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SMOOTH OPERATOR

A day in the life of a flight operations manager is never routine. He is responsible for supervising and managing the logistics that goes into planning a flight and ensuring the safe flight operations of an airline. Bridging Skies goes behind-the-scenes to speak with Al Nawaz, Jetstar Asia Airways' flight operations manager, who reveals the challenges, as well as excitement behind the job.

Al Nawaz's expansive job scope involves monitoring and orchestrating all the backroom efforts that culminate into a safe and comfortable flight experience for Jetstar passengers. His key duties entail supervising the flight operation staff and coordinating aircraft and aircrew availability to ensure sufficient human resources for round-the-clock operations, preparing annual flight operations budget, updating operations procedure manual and even monitoring meteorological reports to anticipate any impact on flights.

"I deal with various situations daily. While there are rules and guidelines to follow but my job is really to adapt them to the different incidents that could occur and provide relevant, appropriate solutions," explained Nawaz. "Some people might think this is stressful, but to me, there is a great sense of excitement and achievement in making decisions that influence operations as a whole and to actually see those outcomes materialise."

ALWAYS READY TO STEP UP

Due to the unpredictable nature of the role, Nawaz multi-tasks and thinks on his feet a lot, as he deals with a myriad of situations and incidents that may impact flights, disrupt daily operations or inconvenience passengers. "One moment I'd be updating flight schedules, and the next moment I could be monitoring inclement weather or even participate in an emergency response," he said.

There were a number of instances when natural disasters struck and Nawaz was roped in to deal with their impact on airline operations. When Typhoon Nesat slammed into the Philippines in September 2010 and affected flight operations, he worked around the clock to replan flight schedules and communicate with engineers and ground handlers to ensure the airworthiness of the aircraft. Nawaz and his team worked closely with the National Environment Agency to predict the typhoon's path and made the necessary arrangements on

the ground to anticipate and accommodate any delays. He also liaised with various departments and relevant agencies to ensure that coordination efforts were synchronised.

As flight operations is a key component of an airline's operations, Nawaz is also involved in developing the airline's emergency response procedures and is one of the first few individuals to be informed when a crisis occurs. Depending on the nature of the incident, he leads the various departments in taking the appropriate courses of action. For example, when migratory birds strike the aircraft's engine, Nawaz liaises with airworthiness inspectors and engineers on the ground to ensure that the aircraft is certified fit for flight. "We have had to delay flights because of this as we need to ensure that the aircraft is airworthy before it can operate again. If the situation calls for it, I am also authorised to ground the flight," said Nawaz.

BIG PICTURE, SMALL DETAILS

Having a hand in every aspect of flight operations also means that Nawaz needs to prioritise his responsibilities, understand his operating parameters well and be adept at thinking big picture without missing the minute details. "In a way, my team and I constitute the spine of operations – we disseminate guidelines and ensure that the different departments in Jetstar are functioning optimally and they all put in the effort so that the flights can take off as scheduled. This role connects me to every aspect of the airline and we have to make it run like clockwork – pilots must be trained and fit for flying, the plane should be certified airworthy, passengers and cargo are tucked in their places safely, among others, before this can work," said Nawaz.

LOOKING FOR A CHALLENGING CAREER? AVIATION IS THE ANSWER!

With the industry poised for growth, Nawaz believes that the dynamic aviation landscape is one of the most challenging and exciting industries to be in now. He encourages aviation students and jobseekers to explore beyond the obvious, visible professions and delve into a host of other operational opportunities behind-the-scenes where all the action is. Interested candidates need to be an effective team player with an open mind to overcome enduring misconceptions about "backbench" work. For his own role as flight operations manager, Nawaz assures that the work is not as tough or boring as many people perceive. With the right training and attitude, it can be a highly fulfilling job. "No two days are ever alike. I get to learn and work with teams from different operational areas, and I gain a broader understanding of the industry as a whole."

Despite the high demands of the job, the department's attrition rate is low. Each member of the team has been there for at least four years and Nawaz himself has been a flight operations manager with Jetstar since the airline's inception in 2004. He worked with Emirates previously and has 21 years of aviation experience under his belt.

With the variety of aviation education and training opportunities available here, students, enthusiasts and mid-career candidates have ample support to gain the necessary skills to join

the dynamic aviation workforce. However, Nawaz believes that adopting the right attitude to learning is key.

“He or she has to approach the job as a challenge. I don’t consider this just a job! To me, it’s an exciting, constantly evolving way to deal with problems. If you enter with the right attitude and mindset, you will grow and reap a thoroughly rewarding experience in this field,” he enthused.