

“Beats Me”

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Do you study for your check ride in the family room with the TV blaring and kids screaming? Chances are you don't, but instead retreat to a quiet corner of the house. Why is this? The answer is fairly obvious: preparing for a check ride is important business. You can't afford to be distracted from your studying.

Dis • trac • tion: We know what it is. But just for fun, I looked it up in my trusty dictionary. Look at some of the terms and phrases used to describe it: *To stir up or confuse with conflicting emotions or motives; Harass; Mental confusion; Something that distracts; To draw or direct (as one's attention) to a different object or in different directions at the same time; To draw apart.* The last one really struck a nerve, because it gave me the notion of “drawing apart” that well-oiled cockpit team that we are trained to form.

In 1998 NASA researchers conducted a study of cockpit interruptions and distractions. As part of the project, they reviewed NTSB reports of accidents attributed to crew error. They concluded that nearly half of those reviewed accidents involved lapses of attention associated with interruptions, distractions, or preoccupation with one task to the exclusion of another.

They also analyzed over 100 ASRS reports that provided evidence of crew distractions. Of the ASRS reports reviewed by the NASA team, what do you suppose was the leading category of crew distraction? Cockpit conversations.

The NASA researchers were not condemning cockpit conversations, mind you. In fact, they acknowledged that prior research demonstrated that crews who communicate well tend

to perform better overall than those who do not. But the research team then stated that “conversation has a potential downside because it demands a substantial amount of attention to interpret what the other person is saying, to generate appropriate responses, to hold those responses in memory until it is one's own time to speak, and then to utter those responses. One might assume that it is easy to suspend conversation whenever other tasks must be performed. However, the danger is that the crew may become preoccupied with the conversation and may not notice cues that should alert them to perform other tasks.”

You don't need to be a rocket scientist (aka NASA researcher) to know that this “merger mania” is the subject of a lot of cockpit conversation these days. As pilots, we know that discussion and pontification about the “what ifs” can be a great distractor. Often, after all of the talk is over, passion-filled thoughts continue to distract us. *How will they merge the seniority lists? What if I get bumped? Should I take another bid right now?* These thoughts tend to continue running through our heads, long after the conversation has ceased.

Oh, was that call for us? Sorry I missed it.

Anyway, as I was saying . . . consider this: Distractions can affect safety. Talking about the merger can be distracting. There is nothing that any of us can do as pilots to affect the outcome of the proposed merger. Nothing. It will either happen or not happen, regardless of how much we talk about it, worry about it, speculate about it, or complain about it. We cannot affect it. There's a good saying about not

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worrying about those things that we cannot control.

Ok, we’ll call the tower at the marker, USAir 123.

Let’s see. Where was I? Oh yeah. Another thing to consider: There’s a pretty good chance that the person flying with you is sick and tired of hearing, and being distracted by, talk of the merger.

Uhh . . . yeah approach, uh . . . we thought we were cleared to land. I guess we didn’t call tower. Roger, we’ll call Ground Control.

I hate it when those ATC guys keep interrupting me. If you want a really good distraction for your personal life, try to explain this to family and the FAA. The Feds will understand—they’ve heard it before. Your family may not understand.

The next time the inevitable question arises, “What do you think is going to happen?” perhaps the best answer is, “Beats me.” That just may signal that you don’t feel like speculating on something that you have no control over, and would like to remain focused on the task at hand—flying passengers safely to their destinations.

Now, what did I do with those ASAP forms?

