Exploring the Perception, Challenges and Benefits of Cabin Crew Peer Support Programmes

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SUMMARY

Twenty cabin crew with current operational experience across a variety of airlines and ranks participated in semi-structured interviews, to determine their views on the perception, challenges and benefits of peer support programmes. Perceptions of peer support were generally positive and involved talking to colleagues about a difficulty that was being experienced to feel 'heard', 'listened to' and supported by those who understood the lifestyle. The potential benefits of peer support were clear, however, concerns surrounding the trust and confidentiality of colleagues, as well as barriers to success such as lack of trust of management, financial instability of the industry and organisational culture were highlighted. Findings include recommendations to research the issues quantitively with a more diverse group of cabin crew and to industry to implement bespoke, externally–managed programmes, supported by management.

KEYWORDS

Peer support programme, cabin crew, mental health

Introduction

Cabin crew are important, frontline employees within the aviation industry (Tsaur, 2020). Whilst they also provide the onboard service to passengers, their primary purpose is to ensure the safety of the cabin, passengers and crew who travel within it. Cabin crew have not always been offered satisfactory supervision and social support, with Hajiyousefi et al suggesting that only half of flight attendants surveyed within a study conducted in Norway were satisfied with supervision and support (Hajiyousefi, 2016). Social support is thought to be able to improve safety behaviours of cabin crew (Liu, 2022), with support recognition from different sources such as colleagues stabilising the three-way interaction between proactive personality, safety climate and social support (Liu, 2022).

Supporting workers with mental health not only is an 'ethical, legal, and business benefit' but also improves 'productivity, morale, workplace behaviours, communication and decision – making' (Santilhano, 2019, p.67). Managing stress and supporting mental health is paramount to ensuring flight safety with Dismukes et al stating that stress can adversely affect the cognition and skilled performance of pilots as well as experts in other domains (Dismukes, 2015, p.1), exploring the categories of attention, working memory, decision making, team performance, and communication (Dismukes, 2015).

Aviation personnel face significant challenge and stressors as a result of industry and occupational changes; adaptive coping strategies are recognised as a component of therapeutic interventions for

work-related stress (Cahill, 2021a) one example of which is the introduction and promotion of social support such as peer support programmes (Cahill, 2021a). Furthermore, stress is described as an 'insidious threat' to aviation safety, due to the 'impairments in alertness and performance it creates' (Hajiyousefi, 2016, p.32). The lifestyle for cabin crew can vary, dependent on the type of flying undertaken, base location, and the onboard rank. All cabin crew are likely to experience working unsociable working hours, periods of isolation, and fatigue/tiredness. In addition, cabin crew 'hassles' within their work environment include job, peer interactions, passenger service, and personal hassles (Tsaur, 2020, p.1). McNeely et al suggest that cabin crew experience higher prevalence of 'fatigue, depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders, as well as reproductive and all cancers' (McNeely, 2018, p.4), which increase the likelihood of mental health conditions compared to the general population (McNeely, 2018, p.9).

The aim of peer support is to offer those that need, a confidential service where they can speak openly and honestly about their problems, receiving signposting where required. The service within the aviation industry uses trained volunteers from within the airline, supported by aviation psychologists. Peer support programmes are one tool available to support people with their mental health and wellbeing, providing individual, operational safety (Yelgin, 2021) and organisational benefits.

Understanding the regulation, and current climate is important to determine the purpose and potential benefits of Peer Support Programmes. One response to the Germanwings flight 9525 incident was the introduction of regulation (EU) 2018/1042, now (EU) 2020/745, mandating the implementation of a support programme for pilots. In order to comply with regulation, airlines must provide a peer support programme to pilots (EPPSI 2019), the aim of which is to support pilots with their mental health and wellbeing (EPPSI, 2019, CAA, 2018).

EASA suggest that positive feedback was provided on the proposal regarding support programmes from commentators upon introduction (EASA, 2016, p.25), with benefits including an improvement in under-reporting, increased awareness of mental health and wellbeing, and a more open culture regarding the use/misuse of psychoactive substances or other psychological/psychiatric problems (EASA, 2016). More recently, the attention and focus within the industry has turned to whether a similar initiative for supporting the mental health and wellbeing of cabin crew should be regulated and implemented, given similar issues may be prevalent in the cabin crew population (whilst noting there are professional differences), and whether there would be improvement to operational cabin safety (Tsaur, 2020).

Cahill et al, discuss whilst peer support programmes are in place for the pilot community, they remain an unused service likely due to the stigma surrounding loss of license/medical, but also due to existing supports being highlighted as unfit for purpose (Cahill, 2021a, 2021b). Moreover, the research highlighted how there was a desire for peer support programmes for all members of the aviation workforce, and not just pilots with 75.9% of cabin crew questioned responding that they would use a peer support programme if there was one in place. However, the underuse of existing services for pilots, suggests that there is a disconnect between the desires of the workforce, and the reality of the peer support programme infrastructure.

The challenges faced by cabin crew, highlights the importance of the topic of mental health and wellbeing with this occupational group. There is currently limited research as to the perception of peer support in general and the impact of peer support programmes for cabin crew. Therefore, the aim of this work was to explore the perception, challenges, and potential benefits of peer support programmes amongst cabin crew.

Method

Design

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to ensure that whilst interviews focused on the necessary themes to gain relevant information, sufficient flexibility was offered to answer openly, whilst also providing perspectives that may not have been previously identified (Coolican, 2014). An interview schedule was developed drawing on relevant literature.

Sample and Participants

A sample of current, operational main crew and onboard managers, from different airlines within the UK was sought. A variety of cabin crew from short-haul, leisure, private and long-haul operations as well as varied service lengths in the industry were consulted to provide a representative sample.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval was given by the university ethics committee and British Psychological Society ethical procedures were followed (British Psychological Society, 2018).

Procedure

Interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams. Interviews commenced by reviewing the demographics of participants, and discussing their experiences within the industry, helping to build rapport and trust. Following this, the perceptions, challenges and benefits of peer support were explored. Interview discussion points included suitability for the role, skills and training, confidentiality, supporting the peer supporter, implication to safety, and overall wellbeing. Appropriate semi-structure interview techniques were utilised in line with Kvale and Brinkmann's guidance (Kvale, 2018). Interviews lasted between 27 and 63 minutes.

Analysis

Data were thematically analysed via NVivo, using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. This identified, coded, and analysed emerging patterns and trends within the interview responses, in a detail rich, yet unrestricted way, whilst acknowledging the centrality of researcher subjectivity and reflexivity (Braun, 2019, 2020). This also included an analysis of literature and regulatory documents previously explored to guide initial coding themes. Data gathered were then transferred to quote expansion tables.

To ensure quality of the research Lincoln and Guba (Lincoln, 1985) trustworthiness checks were conducted within the categories of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This process took place prior to, during and post – data collection, including incorporating the use of an SME at the initial interview schedule creation, thematic evaluation and report production phases.

Results and Discussion

Sample

Participants held a wide range of experience across differing airline operation types and airlines, eight with short and long-haul experience, nine long-haul only, one short-haul only, and two with private aviation experience. The overall average length of service was 14.05 (SD = 9.88) years, with eight On Board Manager crew averaging a 19-year career (SD = 10.50), and 12 Main Crew averaging a career of 10.75 years (SD = 8.28).

Research Themes

The results and discussion are split into three separate themes (with sub-themes). The three main themes were perception, challenges and benefits, as shown in Table 1, and are illustrated via short, abbreviated quotes focussing on key words in line with Merriam (Merriam, 2009).

Table 1: Research Themes

Theme	Category
Perception	Perception of peer support and/or peer support programmes.
	Perception of suitability for the role of peer supporter of cabin crew.
	Perception of required skills and training.
	Trust of cabin crew.
Challenges	Challenges of a peer support programme.
	Confidentiality.
	Support the peer supporter.
	Management support.
Benefits	Purpose (benefits) of peer support.
	Safety.
	Wellbeing.

Perception

This section explores the theme of perception, focusing on the support programme, the role of peer supporter, as well as skills, training and trust of cabin crew.

Perception of Peer Support and/or Peer Support Programmes

The perceptions of peer support were mixed and based upon a variety of factors. One participant stated that when they thought of peer support they thought *'of the channels that the company has set up that help with mental health'* (P3) rather than a specific peer support programme, indicating that they were unsure of what a peer support programme was. Others said that peer support was *'talking to your peers, your colleagues and being helped by them'* (P1) and *'speaking to someone'* (P5) summarising that *'peers are friends'* (P11), or *'somebody in the same position as you,'* (P14).

There were some participants that had *'never'* (P17) heard of peer support, however thought *'it would be an amazing thing'* (P17), and that *'airlines should have something in place'* (P11). The lack of knowledge, but desire for support suggests that whilst some airlines do not have a dedicated peer support programme, those that do, likely do not advertise or signpost their programmes regularly to cabin crew supporting the views of Cahill et al (Cahill, 2021a). However, it was also noticed that whilst mental health has become a more openly spoken about and accepted concept, *'it's still got a stigma attached to it',* (P4) due to the concerns surrounding loss of medical or loss of career, mirroring the views expressed by Cahill et al (Cahill, 2021b) and the pilot community. Peer support was viewed by participants as suitable for *'everyone'*, as 'everyone has issues with their mental health' (P3), and that 'mental health has a significant impact on cabin crew' (P3) building on the findings from Tsaur et al in relation to the hassles experienced by operational crew (Tsaur, 2020).

Perception of Suitability for the Role of Peer Supporter of Cabin Crew

Participants thought that *'only crew really understand crew'* (P6), and it was felt that *'crew*

members will pull together' (P13) and support each other. Some job factors are very unique to the cabin crew role, making it difficult for a peer supporter to empathise if they haven't experienced it for themselves, for example loneliness and feeling of missing out on events at home, representing views regarding job hassles expressed by Tsaur et al (Tsaur, 2020) and the unique challenges that the aviation industry presents for cabin crew.

A participant explained that cabin crew were suitable because whilst they all came from *'different backgrounds'*, they were *'also similar'*, and that *'by the end of your eight-hour sector or whatever it is you're like, a little family'* (P2). This for them meant they already had the ability to trust and confide in cabin crew, so would feel comfortable approaching them for peer support. However, one participant explained that they held concerns fearing *'they might not feel comfortable talking to them because they know them'* (P6), contrasting Tsaur et al (Tsaur, 2020) and McNeely et al (McNeely, 2018) .

Variety in terms of age, experience, and demographic within peers was deemed important to promote use, as would *'a 58-year-old going through something [be] happy talking to an 18-year-old?'* (P18). The experience of some cabin crew who have *'been crew for like 20-30 years'* (P9) was seen as advantageous, as they would be able to relate to a range of experiences, empathising with the unique hassles of the role discussed by Tsaur et al (Tsaur, 2020).

Perception of Required Skills and Training

There was a general agreement that cabin crew naturally had a lot of the soft skills required to be peer supporters, for example the ability to be *'empathetic and sympathetic'* (P6) and are *'caring'* enough to *'speak to people and understand and just be open and honest'* (P20). This would help to build rapport and trust between a peer supporter with core principles such as 'empathetic listening key to success of a peer support programme' (Santilhano, 2019, p.73). These soft – skills are required to fulfil the competencies of operating as cabin crew and are therefore likely to be naturally found within this community.

Training in how to signpost to, and support from *'professionals'* (P13) was also perceived as an important skill to learn. Cabin crew who had previous experience were perceived as valuable with one participant expressing that they would feel comforted if their peer supporter had *'been an NHS nurse, or psychiatric carer'* (P16), had undertaken *'mental health first aid'* (P17) or even had *'personal experience of maybe dealing with situations'* (P8). This is useful experience as the peer supporter will likely have increased knowledge and understanding of mental health, and appropriate forms of signposting, as well as confidence in their ability to support cabin crew, leading to a higher chance of a successful peer support programme interaction as discussed by Santilhano et al (2019).

Trust of Cabin Crew

The perception of whether cabin crew would make appropriate peer supporters, and thus the success of a peer support programme was associated with whether participants felt as though they could trust their colleagues; *'could you ever fully trust them?'* (P1) one participant mentioned, suggesting that some cabin crew were seen as *'snakes in the grass'* (P1), and would be using their position as a peer supporter for ill-intentioned means, for example information *'getting back to the manager'* (P2), supporting Cahill et al's research highlighting the necessity, but not guaranteed factor of trust to the success of a peer support programme (Cahill, 2021a). A participant explained that they *'wouldn't want to go and then be grassed up'* (P2)*,* with concerns shared surrounding whether the peers would *'keep it to themselves'* (P8). The fear of repercussion from management was mirrored in several testimonies with one participant disclosing that *'I know people who have been contacted by ground management and they've said we know you've done this'* (P1), which has dissuaded cabin crew from contacting support in the future. This view was not supported by all participants,

with most supporting the desire for an external, confidentially run service, but desiring the relatability of speaking to fellow colleagues.

Challenges

Interviews explored the challenges of implementing peer support programmes, based upon perception and existing mental health concerns.

Challenges of a Peer Support Programme

Organisational challenges and barriers were cited by participants in the implementation of a peer support programme or improvement of an existing one. The first challenge related to financial impact with phrases such as *'airlines are very reluctant at the moment to spend money'* (P1), *'cash is king',* (P2) and *'cost versus value benefit'* (P12) mentioned. Convincing management committees and senior leadership that implementing a programme that will potentially incur additional cost, is perceived to be a challenge, however potentially of benefit to the safety climate of an organisation as discussed by Liu et al (Liu, 2022).

Another challenge is the *'resourcing'* (P2) required to run a peer support service, with one participant asking, *'why would they take you out of the operation?'* (P2), to train and volunteer as a peer supporter, particularly poignant given the reduction of personnel in recent years. Accessibility was another perceived challenge by participants, with a peer support programme needing to be *'easily accessible'* (P1) to have any impact. In addition, *'time putting it together'* (P11), as well as the concern surrounding *'how long is it gonna take to roll out?'* (P18) was cited. Participants worried *'whether the airline would promote it?'* (P13) with commitment required as discussed by Santilhano et al from management regarding time and resource for mental health and wellbeing initiatives in order to improve trust in the programme (Santilhano, 2019).

Confidentiality

One of the most important functions of a proposed or existing peer support programme for participants was confidentiality. A lack of confidentiality was cited as a concern or barrier to the success of a peer support programme. It was described that *'trust is very, very hard to gain but very easy to lose'* (P19), and there was a *'fear of someone telling'* (P9) described by another participant. Confidentiality therefore is viewed as important because *'you want people to feel comfortable and safe'* (P5), especially when talking about subjects such as mental health that as stated by Cahill et al, have perceived stigma attached to them (Cahill, 2021b).

There was discussion by all participants about when confidentiality should be broken, with an unanimously agreed upon view expressed that whilst any programme has to be *'100% confidential there has to be a point in which the advisor decides is this person fit to be on an aircraft as operating crew?'* (P16) including if it was deemed that the colleague using peer support might *'harm [themselves] or harm others'* (P6). Therefore, it can be determined that if a peer supporter felt that the safety of the individual or the operation was at risk, there should be an escalation process to support both the operation and the individual, breaking confidentiality.
A participant also discussed the potential for removal of confidentiality should an emerging trend be identified amongst the peer support programme. The participant stated that *'if it could be a potential safety issue then that's when it needs to then be reported to the company'* (P20). However, this would have to be handled sensitively, as discussed by Santilhano et al (2019), confidentiality is critical to the integrity of a peer support programme and could be extremely difficult to operationalise.

Support the Peer Supporter

It is *'important [to have] a safe place for the councillor or the peer supporter, the listener to be able to offload'* (P14). This was explained as useful because what the peer supporter may experience could be upsetting and provide a challenge to the programme with attracting and retaining peer supporters, and therefore a secondary effect of volunteering to be a peer supporter could potentially be a decline in personal mental health, should it not be supported appropriately, further heightening the stress caused by job hassles mentioned by Tsaur et al (Tsaur, 2020) and mental health conditions highlighted by McNeely et al, experienced by cabin crew (McNeely, 2018).

Management Support

The success of a peer support programme was attributed by many participants to the support from management. One participant commented that a barrier to the success of a programme was *'management and [the] organisation'* (P2), with it being felt that a peer support programme could just be used as a way of *'ticking boxes'* to make it *'look like [they're] doing something'* (P2). The lack of trust in the relationship between cabin crew and management was a reciprocated dynamic with one participant stating that *'crew don't trust management, management don't or don't seem to trust crew'* (P13). To improve that, one participant suggested that *'as the CEO of a company, you've really gotta care about your company'* (P11), and by implementing a peer support programme, this would be a step closer to improving that dynamic between the workforce and senior management, supporting the view researched by Santilhano et al (2019) that by supporting mental health, there would be improvement to productivity, morale and workplace behaviours.

One way recommended to build the trust of the programme involved management communication and endorsement with one participant stating that *'for this to work, the management would not only need to market it, but they need to be the ambassador for it'* (P20). However, many cabin crew would prefer a programme to be kept separate from management to encourage trust, and therefore it is concluded that whilst positive endorsement, and encouragement of a peer support programme is essential to success, the service should remain external to the company and from management, ensuring confidentiality supporting the findings of Cahil et al (2021a) and Santilhano et al (2019).

Benefits

Research within this paper is presented from both an organisational and individual perspective.

Benefits (purpose) of Peer Support

Participants had a range of ideas regarding the purposes and subsequent benefits of a peer support programme. One participant explained that from their experience with an existing programme it was quite important to have somebody to talk to who might not be your closest family or friends, as *'you might not want to talk to them'* (P1) nor might you want to speak to a professional about something. Overall, participants felt as though the purpose of peer support programmes should be to talk about *'anything that's worrying you'* (P8), and that it should be a place where *'crew can feel supported'* (P2) with their mental health and wellbeing.

Participants commented that the programme could be used for a range of issues including *'work-related'* (P1), *'home-related'* (P3), *'financial'* (P3) and for serious issues at work such as *'death on board'* (P6), *'mental-health concerns'* (P13) and *'demands of the lifestyle'* (P15).

Participants expressed that it should not always need to be used for extreme events and should be used to *'support crew in their day to day lives and well as when it gets a little bit more serious'* (P3). This was seen as normalising the conversation surrounding mental health, removing the

stigma discussed in research from Cahil et al. This develops the organisational culture of the airline, by encouraging a psychologically safe environment, in which discussion surrounding mental health and performance variability was supported, supporting the views of Liu et al (Liu, 2022) in improving the safety climate of an organisation. Overall, it was felt that the purpose of a peer support programme should be to *'support'* (P10) within a non-judgmental, *'no-blame culture'* (P8).

Safety

The most important part of a cabin crew member's role is to ensure the onboard safety of passengers and crew travelling within the cabin as discussed by Tsaur et al (Tsaur, 2020) therefore it is important to ascertain whether there would be improvement to operational safety. It was thought that there would be an *'impact on safety positively'* (P18). Another participant suggested that *'the highest performing teams will be the safest teams'* (P12), with words such as *'safer, nicer environment'* (P5) and *'open kind of culture'* (P1) used to explain how the improvement to safety would manifest amongst cabin crew. It was felt that peer supporters could not only preserve the career of the individual, but the safety and security of an airline by supporting cabin crew to consider reporting unfit for duty, supporting the view of Dismukes et al (Dismukes, 2015).

Where wellbeing is not supported, *'people create work arounds, and sometimes you don't always do what the manual says to the word'* (P2). Some participants also felt that there would be an improvement to safety culture. It was expressed that cabin crew were *'more likely to own up to potential things that have happened'* (P1) if appropriate support was in place, with another view that they felt the *'psychological contract'* (P2) between the cabin crew member and the airline would be improved if wellbeing was prioritised, as cabin crew would want to focus on the integral safety part of their role, in line with Liu et al (Liu, 2022) and the Aerospace Medical Association (Aerospace Medical Association, 2021).

Wellbeing

'General morale' (P16) was mentioned by participants as a benefit, as well as *'less rates of sickness'* (P20) and a sense of relief, and *'possibly [being] happier going into work'* (P7). A participant described how they thought that *'when we don't feel listened to or supported, it can make you feel over - emotional, and I think mistakes can get made as well'* (P14). Another supported this stating that *'if your mental health is not there, if you are feeling with that in any way shape or form, it's exceptionally hard to open yourself up to brand new people'* (P12). One participant felt that their airline *'could be a champion for this, and we can make this a better place to work where people want to come and work'* (P7), which would improve recruitment strategies, as well as the individual wellbeing of cabin crew when considering the unique stressors associated with the role discussed by Tsaur et al (2020) and McNeely et al (2018).

Ultimately, it was thought that a *'[peer support programme] will make people happier'* (P5), *'problems aren't likely to get exacerbated'* (P6) and a peer support programme will *'give us support, so coping strategies and how to get through it'* (P6). This is ultimately because it is perceived that *'mental health in the crew community needs to be addressed'* (P10), and *'the sooner people get on board with something, then it will be better for all of us'* (P7).

Conclusion

The key research findings are as follows:

(1)   Peer support programmes are considered to be a positive initiative to support the mental health and wellbeing of cabin crew.

(2) The implementation and management of a peer support programme should be external to the company, to promote confidentiality and ensure trust.

(3) The value of senior leadership is paramount to programme success, specifically via meaningful promotion, support and encouragement of service use.

(4) Cabin crew have many of the relevant transferable non-technical skills that would make them strong candidates for the role of peer, however diversity amongst peers and training and support for supporters is paramount.

Recommendations

(1) Following the identification of key perceptions on the issue, these themes should now be investigated quantitatively on a wider sample of cabin crew.

(2) Airlines should consider implementing a peer support programme for cabin crew, involving the end user during design phases to maximise suitability.

(3) If a programme exists, it is recommended that further research is done within the airline to determine the current usage, and whether the programme remains fit- for-purpose.

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