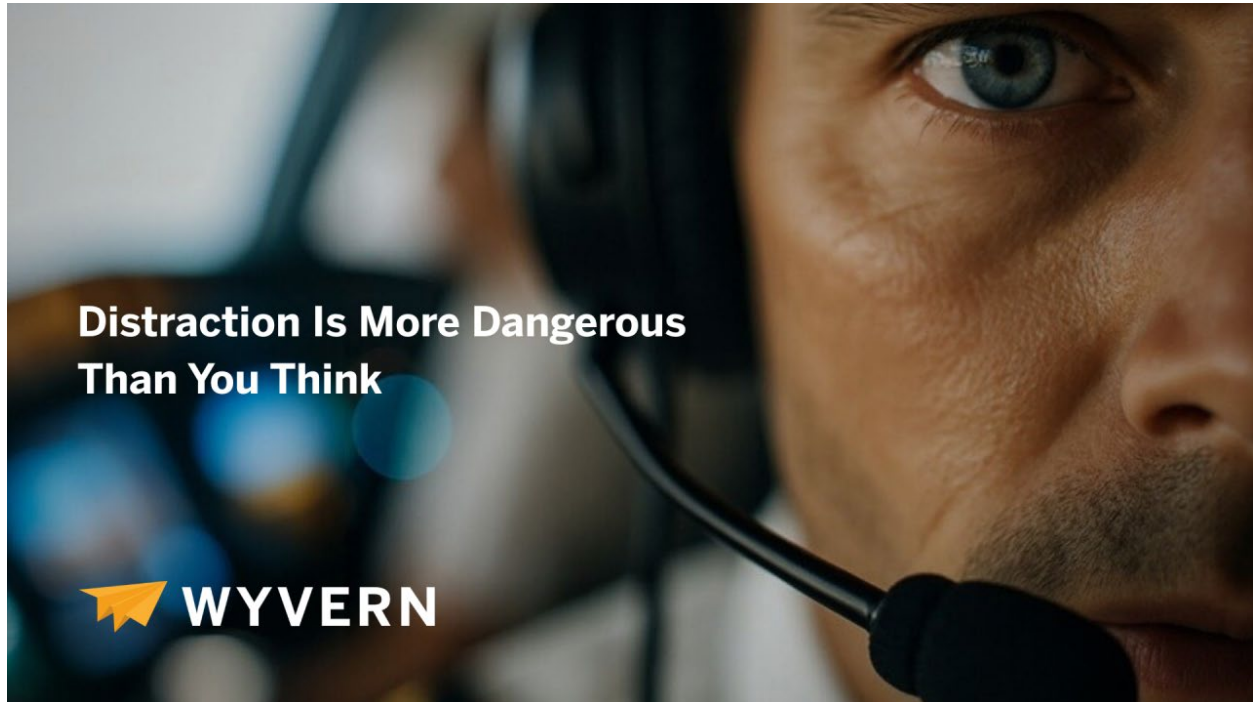


Distraction Is More Dangerous Than You Think



In aerospace, accidents rarely stem from a single catastrophic error. More often, it's a chain of small lapses—an overlooked checklist item, a misunderstood clearance, a missed callout. And one of the most dangerous links in that chain? **Distraction**.

Whether it's a radio call during a critical checklist, a jumpseat occupant breaking the sterile flight deck rule, or an overloaded controller fielding simultaneous transmissions, the effect is the same: attention is diverted, and safety margins narrow.

Real-World Case: When Focus Fails

A seasoned flight crew received a late ACARS message with revised landing data while on final approach. The pilot flying adjusted the speed while the pilot monitoring went “head-down” to reprogram the FMS. Neither noticed they had drifted below the glideslope—until the GPWS warning sounded. A last-minute correction avoided disaster.

This wasn't poor airmanship—it was **task saturation** triggered by a routine distraction.

Meanwhile, ATCOs are no less vulnerable. In São Paulo, a 737 was cleared to line up on a runway already cleared for landing. A go-around was issued just in time—prompted not by the controller but by the inbound crew's query.

The Evidence Is Clear

- 72% of approach-and-landing accidents involve an omission or inappropriate action
- 14% of flight crew safety reports cite distraction or interruption as a contributing factor
- Distraction has also played a role in numerous ATC-related incidents—including runway incursions, level busts, and wrong-runway landings

And too often, these errors involve **deviation from Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)**—procedures created to ensure safe outcomes under pressure.

For Flight Crews and ATCOs: The Front Lines of Focus

SOPs are not just paperwork—they’re the product of years of operational experience designed to support performance during routine, abnormal, and emergency situations.

When distractions break the flow of SOPs, the consequences can be severe:

- A checklist pause due to a cabin call results in a missed configuration item
- A crew distracted by conversation enters an active runway without clearance
- A controller distracted by overlapping calls misses a conflict alert

Best Practices:

- **Verbalize checklist interruptions:** “Holding checklist... Resuming checklist.”
- **Announce head-down tasks** to maintain shared situational awareness
- **Use the “Identify – Ask – Decide – Act” method** to reorient after an interruption
- **Apply the Sterile Flight Deck Rule** religiously—below 10,000 feet is not the time for casual talk
- **Controllers should minimize background noise**, distractions from peers, and maintain discipline in phraseology and strip marking

SOPs only work when they’re followed—distractions are one of the top reasons they’re not.

For Organizations: Build the Defenses

Distraction and interruption are operational hazards—but with the right systems, training, and culture, their effects can be managed.

Organizational Strategies:

- **Audit SOP vulnerability:** When are critical tasks most at risk of interruption? Departure performance planning during fueling? Approach briefings while ATC is busy?
- **Train for procedural discipline:** Emphasize that SOPs are not optional—even under pressure. CRM and TRM training must reinforce their role as the standard.
- **Design SOPs that work in the real world:** If a procedure is too complex or poorly timed, it won't be followed. Build clarity and realism into every step.
- **Equip crews to manage task saturation:** Stress management, time allocation, and assertiveness must be part of the training curriculum.
- **Support ATCO performance** with proper workstation ergonomics, distraction-free environments, and clear shift handoff protocols.

Management must lead by example: **demand procedural compliance, support error reporting, and train for recovery—not just prevention.**

Final Thought

In this industry, precision starts with attention. Maintain it under pressure.

Distractions and interruptions can't be eliminated—but they can be managed. By reinforcing SOP compliance, improving crew and controller awareness, and embedding recovery strategies into everyday practice, we reduce risk where it matters most: **before the mistake becomes irreversible.**

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References

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