

Competency Maintenance During Extended Operational Disruption

Lessons from COVID-19 and a solution for the current Middle East crisis

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1 The Current Situation

As of mid-March 2026, conflict in the Middle East has produced the most significant operational disruption to Gulf aviation since COVID-19. Qatar Airways is at approximately 5% of normal capacity. Etihad at roughly 15% of pre-conflict schedules. Emirates, recovering above 60%, still has thousands of crew on reduced rosters. Airspace across a dozen states remains under EASA CZIB 2026-03.¹ Tens of thousands of flight crew are grounded or flying far below normal frequency.

Every week this continues, the return-to-flying training bill grows. COVID-19 proved that bill can reach tens of millions of pounds per major carrier.

2 The Evidence

The chain of risk is well-documented: reduced operations mean reduced flying; reduced flying causes non-technical competencies to decay; and it is these non-technical competencies that result in non-competent assessments at Grade 2 or below during recurrent training cycles, requiring costly remedial simulator sessions. Each link has institutional evidence behind it.

EASA's Safety Issue Report, *Skills and Knowledge Degradation due to Lack of Recent Practice*,² and a Griffith University study of 234 airline pilots (*Human Factors*, 2022)³ confirmed the findings:

- **Non-technical competencies decay fastest, not handling skills.** Pilots anticipated manual flying would degrade most. They were wrong: it recovered quickly. The competencies that decayed and took longest to recover were procedures, situation awareness, workload management and communication. EASA states: *“Procedures must be viewed as highly sensitive to proficiency decay.”*
- **These are the competencies that trigger additional training if standard is not reached.** Pilots who require retraining do so overwhelmingly on non-technical competencies. Each remedial training simulator session costs £1,000–2,000 per hour.
- **The data is unambiguous.** IATA's Flight Data eXchange recorded unstable approaches per 1,000 operations approximately **doubling** in April–May 2020.⁴ Embry-Riddle documented a **50% increase in pilot errors** post-shutdown.⁵ 75% of grounded pilots received *no* self-study programmes from their airlines.

“The more proficient the pilot at the beginning of the crisis, the easier it will be to come back. The more proficient pilots at all times, the more resilient the aviation system will be. Pilot training is a wise, invaluable investment for any operator.”

Captain Tanja Harter, ECA Technical Board Director⁶

One additional remedial session per pilot across a fleet of 5,000 is **£5–10 million**. Post-COVID, airlines faced global simulator shortages and backlogs lasting months.⁷ That bottleneck will recur when Middle East operations resume at scale.

EASA's concept paper on alternative training media (RMT.0599) explicitly recognises this: *“The introduction of alternative training tools may serve to restructure the capacity of FFS, in favour of FFS time for flight critical competency training and pilot assessment.”*⁸ The EPAS 2024 reinforces this, calling for CBTA implementation *“taking advantage of new technology and an increasingly data-driven approach to training.”*⁹ The regulatory position is clear: maintain non-technical competencies off-sim, and free simulator capacity for the training that actually requires one.

3 A Measured Response

Resilience Deck is a competency assurance platform built on the ICAO CBTA framework (Doc 9868) and aligned with EASA EBT requirements. It delivers continuous development of non-technical competencies via iOS and iPadOS, requiring no simulator time. Exercises include scenario-based knowledge checks, procedural sequencing tasks, and self-reflection prompts, each mapped to specific observable behaviours

within the ICAO framework. By maintaining these competencies between sessions, Resilience Deck directly reduces the remedial training burden when pilots return to the simulator, freeing capacity to bring more crew back into recency faster.

Measured Results: Major European Carrier

6-month controlled trial (Oct 2024–Mar 2025): 60 pilots, 27 instructor-evaluators, 8 Competency Development Sessions. Competency was measured by instructor-evaluator grading against the ICAO 9-competency model, not pilot self-assessment.¹⁰

Metric	Result
Overall pilot competency	3.55 → 3.90 (+10%)
Grade 2 (“potentially unsafe”)	Eliminated (from 8% of baseline)
Grade 4+ population	30% → 56%
Leadership & Teamwork	3.51 → 4.33 (+23%)
Problem Solving & Decision Making	3.57 → 4.08 (+14%)
Application of Procedures	3.50 → 5.00 (+43%)
Instructor competency	3.39 → 3.97 (+17%)

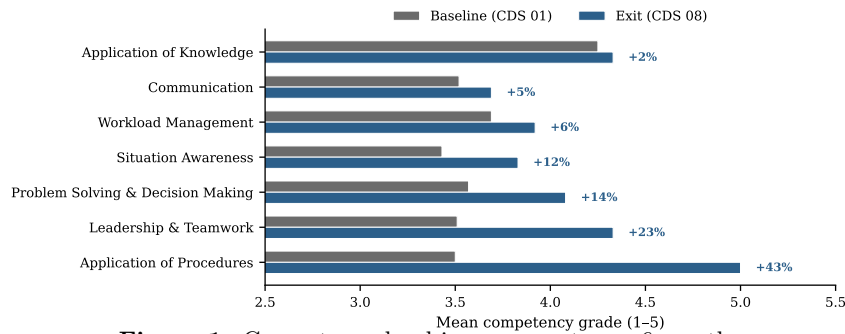


Figure 1: Competency-level improvement over 6 months.

For carriers with crews grounded or on reduced schedules, Resilience Deck provides immediate competency maintenance. Pilots receive their airline’s framework and begin daily exercises against the observable behaviours they will be assessed on when operations resume. The platform generates structured competency records aligned to EASA EBT data collection requirements, giving heads of training fleet-level visibility into where competencies are being maintained and where gaps are emerging.

Cost Comparison

Approach	Per pilot	Fleet of 5,000
Additional remedial sim session	£1–2k	£5–10m
Resilience Deck (annual)	£60	£300k

Resilience Deck costs less per pilot per year than three minutes of simulator time.

In the trial, remedial training rates dropped by 3 percentage points, a direct reduction in simulator demand.

Next Step

We are offering a live demonstration of Resilience Deck configured with your airline’s competency framework. In 30 minutes, we can show your Head of Training exactly what your pilots would see, what fleet-level data you would receive, and how deployment works at scale with SSO integration.

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¹ EASA CZIB 2026-03; OPSGROUP Middle East Airspace. ² EASA Together4Safety (2021). *Skills and Knowledge Degradation*. V2.0. ³ Mizzi, Lohmann & Carim Junior (2022). *Human Factors*. DOI: 10.1177/00187208221113614. ⁴ IATA (2020). *Unstable Approaches During COVID-19*. ⁵ Olaganathan & Amihan (2021). *GJETA*. ⁶ ECA (2021). *Current & Confident*. ⁷ CNBC (2021). ⁸ EASA (2017). *Concept Paper: Alternative Training Media and Methods*. RMT.0599. ⁹ EASA (2023). *European Plan for Aviation Safety (EPAS) Vol. II, Section 2.2*. ¹⁰ Major European carrier / Resilient Pilot (2025). *CBTA Trial*. Internal data.