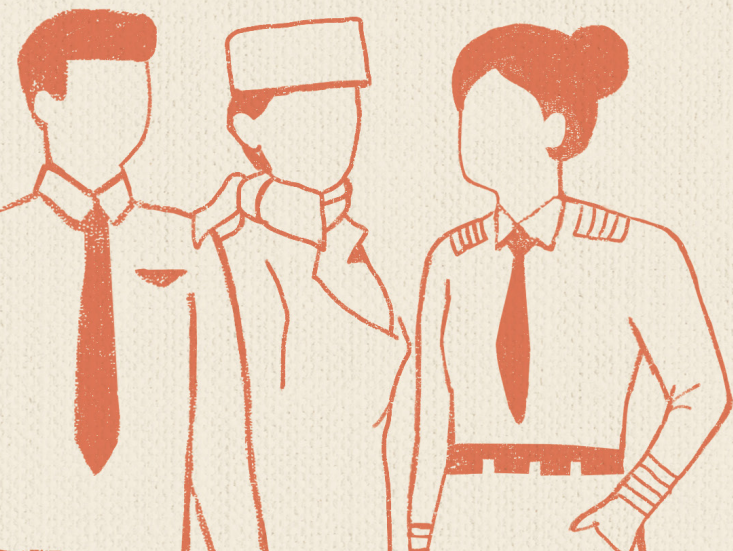


UGHENT STUDY

AIRCREW CLEARED FOR TAKE-OFF?



Funded by
the European Union



Funded by
the European Union

About the study

In 2015, Ghent University published the first EU Commission-funded investigation into atypical employment in aviation.

It revealed that around 14% of European pilots were working under non-standard contracts such as self-employment or agency work, raising concerns about bogus self-employment, weak social protection, and safety risks.

Ten years on, the aviation industry has been reshaped by the COVID-19 crisis, the green transition, the growth of low-cost and ACMI operators. To examine how these changes

affect pilots and cabin crew, Ghent University conducted a second study in 2024–2025, again with support from the European Commission and in cooperation with ECA, ETF, and ENAA.

By linking employment, well-being, and safety, the study shows that working conditions in aviation are not just a social concern but a core safety issue.

Together, the 2015 and 2025 studies provide a unique long-term perspective, highlighting the need for stronger regulation to ensure fair, safe, and sustainable employment in European aviation.

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INTRODUCTORY WORDS BY THE UGHENT RESEARCHERS

“ The fact that aircrew trusted us with their worries, and that employers also gave us candid insight into their perspective, is something I do not take lightly. It reinforced my responsibility as a researcher to ensure these voices are translated into evidence that can meaningfully inform policy and practice, while striving for solutions that benefit both sides. I am deeply grateful for their confidence in allowing us to translate their professional realities into evidence that can inform safer and fairer futures for European aviation. ”

- LIEN VALCKE
post-doctoral researcher, Ghent University

“ By combining theoretical reflections with practical insights from within the aviation industry, we aim to secure the future of employment in aviation. ”

- YVES JORENS
Senior Full Professor of (European) Social Security
Law and Social Criminal Law, Ghent University

From 2015 to 2025

A decade of change in aviation jobs

Back in 2015, Ghent University shocked the industry with the first EU-funded study on “atypical employment” in aviation. It revealed that 14% of pilots were flying under contracts that were anything but standard - self-employment, agency work, even pay-to-fly schemes.

Most of these were concentrated in low-cost carriers, and many looked suspiciously like bogus self-employment. The message was clear: a growing slice of Europe’s pilots were left with little security, fewer rights, and big questions around safety.

Fast forward ten years, and the new **UGent 2.0** study paints a more complex picture. The proportion of atypically employed crew has dropped slightly to just over 10%, with 5.8% self-employed. On the surface, that looks like progress. But the real story is that job insecurity and stress have spread beyond atypical contracts.

Even pilots and cabin crew with permanent jobs at legacy airlines now report rising fatigue, more pressure, and declining trust in management.

For the first time, cabin crew were included in the survey, and their situation stands out.

Younger crew and cabin staff emerge as the most vulnerable group, facing higher stress levels and weaker support. Across the board, aircrew describe a sense of “dehumanisation” – being treated as numbers, not professionals – and growing reluctance to report fatigue or safety concerns.

The comparison could not be starker. In 2015, atypical work was the exception, a problem of contracts at the margins. In 2025, the pressures are industry-wide. Stable jobs are no longer a guarantee of security or well-being, and the line between employment conditions and safety has become impossible to ignore.

Taken together, the two studies deliver a blunt warning: atypical work hasn’t disappeared, and the risks it created a decade ago are now felt across the whole sector. **Without stronger rules, fairer contracts, and genuine social dialogue, Europe’s aviation industry risks losing not only its people – but also its safety edge.**

Demographic & professional profile of the survey participants

Survey participation

TIMELINE

The survey ran from **29/10/2024** to **18/11/2024**, with an extension until **06/12/2024**.

PARTICIPATION

4.092 Pilots | **2.869** Cabin Crew

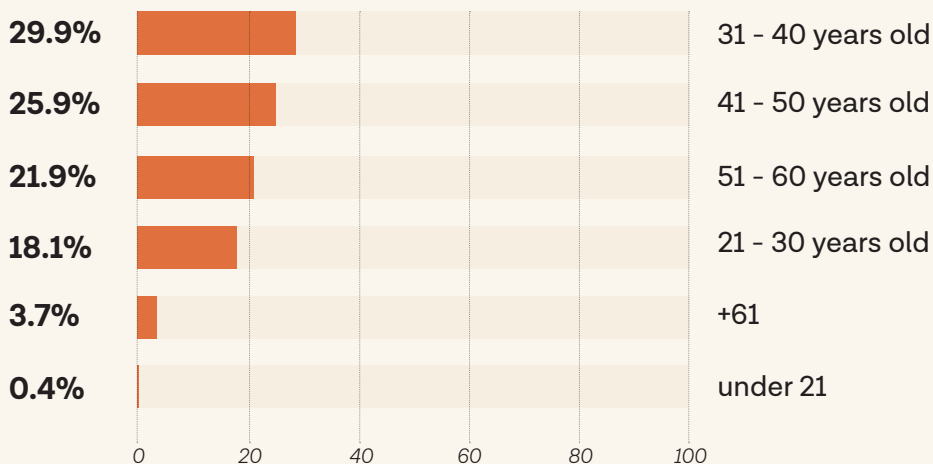


58.8%
Pilots



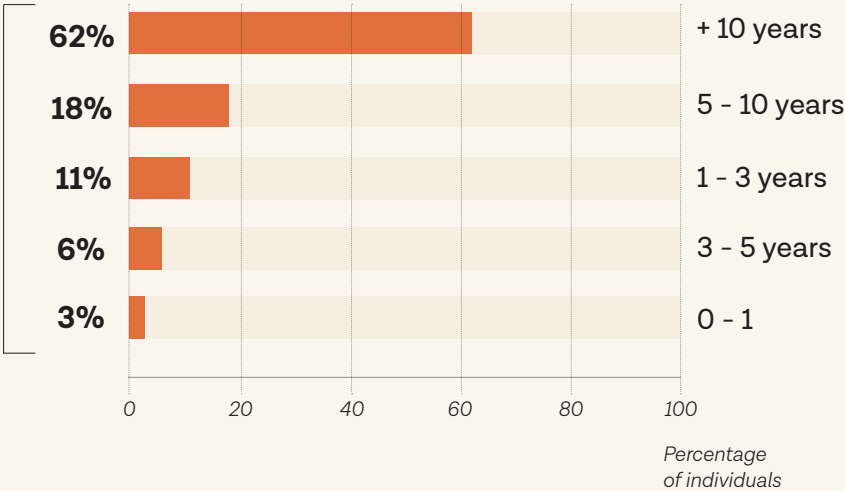
41.2%
Cabin Crew

Age

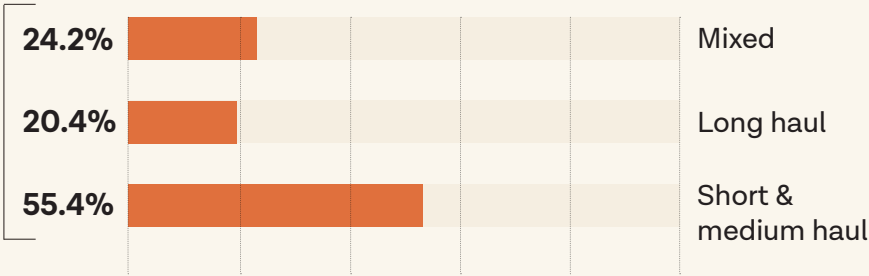


Percentage of individuals

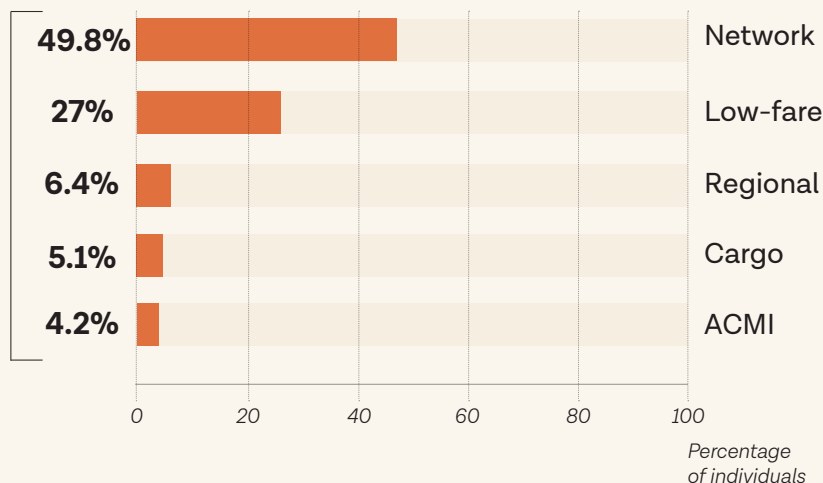
Years of experience as a cabin crew or pilot



Type of operations



Where do pilots & cabin crew work?



Difference in groups

In the pilot group, we see slightly higher numbers for ACMI (6.3%) and cargo (5.1%), lower numbers for network airlines with 46.3% and around the same for charter with 4%.

In the segment of cabin crew, we see higher numbers for network airlines, 54.9%, regional airlines (8.6%) and low-fare airlines with 28%. But lower for ACMI (1.2%).

In 2014 *(only pilots)*

45% worked for a network airline *(largest group)*

22% worked for a low-fare airline

Top nationalities of survey respondents



14.1% Spain



7.8% Netherlands



11.7% Germany



5.2% Sweden



8.6% Italy



5% Belgium

Living at homebase

Overall: **85.4%**

Pilots: **81.9%**

Cabin crew: **90.3%**

In 2014 *(only pilots)*

Pilots living in the country of their homebase

2024: **81.9%**

2014: **64%**

+17.9% increase over the last decade

Unionisation level

20.2% of respondents are not members of a trade union.

This contrasts sharply with the traditionally high unionization rates in European aviation (**95–100%**).

Union affiliation by airline type

Network carriers: 87%	Charter airlines: 70%
Regional airlines: 82.4%	Business aviation: 59%
Low-cost carriers: 76%	ACMI operators: 35%

Among ACMI employees, 16% said they did not join a union due to fear.

Union membership & representation Typical vs Atypical employees

UNION MEMBERSHIP

Typical employees: **84%**
Atypical employees: **39%**

FEAR OF JOINING A UNION

Typical employees: **0.6%**
Atypical employees: **20.3%**

NO UNION EXISTS AT WORKPLACE

Typical employees: **3.6%**
Atypical employees: **23.5%**

***Conclusion:** Atypical employment is linked to weaker union presence, higher fear of joining, and less access to union representation.*

Top motivators for airline job changes

More than half of participants (**56.4%**) mentioned working conditions as the main reason to change the airline.

Other strong motivations include wanting to live closer to home and family (**42.8%**), moving between regional and continental operations (**20.9%**), and flying a different type of aircraft (**19.3%**).

Atypical employment

*Flexibility or
exploitation?*

This study explores “atypical work” in aviation

Any job setup outside a regular contract directly between crew and airline. This can include self-employment, agency work, part-time or temporary roles, and subcontracting. While these arrangements give airlines more flexibility, they often raise questions about fairness and protection for crew.

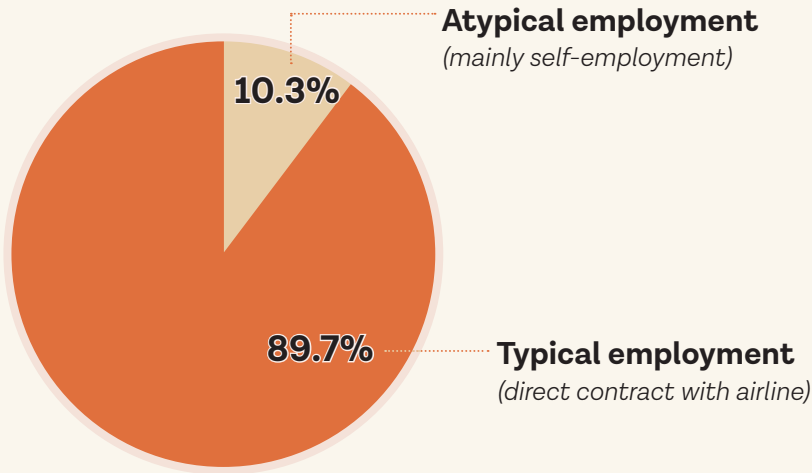
Subcontracting in practice

Subcontracting is now common in aviation, and in some cases it works well as a business tool. But when it's mainly used to cut labour costs, it can mean lower pay and weaker conditions for crew members.

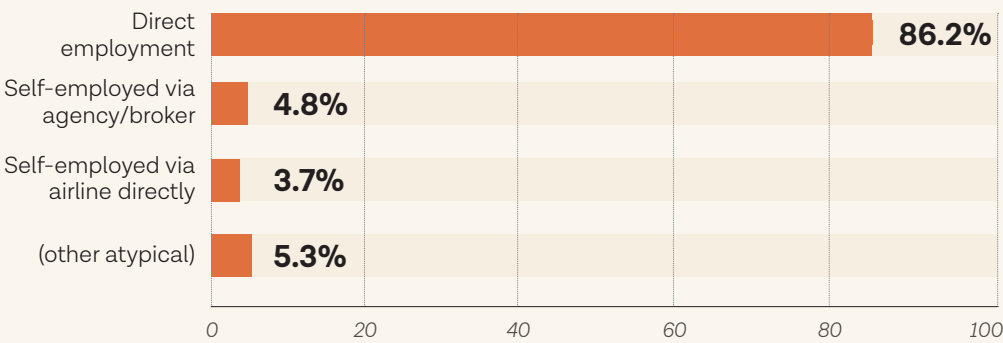
When problems arise

The study highlights risks with so-called “bogus constructions.” Here, long chains of intermediaries act as brokers, supplying labour rather than real services. These setups can be used to bypass labour, tax, or social security rules – blurring the line between flexibility and exploitation.

Employment type among respondents



EMPLOYMENT TYPE AMONG PILOTS



In 2014 *(only pilots)*

About **16%** were atypically employed
79.3% said that they have a direct employment contract with the airline company.

What about instructions?

Instructions are central to safe and efficient aviation operations, making it essential to know who provides them and what they cover. For most crew, the airline's registered office or headquarters is the primary source, a result consistent with 2014, when **92.2% of pilots** reported the same.

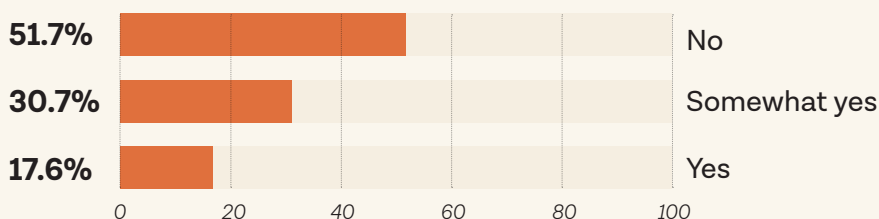
MAIN SUBJECTS FOR INSTRUCTIONS:

87.4% Schedules

81.9% Training requirements

80% Safety & operations

“I can modify the instructions of airline based on safety objections?”



***Conclusion:** Over half feel unable to challenge safety instructions; fewer than 1 in 5 feel fully empowered.*

Who evaluates safety objections?

2014 – Airline’s registered office / HQ: **82%** | Captain: **23.3%**

2024 – Airline’s registered office / HQ: **69%** | Captain: **26%**

Key insight: Decision-making on safety objections has shifted further away from captains toward airline headquarters over the past decade.

Ability to decide not to fly due to sickness

OVERALL RESPONDENTS

53.8% feel able to decide not to fly

20.8% feel not able to do so (various degrees)

PILOTS

58.2% strongly agree

24.8% somewhat agree

17% do not feel able to do so

CABIN CREW

46.9% strongly agree

26.5% somewhat agree

26.5% do not feel able to do so

Key insight: Pilots report more confidence than cabin crew in refusing to fly when unfit, but a concerning share in both groups still feel unable to make that call.

In 2014 (only pilots)

93% of respondents were able to decide not to fly due to sickness.

Are you sometimes reluctant to take such decisions about fitness to fly out of fear for possible negative consequences for your professional career?

Nearly **1 in 3 pilots** and almost **half of cabin crew** admitted they sometimes hesitate to declare themselves unfit to fly.

UGhent researchers found career concerns weigh heavily on these decisions.

Atypical employment by age

Under 21 → 41.4% atypically employed (highest proportion).

Under 40 → more likely to be atypically employed compared to older groups.

40+ → mostly in typical employment.

Key insight: Younger crew, especially those under 21, face much higher rates of atypical employment, highlighting their vulnerability in the sector.

Disagreeing with their homebase as a real homebase is most common among employees aged 21 to 30.

Atypical employment by airline type

Wet-lease providers → 65% atypical

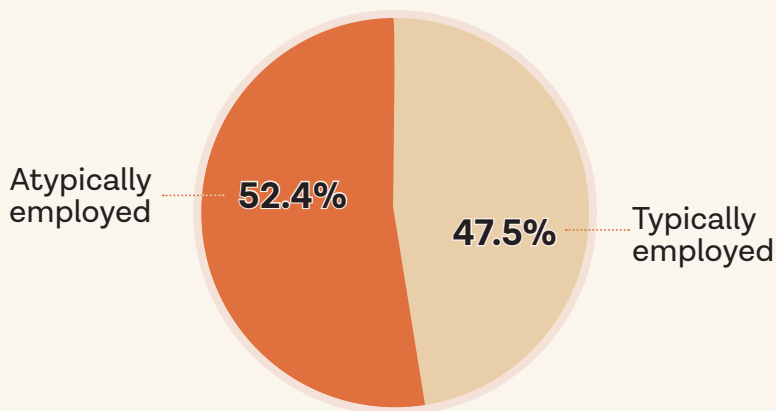
Low-fare airlines → 12.9% atypical

Network airlines → 3.8% atypical

Key insight: Wet-lease providers rely on atypical contracts far more than any other airline type.

Regional disparities

Atypical employment is significantly more widespread in Eastern Europe due to local regulatory and labour market conditions.



Outside Eastern Europe, **92.6%** of respondents reported having a regular job contract, while only **7.4%** worked under alternative arrangements.

In Eastern Europe, the picture was almost reversed: **52.4%** said they were in atypical jobs, compared with **47.5%** in regular employment.

DID YOU KNOW?

Willingness to report fatigue is the worst among self-employed crew, reflecting a greater burden and unwillingness to report.

Self-employed crew face the poorest outcomes across wellbeing, job security, fatigue, and safety, while agency work presents moderate risks; direct employment remains the most favourable arrangement.

Remuneration

compensation & benefits in aviation



Only 47.3%

is compensated for maternity leave



74%

is paid in 'Block hours'



59.8%

is compensated for their work medical



56.3%

says they do not have enough time
for pre- and post flight duties

Remuneration

compensation & benefits in aviation



79.2%

is compensated for their uniform



32.9%

does not feel able to negotiate
about working hours



62.8%

is compensated for crew ID card



20.7%

of respondents work part-time

Well-being & Mental Health

Well-being as a safety factor

This study examines the physical and mental wellbeing of cockpit and cabin crew across Europe. Wellbeing is understood broadly, including health, fatigue, stress, job insecurity, and feelings of dignity at work. These factors are not only important **for the personal lives of crew members but also play a critical role in ensuring safe operations in aviation.**

Challenges for crew

Aircrew face unique stressors such as irregular schedules, long duty times, time zone changes, and high responsibility, all of which can lead to fatigue and mental strain. Cabin crew, in particular, experience additional pressure from having to balance safety duties with growing commercial responsibilities like inflight sales. While fatigue is widely recognised as a risk in aviation, many crew members report that current rules do not fully capture their actual workload or rest needs.

Health and well-being today

Survey results show mixed levels of wellbeing. Overall, around 42% of participants rated their physical health as only moderate or worse. Pilots reported slightly more positive results, with two-thirds describing their health as good or very good.

For cabin crew, however, the picture was less encouraging: more than half rated their health as moderate to poor, highlighting their particular vulnerability under current working conditions.

Well-being in the aviation sector

Well-being in the aviation sector (in terms of general health, mental health, job insecurity, and perceptions of the organizational climate) **improves with age and experience, highlighting younger crew as a more vulnerable group.**

Airline Type & well-being

The study found clear differences in mental health depending on the type of airline. Crew at network and cargo airlines reported the best wellbeing, while those at low-fare carriers showed poorer results. The most concerning outcomes came from ACMI operators, where crew reported the lowest levels of mental health.

Overall, the type of airline is a strong predictor of wellbeing, highlighting how different business models impact the daily lives and health of crew members.



**Best
results**

(Network & cargo)



**Middle
ground**

(Charter, regional
and business)



**Worst
results**

(Low-fare & ACMI)

VOICES FROM THE CREW

- anonymous
quotes by aircrew

“I feel like a criminal just for being sick”

“xxx does not value me as an employee. It treats me as a Crewcode (number) and nothing else. There is no regard for Mental wellbeing or physical wellbeing. It prides itself in profit over human wellbeing. It has a poor toxic workplace culture and a culture of fear.

This fear originates from the amount of people they sack for stupid reasons and because they can get away with it...”

Safety Culture

Safety beyond technology

Safety is the foundation of aviation, but this study shows it is shaped not only by technical systems and procedures, but also by human and organisational factors. Workplace culture, wellbeing, fatigue, and training all play a vital role in keeping operations safe.

Crew perceptions of safety

Survey results reveal how cockpit and cabin crew view safety today, including fatigue levels, training adequacy, and whether they feel encouraged to report problems (known as “Just Culture”). By comparing data from 2020, 2021, and 2024, the study tracks whether safety culture has improved, declined, or stayed stable in the face of post-pandemic pressures and flexible employment practices.

Differences across groups

The findings highlight differences between pilots and cabin crew, between younger and older staff, and across European regions. Interviews with airline HR representatives also shed light on how companies approach safety – revealing both best practices and challenges. Together, these insights provide a fuller picture of the factors shaping safety in today’s aviation industry.

Age & safety

Older respondents consistently report higher scores for safety work climate, personal safety, and fatigue reporting. It means that older crew members perceive their safety environment more

positively and are more willing to acknowledge and report safety-related issues than their younger counterparts.

Airline type & safety dimensions

Network and cargo airlines achieve the most favorable results across different indicators such as safety work climate, personal safety behavior, and fatigue reporting.

In contrast, **low-fare carriers and ACMI operators systematically report less positive outcomes**, indicating weaker safety climates, lower levels of personal safety behavior, and reduced willingness to report fatigue.

Conclusions

The kind of airline is strongly associated with safety culture and behavior, with network and cargo operations providing a more supportive and robust safety environment compared to low-fare and ACMI models.

DID YOU KNOW?

Direct employment is linked to stronger safety culture and reporting. In contrast, self-employed pilots report weaker safety climates, less safe behavior, and lower willingness to report fatigue, showing the risks of atypical employment.

While safety climate & safety-related decision-making are compromised across atypical contracts, the effects are particularly pronounced among pilots.

This suggests that atypical employment not only undermines perceived safety culture but may also limit the autonomy of aircrew to make critical decisions about safety and fitness to fly.

VOICES FROM THE CREW

- anonymous
quotes by aircrew

“Aviation safety isn’t given the attention it deserves. The attitude feels like: ‘everything is fine — until it isn’t.’”

“ACMI should be **investigated deeply**. We are against the law all time.”

“Airline business has changed a lot during last 35 years and Flight safety has definitely improved a lot but **treatment of employees are worst as ever before**, flight hours to maximum and human factors not considered. We are only numbers and should function like robots, we are asked to perform only at highest standards with lowest salary.”

2015 vs 2025

What has changed?

Key trends after 10 years

Stress doesn't choose an airline.

Type of airline is not a decisive element anymore when talking about stressors related to scheduling, fatigue, and mental health. Vulnerabilities and concerns can be found all over airline companies. Atypical employment and ACMI arrangements, however, continue to show higher risks regarding well-being, fatigue, and legal uncertainty, and aircrew based in Eastern Europe are particularly exposed to such risks and vulnerabilities.

What really shapes safety & well-being?

Management style, organizational support, and clarity of operational instructions, as well as psychosocial well-being and fair employment conditions, are now consistent predictors of both safety and well-being, and can be considered as foundational to effective safety culture.

Main Policy Recommendations

- **Promote** clear and fair employment conditions, and enhance stability and legal certainty by clarifying and enforcing the home base and operational base definition.
- **Balance** safety and social standards with the need to preserve international competitiveness of European aviation in case of regulatory adjustments.
- **Strengthen** the fight against bogus-subcontracting constructions.
- **Ensure** consistent protections for medical absence, duty gaps, and minimum social benefits.
- **Monitor** compliance with collective agreements and labour law across business models.
- **Require** systematic incorporation of psychosocial risk, fatigue management, and employment conditions into safety management systems.
- **Encourage** airlines to go beyond rule compliance and instead to proactively manage aircrew fatigue and to provide trusted fatigue reporting procedures.

- **Integrate** organisation support, workforce well-being, and robust safety culture in order to achieve optimal safety outcomes.
- EASA and the European Commission to be open, clarify and revise Flight Time Limitations (FTL) and ensure their application on the ground.
- **Pay particular attention** to the safety performance of ACMI operators, to maintain overall operational safety levels within the industry.
- **Foster** a management style that balances operational efficiency with a proactive commitment to employee well-being and staff retention.
- **Develop** programs specifically for younger crew and cabin staff to enhance resilience, mental health, and professional development.

VOICES FROM THE CREW

- anonymous
quotes by aircrew

“After more than 20 years of profession, working for a supposed flagship company, I can relate that the company is not concerned about people developing a life career with them.

The company prefers a high rotation of workers, and is continuously lowering salaries and offering worse conditions on scheduling, hotels and transportation during layovers, opportunity of familiar, life conciliation, etc. They also keep rising work load on board, reducing on board rest opportunities to the minimum required by FTL.

Nowadays, being a cabin attendant is not a profession but a temporary job for young people”

About the organisers



European Cockpit Association (ECA)

The representative body of European professional pilots, advocating for flight safety, fair working conditions, and sustainable aviation policy.



European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF)

Defends the interests of transport workers across Europe, advocating for fair employment, safety, and strong social standards.

About the organisers



European Network Airlines Association (ENAA)

Represents network carriers in Europe, promoting a competitive, connected, and sustainable air transport system.



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