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News and Announcements

Meeting Report

New Born IT-APA Is Quickly Growing Up

Alessandra Rea, Nicoletta Lombardo, and Micaela Scialanga

IT-APA Italia, Rome, Italy

IT-APA Italia – The Association of Aviation Psychology was founded in 2019.

The idea of forming an Italian association is longstanding: It was born in 1996 when for the first time we met together in the 22th EAAP Conference in Sabaudia. There were really not enough of us to be able to form an association that would make a difference. But anyway, the idea was born even though it remained a wish. Times have changed, the Italian authority ENAC (Ente Nazionale Aviazione Civile) is about to publish the aviation psychologist accrediting criteria, so last year we decided to found the association.

The choice of logo and name was a way to give ourselves a connotation: “IT” is a suffix that EASA gives in its certification to identify the Italian organizations. In this way, we wanted to underline our commitment at a national level, placing it within a European context in which we mediate continuously. The airplane in our logo with its trail signs the Greek letter phi, symbolizing the fusion between psychology and aviation.

Our members (currently 40) are psychologists and human factor specialists operating in the field of aviation, applying concept methods and instruments of the psychological sciences. We work in many processes, e.g., the selection, training, and evaluation of personnel; research and the support of different aviation professionals: pilots, flight attendants, air traffic controllers, maintenance engineers, and security personnel (see our association website at <https://www.itapa.it/> for all information and contact).

The Board is composed of the founder members (see Figure 1): Alessandra Rea, President, is an aviation psychologist who works in this field since 1996 (she was a junior aviation psychologist in Sabaudia!), Nicoletta Lombardo, Vice President, is an aviation psychologist and Head of Human Factor Department in ENAV (Italian provider in ATC), and Micaela Scialanga, General Secretary, psychologist and airline Captain, she is a co-author of a book about issues emerged after the Germanwings case and wrote several articles about the role of aviation psychologists.

IT-APA aims, through the promotion of aviation psychology and the professional figure of the aviation psychologist, to ensure high safety standards, to prevent incidents, and to promote health and well-being of professionals and passengers.

In order to promote our association we introduce ourselves to ENAC – the main national authority in the aviation field, offering our contribution to the current emerging issues, i.e., the Support Program, Pilot Assessment, Aviation Psychologist competencies, and training definition.

We firmly believe in the added value of the network and that is why we actively collaborate with other international associations like the EAAP itself, the AEPA (Asociación Española de Psicología del Aviación), and encourage partnership, e.g., with the ABRAPAV (Associação Brasileira de Psicologia da Aviação). We also collaborate with Italian organizations and companies operating in the field of human factors in aviation, transport, and other organizations.

One of the main areas in which we are involved is the implementation of Reg. 2018/1042 that prescribes for CAT (Commercial Air Transport) operators to implement a Support Program available to those pilots, who experience difficulties. Moreover, EASA extends support programs to other safety-sensitive personnel such as the cabin crew, the maintenance engineers, ramp workers, etc.

The Support Program should be easily accessible for the flight crew, and should provide adequate means of support at the earliest stages.

We understand that the great potential of this instrument takes for granted the personnel’s willingness to ask for help and to receive it, considering an eventual request for help as implicit. So we developed a questionnaire with the aim to investigate if flight and cabin crews are familiar with the professionals involved in the Program, if they trust them, and if they would be willing get in contact when they find themselves in a difficult situation. We also wondered how crew members perceived their own health and psychological well-being. The knowledge of these areas could



Figure 1. Left: Micaela Scialanga (IT-APA General Secretary), right: Alessandra Rea (IT-APA President).

promote interventions tailored to the population characteristics and also steer specific training pathways finalized in implementing the role of the aviation psychologist inside organizations. We invited Italian crew members to join this

project, pilots and technical specialists (HCM/HHO) operating on helicopter public transport have been included. The survey is an online self-report instrument; its completion takes approximately 10 min (see <https://www.itapa.it/WP/survey-2020-2/>). So far we received 632 answered questionnaires and started to analyze the data. Interesting partial results show that more than 50% of respondents do not have a clear understanding of the role of psychologists and also the nature of their own well-being. Almost 25% of respondents do not recognize its usefulness. The final data will be analyzed after February 14, 2021 – the compilation deadline. The project is completely financed by IT-APA and designed together with professors from the Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, Sapienza University, Rome, Italy.

With regards to the program, IT-APA also gives support to operators in the pre-implementation phase. We also collaborate with operators by giving them support on how to implement it. We have created a network of peers and clinical aviation psychologist for anyone who wants to ask for help, especially in this difficult COVID pandemic period.

The recognition and protection of the professional figure of the aviation psychologist is one of our key objectives. For this reason we work on the issues of training, definition of competencies, and recognition by Ordine Nazionale degli Psicologi (our national association).



Figure 2. Role play during “Group Crisis Intervention” Course promoted by IT-APA and held in Rome, June 26–27, 2020.



Figure 3. Debriefing role play during “Group Crisis Intervention” Course promoted by IT-APA and held in Rome, June 26–27, 2020.

We have concentrated particularly on training and organized our first course for our associates. Aviation colleagues have been certified according to ICISF/CISM protocol for both individual and group intervention and psychologists have been informed about how aviation peers are trained according to this model (Figures 2 and 3).

At the moment, in Italy no accredited trained courses for aviation psychologists are offered, neither at universities nor privately. Therefore, IT-APA is activating training courses for psychologists interested in specializing in this field.

Nevertheless, even though IT-APA has been active for little more than 1 year, we have become a point of reference in aviation psychology. We wish to follow training and development from their earliest stages, this is why we are currently following students from Technical Aeronautical Italian High Schools and psychology university students. It is therefore possible to apply for IT-APA membership as a “student member.”

For the professional figure of aviation psychologist, we are working actively with EAAP for the criteria of a competencies framework.

The objectives are challenging and the commitment and the enthusiasm that characterizes us and our members gives us the energy and willingness to make headway.

Turning back to the memory mentioned at the beginning, the excellent EAAP Conference in 1996 was the initial spark that led us slowly realize what makes IT-APA today. We take this opportunity to thankfully remember one of the key figures of aviation psychology and human factors in Italy: Cpt. Marcello Ralli, who sadly passed away recently. It was he who proposed and organized that special conference and our tribute goes to him.

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