

Safety & Training

By Dan Deutermann

Actually Implementing an SMS: How Hard is it Really Going to Be?



You are a small helicopter operator and you have recently purchased one of those high speed-low drag safety management systems (SMS). Congratulations. Now what? You open the box, start clicking the computer and pretty soon find yourself facing a lot of forms that need filling in, along with a lot of questions needing answering by your co-workers. So you go asking those questions and before you know it, they've adopted a "see and avoid" doctrine regarding you as that pesky Safety Officer. On top of that, the boss needs to know where this program stands—and yesterday—because there is an auditor coming on behalf of a client and having that SMS in place is critical!

If you haven't faced this dilemma as a commercial operator yet, rest assured, you will in the next couple years. However, it need not be a painful experience. An associate and I recently had an opportunity to work with Hi-Jet Helicopters in the South American country of Suriname. Much of the regulations there can be described as ICAO layered with a lot of FAA. This company operates only helicopters (BK117s, an AS365 and a B105) and offers the full gamut of helicopter operations with the majority of flights taking place over the Amazon jungle. Wishing to pursue some new contracts, they had run into a rather large obstacle—they lacked of a formal SMS capable of passing any auditor's standards.

To assist in getting started, we initially recommended the owner/chief pilot send some of his employees to the SMS workshops at Heli-Expo in

March, mainly to provide the basics; he sent eight, including himself.

Shortly thereafter, the owner arranged for us to visit Suriname with the intent of implementing his SMS over a dedicated period of four days. In SMS terms, this company was at Level 0. The entire staff was told to focus on this training program and minimize flight ops. A critical element of any SMS is that it must have complete buy-in from the top down—this aspect is developing for the crew at Hi-Jet. Utilizing the free SMS toolkits published by the International Helicopter Safety Team (IHST), we sat down with the owner and explained his role in promoting aviation safety, as well as helped establish the organizational structure and roles his various employees would need to play to truly make SMS work. We discussed some "do's and don'ts" for implementing SMS, and then drafted a short-and-sweet, half-page safety policy for the owner to call his own.

Over the next few days, we conducted SMS training for the staff, covering every aspect and providing practical exercises. The owner appointed a flight safety officer and a ground safety officer. He unveiled a simple safety policy and stressed how important this was to him before signing it into effect. We helped publish an initial SMS manual and ensured elements of it were reflected in their general ops manual. Classes were conducted on "Just Culture," hazard reporting, risk management and they were given an introduction to CRM as it applies to helicopter pilots. CRM class was then taken into the air, as we conducted practical exercises to permit the less-experienced pilots an opportu-

nity to experiment with CRM concepts for the first time flying dual-piloted. They had their first documented safety committee meeting and were shown how to conduct trend analysis using hazard reports, including from their own minor mishaps. Finally, we overhauled Hi-Jet's Emergency Response Plan and conducted an accident drill. On the last day we witnessed a couple of commercial flight events and were able to see how rapidly this company had come to embrace the principals of an effective safety program. It should be noted that English is not their primary language (although they all could speak it quite well).

This is what it looks like, folks. This is taking an SMS out of the box and getting something more than some forms or computer-generated graphs to stare at. This company even invited reps from their aviation regulatory authority to attend portions of the training (which the regulators accepted), demonstrating an element of transparency I found professionally refreshing. They were using the SMS toolkits available via the web, and by all counts could apply for an ICAO Level 1 SMS status today. Hi-Jet has also put into place the supporting elements to attain Level 2 once the program has matured a bit more. This SMS animal is the soft and fuzzy kind, you can pick it up and pet it and not worry about hidden fangs, claws or venom.

SMS programs exist to provide a measure of efficiency and ultimately to keep operators from experiencing an unfortunate event in the future. Don't just buy one in a box and then put it on the shelf—learn to use it. 🇺🇸