

Case Study  
what friends are for (cont'd)

Her interphone rang; it was the busy planning controller for the west sector. "Sorry, we forgot to hand off ABC654 to you. He has disappeared from our screen, can you see him? He may be in your area already at flight level 350, I think his transponder may have failed".

### The Journalist

A short item on his local radio station reported a near miss between two aircraft over the city. The story was broadcast without any comment but it was obviously close – one of the passengers had called the radio station. The airline involved was the same airline he had received information on safety concerns a few months earlier.

As soon as he asked for more information, the airline invited him over. At the meeting the following day he found, to his great surprise, that the Airline Public Relations Manager was a good friend from long ago. Steve and he had been at university together and had a lot of fun. "You have to understand that this incident had nothing to do with us, he said. The crew did not even notice what happened". "Trust me old friend, this airline always puts safety first" Steve continued. He smiled, "but why not discuss it over lunch shall we, we have a lot of catching up to do!

### The Magazine Article

*"According to well informed sources, human factors played a major role for the serious incident last week. The airline's pilots had no involvement at all. "There was absolutely nothing our pilots could do to avoid the incident, however our airline will continue to focus on safety. It is always our top priority", said Steve Bull, public relation manager at ABC Airlines. "The passengers can trust us" S*

# Case Study Comment 1 by Eileen Senger

"You are paid to do this" is usually a sentence used to finish a conversation. The ultimate way to bring the discussion to an end.

All the characters in this story are paid to do their job – but do they live up to it according to modern standards? In our corporate world today, we have shifted away from the worker who is really only paid to do his, mostly heavy physical, job. Nowadays we want an engaged employee, who identifies him/herself with the company and, by constructive criticism helps advance the interests of the company. In the aviation world this is taken even further: we are brought up to care. It is part of our training to think further, to see things in context and to identify and address problems and potentially dangerous situations – our "Duty of Care".

The Area Controller in whose sector the Airprox takes place is the only one who can hardly be blamed. The only thing that they could be blamed for is that they didn't



stop their planner from leaving for that private phone call. Then again there was nothing to do and, had it not been the phone call, then maybe it would have been a toilet break or a chat with the supervisor about the break plan. The fact that the controller is alone on position does not contribute to the events happening at all.

The Controllers in the neighboring west sector are extremely busy and because of all that extra workload caused by the thunderstorm, the planner forgets to hand off the 747. Mistakes happen. But this time, there is no safety net to catch it - the primary radar has been taken out of service to save money.

All the Controllers quickly accepted the management decision to switch off the primary radar. Parking fees seemed more important because they affect you every day. The primary radar is "only" there as a backup, hardly ever needed. But then comes this one



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occasion where you do need it...The Controllers' Union protested against the decision to switch off the primary radar, so they lived up to the standards we expect from them. But when protest didn't help that was it. No more protest, actions, discussions. Why was there not more agitation from the controller's side? They probably didn't feel unsafe without a primary radar. Let's be honest, how often does it happen nowadays that an aircraft transponder fails when the flight is being operated with the other one already subject to 'deferred defect' status?

The Top Manager of the ATC company (probably the person paid most in this story) is worth his money in terms of optimising the financial performance of the business. But he fails to properly think things through to their potential conclusion. What is the price tag of a mid-air collision? For the lives that end? For your revenue, for your reputation, for your insurance premiums, for all the psychological damage it will

cause? And how much was the annual cost of keeping that primary radar in service again?

The job offer too good to refuse has a little twist to it as have most things that seem too good to be true. The Captain is paid not to ask too many questions. When the ground technician explains his concern about not understanding the origin of the unsolved electrical problem, the only thing the Captain is interested in is whether it is a no-go item or not. The technician, who will stay with his two feet on the ground, seems more worried than the pilot who is actually entrusting his life to this pretty old machine. And not only his life but that of his crew and of all his passengers.

The former ABC Airlines cabin crew member is the only one breaking the cycle here. She came to the conclusion that despite the money she was being paid, she did not want to be part of this airline any more. She felt un-

safe and concerned, so she passes her information on to the press. I am left wondering why she did not inform the aviation safety authority of her country. Was she scared that she wouldn't be able to get another job in the industry? It is sad that by turning to the press rather than the authorities, the problems with this airline were not dealt with.

The Journalist is not doing what he is paid for! Although he receives a report that ABC Airlines is not taking safety standards seriously, he does not publish a critical article. He does begin to do some research but when a near miss occurs involving the same airline, he allows himself to be diverted from objectivity by his "old friend", the public relations manager. Once they have done their "catching up" he accepts 100% of the ABC Airlines line about the incident and the resulting magazine article reads like a ABC Airlines press release. This journalist does not live up to the professional standards readers expect.

The airline Public Relations Manager is really worth his money! He does what he is paid for. Thanks to his connections and his charming manner, he manages to soothe all concerns and clear his company from any responsibility.

## A RECOMMENDATION

**Ask yourself! Are you just doing what you are paid for or are you keeping your eyes, ears and mind open? Are you living up to the standards that you would like everyone else to live up too as well?**

