

# SMS: We Get Questions

**W**e at Safety 1<sup>st</sup> get asked many questions about safety management systems (SMS), such as, “What exactly is a safety management system?” and “What are the differences between an SMS and other safety programs that have evolved over the years?” We thought it would be useful to pause and answer some of the common questions and explain the benefits a robust SMS program can bring to small operations.

## What is a safety management system?

An SMS is a set of work practices and procedures put into place to improve the safety of all aspects of your operation. These procedures are established because smart companies realize that the potential for error is always present. Work practices provide the best defense against errors that could ultimately result in incidents or accidents.

Research has shown that most accidents and incidents can be traced to human error. We still address these errors out on the ramp, in the cockpit, and in maintenance. But we have grown smarter over the years and traced some of these errors back to management, thus the term safety management system. Believe it or not, most factors that lead to accidents are under the control of the organization, rather than individuals. Because the greatest threats to aviation safety are embedded within organizations, preventing accidents requires organizational action.

A comprehensive SMS is a systematic, comprehensive process

for managing risk. A successful management system provides for goal setting, planning, documentation, and measuring your performance. Having a good SMS can be seen in the way people work on a day-to-day basis. This is as an organization's culture, and ideally, it is woven into the fabric of your operation and is exhibited by everyone in the company every minute of every day.

To be successful, your operation's SMS must contain four key pillars of safety management: safety policy, safety risk management, safety assurance, and safety promotion. Don't be intimidated by these terms; it's not as hard as you think, and you may be doing many of these tasks already. Your SMS will ensure that you do them, document them, and encourage everyone at your operation to understand and participate.

## But we're a small operation, do we really need an SMS?

Size does not exempt an operation from having accidents or incidents, and it should certainly not determine whether you have an SMS or not. Being a small operation could work to your advantage, as smaller operations often find it easier to implement an SMS.

As a smaller operation, implementation should go more quickly because there are fewer people that require communication and coordination to get the SMS underway. And communication is one of the key components to the success of your SMS.

One of the biggest issues we hear at Safety 1<sup>st</sup> is that it's way too difficult for a small organization to implement an SMS. Some companies use this excuse for not

even considering an SMS. But not having an SMS puts an operation at undue risk in the long run. And implementing it may be much easier than a larger company's experience. Everything is relative. After all, it's a small company and coordinating safety among a couple of people is not as intricate as it is with dozens or hundreds of co-workers.

## Can you provide us with a “completed” SMS manual?

The aviation industry constantly tells the FAA that “one size does not fit all” when it waves the regulatory wand across all of aviation. When it comes to SMS, one size does not fit all operations either. Being handed a completed manual doesn't make it yours. SMS takes a bit of sweat equity, but the bottom line is if you develop your safety program, it will indeed reflect safety at your operation. Don't misconstrue this to mean there isn't help available. There's a lot of guidance on SMS from Safety 1<sup>st</sup> to help you with your safety manual. (Keep reading, and we'll get there.)

## Will an SMS cost a lot?

Your SMS doesn't need to cost an arm and a leg. It does, however, require time, attention, and resources. And again, if you're a small operation, you may be able to implement your SMS without adding new personnel, whereas some larger operations may need to hire a full-time safety manager.

Costs may also include guidance and the purchase of safety-related reference materials. You may even want to attend formal safety training to help develop vari-

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## Safety Watch

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ous portions of your SMS during implementation. Take advantage of all the resources available! Whatever the costs, keep in mind they will be minimal compared to an accident or incident. You'll be able to manage safety issues proactively before they lead to an incident or accident. An SMS can reduce losses and directly impact your bottom line. Safety 1<sup>st</sup> is here to help.

Having an SMS will help you manage risk at your operation. NATA is committed to assisting with this process. We have developed SMS for both ground and air operators. Investigate for yourself at [www.natasafety1st.org](http://www.natasafety1st.org), or call (800) 808-6282 and ask for Amy Koranda (SMS Ground Operations) or Russ Lawton (SMS Air Operations). We are here to help every step of the way.



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