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Pilot monitoring – ‘cultivating a healthy unease’

In enhancing aviation safety, what is the aviation community doing about the monitoring role of the pilot not flying the aircraft on a two-crew flightdeck? **TIM ROBINSON** reports from a major RAeS Flight Operations Group conference.



From this crew-intensive flightdeck on a Vickers VC-10...
(RAeS/NAL)

DETAILS

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Another fascinating monitoring viewpoint came from the **Royal Navy** who described the challenge of monitoring another piece of high technology – a nuclear reactor in a submarine. Monitoring this atomic powerplant requires extreme vigilance and it was noteworthy from the speaker the safety culture and professionalism of the Silent Service. However, it was interesting to note that the reactor, although it has automatic systems, is controlled manually. Furthermore, submariners are indoctrinated to be naturally suspicious at all times – cultivating a ‘healthy unease’ has been second nature.

In short, this is a challenging human factors issue. The life experience of tomorrow's ‘digital natives’ who will grow up in a world where information is on tap and where smart phones very rarely go wrong, means that they will inevitably trust technology to work. Those entering the pilot profession will invariably carry this on, especially when aircraft are ultra-reliable and highly automated.

The high reliability and safety built-in to modern airliners thus means today the role of the pilot is akin to a quote attributed to an **Aerolineas** pilot: “Most of the match the goalkeeper just watches the match then, suddenly, it’s all about him.”

However, as this conference demonstrated, it can be possible to cultivate a ‘healthy unease’ where pilots not only question the aircraft, their co-pilot but, most importantly, themselves.

While it might not be possible (or desirable) to undo this innate trust in technology, simply recognising how bad humans are at monitoring everyday routine may, in fact, be the first step on the road to developing a questioning scepticism that one day may save lives.