Aviation incident reporting in Sweden: empirically challenging the universality of fear

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Abstract

To support the efforts of the Swedish Civil Aviation Authority to improve their reporting system an investigation is underway which looks at the factors which influence people's willingness to report incidents. This study consists of interviews with employees at a cross-section of airlines, as well as data gathering from the Swedish media and other sources. This paper examines the cultural issues which form the backdrop of the research. The issues of trust, fear, and blame are particularly interesting, since Sweden is a relatively non-punitive society with an extremely liberal freedom of information act. Questions about the universality or cultural dependence of fear arose because the theories on incident reporting originate mainly from English speaking countries and the structure of the reporting system in Sweden appears successful even though it defies the main tenets of those theories. Results from cultural comparisons by Geert Hofstede, and Helmreich and Merritt are interpreted as they apply to the study topic. The initiative taken by the Swedish CAA to embark on this project could be an example to other organizations to carry out broadening checks even when an existing 'safety system' appears to be successful.

Introduction

Incident reporting schemes are used in aviation as a tool for communicating near-miss experiences with other practitioners. This shared information can be used to identify and address safety concerns with the objective of avoiding accidents (see Johnson, 2000, 2003 for other potential benefits). Incident reporting systems are mandatory for the majority of commercial flight operations (including all airlines) within the current jurisdiction of the Joint Airworthiness Authority (JAA). Whereas it was (in theory) optional for European nations to join the JAA, compliance with regulations of the JAA's newly formed successor, the European Aviation Safety Authority (EASA) will be mandatory for all European Union (EU) member states.

The EASA regulation requiring individual companies to establish and run internal incident reporting systems will take effect in July, 2005 (Official Journal of the EU, 2003). The requirements provide basic guidance as to the structure and approach of the reporting system but beyond that it becomes the responsibility of the organisation to fulfil the requirements to whatever extent, and using whatever methods, they deem