

their training and safety management systems. [The Flight Safety Foundation LFAO working group](#) is coordinating efforts worldwide, and has collected several case studies on successful efforts at learning from all operations. Supported by NASA, our Embry-Riddle team recently conducted a [gap analysis](#) to determine what is needed to support individual and team resilient performance. Collectively, we are learning how organizations, managers, and flight crews can all take concrete steps to increase resilient performance by learning from all operations.

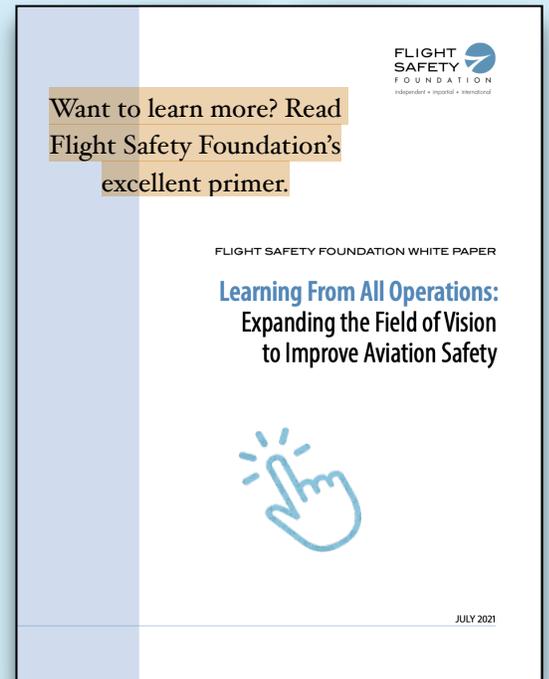
## TURNING IDEAS INTO ACTION

Here are some steps you can take today to increase your own contribution to system resilience, and help your organization build resilience on the flight deck:

- Take a moment, right now, and reflect on the past three flights in your logbook. Although you may consider these flights routine, think about what challenges you encountered. How did you handle them? What prior knowledge helped you? What attitudes and behaviors prepared you? What did you learn that you can apply to your next flight?
- Commit to debriefing your next flight with your crew. Consider adopting the phrase used by United Airlines, "What went well and why?"
- If you are in a management position in safety or training, think about how you can support your flight crews' resilient performance. Look into systems like [CloudAhoj P-FOQA](#), [FlightPulse](#), or [CEFA](#), all of which provide data feedback for pilots to examine their own routine performance.
- Share this article with your colleagues and get a conversation going. The first step in learning from all operations is understanding that we can learn from our successes as well as our failures.

To paraphrase Marit De Vos of Leiden University, in aviation it's like we've been trying to learn about marriage by only studying divorce. We all know there's more to professional aviation than avoiding disaster. ❖

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## All Hands on Deck *Small Flight Departments Face Unique Challenges*

JENNY SHOWALTER

I started working at my family's former FBO in Orlando in the mid-90s during college and joined the business full time in 1996. I still remember the buzz of hosting our first National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) Static Display. Our ramp was literally overflowing with light and mid-sized jets, and the Falcon 900 and Gulfstream GIV stood out as the heavyweights. That was also the year the Global Express made its debut, ushering in the era of ultra-long-range jets that now seem like old news.

Back then, and still today, Orlando's business aviation scene reflected what the data tells us: small operators are the heart of our industry. According to NBAA, members operating one or two aircraft make up roughly 80% of the association's membership. That includes a significant number of owner-flown and single-pilot operations. Recent years have seen a rise in individual aircraft ownership paired with outsourcing to management companies. These organizations help bridge gaps by providing access to dispatch, HR, chief pilots, and other support roles, easing some of the burden on small flight department teams.

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Although many benefit from that type of managed support, there are still plenty of stand-alone departments, and the day-to-day experience of a small operator remains distinct. As the wife, daughter, and sister of pilots flying for single-aircraft Part 91 operations, when I talk about the small operator experience, I'm not looking from the outside in. I've lived it. And in my work today as a business aviation career coach, I hear the same themes echoed by professionals working in these lean, high-trust environments.

## **WEARING ALL THE HATS**

It's easy to center conversations about safety around larger, more resourced flight departments. They have the structure, staff, and funding to make safety a dedicated function. But small operators? They operate with fewer hands and more shared responsibility. When one or two people are managing dispatch, scheduling, catering, maintenance oversight, and operational control, not to mention flying, the margin for error shrinks fast. There's a reason the phrase "many hands make light work" exists. In small operations, the opposite is often true. Everyone is doing more with less backup. Safety, no matter how important, can get pushed aside, like skipping a debrief or deferring a minor issue to save time.

Aircraft have evolved. The demands have multiplied. But the team size? Too often, it hasn't. Fast forward from when I joined the industry to today, and aircraft are bigger, faster, and capable of flying farther than the human body or a two-pilot flight department can realistically keep up with. The demands on small teams have grown, but the team size hasn't. For many, it's still the same handful of people trying to meet every operational, regulatory, and customer expectation without dropping a ball. That's where fatigue and burnout show up, and when they do, safety can be the first to feel the impact.

## **THE HIDDEN COST OF AVAILABILITY**

If the phrase "Take vacation while the plane is in maintenance" sounds familiar, you're not alone. Small operators are often on a short leash, expected to be available 24/7/365. Constant readiness might feel like part of the job. But over time, it chips away at quality of life, and safety. Growing up in aviation, I was trained from a young age for this lifestyle. I learned early on that my dad's primary role was to be available for work,

even when it was inconvenient. My dad, brother, and husband are among those who still live on call. Whenever we're making plans, my husband always gives the caveat, "subject to change," and I know I may have to handle things on my own if he gets called in.

This constant state of readiness isn't just tiring. It lessens your ability to stay sharp. When time, focus, and mental clarity disappear, so can the ability to consistently make safe decisions. Many of my coaching clients are professionals from small flight departments who open up about these same challenges. The pressure to always be available. The unspoken expectation that if you "haven't flown in two weeks, you must be rested and ready," even though you've been "on standby" the entire time. It's a dynamic that wears on even the most dedicated team member. The mental load of being perpetually prepared creates a quiet strain that doesn't always show up in logbooks, but it shows up in decision fatigue, strained communication, blurred roles, and safety shortcuts made under pressure.

## **LEADING WITH CLARITY IN CLOSE-KNIT TEAMS**

That strain can also show up in how leadership functions, or struggles, in small departments. If you're running a single-pilot operation and relying on steady contractors, it's usually clear who's in charge. But in a two-pilot operation, where both pilots are equally trained and typed, leadership can get murky. And when a principal is involved, the pilot in charge often serves a dual role, managing the relationship with the aircraft owner while also leading the team. That responsibility requires clear communication, not just with the principal, but within the department, to ensure aligned expectations.

When one of you leads on paper, but you operate as equals, it can build a strong, respectful rhythm, or create quiet tension. That relationship can be difficult to navigate if the lines of communication aren't open. Without clarity and trust, even the best-intentioned teams can find themselves off balance, and that uncertainty can spill into the way decisions are made and how risks are assessed.

I also hear about issues that go beyond structure. Things like eroded standards or relaxed norms, simply because the relationships are too close, and the same two or three people are always flying together. Familiarity can breed assumptions. Pre-flights, debriefs,

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reporting, SMS participation, and other safety practices start to slip, not out of neglect, but out of habit. It becomes easy to believe you're operating safely simply because you know each other well or because 'this is the way we've always done it.' But without structured checks and balances, those assumptions can create blind spots, and in aviation, blind spots are vulnerabilities.

### BRINGING SAFETY INTO FOCUS

This is where professional development, training, and staying connected to industry best practices come into play. It's important, especially for small teams, to develop team members outside of your organization, so they gain perspective. Exposure to how others operate provides a useful contrast that helps identify what's working, what's missing, and what may have become too familiar. Sometimes the safest thing you can do is step outside your own bubble. I know, it's easier said than done. But for small operators, making time for growth isn't optional. It's essential.

Small operators are the backbone of our industry. But they carry heavy, often hidden burdens that deserve more attention. That's why it's worth stepping back and asking the hard questions: Are we doing everything we can to keep safety front and center? Are we speaking openly about the pressures our teams face, and addressing the risks that come from familiarity, fatigue, or unspoken expectations?

For small flight departments, there's no safety department to pass the responsibility to. It lives with every member of the team, especially leadership. Taking a fresh look at internal communication, professional standards, and principal expectations isn't just the best practice. It's a safety imperative. Because when resources are limited, clarity, consistency, and open dialogue become your most important tools. ❖



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## Small Flight Departments

The National Business Aviation Association maintains a Small Flight Department Subcommittee focused on the challenges raised in the article above and more. Check out the many resources and articles developed specifically for small flight departments and available on NBAA's website using the link to the right.

