

Private aviation: Private flying becomes safer

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Flying on business in private aircraft is growing safer at the same time as the rate of accidents among airlines is increasing.

There were 11 fatal accidents involving business jets and turboprops last year resulting in the deaths of 40 passengers and crew, according to an exclusive analysis of incident statistics produced by the Ascend aerospace consultancy

The total is sharply down on the corresponding figure of 16 accidents in 2009, with 67 deaths, and 28 accidents in 2008 with 97 deaths. That partly reflects the sharp fall in miles flown in the wake of the global economic downturn. However, the 2010 figures are still much lower than the average for the past 10 years of 23.1 accidents and 73.2 deaths per year.

The fatal accident rate went from about one per 1,700 aircraft overall in 2009, to one per 2,500 aircraft last year, Paul Hayes of Ascend points out. And 2010's passenger and crew fatality rate was "better than one per 7,500 seat years, compared to one per 4,500 seats in 2009", he says.

Ascend's figures for airlines, released earlier this year, showed the number of fatal accidents in 2010 rising by 22 per cent to 28 compared with 23 in 2009. This was also worse than the 10-year average of 27.2, and took the number of passengers and crew killed from 731 in 2009 to 828 last year.

That meant the fatal accident rate rose from an all-time low of one per 1.5m flights in 2009 to one per 1.3m flights last year. But at least the overall direction of the accident statistics is in the right direction. The average rate for the 1990s was one per 700,000 flights.

Flight from quality

Meanwhile the airlines continue to do a fine job of discouraging people from flying – or encouraging them to seek alternatives such as private aviation.

The Ascend consultancy's annual survey of global corporate travellers who fly mainly business class with the airlines points to a sharp rise in travel this year – 49 per cent of those surveyed expect to fly more for business against 35 per cent last year and a mere 10 per cent in 2009.

But they're not happy about it, the survey, released this month, points out. Some 70 per cent of North Americans say airline service on board has declined in the past two years, and 40 per cent of them say no aspect of travelling on scheduled flights has improved. Apart from on-board service, the 380 corporate travellers surveyed cited delays at security queues and crowding on aircraft as having grown worse over the past two years.

A rapidly increasing number of airlines across the world are developing alliances with fractional or charter companies, or offering private jet services themselves. It is only to be hoped that some of the service quality that is an essential part of the mix in the business aviation world can trickle back to the airlines.

Licensed to fill forms

European aviation authorities, in keeping with their reputation of being highly effective generators of bureaucratic burdens, have put forward licensing rules requiring all foreign-licensed pilots residing in European Union countries to convert to a European licence.

This goes against the spirit of the international harmonisation of licences, under International Civil Aviation Organisation regulations hammered out over many years by national licensing bodies. It is, though, consistent with a series of planned measures from EU authorities, assuming responsibility for aviation from member countries' own bodies, that critics have called protectionist and aimed mainly at organisations and flight crew originating in the US.

Protectionist or not, should the EU licensing changes come into force they are likely to be costly and time-consuming for pilots and the companies that employ them – if they convert their licences. If they do not, the rules could well lead to pilot shortages. And passengers can expect extra costs to be passed on to them. All without any benefit to safety.

The US and the EU have, however, just thrashed out an initial agreement on some other areas on which they have locked horns. The General Aviation Manufacturers' Association, a Washington-based international body, says the bilateral agreement covering certification and maintenance opens the way to solving other contentious issues, such as flying licence restrictions.

Which could mean a very rare thing – a victory for common sense [over red tape](#).

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