stop it happening again.

“Now, that’s written down so everyone has access to it.”

Alex has also devised an ‘operations notice system’ – a board for written messages and the initials of each pilot, accompanied by a coloured tag.

“When I, or the chief pilot, issue a new message, the tags next to each pilot’s initials are turned to red. That way, the pilots know there’s a new message they must read.

“When they’ve read it, they sign the board and turn their tag over to green, and I can see the message has been read.”

Alex has also made more use of internal emails.

“I know there’s a bit of pushback these days about email messages. But if you use them sparingly and only for really important messages, they’re a good way of getting a message out while you think of it and are maybe short of time; and unlike a paper note, they can’t get lost.”

An added advantage with email messages, of course, is that the sender can also set up an auto-confirmation message, so they know the recipient has received the email.

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Alex is also improving the way staff can report concerns.

“If you give someone a pen and paper and ask them to write it down, they groan. If they can do it electronically they’re much more likely to comply.”

Alex is therefore working on a fillable electronic document to make it quicker and easier to report.

“SMS encourages you to look at the procedures in your manuals from a practical viewpoint and question, ‘in reality, does this actually work for us?’ Our reporting system was a good example of that.”

Alex also says SMS is never going to be perfection. “You’ve got to keep examining what you’ve put in place and ask, ‘does that still work for us?’”

That’s why Alex chose not to use an outside consultant to draw up an SMS plan for Air Milford.

“I needed someone with an intimate knowledge of how the operation works,” he says.

Air Milford has various kinds of safety meetings.

“We have formal, dedicated, documented safety meetings, with minutes. We have casual, almost spontaneous ‘cup of tea’ meetings, particularly with the pilots. Sometimes we start out like that but actually they become more formal because a good decision is reached and that decision needs to be documented.”

Alex tries to call formal safety meetings when most staff are present.

“It’s not always easy. We’re a seven-day operation and there’s always someone having a day off.

“But I bribe them with a good cup of coffee to come in for just an hour, to take part. That seems to work well,” he laughs. ➤