Supporting a Pilot's Return to Work

INTRODUCTION

Returning to work (RTW) after extended periods away from flying can be psychologically challenging. Many pilots face stress and a lack of confidence due to time away from the cockpit. Stress relating to returning to work is normal, but it may trigger feelings of anxiousness. Structuring the RTW process helps to reduce these feelings and provides a sense of control.

This Briefing Leaflet provides guidance and best practices to support a smooth transition back to flying after a long-term absence.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PILOTS

One of the biggest challenges may be shifting one's mindset from *at home* to *at work*. Taking the time to mentally, physically, and emotionally prepare can make a significant difference. Strategies to assist in this transition are outlined below.

Operators or Member Associations may have a structured RTW process which often includes a checklist.

Training can be stressful, whether one has been absent for some time or flying regularly. To navigate this:

- Communicate with individual support networks and let others know this is a potentially stressful period.
- Recognize personal stress reactions - understanding personal responses to stress helps maintain balance.
- Speak to a suitable person if difficulties are encountered. Engaging positively helps to create a supportive training environment.

Training is intended to be a confidence-building process, not just an assessment.

BEST PRACTICES FOR MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS / PEER SUPPORT NETWORK

MAs and peer support programs can assist pilots during the RTW process by:

- Informing pilots about available peer support resources.
- Providing support throughout the training process as needed.
- Being proactive in negotiating a structured return to work process.

BEST PRACTICES FOR OPERATORS

Operators play a key role in ensuring a smooth and structured return through:
- Timely scheduling of RTW training.
- Providing the training syllabus, study materials, and CBT programs promptly.
- Ensuring training meets the candidate's needs.
- Ensuring trainers are prepared for specifics of RTW training requirements
- Creating a safe and supportive training environment, prioritizing learning over evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Returning to flying after an extended absence can be challenging but manageable with the right preparation and support. Pilots should proactively engage in mental, physical, and professional preparation, while operators, Member Associations, and peer support teams work together to ensure a structured, supportive transition.

A well-planned RTW program that leverages available resources and strategies fosters a positive learning environment while supporting both confidence and proficiency.

STRATEGIES FOR PILOTS RETURNING TO WORK

Returning after a long absence can be physically, cognitively, and emotionally challenging. A plan of action to strengthen personal resources will help build confidence and proficiency:

Physical

- Create an optimal living environment to support rest, study, and well-being.
- Adopt healthy sleep habits.
- Exercise regularly by building a routine that supports stamina and well-being.
- Maintain proper nutrition and hydration.

Cognitive

- Bring technical knowledge up to standard.
- Establish disciplined study habits to manage the volume of information.

- Use 'mental training' techniques e.g. visualization, chair flying.
- Understand the RTW process—timeline, documentation, and training structure.

Emotional & Mental Resilience

- Manage stress proactively - feeling apprehensive is normal; have coping strategies in place.
- Utilize peer support - access available resources for emotional and professional guidance.
- The RTW process can be stressful. Utilize healthy coping mechanisms such as relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, and meditation.
- Maintain balance between work and personal life.

Social & Relationship

- Stay connected with family and friends for emotional support; however, manage their expectations.
- Research MA resources available for returning pilots.
- Seek mentorship or guidance where needed.

Other self-care strategies

- Maintaining personal faith and a sense of meaning and purpose.
- Engaging in creative activities.
- Practicing gratitude and self-compassion.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Fitness to Fly – ICAO, IFALPA and IATA Guide: https://www.ifalpa.org/media/3055/fitness-to-fly.pdf
- Paul Dickens – Cleared for Takeoff!: https://www.icao.int/safety/aviation-medicine/AvMedSARS/Cleared%20for%20Take%20Off!.pdf
- Center of Aviation Psychology: Returning to work. Sept 2021. Returning to Work