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# Crisis Management in the Airline Industry During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Comparative Analysis of Emirates and Wizz Air

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**Abstract:** The article analyses crisis management in the aviation industry during COVID-19, focusing on differences between airlines with distinct business models. The objective is to identify these differences by comparing the crisis management actions of Emirates and Wizz Air during the pandemic. The article consists of two parts. The first provides a literature review covering crisis management concepts and airline economics, and examines crisis management measures in the air transport sector. The second part defines the methodology and background, mentioning the specifics of COVID-19 pandemic, and briefly presents the characteristics and business models of the carriers – Emirates as a full-service airline and Wizz Air as a low-cost carrier. Next it details the decisions made by both companies and, finally, identifies the differences in their crisis management actions during the pandemic. Emirates adopted a more defensive approach, while Wizz Air pursued aggressive actions.

**Keywords:** crisis, crisis management, air transport, airlines, Emirates, Wizz Air, full-service carrier, low-cost carrier, COVID-19.

## 1. Introduction

Crises have been a part of human history for centuries, but crisis management has become increasingly critical in today's unpredictable world. Organizations must handle disruptions that can threaten their survival. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of crisis management. Many companies were unprepared for its challenges, and even those with emergency plans fought problems. The air transport sector, crucial for moving goods and people during crises, is vital to the global economy. However, research on crisis management in the airline business remains limited, highlighting the need for further study.

The article focuses on analysing crisis management in the airline industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research problem is a question – what were the differences in crisis management activities in the airline industry during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on case studies of carriers using different business models? The aim is to identify these differences by comparing the crisis management actions of Emirates and Wizz Air during the pandemic. The study will be structured in two main parts. The first will review literature on crisis management, airline economics, and anti-crisis measures in the aviation sector, while the second will present a comparative analysis of the actions taken by the airlines. To ensure the coherence and reliability of the article, various research methods will be used, including literature review, desk research, case studies, and comparative analysis.

## 2. Crisis Management in Aviation – A Literature Review

### 2.1. Concept of Crisis Management

In the context of management science, a crisis is the result of unexpected events disrupting or threatening the everyday operations of an organization. However, it is important to remember that each crisis is different from the previous one, and the detailed definition of the phenomenon itself, as well as the approaches to dealing with it, often depend on its type (Oldhorn, 1989). To address this issue, Tab. 1 presents the categorization of crises.

**Table 1.** Categorization of crises

| Type | Description |
|---|---|
| Internal | Arises from within the organization, such as mismanagement, fraud, or system failures. |
| External | Driven by outside forces like economic downturns, terrorism, or geopolitical instability. |
| Natural | Caused by environmental events like earthquakes, hurricanes, or pandemics. |
| Political | Stems from government actions, wars, sanctions, or trade restrictions. |
| Reputational | Damages public perception due to scandals, unethical behaviour, or negative publicity. |
| Financial | Involves monetary instability, including bankruptcy or market crashes. |

Source: own elaboration based on (Coombs, 2007; Soroka, 2013).

Over time, various crises have underscored the need for structured approaches to crisis management. These unexpected events and their ripple effects form the foundation of the field (Farazmand, 2001).

Crisis management, focused on planning and responding to unforeseen incidents, is a relatively young discipline. Its growth in the late 20th century, as

noted by Penuel et al. (2013), was driven by notable disasters like the Chernobyl incident, Challenger explosion, and Exxon Valdez oil spill. As crises became more severe, including terrorist attacks and cyber threats, crisis management became essential for organizations' survival and attracted significant academic attention. Researchers have since worked to define and structure this field, as reflected in efforts to develop a universal definition of crisis management, presented in Tab. 2.

**Table 2.** Selected definitions of crisis management

| Author | Definition |
|---|---|
| Fink | "Crisis management begins with the recognition of a prodromal event, a symptom of an oncoming crisis." |
| Mitroff | "Crisis management is primarily reactive. It addresses crises only after they have happened." |
| Pearson, Misra, Clair, and Mitroff | "Crisis management is helping to avert crises or more effectively managing those that do occur." |
| Regester and Larkin | "Crisis management is about recognizing you have one, taking the appropriate actions to remedy the situation, being seen to take them and being heard to say the right things." |
| Devlin | "Crisis management is to confine or minimize any damage to the organization's reputation or image." |
| Canyon | "Crisis management is the measures and methodologies used to recognize, control and limit the damage of a crisis, and its ripple effects." |

Source: own elaboration based on (Canyon, 2020, p. 8; Devlin, 2007, p. 1; Fink, 2002, p. 14; Mitroff, 2004, p. 25; Pearson et al., 1997, p. 60; Regester & Larkin, 2005, p. 173).

From these definitions, crisis management emerges as the practice of handling risks and minimizing the consequences of crises. It should involve tasks such as diagnosing causes, assessing risks, preparing and executing crisis plans, while also ensuring ongoing monitoring and recovery (Mączyńska, 2009). Additionally, communication plays a key role, especially in today's rapid, information-driven environment. Effective communication can help manage a crisis, while poor communication can worsen its impact (Anthonissen, 2008).

In the literature, various approaches to crisis management have been proposed. For example Bland (1995) outlines a five-phase process based on empirical research: theoretical training, planning, media training, simulations, and audits. Similarly, Seeger et al. (2005) suggest five stages: forecasting, prevention, operation, reconstruction, and research, whereas Baubion (2011) simplifies the process into two phases: preparedness and response. However, the most widely accepted framework involves four key stages: prevention, preparation, response, and recovery (Wojciechowska-Filipek & Mazurek-Kucharska, 2019).

Additionally, over the years, several strategies of crisis management have been developed. A comparison of the most important ones is presented in Tab. 3.

**Table 3.** Strategies of crises management

| Strategy | Description |
|---|---|
| Defensive | Aims at maintaining stability and minimizing damage through cost-cutting and retrenchment. |
| Offensive | Seeks to capitalize on crisis conditions by investing, expanding, or taking risks. |
| Exploration | Focuses on adapting to new opportunities arising during the crisis. |
| Exploitation | Utilizes existing resources and operational efficiency to sustain business continuity. |

Source: own elaboration based on (Mitroff, 2001).

Despite some universal principles, no single approach fits every situation, as each crisis and industry present unique challenges. Hence, to identify the range of actions that may prove effective in a specific situation, it is necessary to describe the operational mechanics of entities that are key to a given sector. In the case of this article, these will be airlines.

## 2.2. Airline Economics

As aviation services have become more globalized, airlines have emerged as crucial players, shaping the efficiency of the sector. According to IATA (2023), the airline industry contributes approximately 1% to global GDP, supporting millions of jobs worldwide. In 2019, over 4 billion passengers travelled by air, demonstrating the industry's fundamental role in international mobility and commerce. To fully understand its characteristics and dynamics, airlines should be defined at three levels: legal, economic, and functional (Marciszewska, 2001).

Legally, an airline is an entity authorized by a state authority to provide air transportation for passengers or cargo (Żylicz, 2011). Economically, an airline is a business providing air transport services using aircraft (Tłoczyński, 2016). Functionally, an airline is a structured organization that manages a route network that connects various cities (Wells & Young, 2003). As the aviation sector evolved, different airline business models emerged, particularly legacy carriers and low-cost airlines, which differ in the services they offer.

Historically, full-service carriers dominated the industry, offering comprehensive but expensive services. The rise of low-cost airlines focused on price competition created new market segments, making air travel more accessible and popular. While low-cost carriers have grown, full-service airlines remain strong in certain segments. To compare the two, key areas such as services, market segments, and strategies must be analysed (Nair et al., 2011).

First, both airline types primarily compete in passenger transport. The cargo sector, with fewer opportunities for cost-cutting, is rarely explored by low-cost carriers. Second, their marketing strategies differ significantly. Full-service airlines invest heavily in advertising and offer loyalty programs, while low-cost airlines

minimize marketing expenses, focusing on online commercials and eliminating loyalty programmes (Tłoczyński, 2006).

Service offerings are also distinct. Full-service airlines feature higher fares with multiple class options (economy, business, first class) and offer benefits like free baggage, seat selection, and in-person booking. In contrast, low-cost airlines prioritize low prices with a single fare (economy class) and charge extra for services such as baggage and seat reservations, with tickets typically available only online (Rucińska et al., 2012).

Route structures differ as well. Full-service carriers use the hub-and-spoke model for long-distance connections, while low-cost airlines offer point-to-point routes, mostly limited to regional destinations. Low-cost carriers favour secondary airports to reduce costs, while full-service airlines use major hubs (Lange & Bier, 2019). In--flight experience varies significantly, with full-service airlines providing more space, assigned seating, and free amenities, while low-cost carriers limit space and charge for onboard services (Gross & Lück, 2016).

Lastly, organizational structures reflect their business models. Full-service airlines have traditional, multi-layered management with complex decision-making, while low-cost airlines adopt a leaner structure, eliminating middle management for faster decisions. Both models are dedicated to their operational needs (Wensveen, 2007).

As indicated by the above analysis, the presented models sometimes demonstrate extremely different characteristics. However, they share the international nature of operations and the resulting vulnerability to crisis. Hence, to complete the aspect of crisis management in aviation, it is necessary to present the methods employed by airlines to combat them.

### 2.3. Crisis Management Measures in the Air Transport Industry

Crises have always been challenging for aviation, from disasters to economic downturns (Doganis, 2005). Airlines implement crisis management strategies, yet each crisis differs, making responses uncertain (Clark, 2010).

The crash ofJapan Air Lines Flight 123 in 1985 led to swift action: victim support, scholarships, and leadership accountability, helping regain trust (Hood, 2012). Similarly, British Airways handled the Kegworth crash by ensuring visible leadership and family support, strengthening its reputation (Regester & Larkin, 2005). However, large-scale crises demand different strategies. After 9/11, fear of flying led airlines to cut flights and costs (Cento, 2009). The 2002 SARS outbreak forced similar reductions (Boksberger, 2011).

These cases show aviation crisis management varies by situation. Examining airline responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can offer further insights.

## 3. Crisis Management Actions Undertaken by the Carriers During the COVID-19 Pandemic – A Comparative Analysis

### 3.1. Methodology and Background

The comparison will be based on pairing two airlines utilizing fundamentally different business models – low-cost and full-service. The primary goal is to identify differences in their crisis management approaches and serve as an introduction to the discussion on the resilience and efficiency of each model in times of crisis. When selecting the airlines, factors such as target segments, marketing strategies, airfares, route networks, inflight services and organizational structures were considered. Additionally, the availability and level of detail of strategic data, as well as financial conditions, were taken into account.

After a thorough analysis of the aviation market, Emirates was chosen as a representative of full-service airlines, while Wizz Air was selected to represent low-cost carriers. Other airlines were excluded due to differences in their hybrid business models or a lack of consistent crisis response documentation. A brief overview of the operations of the selected entities is presented in Tab. 4.

**Table 4.** Comparison of Emirates and Wizz Air

| Feature | Emirates | Wizz Air |
|---|---|---|
| Segments | Passenger and cargo | Passenger |
| Marketing | High expenses, traditional channels, loyalty programmes | Low expenses, primarily online channels, no loyalty programmes |
| Airfares | High, multiple fare system | Low, single fare system |
| Routes | Primarily hub and spoke, length spatially unlimited with central, main, and regional airports served | Point to point, domestic and continental with regional and local airports served |
| Inflight experience | Large space per passenger, assigned seating, free in-flight service | Limited space per passenger, unassigned seating, paid onboard service |
| Organizational structure | Complex, UAE state-owned | Flattened, European private equity |

Source: own elaboration based on (Emirates, n.d.; Wizz Air, 2024).

When analysing the decisions made by the airlines and their crisis management actions, the circumstances under which these decisions were made emerge as essential. The COVID-19 pandemic, initially a health crisis, rapidly evolved into a significant economic and social catastrophe. The widespread lockdowns implemented during that period brought the airline industry to a standstill, halting nearly all passenger travel. The frequent use of flight bans as a strategy to control the virus spread led to the term ‘closing the skies’ becoming widely used. The

events from that time highlight the unpredictability of challenges ahead. Responses had to be made in real-time, often without the benefit of pre-established plans (Nadanovsky & Pires dos Santos, 2020).

Given the above, the analysis will take the form of a comparison of the crisis management actions undertaken by the airlines. The first stage of the research procedure will involve gathering information about events, their chronology, and details which will primarily come from four key sources:

- Emirates' Annual Report 2019-2020,
- Emirates' Annual Report 2020-2021,
- Wizz Air's Annual Report 2020,
- Wizz Air's Annual Report 2021.

The above data will then be described, analysed, interpreted, and verified to finally be compared with the goal of identifying differences between them. Remembering that, according to the WHO (2024), the pandemic officially began on March 12, 2020 (though the spread of the virus began a few weeks earlier), and that both airlines were among the leaders in their markets, dynamically growing and generating significant revenues before the crisis, the actions taken by Emirates will be described first.

## 3.2. Results and Discussion

### 3.2.1. Emirates Airlines

From the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, Emirates' main strategy focused on strict cost control, utilising cash reserves from prior profitable years. On March 25, the airline suspended all passenger flights in line with public health guidelines. This approach, shaped by close cooperation with the government, led to significant subsidies that helped preserve most of the workforce and maintain operations (Emirates, 2020).

Despite capital injections, Emirates had to implement cost-cutting measures, including workforce reductions, pay cuts, halting recruitment, and renegotiating contracts. The airline also grounded a large portion of its fleet and streamlined business processes (Emirates, 2021).

The SkyCargo division, handling freight transport, adapted quickly as demand for cargo services rose. Emirates reconfigured passenger aircraft for cargo use, expanded the network, improved loading protocols, and reduced ground logistics. The airline also increased charter operations to meet growing demand. Thanks to government subsidies, cost-cutting, and SkyCargo's adaptation, Emirates survived the worst part of the crisis. By June, when the UAE began reopening, the carrier gradually resumed passenger flights (Emirates, 2021).

To reassure customers, Emirates introduced new health protocols and technologies, such as biometric processing and COVID-19 medical cover, to enhance safety. The airline also offered free flight rebooking, extended loyalty points, and

sped up refunds. Emirates partnered with health authorities to support vaccine transport and distribution. Resuming operations was gradual, with the carrier maintaining its cost-reduction strategy and keeping investments minimal during the recovery (Emirates, 2021). A synthesized summary of the crisis management strategy adopted by the airline is illustrated in Fig. 1.

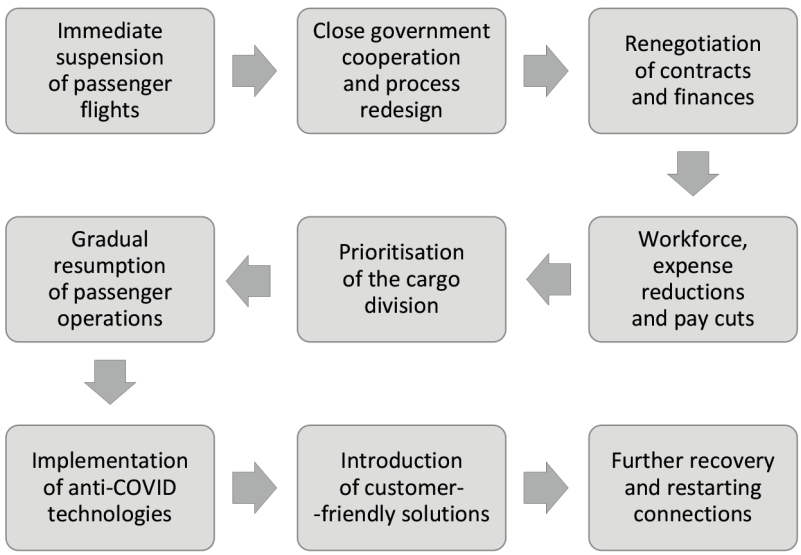


**Fig. 1.** Emirates' crisis management actions during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own elaboration.

From the above summary, it is crucial to note that Emirates does not refer to any crisis preparations or plans in its reports. The timeline of events outlined by the airline indicates that their actions were largely reactive and taken on an ad-hoc basis. This is further supported by the fact that their response only commenced after the UAE government implemented flight bans and strict measures to limit virus transmission. In contrast, Wizz Air demonstrated a different approach in its crisis management strategies, which will be explored in the following section.

#### 3.2.2. Wizz Air

Wizz Air's initial crisis management actions began in February, even before the official COVID-19 pandemic declaration. The airline activated its crisis management centre and formed a cross-functional team to address both operational and customer concerns. The strategy focused on cash preservation and cost reduction, which included workforce cuts, salary reductions, grounding majority of the fleet, renegotiating supplier contracts, and postponing capital expenditures (Wizz Air, 2020).

Although Wizz Air lacked a dedicated cargo division, it allocated some aircraft for freight transport to generate cash flow and enhance its image, primarily transporting medical supplies and conducting humanitarian flights. The airline also implemented various low-cost health protocols and standards to protect passengers and staff, launched a brand awareness campaign and automated the refund process (Wizz Air, 2021).

As countries began to ease travel restrictions in June, Wizz Air was among the first to resume operations, adjusting routes and schedules to meet new demands. The airline expanded by opening additional bases, connections and introducing features like a travel map that informed passengers about flight availability and destination restrictions (Wizz Air, 2021).

To navigate the constantly changing conditions of flight bans and restrictions, Wizz Air initiated charter operations to transport sports teams and holiday travellers, primarily aimed at strengthening brand loyalty. Despite challenges from inconsistent regional strategies, the airline remained committed to its cash and cost control approach while soon after investing in route development and new bases following the resumption of passenger flights (Wizz Air, 2021). A summary of Wizz Air's crisis management actions is depicted in Fig. 2.

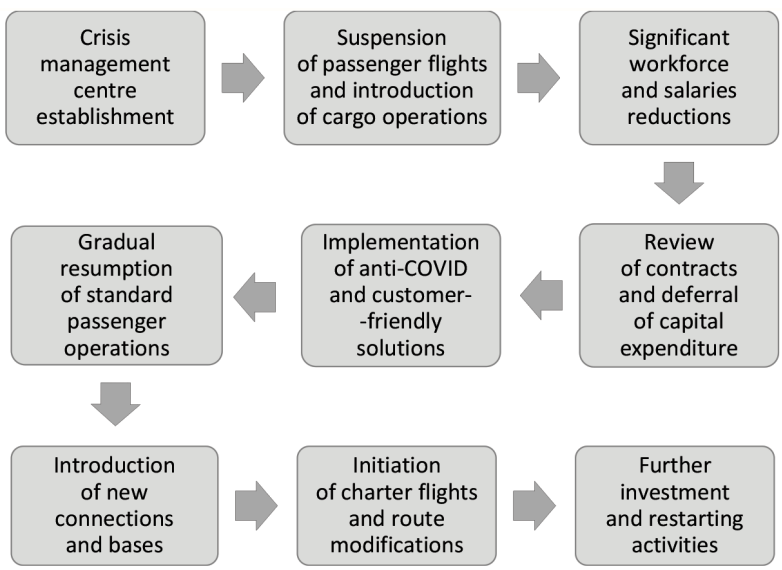


**Fig. 2.** Wizz Air's crisis management actions during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: own elaboration.

Analysing the visualisation above, it is clear that Wizz Air's actions featured a level of structure and consistency. The formation of a dedicated crisis management unit suggests that there were pre-existing plans in place, reflecting a proactive view

towards crisis preparedness. This strategic approach probably enabled the airline to initiate investment activities at an early stage in the crisis.

### 3.2.3. Comparison

After reviewing the decisions, actions and strategies of Emirates and Wizz Air, the next step is to compare their actions. This comparison will highlight differences in their pandemic responses.

Initially, both airlines adopted similar strategies focused on cash preservation during the pandemic outbreak. However, Wizz Air took proactive crisis management steps even before restrictions were imposed. In contrast, Emirates decided to collaborate closely with the government only after flight bans were introduced, while Wizz Air quickly established a small cargo unit at that time.

Both airlines implemented cost-cutting measures at the same time, such as workforce reductions and contract renegotiations. Following these actions, Emirates concentrated on its established cargo division, whereas Wizz Air introduced COVID-19 preventive measures and customer-friendly initiatives, although these were less comprehensive than those of Emirates, which came after the reopening of passenger operations.

As the situation changed, Emirates limited its investment activities, while Wizz Air expanded by opening new bases, routes, and charter operations. While both airlines implemented cash-saving strategies similarly, they exhibited notable differences in their approaches. A summary of these distinctions is outlined in Tab. 5.

**Table 5.** Differences in crisis management actions between Emirates and Wizz Air during the pandemic

| Area | Emirates | Wizz Air |
|---|---|---|
| Actions before the outbreak of the pandemic | No major actions taken | Establishment of a structured crisis management centre |
| Cargo division | Strong adaptation of the existing division, relying on it for survival during the pandemic | Establishment of a new division, treating operations more as a marketing element |
| Implementation of anti--COVID and passenger--friendly solutions | Later implementation, more advanced solutions | Earlier implementation, less advanced solutions |
| Resumption of passenger operations | No new routes or bases, slow reopening of existing ones | Rapid introduction of new routes and bases, quicker reopening |
| Government support | Significant financial aid from the government | Limited government assistance, dependence more on market--driven strategies |
| Chosen strategy | Exploitation, reactive approach | Exploration, proactive approach |

Source: own elaboration.

As shown in the comparison, Emirates behaved in a rather defensive yet stable manner, while Wizz Air's decisions had a more aggressive and dynamic character. It seems that these differences primarily originated from variations in their business models. Full-service airlines tend to adopt more cautious actions due to their long-standing presence in the market and the nature of their operations. Low-cost carriers, due to the specifics of their processes, are more willing to take risks.

## 4. Conclusions

This article aimed to identify differences in crisis management within the airline industry during the COVID-19 pandemic, using case studies of Emirates as a traditional carrier and Wizz Air as a low-cost airline.

Crisis management is a complex aspect, as demonstrated by the different responses of nearly direct competitors to the same crisis. These differences may stem from their economic frameworks and distinct business models. Addressing the research question – what were the differences in crisis management activities during the pandemic – it is quite clear that Emirates adopted a defensive approach with no clear action plans, while Wizz Air implemented aggressive initiatives to resume and expand operations, establishing crisis management structures. Additionally, the chosen approaches (exploration vs. exploitation) played a crucial role in shaping their responses.

A natural extension of the studied aspects would be the assessment of crisis management effectiveness during the pandemic, though measuring outcomes is challenging since each crisis is unique. A company's preparedness often depends on chance, with previously chosen business models either protecting or threatening the organization. Employing qualitative methods, such as interviews with airline employees, could help explore these aspects further.

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## Zarządzanie kryzysowe w branży lotniczej podczas pandemii COVID-19: analiza porównawcza Emirates i Wizz Air

**Streszczenie:** Autor analizuje zarządzanie kryzysowe w branży lotniczej podczas pandemii COVID-19, koncentrując się na różnicach między liniami lotniczymi o różnych modelach biznesowych. Celem jest zidentyfikowanie tych różnic przez porównanie działań Emirates i Wizz Air w czasie pandemii. Artykuł składa się z dwóch części. Pierwsza zawiera przegląd literatury w obszarach koncepcji zarządzania kryzysowego, ekonomiki linii lotniczych, a także strategii zarządzania kryzysowego w branży lotniczej. Druga część definiuje metodologię i tło badania, wspominając o specyfice COVID-19, a także krótko przedstawia charakterystykę i modele biznesowe przewoźników – Emirates jako przewoźnika tradycyjnego oraz Wizz Air jako przewoźnika niskokosztowego. Następnie szczegółowo opisuje decyzje podjęte przez obie linie, a na końcu identyfikuje różnice w ich podejściu do zarządzania kryzysowego podczas pandemii. Emirates przyjęła bardziej defensywne podejście, podczas gdy Wizz Air podjęła agresywne działania.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kryzys, zarządzanie kryzysowe, transport lotniczy, linie lotnicze, Emirates, Wizz Air, przewoźnik tradycyjny, przewoźnik niskokosztowy, COVID-19