

Ryanair crews' no-frills idea: Drop the boss

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Ryanair's Michael O'Leary has for years endured complaints from passengers about his famously no-frills Irish airline.

Now a senior Ryanair pilot has taken the rare step of publicly challenging his boss after the outspoken chief executive said he was trying to convince authorities to let his aircraft fly with only one pilot. A flight attendant could do the job of a co-pilot if needed, Mr O'Leary said last week, because "the computer does most of the flying now".

Captain Morgan Fischer, who trains other pilots at Ryanair's Marseilles base, says he knows the airline is dedicated to keeping its costs as low as possible, so why not go one better – **and replace Mr O'Leary with a junior flight attendant?**

"I would propose that Ryanair replace the CEO with a probationary cabin crew member currently earning approximately €13,200 net per annum," Capt Fischer has written in a letter to the Financial Times, **which reported Mr O'Leary's comments last week.**

"Ryanair would benefit by saving millions of euros in salary, benefits and stock options," the captain said, and there would be no need for approval from the authorities.

Mr O'Leary quibbled with some of Capt Fischer's numbers but, in characteristically mischievous mode, he effected to agree with some of his points.

"Michael thinks that cabin crew would make a far more attractive CEO than him – this obviously isn't a very high bar – so we are going to seriously look at the suggestion," said Stephen McNamara, a Ryanair spokesman. "After all, if we can train cabin crew to land the plane, it should be no problem training them to do Michael's job as well."

Capt Fischer, 41, who has been based in Marseilles for the past five years and has 20 years' flying experience, mostly with **TWA** and American Airlines, declined to comment further on Monday.

Mr O'Leary is well known for his ability to generate headlines with eye-catching ideas, from coin-operated lavatories to "fat taxes". But his thoughts on ditching co-pilots – first raised in a Bloomberg Businessweek interview earlier this month – seem to have struck a sensitive nerve among some.

Ryanair employees have complained to the media in the past, but most have done so anonymously.

Seeing a pilot publicly poke fun at Mr O'Leary, as Capt Fischer has done, is "extremely unique", said Capt Evan Cullen, president of the Irish Airline Pilots' Association, **who has also written to the FT about Mr O'Leary's comments.**

Capt Cullen was provoked by Mr O'Leary's suggestion that, in 25 years, Ryanair had had only one pilot who had suffered a heart attack in flight, "and he landed the plane".

Capt Cullen said Mr O'Leary must have been referring to a 2002 incident in Belgium when a pilot collapsed with a heart attack shortly after take-off from Charleroi airport south of Brussels. A doctor on board who assisted the pilot described him as "clinically dead", according to a report by Ireland's Air Accident Investigation Unit, and the co-pilot had to return the aircraft to the airport.

"The safety implications are obvious, as is the reason for having two qualified pilots in the cockpit," said Capt Cullen.

Mr McNamara said this was not the incident Mr O'Leary had been referring to, "although the fact that the first officer landed the aircraft without incident underlines the fact that a first officer in the cabin, or a suitably-trained cabin crew, could readily land an aircraft in such an emergency".

He said the issue at stake was that aircraft were now heavily automated, and with more than 500,000 flights a year the second pilot was rarely, if ever, called on to land in an emergency.

Some safety experts disagree. "It is true that aircraft are far safer today than ever before and many of the processes have been automated," said Paul Hayes, air safety director at Ascend aviation consultancy. "But in a high work-load situation, say an instrument approach in congested air space or in an emergency, I'd still like to have a pilot and co-pilot working together as a team."

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