Human Resource Management (HRM) in the Aviation Industry

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ABSTRACT

A co-pilot locked his pilot out of the cockpit during flight and deliberately crashed the German airliner into the French Alps on March 23, 2015, killing all 150 people aboard. Although rare, the recent occurrences are noted in this paper; however, it doesn’t include the still missing Malaysia Airlines flight from March 2014, though suicide is a plausible explanation. The strict privacy laws in Germany bar doctors from revealing medical information on their patients. This allowed the mentally ill co-pilot to conceal his condition and ignore a doctor’s opinion that he shouldn’t have flown the day of the crash. This paper advocates that human resource managers establish a “Just Culture” where self-reporting by employees is encouraged together with providing wellness centers and employee assistance programs.

INTRODUCTION

The circumstances surrounding the March 23, 2015 crash of Germanwings Flight 4U 9525 by the suicidal co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz, poses several questions about the safety of air travel. First of all, it raises questions about psychological oversight of pilots; should regular psychological checks be mandated in tandem with annual medical checks for pilots? It has opened debates into other procedures to help pin-point suicide-prone crew. Since the pilot was locked out of the cockpit by the first officer, it also raises a question as to whether introduction of secure cockpit doors, initiated after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., has created a safety issue in and of itself.

The disturbing realization that it was the co-pilot on this flight from Barcelona to Dusseldorf who orchestrated this murder-suicide of 150 people aboard the Airbus 320 jetliner descent into the French Alps has made the general public ask: how do we know if airlines are taking necessary precautions to see whether the crew is mentally fit to fly (Kaiser, 2015; Mendoza, 2015; Wharton, 2015)? The subject of pilots acting bizarrely or even sabotaging their plane is rare, but not unheard of in this global industry. This low-cost German airline, a subsidiary of Europe’s second largest airline, Lufthansa, was manned by a troubled first officer, who as far back as 1999, while in flight training, had to interrupt his training for several months for experiencing deep depression (Boston and Thomas, 2015; Boston and Troianovski, 2015). He began flying commercially as a first officer in September 2013 and since that time he experienced personality disorders, vision problems, and poor interpersonal relationships with girlfriends, all glaring evidence of a sick individual who we can assume thought his brief flying career was over (Stanglin and Hjelmgaard, 2015). He was instructed by a note from his doctor not to fly on this day but the torn-up note was subsequently found in his apartment (Eddy, 2015). A former air safety investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and a former scientist for human performance at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) says the global shortage of pilots might be leading to lax hiring standards. Every week there are nearly 30 new jets rolling off assembly lines; each new one requires airlines to hire and train at least 10 to 12 new pilots. Maybe some of these airline carriers are
taking people they wouldn’t normally take, failing to adequately perform the HRM functions of recruiting and screening potential new hires. Pilots are expensive for airlines yet the global industry needs to create a pool of over one-half million more to meet future demands (McHugh and Lowy, 2015).

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the safety of air travel despite the random and unpredictable episodes of erratic crew members endangering the safety and well-being of passengers. The literature search results in distinctions between military aviation, general aviation, and commercial aviation mishaps. Also, the mental health literature contains a depth of statistical data on what is normal and what is abnormal human behavior and how stressors in the work environment can play a major role in shaping the mindset of pilots in general. From a HRM perspective, this paper points out the importance of crew resource management and the necessity for teamwork and perfection in day-to-day flying and the relationship of safe flight operations and a just culture where employees can reveal errors and other problems.

Following the literature search and defining terminology commonly used in the mental health field, some data supporting the premise that flying remains safe as do the aircraft themselves despite the rare and unpredictable rogue crewmember that may lose mental stability while in control of a complex piece of machinery. Aberrant behavior in a dangerous flight envelope suggests that human beings today may be the weakest link in air safety. Therefore, the next section discusses advanced flight technology (glass cockpits, fly-by-wire flight controls) and the future prospects of perhaps using more flight automation to overcome the frailties of the human pilot in control during all aspects of flight performance. In this regard, aviators (military, general, and commercial) are succinctly discussed as pilot error is attributed to each category of air operations. The next major section of the paper looks at what human resource managers can do to provide the right type of culture – a Just Culture – to encourage employee self-reporting of their conditions to fly in a professional manner. The typical mindset of aircrew members is addressed and the requirement for employee assistance programs is outlined. The erratic, depressed, or otherwise unstable employee can possibly be rehabilitated over time and with the proper care and counseling. Before the concluding section, the paper addresses the European Union’s (EU) criticism of Germany’s shortfall in airline oversight and flags some of the difficulties of Deutsche Lufthansa and its Germanwings subsidiary operations. The paper concludes with a discussion on the necessity to keep human beings in the cockpit and to improve their overall training and professionalism as the expansion of the global airline industry continues.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Mental Health**

Mental health is an important issue in the workplace. According to the U.S. Government’s Office of Personnel Management (OPM, 2015) mental health is a state of well-being. The federal government’s Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2015) has developed several useful guideline pamphlets free to users. And the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH, 2015) offer knowledge about the cause of stress at work and outlines steps that can be taken to prevent an overload of job stressors. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH, 2015) is the lead federal agency for research on mental and behavioral disorders.
Depression

Some of these people experience depression of one form or another. They do not just experience a down day or two as normal people occasionally do, the encounter depression that interferes with their daily life and causes some degree of mental problems as well as interpersonal conflicts. Depression is a common but serious illness. Once again, however, many people with a depressive illness never seek treatment. This despite the realization that the majority, even those with the most severe depression can get better with treatment of one or more methodologies to start the curing process (NIMH, 2015).

Depression is a decrease in functional activity accompanied by symptoms of low spirits, gloominess, and sadness. The National Institute for Mental Health estimates that nearly 17 million Americans, or as much as 10 percent of the adult population, experience depression every year. A study by Harvard University School of Public Health and the World Health Organization found that by year 2020, depression will be second only to heart disease as a cause of medical and physical disability. Fortunately, with available treatment, 70 percent of depressed individuals will significantly improve, usually within a matter of weeks. Obviously, managers must be prepared to identify the signs of depression and get those workers the assistance they need (Whybrow, 1997). According to at least one doctor, depression does not make someone murder 149 people. Indeed, a study of 47,000 people in Sweden found that only 3.7% of men and 0.5% of women diagnosed with depression went on to commit a violent crime (Falk, 2015b).

For almost twenty-years, stress-related issues in the workplace have been on the rise. Every year, mental illness and substance abuse cost employers an estimated $80 to $100 billion in direct costs (Mental Health America, 2015). According to the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, more than one in four American adults has a diagnosable mental health disorder, and one in seventeen has a serious disorder such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (NIMH, 2015).

Suicides

Depression appears to be the leading cause of aircraft-assisted suicides, but only clues such as audio recording and data recordings about an aircraft can lead investigators to a conclusion that a pilot killed himself (McCoy, 2014). In 2010 the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) removed restrictions for pilots who had been treated satisfactorily for at least a year with any of four antidepressant medications. It also gave pilots who hadn’t previously reported depression diagnosis or use of anti-depression medication a six month amnesty period to come forward without risk of penalty. The FAA claimed that: “We need to change the culture – pilots should be able to get medical treatment they need so they can safely perform their job (Bialik, 2015). U.S. government estimates that about 31,000 Americans die each year as a result of suicide (Seigel, 2000). It is the 11th leading cause of death in the United States (Bills, Grabowski, and Li, 2005). There has been little written on people who commit suicide-assisted murder by aircraft. This is an extremely rare event and even for experts, judging whether a pilot is suicidal is one of the hardest parts of the job (Kaiser, 2015). Almost 80% of people who commit a murder-suicide experience a crisis within two weeks of the incident, according to data maintained by the Centers for Disease Control. More than 70% of cases involve problems with romantic partners. In 93% of cases, the perpetrators are men (Falk, 2015b). Experts on suicide say that the psychology of those who combine suicide with mass murder may differ significantly from those who limit themselves to taking their own lives (Goode, 2015).
ARE HUMANS NOW THE WEAKEST LINK IN AIR SAFETY?

Flying is safe

The risk of your being killed in an airline mishap in any given year is 1 in 11 million. In the U.S., your chances of being struck by lightning in any given year are about 1 in 1.2 million, and of being killed in a car accident, 1 in 14,000 (Falk 2015a). Airline accident rates are at historic lows. 0.23 aircraft destroyed per million flights. The five year average was more than twice as high. Sometimes a freak act of nature has brought down an aircraft. But, suicide plane crashes are a very rare occurrence. On the very day the Germanwings crash occurred on March 23, about 100,000 commercial flights occurred without incident (Michaels, Meichtry, and Pasztor, 2015). The Airbus 320 aircraft entered service in March 1988. By the end of February 2015, nearly 6,200 A-320 series of aircraft were in operations worldwide. To date, the entire fleet has accumulated 150 million-flight hours in over 85 million flights (Engineer, 2015). The A-320 has among the world’s best safety records and was the first commercial airliner to have an all-digital fly-by-wire control system. For decades airplanes have had autopilots to maintain control in flight and many fear that the old “seat of the pants” aviator may becoming simply a systems operator monitoring computer systems instead of being pilots (Green, 2015).

Aircraft Automation

The undue reliance on aircraft automation have many industry managers as well as pilot leaders encouraging a revamp of pilot training and simulator check rides to provide pilots with more practice of manual aircraft-handling skills. A study prepared by international flying safety experts a few years ago concluded that excessive pilot dependence on automation, combined with failures to master existing cockpit technology, posed the greatest hazard to passengers (Pasztor, 2015). Naturally the aviation industry does not want to lose piloting skills so if there were a real emergency they might be less able to solve it. Flying has become so safe that many prominent recent crashes have been the result of human action – pilot error, and yes, even mass murder-suicide. That raises an important question: Is it time to give more power to the autopilot (Green, 2015)? The most important impediment to controlling planes remotely (even temporarily) is philosophical. Even if machines become statistically safer than humans, as Google contends will cars, how do you prove it would be safer? The advent of self-driving cars has raised related ethical questions. Who’s responsible in an accident? How should a car prioritize victims if it can’t avoid an accident? But one thing most agree on is that self-driving cars will be much safer than human-driven cars. Driving kills tens of thousands of people a year. Self-driving cars would most likely cut that rate by several orders of magnitude. Every day around this amount of flights take off and land without incident around the world. Last year, not a single person died in a commercial crash in the U.S. Most of the recent crashes abroad have involved serious pilot error, and when that error is deliberate, it’s extremely disturbing. Much of the criticism over the years of these fly-by-wire systems has focused on the problem of pilots becoming too dependent on technology, but these systems could also be a means of preventing future tragedies. In fly-by-wire planes, the computer operates within what’s known as normal law, which means that the computer will not enact any control movements that would cause the plane to leave its flight envelope (Kosner, 2015). Some say new technology could be the way to ensure that such air disasters are not repeated in future. Planes could be fitted with computer software that overrides potentially dangerous actions by pilots, or aviation authorities on the ground could take control of planes if necessary – even retrofitting toilets in the cockpit. Although technology might be a solution to prevent
another air disaster, the public still trust human beings more than computers to fly their planes. It will take years before we even see glimpses of technology now being applied to give us driverless trains and driverless cars (Elyatt, 2015). Unfortunately, there is no new way of doing business or applying advanced robotics technology that can offer perfect protection against calculated malice (Falk, 2015a; Falk 2015b). Flying public at this point is unwilling to get into an airplane that has no human being in the cockpit (Wharton, 2015).

Military Aviation

Little has been published about the aeromedical management and disposition of aviators who attempt suicide, and almost no information about military aviators exists in the open literature. Certainly, military pilots have committed suicide by plane too, including an Air Force A-10 pilot who crashed into a Colorado mountain in 1997 (Matthew, 1997). The U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine’s Aeronautical Consultation Service (ACS) evaluated 14 trained aviators (pilots and other aircrew members, excluding flight surgeons) who had attempted suicide between 1981 and 1996. Of these, 11 (79%) ultimately received a recommendation for return to flying duties. In most instances, the underlying stressors included failed intimate interpersonal relationships, administrative or legal problems, psychiatric disorder, the death of a spouse or job conflicts. Evidence of abuse of alcohol or other substances was found in 54% of an earlier, larger data set of attempters. The top medical priorities after such attempts should be to diagnose what is wrong, and to treat it. In spite of the common assumption that a suicide attempt inevitably ends a military flying career, some attempters can return to safe and effective flying duty after appropriate psychotherapy (Patterson, Jones, Marsh & Drummond, 2001).

General Aviation

In general aviation in the United States – the category of traffic that excludes scheduled commercial flights – fewer than one in 300 fatal pilot deaths between 2003 and 2012 was attributed to suicide, and the rate has declined sharply from the prior decade (Bialik, 2015). Looking at twenty years of data (1993-2012) researchers concluded that 24 of 7,244 plane crashes were deliberately caused by a pilot. That is less than one percent of the total, but it is still enough to raise questions about the mental health stressors of pilots (Kaiser, 2015; Quan, 2015a). The FAA reported last year that of the almost 3,000 aviation-related U.S. fatal accidents from 2003 to 2012, only eight were caused by pilot suicide and all involved small aircraft. Half of them involved alcohol and a couple involved antidepressants. And that number was half of the number from the previous decade. In incident reports by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), it is estimated that 3 or 4 pilots a year use an airplane to commit suicide. Often, though not always, in small planes (Seigel, 2005). According to FAA data, 24 American pilots have killed themselves while flying their planes in the last two decades, 23 of those pilots intentionally crashed their craft, and one student pilot jumped out of his flight mid-flight. All were male and middle-aged (McCoy, 2014). In a review of 415 general aviation accidents in the United Kingdom from 1970-96: Three were definite cases of suicide and in another seven it seemed possible that the deceased had taken their own lives. Therefore, in the U.K., suicide definitely accounts for 0.72 percent of general aviation accidents and possible for more than 2.4% (Cullen, 1998).

Commercial Aviation

In-flight suicide by a commercial pilot entrusted with the lives of innocent passengers is virtually unthinkable. It is the paramount violation of the primary mission, akin to a doctor poisoning patients or a
police officer gunning down citizens. When such incidents have occurred, there has been no clear warning, only shock and disbelief afterward. A loss of their concern for the safety of the people they fly represents an enormous degree of psychiatric disability. Table 1 below contains some known suicide-murder flights.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>AIRLINE</th>
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<th>CRASH SITE</th>
<th>FATALITIES</th>
<th>AIRCRAFT</th>
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<td>4U9525</td>
<td>French Alps</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>A-320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>470</td>
<td>Namibia</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>E-190</td>
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<td>10-31-1999</td>
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<td>990</td>
<td>Atlantic</td>
<td>219</td>
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<td>MI185</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>104</td>
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<td>44</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Tokyo Bay</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>DC-9</td>
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Table 1: Aircraft-Assisted Suicide-Murder

Sources: Alonso-Zoldwar, 1999; Carley, 1999; Creedy and Stewart, 2015; Flottau, 2015; Goode, 2015; Jansen, 2015; McCoy, 2014; Perry and McGuirk, 2014; Quan, 2015a; Quan, 2015b; USA Today, 2015.

In addition to these known fatal aviation accidents that were intentionally caused by pilot suicide, many others remain uncertain or suspicious such as the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, a Boeing-777 aircraft that departed Kuala Lumpur on March 8, 2014 to Beijing with 217 aboard when it vanished (Economist, 2014; Economist 2015a; Gardner, 2014; Yining and He, 2014; Perry and McGuirk, 2014; Sheldrick, 2014). After an Air India crew traded blows in the cockpit, they allegedly agreed to stop fighting and complete the flight from Jaipur to Delhi (Falk, 2015a,). Other concerning incidents on the flight deck include commercial flights flown by Jet Blue on March 27, 2012; Air Canada on January 28, 2008; and Federal Express in 1994. On the Jet Blue flight from New York to Las Vegas, the captain of the Airbus 320-200 experienced an acute psychotic breakdown. The co-pilot locked the captain out of the cockpit and diverted the flight to Amarillo, Texas where the 47 year old captain was treated. In the Air Canada flight the Boeing 767 with 146 passengers and 9 crewmembers departed Toronto for London when the experienced co-pilot became disoriented and confused, having a mental breakdown as the flight was diverted to Shannon, Ireland where the first officer was treated in a psychiatric unit (Scarpa, 2014). The FedEx DC-10 aircraft incident involved a flight engineer unsuccessfully trying to kill three pilots on the flight deck (USA Today, 2015).

Just Culture

A Just Culture is described as a culture in which employees are not punished for actions, omissions or decisions taken by employees that are commensurate with their experience and training; however, gross negligence, willful violations and destructive acts are not tolerated. The entire concern over taking responsibility for one’s action became interwoven into the Just Culture philosophy. It stress finding a middle-ground between a blame-free culture, which attributes all errors to system failure and says no individual is held accountable, and an overly punitive culture, where individuals are blamed for all mistakes. Creating an organizational culture where people embrace their accountability toward one another and toward the organization produces greater transparency and openness (Marx, 2009). Just culture is associated with incident-prone professional activities (e.g., pilots and doctors) where consequences of mistakes are potentially grave. The ultimate goal is safety (Stastny and Garin, 2004).
Self-Reporting By Employees

The system relies on pilots self-declaring. Therefore, unless a pilot is honest about an alcohol problem or psychiatric disorder, there is no guarantee a problem will be spotted. Even though commercial airline pilots undergo psychological testing, aviation experts acknowledge those who are depressed or suicidal may be difficult to detect (Kaiser, 2015). It is recognized that there may be barriers affecting a frank discussion of mental health issues between an aeromedical examiner and a pilot. A highly independent culture exists where pilots are in control and they fear losing their medical certificate. The problem is that pilots who report symptoms run the risk of having their commercial pilot license suspended or revoked. So the stay quiet. Pilots are not likely to disclose any potential mental health problems, because that could get them grounded (Kaiser, 2015; Scarpa, 2014). Airlines must do a better job of monitoring mental illness among pilots. Existing rules rely on self-reporting; but most pilots are not willing to self-report (Wharton, 2015). Pilots, like others with high stress jobs, tend to be good at compartmentalizing, warding off difficult or emotional experiences so they don’t interfere with their ability to function day-to-day (Kaiser, 2015). Pilots fear and loath being grounded. Pilots are exposed to constant stress when flying, including adapting to changing altitudes and time zones. When you couple that with being away from home and the increasing volatility in the airline industry, you’d expect to have a lot of anxiety and emotional issues. Pilots grow up in a culture of machoism—“suck it up and do the job,” explained one expert observer (Quan, 2015a).

The U.S. System of Vetting Air Crew

The FAA maintains strict guidelines for evaluating the overall health of aircrews. For example, no one suffering from psychosis, bipolar disease, severe personality disorder, manic-depressive illness or substance dependence can be issued the medical clearance to fly an airliner. Furthermore, the FAA requires pilots to report arrests for drunken driving, mental disorders of any sort, and if they have attempted suicide (Gardner, 2014; Riva, 2013). In the United States, the FAA requires captains to have their first class medical certificate renewed every year if the pilot is younger than 40 and every six months if the pilot is 40 or older. But psychological checks are not required, although concerned doctors could order pilots to undergo testing for emotional stability and mental state. The emphasis is on the physical and less on the mental, mainly because mental health is harder to quantify. Furthermore, many aeromedical professionals are inadequately trained in mental health diagnoses (Kaiser, 2015). Since physicians share information about incipient or serious mental health disorders with regulators, the U.S. airline carriers have their own internal systems to keep track of at-risk pilots, much of this carried out by pilot union officials. The Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA) notes that during flight, pilots and flight attendants operate under the principles of crew resource management and are in a position to observe each other’s behavior. And, airlines have procedures in place that allow crew members to express concerns (e.g., a desire not to fly with a particular individual) or that they may have concern about an individual’s actions so that they may be officially addressed (Quan, 2015a). Additionally, the ALPA points out that all flight and cabin crew members monitor and evaluate each other with airline procedures in place to deal with contingency response requirements should a concern arise. And all airlines can and do conduct fitness-for-duty testing on pilots if warranted (Jansen and Frank, 2015).

Employee Assistance Programs

According to Federal Aviation Regulation 120, Section 115, the employer shall provide an employee assistance program for employees (Gleim, 2015). Many American companies are providing...
employee assistance program training for managers to address mental health issues. But they are not the norm. Sixty percent of Americans with a mental disorder get no treatment (Williams, 2012). There are many mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety/panic disorders, and substance misuse that are far more common than sudden psychosis and show patterns that facilitate early detection and have proven effective treatment strategies (Scarpa, 2014).

Operational Procedures of International Commercial Airlines

The industry could be facing a debate as to whether introduction of secure cockpit doors, initiated after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S., has created a safety issue in and of itself. The A320 cockpit door can be opened from outside using an emergency code entered into a keypad. Once entered, the door can be opened from outside after about 30 seconds, but this can be overridden from inside the cockpit by moving the door toggle switch to the locked position which is obviously what co-pilot Lubitz did (Creedy and Stewart, 2015; Flottau, 2015). After terrorists hijacked planes to commit the 9/11 attacks, commercial airlines fortified the cockpit doors of their aircraft so they were impregnable. Pilots who left the cockpit could only re-enter using a special code, and the person left in the cockpit could override this code if they suspected a potential hijacker was trying to force his way in (Economist, 2015b; Falk, 2015b). In the United States, FAA requires two crewmembers in the cockpit at all times. It just means that whenever one person leaves the cockpit, a second person – a flight attendant or off-duty pilot – steps in until he returns (Flight Safety Foundation, 2015). Fortunately, European airlines are now adopting that rule, too (Falk, 2015b). The European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) published a temporary recommendation for airlines to ensure that at least two crew, including at least one qualified pilot, are in the flight crew compartment at all times of the flight. EasyJet and Norwegian Air Shuttle are the first European airlines to revise cockpit procedures to ensure the ‘rule of two’ is in effect. If one pilot exists, he must be replaced by a relief pilot or cabin crew member (Flottau, 2015). The attack on several FedEx pilots by a disturbed flight engineer is an example of how the ‘rule of two’ can fail (EASA, 2015; Falk, 2015b).

EU’S CRITICISM OF GERMANY’S SHORTFALL IN THE REGULATION OF AIRLINES

Years before Germanwings Flight 9525 crash, European Union officials worried that Germany’s oversight of airlines was lax and last November formally told Berlin to remedy the long-standing problem. EU officials said Germany’s air-safety regulator suffered from chronic staffing shortfalls that could undermine its ability to run checks of carriers and crew – including medical checks. The criticism dates back to 2011 when officials from EASA warned that Germany and some other EU countries weren’t complying with EASA-mandated oversight requirements. Germany’s federal aviation office, the equivalent to the FAA in the United States, was put on notice that its insufficient number of qualified personnel could undermine its ability to ensure continuing oversight, to include the lack of oversight of approved medical centers and examiners as well as access it provides to medical records and data. This agency, under the German Transport Ministry, may have had information on Mr. Lubitz’s condition because he took time off from his flight training in 2009 for psychological issues. Whether the deficiencies identified in Germany’s air safety supervision had anything to do with the Germanwings crash remains unclear (Michaels & Wall, 2015a).
Lufthansa is in the process of shifting large parts of its European network to Germanwings after years of losses on shorter routes outside the main Frankfurt and Munich hubs. The company financial goal is to achieve operating profit to $2.65 billion (euro 1.92 billion) by 2015. The company earned $697 million in operating profit for 2013 (Brautlecht, 2014). Lufthansa created several subsidiaries like Germanwings and Eurowings in order to be price-competitive, especially against Middle East airline carriers. The emergence of international competition from the Persian Gulf region -- Emirates Airline and Etihad Airways, both of the UAE and Qatar Airways -- which, over recent years, have siphoned of significant numbers of passengers that fly between Europe and Asia (Michaels & Well, 2015b). All three are government-owned, and Etihad and Qatar don’t issue public financial statements. U.S. carriers (Delta, American, and United-Continental) lodged a trade complaint in January 2015 alleging the Gulf trio has received $42 billion in subsidies and unfair benefits since 2004. Emirates, based in Dubai, Etihad of Abu Dhabi and Doha-based Qatar Airlines say they are commercial enterprises that aren’t state subsidized (Carey and Jones, 2015). Lufthansa has at least 15 wholly or partially owned airline subscribers (Wharton, 2015). Germanwings, a low-fare brand created by Lufthansa in 2002, remains under the safety and operational oversight of the parent company Lufthansa also operates one of the world’s largest airplane-maintenance companies, Lufthansa Technik, so it is an expert in the upkeep of jetliners (Michaels & Well, 2015b). Lufthansa has been beset by labor unrest and other problems. Mr. Carsten Spohr has only been CEO since May 2014. The crash occurred three days after Lufthansa pilots staged the latest of many strikes over the past year. It has been facing rising competition and management changes in recent years. But despite the recent service disruptions and internal changes at the giant airline group, its safety record hasn’t been an issue. Its safety record was unblemished until this crash (Calvin, 2009; Hjelmgaard, 2015). The Group’s last fatal accident was more than 20-years ago, and it has suffered only nine aviation-related fatalities over the past 40-years (Michaels & Well, 2015b).

CONCLUSION

In the last few decades there have been far too many fatal aircraft crashes in which flight crew error was found to be an important causal factor. The most disturbing of all of these human-related mishaps, however, is aircraft-assisted suicide and murder. It is possible that the Germanwings crash will alter the way the airline industry conducts the vetting of aircrew members, and in addition to recruiting, screening, and hiring to meet the demands for additionally qualified air staff, the just culture will carry more sway and encourage valued workers to take advantage of employee assisted programs as well as continuously enhance their skills as aviators. Of course, the airline industry and regulators continually strive to improve safety and they may consider changing some protocols for cockpit occupancy, crew scheduling and enhanced training. The flying public trusts their lives to the professionalism of commercial airline pilots. Certainly for the vast majority of pilots they are highly experienced, thoroughly trained and regularly checked, and typically have advanced safety technology at their disposal. That being said passengers certainly are entitled to know that their airline carrier has done everything possible to make their flight as safe and convenient as possible. There are those who believe it is not in the aviation industry’s best interests to admit to customers that their pilot is capable of suicide. By and large, the airlines have not been prepared to accept that one of their most critical employees may have a mental aberration. The strategic HRM influence on the improvement of flying safety personnel is an important leadership aspect in any flying organization today.
REFERENCES


