

Returning to the Flight Deck

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It has been a very tumultuous year for the aviation industry - we have seen plenty of bankruptcies, colleagues being laid off, countless aircraft long-term parked on runways, and endless plans for when and how to return to the skies.

Finally, we can spot the light at the end of the tunnel! Airlines are bringing back some of their furloughed pilots and cabin crew, we are able to spot more aircraft in the sky, and we even see new airlines pop up from the ashes of once-was companies.

This has made me wonder: Are we returning to the flight deck with a new-found love of flying, and will we maybe go the extra mile now, and bend the rules a bit more to get the job done, to make sure our beloved airline will survive this crisis?

I recently spoke to a former colleague of mine. He told me that he missed flying so badly (we were both influenced by Norwegian Denmark's bankruptcy a year ago). We talked about how great it was to have had the summer off last year, but we both felt that autumn and winter were difficult. Obviously because of the lack of sun and light during the very dark months in Scandinavia, but also because of the sheer joy of flying an aircraft, and the feeling that a perfect visual approach on a clear day gave us. That was sorely missed! Not to mention the mere fact that worries about economic uncertainties rarely existed back when we were flying.

Of course there are a lot of down-sides to the pilot job. Often working while the rest of the family is enjoying a weekend or a vacation. Numerous hours sitting in a very questionable environment of low humidity and pressure, temperature changes, and without the possibility to stand up and move around. Being locked into a small flight deck with someone you might not have anything to talk about with. Crazy work schedules, where the only constant is change. Evening flights, early morning flights, simulator sessions in the middle of the night. Hotel beds and short lay overs. But it is almost like we have forgotten about this, and now tend to romanticize the job.

Will we maybe return and have forgotten about all of these little things? And just appreciate the fact that we are now sitting in an aircraft, seeing the sun every day, interacting with our colleagues, and being able to bring thankful passengers to their destinations? Will there actually be a new-found love for the job, like the feeling we had in the very beginning of our career? With less focus on the small things that used to annoy us, and more focus on how great it is to be flying. And if so, how long will this honeymoon phase last?

On the other hand, the lucky ones returning to the industry now might have a lot of concerns. How will the simulator training go? Having studied procedures and manuals only, does not keep our motor skills intact. Maybe it will be like starting all over again? Pilots who have been on maternity leave for a year might know the feeling all too well!

Will the company manage to survive the tough, competitive market? And what can I do to help? Should I accept lower conditions to get back into the game? Am I willing to commute more remotely in order to fly?

Will there additionally be a willingness to stretch the boundaries a bit on the job? E.g. with regards to flight and duty times. Maybe we won't mind going into Commander's Discretion a few times more than usual. And maybe we won't call unfit even though we are not adequately rested. We can always 'power through', right? The coffee onboard might not be as delicious as our own, but it does the trick.

How about grounding an aircraft on an out station, bearing all of the extra costs in mind? Hotel - not just for the crew, but for all of the passengers. An aircraft that won't fly the scheduled program. New set of crew... We know what the 'right' thing to do is. But we also want to keep the costs to a minimum.

This has always been the eternal struggle of an airline captain, but even more so in these unprecedented times post-Covid. We may be longing for the times in the skies, but are we getting back to the same aviation industry as pre-covid?

