

Mint Series | Skills deficit clips airlines' wings

As Indian carriers look to expand their fleet, they are faced with the twin challenges of training, retaining staff

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New Delhi: On 27 August last year, at least 14 passengers were injured after a stampede onboard a Jet Airways (India) Ltd flight triggered by the cabin crew's reaction to a false fire alarm while on the ground at Mumbai airport.

Some passengers on flight 9W2302, scheduled to fly from Mumbai to Chennai, jumped off the aircraft, suffered fractures and had to be hospitalized.

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A preliminary probe "has indicated serious procedural lapses in dealing with the emergency and evacuation situation, as per the existing procedures laid down in aircraft rules and regulations, by the operating aircraft crew members," aviation regulator Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) said of the incident.

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Two pilots and eight cabin crew members were suspended. An investigation was launched into what was labelled a "serious incident" by the regulator and the chief trainers at all the airlines were called for a meeting. No report has been made public on the investigation more than 10 months since then.

"Does that not say there is something wrong with the training procedures? Will somebody remind the airlines about their so-called strict and scientific selection process," asks Mohan Ranganathan, a Chennai-based safety expert and a member of the government-appointed Civil Aviation Safety Advisory Council.

As they embark on ambitious fleet expansion plans to meet an anticipated boom in air traffic, India's airlines face the twin challenges of training and retaining operational staff, including cabin crew. Demand for flight attendants, pilots and engineers is estimated to reach 90,000 by 2020, from 32,000 in 2011, says the Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation (Capa).

Cabin crew are trained in fire-fighting and emergency evacuations in case of a crash during takeoff or landing. They are taught basic first-aid and the use of portable oxygen for



emergency aid to passengers. They are also trained for evacuation in water (in case the plane is ditched in the sea), which also involves launching life rafts and getting passengers onto them.

In India, such training is done mostly in five-star swimming pools, where the conditions during such an event can't be replicated. Singapore Airlines Ltd and other carriers have training pools with wave generators that can simulate the rough seas.

Airlines seem to be lagging behind on training infrastructure. No carrier has a properly equipped training centre to teach its cabin crew how to fight a fire or how to carry out an evacuation of passengers in the event of an emergency, says captain Vijay Kumar, who moved to Singapore carrier Tiger Airways after many years of flying in India. That's hardly adequate to prepare crew members to deal with a possible emergency on the high seas.

Most do not possess even door trainers—cabin mock-ups equipped with doors. These are used to train cabin crew in opening and closing aircraft doors in normal conditions; in emergency evacuations on land, including identifying the correct door to open in case of fire; and evacuation in water, including choosing the correct door to open and launch life rafts.

In-house abilities

Kumar says airlines need to better plan their expansion and build in-house training institutions. "The good ones plan ahead, recruit and train," he says. "They know which HR (human resources) segment is in short supply and what it takes to train and retain them. Examples are airlines like SQ (Singapore Airlines), Cathay (Pacific), Emirates, etc."

"I remember a mechanic formerly with Swiss Air telling me that their training schedule for induction of new hires used to be finalized about 12 months in advance, even before someone was hired for that position," Kumar says. "Here, we plan only days in advance. BA (British Airways) has recently concluded interviews for pilots who will have to wait for nearly a year for induction."

A private airline official, who declined to be named, says most carriers set up "four rooms" for giving ground classes to pilots and say they have plenty of infrastructure.

"And you see, there is a 100% pass-out rate out of these internal classes," this official says. "What does it say if there is a 100% pass-out rate? It means that the system is not efficient enough and quality standards have been lowered."

Air India Ltd is the only airline in the country with a dedicated aviation training school in Hyderabad—the Central Training Establishment, or CTE—which grooms employees in all areas of aviation skills.

But this is also going to seed. A senior Air India official says the simulators at CTE are so old that when the pilots do their checks on them, they see two runways. The simulators don't work as they should while landing, defeating the

purpose of such training.

SpiceJet Ltd's chief executive officer Neil Mills says internationally, too, airlines don't make huge investments in infrastructure. Training infrastructure is beginning to come up in India too gradually, he says. SpiceJet, for example, has set up classrooms to provide in-house training this fiscal.

Frankfinn Institute of Air Hostess Training and others like it provide grooming lessons and impart basic theoretical knowledge about dealing with emergencies to would-be flight attendants.

Students are taught about situations such as emergency evacuations of passengers and ditching in water, says trainer Swarcha Agnihotri at Frankfinn.

"Every airline has their own standards and a way of teaching, so we don't expect them (trainees) to know all of these," Agnihotri says.

Concerns about safety and lack of experienced professionals are not peculiar to India alone. London-based consulting firm **Ascend Worldwide Ltd's** annual global survey of aviation professionals showed 52% believe airline safety will stay the same or worsen over the next five years.

There was a slump in confidence over safety standards, with 43% saying they believe safety has stayed the same or become worse in the past five years, up from 41% last year and 32% in 2009.

When asked to rank what the greatest threat to improvement in global airline safety would be over the medium term, the respondents ranked a shortage of experienced personnel as the No. 1 risk. "It's understandable that people are concerned about a lack of experienced personnel, given that future shortages of pilots, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, have repeatedly made headlines," says Ascend's director of safety Paul Hayes.

Fleet expansion

In India, the problem is particularly acute. The country's domestic and international passenger traffic is expected to triple to 450 million by 2020 from 2010, to prepare for which airlines are dramatically expanding their fleets. They will need the number of skilled personnel to keep pace.

At the Paris Air Show in June, low-cost carrier IndiGo ordered 180 planes and GoAir 72 from European plane maker Airbus SAS.

"We have 400 aircraft to deliver to Indian carriers," says Airbus India president Kiran Rao, referring to the swelling order book. "Nearly 200 have already been delivered since the start of Airbus. What we are seeing now is India growing from a start-up market to a mature territory."

Boeing India president Dinesh Keskar predicted that the country will buy 1,320 planes worth \$150 billion (Rs 6.7 trillion today) over the next 20 years, raising an earlier prediction of 1,150 new planes worth \$130 billion.

The company estimates that the Indian market will grow 15% annually over the next five years. In a 20-year period, it is expected to average 8% growth.

For India's airline managers, the challenge is to ensure profitability with safety.

"When all these aeroplanes start coming in, the system will collapse unless the whole aviation industry, including service providers, sync their infrastructure and cater for the growth and increased demand," says Shakti Lumba, a veteran airline executive with more than 30 years of experience with Alliance Air and IndiGo.

Airlines are aware of the magnitude of the challenge. At a 24 May meeting of airline executives with civil aviation ministry officials, GoAir's then chief executive Kaushik Khona said the aviation industry was confronting three major issues: "manpower, systems, infrastructure".

"He suggested that qualified manpower should be available and an appropriate safety system should be in place. He expressed concern over the high attrition rate of cabin crew," according to the minutes of the meeting reviewed by *Mint*.

Attrition

Attrition among cabin crew is considerable as foreign airlines, including Emirates, Oman Air, Qatar Airways, Malaysia Airlines, Singapore Airlines, China Eastern Airlines Corp. Ltd and AirAsia Berhad hire flight attendants from India.

"All these airlines are coming to recruit from India," says Samir Valia, vice-president at Frankfinn. "The first preference of the cabin crew is to join a foreign airline. It's a salary which no other profession could have started them on—anywhere between Rs 50,000 and Rs 2 lakh," of which the higher slab is offered by foreign airlines.

After cabin crew or ground staff jobs at international airlines, the next preference is for full-service domestic airlines Jet Airways, Air India and Kingfisher Airlines Ltd, followed by low-cost carriers SpiceJet and IndiGo, Valia says.

Besides higher salaries, foreign airlines have a wider network. "I have been to Moscow, Paris and so many other exotic cities. Indian carriers don't have that kind of network," says an Indian crew member working for Qatar Airways, who didn't want to be named.

Crew members get allowances for their halts, and free air tickets for their family and friends—a big draw for young cabin crew staff.

Emirates already has 703 Indians among its 12,000-strong cabin crew, which boasts 131 nationalities. This fiscal alone it will recruit 11 cabin crew members a day globally, or about 4,000 in the year to help expand the airline's huge network. "We recruit candidates who have both flying experience and those who may have come from other industries with relevant work and service experience," an Emirates spokesman said in an email reply to questions from *Mint*.

Jet Airways, which has 3,200 cabin crew staff for a fleet of 117 aircraft, acknowledges it's not easy getting people and holding on to them. "At Jet Airways, the biggest challenges we face are acquiring and retaining experienced staff/employee aspirations, countering growing demand and opportunities in the Gulf market, and maintaining employee motivation," the airline said in an email comment.

'Uncivil aviation'

To retain their staff, Indian carriers may even have to pay more than competing employers from abroad, Capa says in its 2011 outlook report.

"Airlines in particular are also concerned about where they will find the people to support their growth plans," Capa says. "A shortage of skills is already impacting their expansion, and this is the case not only in technical roles such as pilots and engineers, but also in management positions."

Compensation is already rising for certain categories of staff. For instance, SpiceJet and IndiGo are offering joining bonuses to pilots as a means of attracting talent. They are also promising better working conditions, including better hotel accommodation and duty rosters drawn up well in advance.

"Salaries for pilots/engineers and cabin crew went up only after HR migration started on a large scale in the mid-90s," says Kumar of Tiger Airways. "What can be done to retain them? Competitive pay (levels are comparable now to Middle East levels), company policies that create a sense of loyalty and pride, and job satisfaction. One main grouse of pilots in India is the lack of roster planning and many leave India simply to manage their personal lives better."

Former airline executive Lumba says the demand for skilled personnel will balloon across the board—qualified engineering staff, aircraft maintenance engineers, technicians, airport staff and firemen.

"All this manpower has to be trained, inspected, licensed, etc. So, one has to keep in mind that these aircraft orders have a cascading effect on the industry as a whole and more importantly the regulator," he says.

"If the government and DGCA are not proactive, they would be the biggest impediment to the growth of Indian aviation," he warned. "These guys have till now been in a reactive mode resulting in 'uncivil aviation'. It's time the industry was restored to civil aviation."

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This is the concluding part of a four-part series on airline safety that looked at issues related to hiring and training that compromise safety. This is Mint's third series on air safety. In the first series, we explained how India's aviation boom had been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the risk of mishaps. In the second, we looked at operational, infrastructural, and regulatory issues that compromised air safety.