United Continental Pilots Split on Training Simulators

By ANDY PASZTOR And SUSAN CAREY

PARIS (WSJ)-United Continental Holdings Inc. wants to use less-expensive and less-realistic flight simulators than most big international airlines for essential, recurrent pilot-training tasks, prompting criticism from outside safety groups and many of its own cockpit crews.

With pilot-training issues on the minds of many of the industry leaders gathered here for the Paris Air Show this week, the company's strategy could have broader safety implications for airlines around the world, according to some safety experts.

By pitting pilot-union leaders at the company's Continental Airlines unit-who are comfortable with the less-expensive, 10-year-old regime-against counterparts at United Airlines, who strongly oppose it, the behind-the-scenes debate also shows the technical and personnel challenges of fully integrating operations of the combined company.

The disagreement within United Continental revolves around using fixed-base simulators-which don't mimic the movements of planes in flight-rather than full-motion devices to conduct certain types of mandatory, recurrent pilot training.

A decade ago, Continental received Federal Aviation Administration regulatory approval to use such devices, costing roughly one-third less than full-motion simulators, during the last phase of periodic proficiency checks for pilots flying its Boeing Co. 777 fleet. Continental was moving to expand the practice to its Boeing 737 pilots before last year's merger agreement with United shifted the combined airlines' focus to integrating all FAA paperwork.

Continental believes its novel approach is superior to traditional practice by stressing human factors and cockpit interaction and thereby enhancing safety. But the position, according to some safety experts, appears to run counter to at least some of the latest guidance coming from parts of the FAA and international standard-setting groups such as the International Civil Aviation Organization, an arm of the United Nations.

"We should be aiming for the greatest possible realism to teach crews how to use both mental skills and motor skills to most effectively deal with emergencies," according to Mark Rosenker, a former member of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board. The NTSB continues to champion full-motion simulators for recurrent training. Except for cost considerations, Mr. Rosenker said, "why would anyone opt for anything less?"

Bryan Burks, a pilot for Alaska Airlines Group Inc. and a participant in various U.S. and international study groups looking into training, also questioned Continental's stance. "For a flight exam that goes beyond just checking procedures," he said, "there is broad consensus that simulator motion is essential."

Capt. Wendy Morse, chairman of the Air Line Pilots Association branch at United, said the disparity between recurrent Boeing 777 training for Continental and United pilots "absolutely" will be an internal hot issue as the two carriers prepare to bring their operations into harmony. "When it comes to safety, let's go the more conservative route," she said recently. "When the simulator doesn't move, we feel strongly you don't get the quality [of] training."

Depending on the outcome of United's training-integration efforts, the airline could set the stage for other carriers to follow suit. Smaller, financially-strained airlines-including some in developing countries and certain U.S. commuter carriers-may try to jump on the cost-saving trend, safety experts said.
That would undercut the general tendency of commercial-jet manufacturers and global pilot-training companies to prod fast-growing carriers to embrace full-motion simulators with the greatest possible realism.

"All of our training programs meet and exceed FAA requirements," said a United spokeswoman. "We continuously review and implement best practices" to ensure optimal training methods to give pilots "a complete and thorough experience."

An FAA spokeswoman said Continental relies on "an innovative approach" for using so-called fixed-base simulators to assess the ability of pilots "to work together to assess and handle unusual, complex situations."

Now, leaders of the merged company's training department are pushing to expand that training model across the entire fleet.

Continental pilots still must periodically demonstrate mastery of certain flying skills in full-motion simulators. But for their final simulator test-replicating various problems or emergencies encountered on what is supposed to be an actual flight-aircraft motion isn't a factor.

Training managers at other carriers, by contrast, contend it is short-sighted and even potentially dangerous to validate pilot skills and decision-making without the benefit of the most realistic aircraft motion. Full-motion simulators are designed to help pilots better understand and cope with engine failures, aircraft upsets, impending stalls, windy landing conditions and many other types of emergencies.

John Allen, a senior FAA official who helped devise the principles allowing Continental to specifically tailor training to its operations, declined to comment.

Continental convinced the FAA by showing that pilots who successfully go through its training program are just as proficient as those who use full-motion simulators. In addition, every Continental pilot must pass a random check of cockpit proficiency at least every two years.