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Flying is the safest way to travel: How aviation was a pioneer in independent accident investigation

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Abstract

Independent investigations of aviation accidents and incidents have been broadly accepted within the aviation sector throughout its history as a valuable tool to enhance safety. Such investigations enable the sector to learn by establishing the sequence of events that provides a satisfactory explanation of the accident leads to the drafting of recommendations to prevent reoccurrences. In addition, these investigations, which are publicly disseminated, encourage public confidence in the sector. Other transport sectors, including road, rail and water, have been slower in coming to enjoy the same acceptance of independent investigations; here, there is considerable variation amongst nations, and—with the exception of the International Civil Aviation Organization agreement—almost no international consistency. This article examines why aviation has had a different tradition in this regard. Reasons are found in parallel growth of aviation technology and the philosophy of investigative bodies, the inherently international aspect of commercial aviation, and the role of public and political pressure following major accidents. The safety investigative orientation of the aviation sector is gradually expanding to other transport sections and beyond that to other sectors such as fixed site production plants, health care, and management of natural disasters. With the newly installed Safety Investigation Board, the Netherlands has arguably placed itself at the head of this league table.

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