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Industry Expert Steve Bentley FRAeS Challenges Aviation’s Reliance on External Audits, Calling for a Shift from Box-Ticking to Systemic Accountability

The Compliance Illusion: Why External Aviation Audits Aren't a Safety Blanket

SOFIA, BULGARIA, May 28, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Aviation industry expert Steve Bentley, FRAeS, has issued a stark warning to the global aviation sector regarding its over-reliance on external regulatory audits. With over five decades of commercial aviation experience, including 30 years dedicated to safety and compliance, Bentley argues that many organizations operate under a dangerous "compliance illusion," mistaking a lack of regulatory audit findings for genuine operational health.

As operational complexity increases across the industry, systemic gaps persist in how organizations identify, report, and manage non-compliances. Bentley, currently serving as the CEO of Sofema Aviation Services and Sofema Aviation, is calling for a fundamental cultural shift from basic regulatory box-ticking to true operational excellence.

The Danger of the "Compliance Illusion"

According to Bentley, a common and dangerous misconception occurs when a Competent Authority (CA) inspector completes an audit with minimal or zero findings, leading organizations to falsely assume their operations are perfect.

Bentley clarifies that a regulatory audit is merely a high-level sampling exercise rather than a comprehensive "stock-taking" of every process, part, or staff member. Regulators review a limited slice of the organization within a restricted timeframe.

"When an organization interprets a quiet CA audit as a stamp of approval for their entire ecosystem, they are living under a compliance illusion," Bentley stated. "The CA is there to provide regulatory oversight, not to act as your quality control or to guarantee your operational excellence."

Furthermore, Bentley notes that if an external regulator uncovers a major non-compliance, multiple internal layers of defense - including the personnel executing the work, the Business Area Owner, and the internal Compliance Monitoring Department - have already failed. A regulatory finding is rarely an isolated error; it is a lagging indicator of systemic disconnects across the organizational hierarchy.

Deconstructing Root Cause Analysis and the "Human Error" Trap

A critical vulnerability in current aviation safety management systems is the poor execution of Root Cause Analysis (RCA). Bentley observes that human nature naturally seeks a simple, linear narrative, often resulting in organizations chasing a single "smoking gun" while ignoring underlying contributing factors. Latent weaknesses such as fatigue, vague documentation, high turnover, and poor tooling create the environment that allows root causes to manifest.

Bentley strongly criticizes the widespread industry practice of labeling "human error" or "human factors" as a root cause and concluding investigations with basic employee retraining.

"Human factors can never be a root cause. Ever," Bentley emphasized. "Human error is an output, not an input. If you stop at 'the mechanic made a mistake,' you haven't done a Root Cause Analysis; you’ve just assigned blame."

In a proper investigation, organizations must drill deeper to understand why a qualified professional made a specific choice in a given micro-second. Bentley contrasts this superficial approach with the forensic, exhaustive autopsies performed by Accident Investigation Boards (AIB). He urges the industry to adopt proactive compliance by thoroughly investigating internal systems before an accident forces an external board to do so.

Realigning Accountability to Business Area Owners

The dialogue also highlights a widespread inversion of accountability within aviation frameworks like EASA. Bentley asserts that the ultimate responsibility for safety and compliance resides squarely with Business Area Owners and Post Holders, rather than internal compliance managers or external regulators.

In a mature aviation ecosystem, the roles are distinct:

Business Area Owners: Own the operational risk, manage performance, and ensure processes are actively followed.

Compliance Departments: Act strictly as independent internal auditors and advisors to verify system functionality.

Competent Authorities: Verify via high-level sampling that the internal management loop is closed and functional.

Bentley warns that treating compliance as the sole responsibility of the Compliance Department signifies a failure of management control.

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