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The Big Oof Of ValuJet 592

“The Lessons of ValuJet 592” describes an awful plane crash in 1996 going from Miami to Georgia that killed all 110 people on board. As the article goes on it also delves into how this accident happened, what kind of accident this was, why these kinds of accidents are almost inevitable, and the reaction to the accident.

The pilots called into ground control to request a landing back in Miami and they warned of fire in their cockpit. They do not immediately head back despite given the authorization to do so, and this is the second sign of danger to come. Later on a man fishing at Everglades Holiday Park calls in the crash.

The writer, William Langewiesche, describes three kinds of accidents and claims that most accidents are a mix of all three. There is the Procedural Accident in which something simple was ignored or not understood yet. Langewiesche gives the example of how a pilot should not fly into a violent thunderstorm. The second is an Engineered Accident, and that is when designers or testers miss something that causes a problem later on like faulty landing gear. Finally, the third accident is the System Accident. Langewiesche claims that the crash of flight 592 was the perfect example of a system accident.

A System Accident is more difficult to prepare for than the others. To help prevent from an Engineering Accident management could spend more money on a well regarded designer or double the amount of test flights. With Procedural Accidents we have years of previous flight history to advise us along with regulations from governments. However, a System Accident comes from faults in the system and absolutely no system is perfect. Langewiesche goes on to explain how ValuJet as a company was constantly testing the system it was in and cutting corners wherever it could. ValuJet did not pay enough attention to the possibility of a failure in their system.

When someone is pushing the limits to how cheaply they can fly people through the sky in a giant metal container, they should probably take a step back and critically think about what possible issues can arise. ValuJet was constantly trying to save money by going outside their own company to hire contractors, and in the 592 accident there was a third set of workers who were hired by the company SabreTech who was hired by ValuJet. It will be difficult to maintain consistency throughout the work that workers do when there is this kind of disconnect; It is more difficult to supervise over someone who technically works for another company. Three fourths of the workers on the project were contract workers.

Even when safety is not an issue as an employee I will personally need to be aware of higher ups cutting costs and throwing outside workers on my project. If I am put in a scenario where finishing the contract and turning in a good product is just not possible then the contract could get terminated and there might not be a payday.

ValuJet also underpaid their employees as much as possible. This would not create the best working environment for employees. This is something that I will try to avoid in the future. Even if you put the job on your resume and leave there to get another job, the reputation of the last company could backfire. After the accident ValuJet had to change their name and SabreTech went out of business. Along with all of those downsides comes the fact that I might not be getting as much valuable experience as if I went with a better company. The work environment is very important.

At the end of the day the dangerous cargo of chemical oxygen generators was the cause of the crash, but the point that Langewiesche is trying to make with his article is that the miscommunication and the falsely signed work orders were a symptom of the bigger System Accident. Langewiesche also argues that System Accidents will always be around. These accidents are built into every system in modern day life. There are obviously ways in which someone can help reduce System Accidents but they come from the build up of small everyday errors. Consistency among workers, tight supervision that is not too harsh with punishment, and a supportive work environment are all things that would help prevent system accidents and they are also things that ValuJet seemed to have been missing.

Reading about ValuJet has made me think about the decisions I would make if in charge. If I had to put together a team of software developers I would rather have a smaller amount of great programmers who are getting paid an above average wage than have a larger team of people that are being a little underpaid. The turnover rate among workers will be higher and with that consistency goes down and the work environment will keep changing as well. When the deadline nears it would almost always be better to delay a project so that no part is rushed out; the quality is more of a priority than punctuality. The developers could be working on software for cars or missiles, so the quality of work definitely matters.

Another example of the System Accident is the Chernobyl disaster that struck the U.S.S.R.. A system was created in which workers were scared to fail because it meant severe punishments. No one wanted to ask for help, no one wanted to admit guilt, and the end result is a catastrophe that still affects that area to this day. What was supposed to be a routine check turned out to be a nightmare. The overnight workers, who had never done a test before, were forced into an uncomfortable position due to higher ups wanting quick results.

The best way to keep System Accidents to a minimum is to have good control and understanding of your system. Sometimes corners cannot be cut due to the system you find yourself in. The risk might be too high or the benefit might be too little. In the case of this crash, the risk was definitely too high.