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## Air Safety's Quality Control

Staffing Allocations  
Raise New Concerns  
About Proper Practices

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More planes are flying than ever before, but the number of people who do everything from piloting them to fixing them isn't keeping pace. The growing shortage is raising fresh concerns about air safety.

Industry and government experts are worried that a looming dearth of pilots, aircraft inspectors and air-traffic controllers around the world could place new strains on maintaining some of the advances in airline safety of the past two decades.

In a recent survey of 142 aviation professionals world-wide, 56% said they expect airline safety will stay the same or decline in the next five years, according to British consulting group Ascend Worldwide Ltd., which conducted the poll. The primary reason cited: a shortage of experienced personnel.



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An engineer checks an engine of an aircraft in the Garuda Maintenance Facility in Jakarta.

"We know how to make the system even safer than it is, but we're going to lose ground if we fail to manage growth within the limits of our human resources," says Bill Voss, president of the Flight Safety Foundation, an international nonprofit organization based in Washington.

Some of the strains have already begun to show. Recent independent safety audits found a glaring need for technical personnel in countries including India, Israel and Belgium. In India, one of the world's fastest-growing aviation markets, half of the jobs in some government aviation-oversight offices were vacant.


In the U.S., staffing problems among both carriers and federal regulators were partly to blame for recent maintenance lapses at **Southwest Airlines Co.** and **AMR Corp.**'s American Airlines, which resulted in airport chaos because of canceled flights. Across Europe, airlines often are forced to zigzag around big countries such as Poland and others that don't have enough air-traffic controllers. Even oil-rich Norway has 20% too few air-traffic controllers, according to the Norwegian airspace agency.

Thursday, the International Air Transport Association, or IATA, a global trade group, plans to release safety statistics for 2007 that show a rise in the overall number of airliner accidents from 2006, albeit with fewer total fatalities, after several years of declines in the world-wide accident rate. ([Read more about the report.](#)<sup>1</sup>)

The consequences extend beyond just safety. Personnel shortages could also crimp sales at aerospace companies, including **Boeing Co.** and **European Aeronautic Defence & Space Co.**'s Airbus unit. Jetliners already sit idle in parts of Latin America for lack of pilots.

Behind the new worries about safety are massive changes whipsawing the global aviation industry. In mature markets like the U.S. and Western Europe, soaring fuel prices and rising competition from budget carriers are

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squeezing airline finances and forcing airlines to do more with less. Smaller work forces and cost-cutting measures like loading and refueling planes in a hurry leave staff less margin for error, industry officials warn.

Meanwhile, fast-growing countries such as China, India and some Middle Eastern states are snapping up jetliners as never before. Airline fleets and passenger numbers are growing so quickly that airports, air-traffic controllers and safety inspectors can't keep up. Rich new markets like Persian Gulf emirates are handling breakneck growth by hiring staff from other countries, compounding staff shortages in countries from Europe to Africa.

Flying is still much less risky than it was two decades ago, even in parts of Africa and Asia long prone to air disasters. Today, crashes in the U.S. are at an all-time low and deaths from air crashes world-wide are also near historical lows, with about one crash for each million departures.



Industry and government experts over recent years have jumped in to help countries where accidents surged, including South Korea, Nigeria and Russia. Also, international groups have publicized the most egregious shortcomings, prompting many countries to tighten lax regulation, officials say.

The European Union in 2006 created a global blacklist of countries and carriers considered unsafe, which also has jolted many countries to boost safety. IATA has ratcheted up minimum safety standards for all of its 240 airlines.

But the industry has yet to grapple with the shortage of personnel. The gap is most pronounced for pilots. "It's time to ring the warning bell on pilot

availability" and devise new solutions because "this is an issue that will face all of us," says IATA Director General Giovanni Bisignani.

Some experts project a shortage of 42,000 pilots world-wide by 2020. Pilot-union leaders say some U.S. carriers are using special programs allowing co-pilots to fly with as few as 50 hours of cockpit time in big planes -- far below the hundreds of hours usually required -- because of intense demand. Filling the gap won't be easy because educating pilots takes years.

In Western countries, an entire generation of military-trained pilots is hitting retirement and air forces aren't churning out enough replacements. Sophisticated fleets of business jets are expanding quickly and sucking up cockpit crews who once would have worked on commercial flights. Small regional airlines, which generally hire young and less-experienced pilots and ground staff, have shifted from slow propeller planes to fast and more complicated new regional jets.

The shortage is raising concerns that some pilots don't have adequate training or experience to deal with adverse conditions, especially in developing countries. In Brazil, pilots at TAM Linhas Aéreas SA last year overshot a São Paulo runway and smashed a new Airbus jet into a building during stormy weather, killing more than 190 people. The pilots were apparently confused about how to reduce engine power and apply reverse thrust.

More than 110 people died aboard an Armenian airliner in May 2006 after pilots disagreed with controllers about the severity of weather conditions at their destination. The crew botched an aborted landing, missed

rudimentary steps to climb away safely, ordered contradictory maneuvers and ultimately slammed into the Black Sea.

Similar problems confront air-traffic management. The International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations, an umbrella group for controllers' labor unions, estimates global aviation faces a current shortage of 3,000 controllers. Federation officials argue that the shortage is actually much greater because many controllers are already working heavy overtime. In recent years, controllers' stress and fatigue have contributed to accidents in Brazil, Switzerland and the U.S.

Air-traffic managers say understaffing should create annoying delays -- not accidents -- because harried controllers put planes in holding patterns. But officials admit slips are possible. David McMillan, director general of Eurocontrol, a pan-European air-traffic management agency, said that when airspace is filled to capacity, "there are going to be more opportunities for things to go wrong."

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