International Journal of Aviation Research

Volume 17 | Issue 1 Peer-Reviewed Article

A Maintenance Repair and Overhaul Model for Operational Sustainability; Incorporating processes and risks.

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Abstract
Maintenance, Repair, and Overhaul (MRO) companies are integral to the aviation industry, with the core responsibility of ensuring aircraft remain safe and airworthy. Their role is critical in maintaining the industry's high standards of performance and safety. To remain competitive, MROs must provide a wide range of services—including inspections, periodic checks, engine overhauls, avionics repairs, fuselage and cabin modifications, and interior refurbishments—while consistently meeting regulatory and safety requirements. Beyond technical compliance, MROs must adopt a quality-driven, continuous improvement approach to manage risks effectively. This requires the integration of processes, programs, and systems aligned with international standards to strengthen resilience, build organizational reputation, and achieve long-term sustainability. This study develops a theoretical model for operational sustainability in MROs. Using a qualitative methodology, it examines critical industry hazards and risk management practices, analyzes mitigation strategies, and promotes sustainability principles as essential components of MRO operations.
Keywords: aviation, maintenance, sustainability, continuous improvement, lean, PDCA.

Recommended Citation:

Guinn, L., Woody, M., Maleviti, E., (2025), A Maintenance Repair and Overhaul Model for Operational Sustainability; Incorporating processes and risks, *International Journal of Aviation Research, 17*(1).

1. Introduction

Independent MRO companies play a vital role in the aviation industry by ensuring aircraft remain airworthy and operational, thereby contributing to the sector's consistently high performance (Aerospace & Defense Review, 2024). In collaboration with Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) and companies with in-house maintenance capabilities, MROs provide complementary and competitive services to meet market demand. These services include specialized inspections, repairs, and aftermarket operations such as periodic checks, engine overhauls, avionics repairs, fuselage and cabin modifications, and interior refurbishments (Federal Aviation Administration [FAA], 2024a). The meticulous and highly regulated work of MROs ensures compliance with safety and reliability standards across commercial, military, and private aircraft (International Air Transport Association, 2024). Given the diversity of aircraft models in service—spanning decades in age and technology—an important question arises: What factors are necessary to achieve operational excellence within MRO companies? Addressing this requires a comprehensive and universally applicable roadmap for optimizing operations and achieving long-term sustainability. To meet this challenge, MROs must adopt a quality-driven, continuous improvement approach to effectively manage both known and emerging risks. They must also integrate processes, programs, systems, and international standards to enhance resilience, strengthen reputation, and meet economic, social, and environmental goals. The research question seeking exploration and answer is which are the necessary strategies to integrate in MRO operations for meeting several aviation sustainability goals. To answer or at least explore this question, this paper employs a qualitative methodology to review critical industry hazards, examine risk management approaches, evaluate selected programs, and ultimately propose an operational sustainability model that improves performance, reinforces compliance with safety standards, and advances organizational objectives.

2. Literature Review

Extensive research exists on risk management, operations management, safety systems, cybersecurity, and frameworks for achieving operational excellence in the aviation industry. These studies have informed the development of international standards and continuous improvement methodologies that are widely adopted across airline operations and airport infrastructure. However, relatively few studies examine the application of these concepts specifically within MRO organizations, particularly in the context of sustainability and long-term operational resilience. While the existing literature provides valuable insights into different aspects of MRO performance, research remains limited on integrated strategies that align MRO operations with broader aviation sustainability objectives. This gap highlights the need for more comprehensive frameworks that connect MRO-specific practices with industry-wide sustainability goals. Accordingly, this literature review synthesizes relevant standards, systems, and management approaches to construct a practical framework through which MROs can pursue continuous improvement while advancing economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

2.1 Risk Management and Operational Performance in MROs

Risk identification and mitigation are foundational to aviation safety and quality assurance. Su et al. (2023) introduced a hybrid Prophet–long short-term memory (LSTM) algorithm for aviation risk prediction, demonstrating how advanced analytics can improve hazard anticipation and decision-making. However, like many similar studies, their focus remains on airline operations rather than the MRO context. Sobieralski (2013) quantified the substantial cost of general aviation accidents, emphasizing the economic imperative of effective preventive practices. Similarly, Smedje et al. (2011) highlighted noise exposure risks in maintenance environments, underscoring the need for stronger occupational health safeguards and preventative measures within MROs—issues often overlooked in broader aviation safety research. In MRO operations, it is essential not only to identify risks but also to develop the most effective solutions. A sustainable MRO model requires organizations to anticipate necessary changes, address operational vulnerabilities, and implement corrective measures to ensure long-term resilience. The following subsections outline the primary risks in MRO operations, with a focus on those most likely to compromise the effectiveness of sustainability strategies.

2.1.1. Maintenance Operations Risks

As already mentioned, risks are inherent to MRO operations. Accidents and incidents can have significant consequences, affecting safety of flight, employee health, aviation and MRO operations, the environment, and overall performance and longevity (Su et al., 2023). Risks can be categorized into five broad categories: safety, quality, operational, environmental, and economic.

i. Safety Risks

Safety risks in MRO operations include human error, occupational injuries, and noise exposure, all of which can directly compromise both worker well-being and flight safety. Human factor–related errors, often referred to by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) as the "Dirty Dozen," account for nearly 80% of maintenance mistakes. These factors include lack of communication, complacency, inadequate knowledge, distractions, poor teamwork, fatigue, limited resources, lack of assertiveness, stress, reduced awareness, cultural norms, and pressure to complete tasks within strict timeframes (FAA, 2012). Such errors can create unsafe working conditions or lead to malfunctioning aircraft systems, resulting in equipment damage, property loss, or, in severe cases, injuries and fatalities among pilots and passengers (Society of Automotive Engineers [SAE] International, 2016). Accidents within MRO facilities are often linked to vehicle mishaps, equipment pinches, falls, or uncontrolled decompressions. Severe cases can lead to burns, amputations, fractures, organ damage, or even death. In 2022, the rate of severe injuries in MROs doubled compared with the previous six-year average, costing the industry an estimated $2.29 billion in employee compensation, accident investigations, and productivity losses (Canaday, 2023; Sobieralski, 2013). Noise exposure represents another critical safety concern. Aviation ranks second among all professions for the highest rates of occupational hearing loss (Air Line Pilots Association Staff, 2021). Average daily exposure in maintenance environments ranges from 70 to 91 decibels (dB), often exceeding the 85 dB industry threshold. Primary noise sources include aircraft engines and pneumatic tools, with prolonged exposure leading to as much as 20 dB of high-frequency hearing loss in each ear (Smedje et al., 2011).

ii. Quality Risks

Quality risks in MRO operations often stem from inadequate quality control measures and the absence of standardized processes. Maintaining airworthiness requires strict adherence to regulatory standards to ensure both safety and reliability. Regulatory authorities such as the FAA and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) establish comprehensive frameworks designed to prevent risks related to maintenance quality and safety. These frameworks require MROs to implement robust procedures and quality controls to ensure compliance with technical standards and aviation regulations (SAE International, 2016; Skybrary, n.d.). When quality assurance is insufficient, discrepancies may be overlooked, recalls or defects may go unchecked, and inconsistencies may emerge across operations. Such lapses not only jeopardize safety but also erode client trust. Poor quality can result in a 5–10% loss in revenue for MRO companies due to rework, inefficiencies, and reputational damage (Airbus, 2020). Furthermore, the absence of standardized processes leads to inefficient resource utilization, material waste, and unreliable maintenance practices, all of which undermine sustainability strategies (SAE International, 2016). To mitigate these risks, MROs must establish uniform quality management practices that integrate compliance, efficiency, and sustainability objectives.

iii. Operational Risks

Operational risks arise from labor shortages, supply chain disruptions, and cyber incidents. The multitude of these risk types suggests that MROs should keep pace also with air travel demand. Nonetheless, the industry is poised to experience a 24% technician shortage by 2027 due to increased retirements and a smaller skilled labor pool. Without an influx of trained personnel to perform maintenance and repair tasks, operational disruptions and delays may occur, affecting the smooth operations of MROs. Consequently, a long-term situation with staff shortages will lead to flight disruptions and delays, leading possibly even to flight cancellations (Singh, 2024). Moreover, supply chain shortages can lead to similar impacts, as insufficient material and part availability slows or halts maintenance work. Such shortages can adversely affect both revenue and business reputation. While supply chain conditions have gradually improved in the post-pandemic period, current demand continues to outpace recovery efforts, increasing the risk of supply chain disruptions for MRO organizations (Internationale Nederlanden Groep, 2024). As part of operational risks, external factors must be taken into consideration, such as the ongoing geopolitical conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, which continue to impact supply networks without an expect relief anytime soon, and potentially significantly later given the current conflicts of summer 2025 (LaRocco, 2022). Lastly, cyber-attacks, like software tampering and accidental security breaches, pose risks to operations, extorting $400 billion from the world economy annually (Satair, 2024). Cyber intrusion techniques may include ransomware attacks and phishing that compromise intelligent machinery, equipment, or databases containing private and sensitive information to threaten the integrity and reliability of operational systems (Murugan, 2024). MROs face heightened risks to data security because they heavily rely on digital data, and the threat of cyber vulnerabilities increases as companies further embrace service-enhancing digital solutions and interconnectivity with cloud storage, mobile devices, and artificial intelligence (AI) (Baghdasarin, 2019). Criminals can utilize MRO networks as a gateway to other prime targets, like airliners, which could ultimately jeopardize safety of flight (Satair, 2024). To emphasize the extent of vulnerability and lack of preparedness, Costanza & Prentice (2018) report only 9% of MROs implement security standards, and fewer than half conduct regular cybersecurity assessments. A cyber breach would negatively impact the company’s brand, and may incur economic penalties (Murugan, 2024).

iv. Environmental Risks

Although often considered secondary to immediate operational concerns, environmental risks significantly influence the sustainability of MRO organizations. With the aviation industry increasingly aligning itself with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), effective environmental risk management is now a strategic imperative. MRO operations frequently involve hazardous chemicals such as fuel, oil, hydraulic fluids, and solvents. Leaks and spills may occur due to equipment fatigue, improper storage, or corrosion. Such incidents pose serious threats to employee health, contaminate local water sources, and harm surrounding ecosystems. Improper handling of hazardous waste further increases environmental risks. Under the U.S. Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), strict requirements govern the disposal and recycling of hazardous materials. Noncompliance can result in substantial penalties, including fines of up to $50,000 per violation per day, cleanup costs, and even criminal charges in cases of negligence (Wieher, n.d.). Environmental risks extend beyond hazardous waste. Poor indoor air quality, persistent noise exposure, and improper waste management practices also compromise sustainability objectives. Left unmitigated, these risks can damage the organization’s reputation, attract regulatory scrutiny, and impose long-term costs. Accordingly, adopting proactive environmental management systems and robust prevention strategies is essential. By doing so, MROs not only comply with regulatory requirements but also reinforce their commitment to sustainable practices, thereby enhancing long-term operational resilience.

v. Economic Risks

Economic risks in MRO operations primarily stem from noncompliance with regulatory, environmental, and safety standards. Aviation is a heavily regulated industry, and violations can result in significant financial consequences, including fines, compensation claims, lawsuits, and even the revocation of operating licenses (Shahil, 2024). Severe violations often attract negative media attention, further amplifying reputational damage. Such publicity can undermine customer trust, erode market value, and diminish the competitiveness of the organization (Sarfraz et al., 2018). Beyond regulatory noncompliance, inefficiencies arising from poor quality control, supply chain delays, and workforce shortages also contribute to economic risks by increasing operational costs and reducing profitability. Managing these risks requires a proactive approach that integrates regulatory adherence, process efficiency, and strategic investment in sustainable practices. By doing so, MROs can reduce financial vulnerability while strengthening long-term business resilience.

vi. Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity has emerged as a critical risk factor for MRO organizations, given their increasing reliance on digital systems and interconnected technologies. Baghdasarin (2019) conducted a SWOT analysis of cybersecurity in MRO operations, identifying major gaps in digital safety management and regulatory compliance. Similarly, Murisa and Coetzee (2024) emphasized that existing aviation safety frameworks inadequately address MRO-specific cyber threats, despite the availability of international standards such as International Standards Organization / International Electrotechnical Commission (ISO/IEC) 27001. Root Cause Analysis (RCA) also plays an important role in addressing cybersecurity vulnerabilities. Jayswal et al. (2011) demonstrated how RCA methods—such as Pareto charts and fishbone diagrams—can eliminate systemic weaknesses, reduce defect recurrence, and support sustainability outcomes. Applying RCA to digital risk management allows MROs not only to address incidents but also to protect their repetition, thereby strengthening operational resilience. As with other categories of risk, sustainability depends on effectively identifying, eliminating, and preventing cyber threats. Implementing structured systems such as ISO/IEC 27001 provides MROs with a standardized approach to safeguarding sensitive data, protecting operational integrity, and supporting long-term sustainability goals. These systemic protections ensure that MRO organizations remain resilient in the face of increasingly complex digital threats.

2.1.2. Integrated Management Systems and Operational Framework Concept

One advanced and more inclusive model that appears lately in aviation systems is the integrated management systems approach (IMS). The IMS appears in aviation as a combined approach for safety and quality management systems. Different systems that co-exist but do not interfere with each other. Bernardo et al. (2015) present a compelling example in support of integrated management systems (IMS) that align safety, environmental, and quality programs under a unified operational strategy. Their literature review emphasizes how integration reduces redundancy, improves compliance, and enhances organizational learning, benefits particularly relevant to under-resourced or fragmented MRO operations. Additionally, under the same scope the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2016) offers one of the few comprehensive studies analyzing the structure and scope of MRO activities across the EU, reinforcing the sector's strategic and economic significance. Moreover, the report notes a lack of standardization across facilities, particularly in environmental reporting and strategic alignment. Studies like Sarfraz et al. (2018) further illustrate the moderating role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in environmental risk management. Their findings suggest that strategic alignment between operations and sustainability goals enhances both risk mitigation and stakeholder trust, yet most MROs lack the organizational frameworks to pursue such alignment. An IMS aligns requirements from multiple management systems established within an MRO company. Although both formal and informal programs exist to ensure regulatory compliance, the quantity of policies and procedures introduces complexity and confusion. Additionally, overlap exists across programs, which can result in duplication of effort for a single requirement. The IMS drives cross-functional collaboration to foster a unified company culture and synchronizes multiple management systems to streamline oversight requirements, save time, and reduce costs while efficiently maintaining quality and satisfying all regulatory requirements. An example of this approach involves time checks and scheduled breaks which prevent fatigue to mitigate quality risks and human error simultaneously, meeting ISO 9001 and safety management systems (SMS) objectives in a single effort (Integrated Standards Store, n.d.). Developing an effective IMS begins with the establishment of a theoretical framework that incorporates the essential elements of maintenance operations. This research therefore identifies the critical components that should be integrated into

MRO strategies to achieve long-term sustainability goals. The next section introduces such a theoretical framework, outlining the key elements necessary to support sustainability in MRO operations.

3. Methodology

This paper utilizes a qualitative methodology to analyze the feasibility of selected programs to address MRO hazards. The authors systematically evaluated research databases and publicly available documents, journals, academic papers, and case studies related to MRO operations, compiling qualitative information to illuminate relationships and themes which answer how aviation programs and systems contribute to sustainability and reduce risk. Key words used in the search were “MRO”, “operational sustainability”, “operational excellence”, “Lean methodologies” and search criteria set as “peer-reviewed (scholarly)”. Databases utilized were ProQuest Central, Open Access International Journals, DOAJ Directory of Open Access Journals, PubMed Central (PMC), ROAD: Directory of Open Access Scholarly Resources, Ingenta Connect, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, SpringerLink, Wiley Online Library Journals, Single Journals, Springer Nature OA Free Journals, JSTOR Archival Journals and Primary Sources Collection, Freely Accessible Science Journals, Sage Journals Premier 2025, Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints, Wiley Online Library Open Access, Business Source Complete, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Science and Technology Library. Documents were selected based on applicability and relevance to the MRO industry. The breadth of research reduced bias and corroborated findings for how MROs can achieve operational excellence. Researchers culminated data into a sustainability model possibly universally suitable for MRO organizations. The model displays within a graphic divided into discrete, overarching elements of operational excellence. The graphic provides a visual reference for the relationships between elements, MRO programs, and MRO risks to reveal a path to operational excellence within MRO companies. Considering this research methodology approach, with the limitations of secondary research, a theoretical framework is built, as presented below. This framework encompasses all the management systems that are applicable and appear in the MRO operations, hindering risks that might compromise their continuous viability. The identification of the risks and the systemic operations where they might appear, it is a solid approach to develop a sustainable model for that type of aviation sector, MROs. While management system standards such as ISO and continuous improvement methodologies like Lean and Six Sigma are widely adopted in aviation, no unified model currently exists to integrate these approaches in support of sustainability across MRO operations. Most frameworks operate in silos, emphasizing regulatory compliance or efficiency, but failing to embed systemic risk management and sustainability principles throughout the organization’s operational scope. Aviation Safety Management Systems (SMS), for example, primarily address operational hazards and compliance requirements, while Lean and Six Sigma processes focus on reducing costs and improving efficiency. These approaches often neglect environmental and social performance dimensions, which are increasingly critical for long-term resilience. This study therefore seeks to bridge that gap by consolidating best practices from multiple domains into a single operational sustainability model tailored to independent MRO organizations. The proposed framework incorporates quality, safety, environmental, and cybersecurity systems while embedding continuous improvement methodologies. In doing so, it provides a comprehensive roadmap that aligns with all three pillars of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social—while reinforcing compliance and operational excellence. The following sections present the management systems that are considered in this research and model development.

3.1 Quality Management System

In recognition of the risks poor quality control poses to product safety and brand integrity, MROs can prioritize quality and flight safety by implementing a robust quality management system (QMS) that actively defines and enforces policies, processes, and procedures to identify, mitigate, and reduce risks in alignment with the quality management principles set forth in ISO 9001 and Aerospace Standard (AS) 9110. Integrating quality assurance, proactive improvement initiatives, and prevention planning are vital components of the QMS (StandardAero, 2024a). With a customer-centric approach promoted at all levels, a QMS focuses on four primary objectives: achieving absolute customer satisfaction, reducing operational costs tied to poor quality, exceeding the highest industry safety standards, and promoting sustainability through continual improvement (American Society for Quality [ASQ], 2024). When companies weave these objectives throughout the organization, from the strategic guidance of senior management to the meticulous attention to detail and precision aircraft maintenance technicians demonstrate day to day, a QMS offers a uniform process approach to quality which increases efficiency, enhances safety and compliance, and reduces costs (StandardAero, 2024a). MROs must view every instance of nonconformity as a chance to drive economic growth through process improvement. As a result, MROs actively pursue sustainable development by reducing risks to stakeholders and society as a whole, as well as upholding commitments to responsible progress in order to lead the industry in quality (ASQ, 2024). When these objectives are embedded across all organizational levels—from senior leadership to frontline technicians—MROs benefit from standardized procedures that enhance efficiency, strengthen compliance, and reduce costs. Furthermore, a QMS transforms instances of nonconformity into opportunities for improvement. By addressing deficiencies systematically, organizations advance both safety and economic sustainability while building a reputation for reliability. However, while ISO 9001 and AS 9110 provide strong quality foundations, they offer limited guidance on environmental and social sustainability. Noteworthy though that in 2026, the amendment of ISO 9001, introduces a section about climate change, in the organization context paragraph. The operational model proposed in this paper therefore expands the QMS scope by integrating training, environmental systems, and risk audits to achieve broader sustainability objectives.

3.2 Safety Management System

Safety Management Systems (SMS) are central to risk management and regulatory compliance within aviation. MROs can implement an SMS as a means to proactively optimize safety across the organization. The SMS involves identifying and considering applicable legal and regulatory safety requirements; identifying risks, especially those impacting health like noise, chemical exposures, and falls; developing objectives to address hazards; communicating risks to personnel; preparing for accident and emergency responses; and includes regular audits to monitor compliance (SMS, 2024). A key component of the SMS is creating a safety culture where employees feel empowered to raise concerns. One of its principal advantages is an overall transformation in worker attitudes; recognizing and addressing mistakes becomes a possible aspect of the job, aimed at preventing larger issues rather than assigning blame. Operational frameworks are therefore designed with the understanding that errors are inevitable within dynamic systems and should be met with structured, non-punitive responses that support continuous improvement (Pierobon, 2022). MROs can bolster this transformation with an incentive program that rewards employees who identify and rectify safety issues. Some MROs further reinforce this culture through incentive programs, such as safety coin presentations, that publicly recognize employees who identify and address hazards (StandardAero, 2024a). As SMS adoption expands, it offers MROs an opportunity to enhance compliance, improve workplace safety, and build social sustainability through greater employee engagement and empowerment.

3.3 Environmental Management System

The ISO 14001 Environmental Management System (EMS) provides a structured approach to environmental compliance but does not tie environmental outcomes directly to operational or strategic performance. To this end, MROs can incorporate the ISO 14001 EMS framework as a standardized process approach to apply practical tools which drive environmental sustainability throughout the organization. ISO 14001 aligns environmental goals with strategic objectives and business priorities. Through leadership commitment, life-cycle analyses of MRO products and processes, a robust environmental awareness initiative, regular environmental evaluations, and readily available emergency spill clean-up kits, MROs minimize environmental impacts occurring as a result of their operations. MROs may also partner with third-party consultants to navigate the aviation industry's strict environmental policies and requirements as well as assist with ISO 14001 compliance (ISO, 2015a). Implementation may also involve partnerships with third-party consultants who assist in navigating strict aviation environmental policies and maintaining compliance. Practical measures supported by EMS include environmental training programs, spill prevention and response protocols, and the use of emergency containment kits. Together, these initiatives reduce the likelihood of environmental incidents, safeguard community health, and reinforce the organization’s commitment to sustainability. By aligning environmental goals with business priorities, an EMS strengthens not only environmental stewardship but also organizational reputation and long-term resilience (Young & Dhanda, 2013).

3.4 Hazardous Waste Management Program

MRO operations involve frequent use of hazardous and toxic materials, creating significant risks for both employees and the environment. A Hazardous Waste Management Program (HWMP) provides structured protocols to ensure proper handling, storage, and disposal of these materials, while also establishing clear and standardized emergency procedures for spill containment. Regular inspections of equipment, storage facilities, and chemical inventories are essential to identify risks such as equipment fatigue, corrosion, and material degradation (Wieher, n.d.).

Effective programs also extend beyond compliance by incorporating recycling initiatives for hazardous materials where feasible. Such practices demonstrate environmental stewardship and reduce disposal costs, while also minimizing the likelihood of accidental releases. Importantly, the success of an HWMP depends on workforce engagement. Active participation across all organizational levels reinforces accountability, reduces health and safety risks, and ensures adherence to environmental standards (International Civil Aviation Organization [ICAO], n.d.). By reducing the probability of spills, minimizing regulatory penalties, and protecting both ecosystems and employees, an HWMP supports all three pillars of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social—within MRO organizations.

3.5 Information Security Management System

The increasing digitalization of MRO operations heightens exposure to cyber threats, making the adoption of an Information Security Management System (ISMS) essential. ISO/IEC 27001 provides a globally recognized framework to safeguard sensitive data, strengthen cybersecurity, and ensure compliance with international standards (ISO, 2022). For MROs, vulnerabilities arise from the use of electronic technical orders (TOs), artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled predictive maintenance, and digital repositories of sensitive customer and financial information (Kolisetti, 2024). A breach of these systems could result in operational disruptions, regulatory penalties, reputational damage, and financial loss. Implementing ISO/IEC 27001 requires organizations to deploy comprehensive cybersecurity controls, including access management, malware protection, threat monitoring, and incident response protocols. Employee accountability also plays a critical role, as violations of information security policies can undermine system integrity. Many organizations strengthen compliance by contracting third-party experts to conduct security surveys, monitor threats, and mitigate vulnerabilities (Murisa & Coetzee, 2024). By embedding ISO/IEC 27001 into their operations, MROs can reduce risks of cyber intrusion, protect operational continuity, and reinforce stakeholder trust. As digital systems become increasingly central to aviation maintenance, information security will remain a cornerstone of sustainable MRO operations.

4. Process Improvement Methodologies

Continuous improvement methods such as Lean and Six Sigma are increasingly applied in aviation but are often underutilized in MRO contexts. Researchers find MROs can utilize Lean methodologies to amplify operational sustainability, as typical cost-cutting measures like pay and personnel reductions are not ideal for MRO organizations which are already short on skilled employees (Singh, 2024). Lean techniques employ continuous process improvement cycles to improve quality with less waste and lower cost in less time (Lean Six Sigma MRO, 2024).

The 5S technique, consisting of Sort, Set, Shine, Standardize, and Sustain, builds a visual, well-organized, de-cluttered workspace with hazards clearly marked, safety reminders overtly communicated, and emergency equipment bright and visible to enhance SMS and QMS elements while eliminating workflow inefficiencies. Employees recognize hazards before stumbling upon them, which reduces accidents, and standardized processes highlight inconsistencies that waste time and develop into safety issues, thereby improving social sustainability. In addition, obvious and accessible emergency gear remediates an incident as quickly as possible (Berry, 2012). MROs can similarly apply the 5S technique to its digital workspaces, removing unnecessary files and applications, organizing folder structures, and executing security updates and virus scans in order to reduce the likelihood of a cyber breach (4C Consulting, 2024). Cellular Manufacturing (CM) consolidates tasks based on similar parts or aircraft sections, thus creating equipment sharing opportunities to optimize operational flow and increase work completion rates which increases competitiveness through waste reduction, quality improvements, and faster aircraft deliveries (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2016; Mercer Management Consulting, 2005; Sharma et al., 2019). This approach directly compliments the QMS which focus on controlling and coordinating interrelated processes to achieve quality objectives, increasing operational performance and improving economic sustainability (ISO, 2015b). Additionally, CM consolidation reduces necessary inventory levels, providing some relief to persistent supply chain issues within MRO (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2016; StandardAero, 2024a). Sharma et al. (2019) developed an implementation model for CM systems using analytical hierarchy process (AHP) and analytic network process (ANP) approaches, identifying critical success factors that align with Lean's goals of waste reduction and efficiency. This approach has strong relevance to MRO workflows, particularly in component-level repair and overhaul. Young and Dhanda (2013) offer foundational insights into the systems-level approach required to embed sustainability in organizations. Their work highlights the need for integrated environmental, economic, and social thinking, an orientation currently missing from most MRO strategies, which tend to be compliance-driven rather than vision-driven. The ISO 14001 specifically includes the plan-do-check-act (PCDA) as an effective means to maximize environmental performance. Developing (plan) and executing (do) processes to prevent spills and properly manage hazardous waste meets environmental objectives, and continuously monitoring (check) and improving (act) the systems discovers non-compliance early, incorporates evolving regulatory and stakeholder expectations, and ensures compliance with environmental laws (ISO, 2015a). Similarly, the ISO 9001 suggests PDCA to amplify quality performance, ensure proper resource management, and incorporate improvement initiatives. Customer and regulatory requirements drive the cycle, ultimately leading to high quality maintenance activities, more efficient work procedures, faster aircraft deliveries, and increased economic sustainability (ISO, 2015b). The planning phase is especially important in PDCA to identify all applicable requirements, establish specific environmental and quality goals, illuminate impacts, develop operational controls, and assign adequate resources for successful management. With a robust plan, MROs cycle through the rest of the PDCA process, modifying operations as often as necessary to achieve the highest degree of quality and environmental sustainability (ISO, 2015a; ISO, 2015b).

Finally, the FAA encourages Root Cause Analysis (RCA) to drive compliance (FAA, 2024b). RCA illuminates the true origin of problems among many contributing factors in order to implement effective solutions. RCA is more than troubleshooting, as it uncovers hidden factory processes like needless steps that undermine competitiveness and economic sustainability (SixSigma Institute, n.d.). By regularly performing RCA, MROs align with current and emerging industry standards, reduce repetitive errors, add value to continuous improvement initiatives, protect company reputation, and foster a safety culture. Furthermore, when applied cyclically with regular monitoring, RCA can anticipate problems before they lead to accidents, noncompliance, and costly rework (Tableau, n.d.). RCA supports environmental sustainability by finding, fixing, and preventing leaks, spills, noise, and improper hazardous material handling; enhances social performance by reducing accidents, incidents, injuries and fatalities to protect workers and the public; and elevates economic sustainability by avoiding costs associated with non-compliance, lawsuits, compensation, and clean-ups (Jayswal et al., 2011). Collectively, these methodologies provide MROs with a toolkit to advance all three pillars of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social—while improving efficiency and operational resilience.

In a process improvement approach audits are the main tool. Audits are essential for evaluating program effectiveness, ensuring compliance, and identifying opportunities for improvement within MRO organizations. By applying ISO 19011 guidelines, MROs can standardize auditing procedures across the organization, promoting consistency and reliability in assessments (ISO, 2018). Audits may be conducted internally or by independent external parties, with findings typically documented in formal reports that outline best practices, deficiencies, and recommended corrective actions. Regular audits provide assurance that the organization is meeting regulatory requirements, customer expectations, and industry standards related to safety, quality, and environmental performance. Beyond compliance, audits contribute to sustainability by detecting inefficiencies, preventing recurring errors, and reducing the likelihood of penalties or reputational damage. When results are transparently communicated to stakeholders, audits also reinforce organizational credibility, strengthen trust, and demonstrate accountability. Thus, auditing serves not only as a regulatory safeguard but also as a proactive tool for continuous improvement and long-term operational sustainability.

4.1 MRO Industry Practices

While safety and airworthiness remain the core imperatives of MRO operations, evolving industry demands require the integration of sustainability principles into existing frameworks. This study introduces an integrated MRO Operational Sustainability Model that combines safety, quality, or compliance in isolation, the proposed model emphasizes a holistic perspective. Its quality, environmental, cybersecurity, and operational management practices into a unified approach. The model is scalable, aligned with sustainability objectives, and links operational risks directly to sustainability performance. Unlike traditional frameworks that address safety, integrates international standards (e.g., ISO, AS, and ICAO) with Lean methodologies to ensure that sustainability is embedded across all aspects of MRO operations. By doing so, it not only advances theoretical understanding but also provides a practical roadmap for organizations striving for long-term viability and regulatory resilience. Across the literature, a consistent theme emerges: despite the existence of multiple frameworks for safety, quality, environmental compliance, and cybersecurity, there is no comprehensive model tailored specifically to MRO organizations. The absence of such an integrated framework creates both a research gap and a practical challenge. The proposed model seeks to address this gap by offering a unified sustainability roadmap that prioritizes the three pillars of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social—while supporting continuous improvement and operational excellence. The next sections will present the practical aspects and present areas that could support sustainability integration and development for the MRO sector.

4.2 Technology and Automation

Technological innovation and automation are increasingly central to enhancing quality and efficiency in MRO operations. Digital task cards, for example, provide technicians with precise, step-by-step maintenance instructions, specifying required parts and equipment to minimize confusion and downtime. These tools reduce human error, standardize procedures, and create a framework for performance evaluation and auditing (StandardAero, 2024a). Transitioning from paper-based to digital manuals further supports operational efficiency by reducing waste, decluttering workspaces, enabling real-time updates from manufacturers, and offering advanced search and integration functions. Such digitization not only streamlines workflows but also strengthens compliance and adaptability. Automation also has transformative potential in MRO environments. Automated systems for inventory management and repetitive maintenance tasks reduce manual workloads, allowing skilled personnel to focus on complex repairs and inspections. In addition, advanced diagnostic tools and AI-enabled predictive maintenance systems can forecast failures, monitor system health, and ensure aircraft remain operational for longer periods with greater safety (Kolisetti, 2024). By integrating digitalization, automation, and intelligent technologies, MROs can improve quality performance, reduce costs, and increase competitiveness, all while supporting long-term sustainability.

4.3 Supply Chain Management

A stable and efficient supply chain is fundamental to the success of MRO operations, as the timely availability of parts, materials, and resources directly determines service quality and delivery performance. Disruptions in the aviation supply chain can cause costly delays, compromise safety, and hinder compliance with regulatory requirement. MROs traditionally depend on OEMs for critical parts and supplies. However, OEMs often prioritize new aircraft production, leaving MROs vulnerable to shortages, delays, and inflated costs (Matutyte, 2024). This challenge is amplified by the increasing proportion of aging aircraft in commercial fleets—over one-third of operational aircraft are more than 20 years old—which require higher levels of maintenance and component replacement (Hardy, 2023). To address these vulnerabilities, MROs can diversify their supply chains by incorporating approved non-OEM suppliers. Although such diversification requires rigorous evaluation to ensure traceability, quality, and regulatory compliance, it provides a broader pool of reliable sources. This strategy mitigates risks of shortages, improves delivery consistency, and enhances organizational resilience (StandardAero, 2024b). By reimagining supply chain management as a strategic function rather than a logistical necessity, MROs can reduce operational risks, improve cost efficiency, and strengthen long-term sustainability.

4.4 Employee Training Program

Workforce competence is a cornerstone of safe and efficient MRO operations. In accordance with FAA requirements, MROs must implement approved training programs to ensure employees possess the technical expertise and regulatory knowledge necessary to meet organizational objectives (FAA, 2005). Effective training programs go beyond technical instruction. They adopt a strategic perspective by aligning workforce development with operational demands and maintenance schedules, thereby minimizing downtime while maximizing productivity. Training should encompass initial onboarding as well as recurrent instruction, covering specialized technical skills, safety protocols, cybersecurity awareness, environmental compliance, and quality management practices. Comprehensive training not only equips technicians to manage increasingly complex systems and technologies but also fosters a culture of safety, accountability, and continuous improvement. Programs that emphasize professional development and adaptability enable employees to confidently integrate emerging tools such as digital task cards and predictive maintenance systems, enhancing both efficiency and competitiveness. By investing in workforce development, MROs strengthen all three pillars of sustainability: economic (through efficiency and cost reduction), environmental (through proper handling of hazardous materials and compliance with environmental standards), and social (through employee safety, health, and engagement) (Maleviti, 2024).

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of identified risks and selected management systems, demonstrates that MROs can holistically address employee and customer needs, minimize environmental impacts, and protect financial stability by integrating structured frameworks into their operations. The adoption of SMS is already in place within aviation MROs. The adoption of ISO 27001 is an equally important option to prevent the appearance of digital risks. An SMS is a powerful mechanism for embedding accountability, managing human error, and reducing accidents and injuries, including those associated with noise exposure. SMS also helps mitigate risks stemming from inconsistent processes, thereby supporting both quality and economic sustainability (Shahil, 2024; Sobieralski, 2013). Similarly, ISO 27001 enhances resilience against cyber threats, safeguarding sensitive data and protecting MROs from operational disruptions, legal liabilities, and reputational damage (Murugan, 2024). Quality risks can be addressed through a robust QMS based on ISO 9001 and AS 9110, complemented by strategic supply chain management and technological innovation. Together, these measures improve efficiency, reduce errors, and enhance compliance. By optimizing resources and reducing waste, QMS initiatives also contribute to environmental and social sustainability while reinforcing customer trust (ASQ, 2024; ISO, 2015b).

Environmental impacts can be mitigated through ISO 14001 and a HWMP. ISO 14001 provides a standardized framework for environmental performance, reducing risks of noncompliance, fines, and costly remediation. HWMPs further enhance sustainability by ensuring safe handling and disposal of toxic materials, minimizing workplace hazards, and protecting local ecosystems (Wieher, n.d.; Cumberland, 2024). Employees' perspectives are more open than they used to be, trying to adopt and follow ISO 14001 systems, not only from MROs but throughout the whole aviation sector (Maleviti & Stamoulis, 2017). Audits, and employee training programs, can synchronize organizational processes, reduce redundancies, and create a unified approach to compliance. Audits improve transparency and trust among stakeholders, while training programs build workforce competence and adaptability (Bernardo et al., 2015). Collectively, the findings highlight that MROs cannot achieve sustainability through isolated programs alone. Instead, a comprehensive and integrated model—embedding safety, quality, environmental, and cybersecurity practices—provides a viable pathway toward operational excellence and long-term resilience.

6. Findings

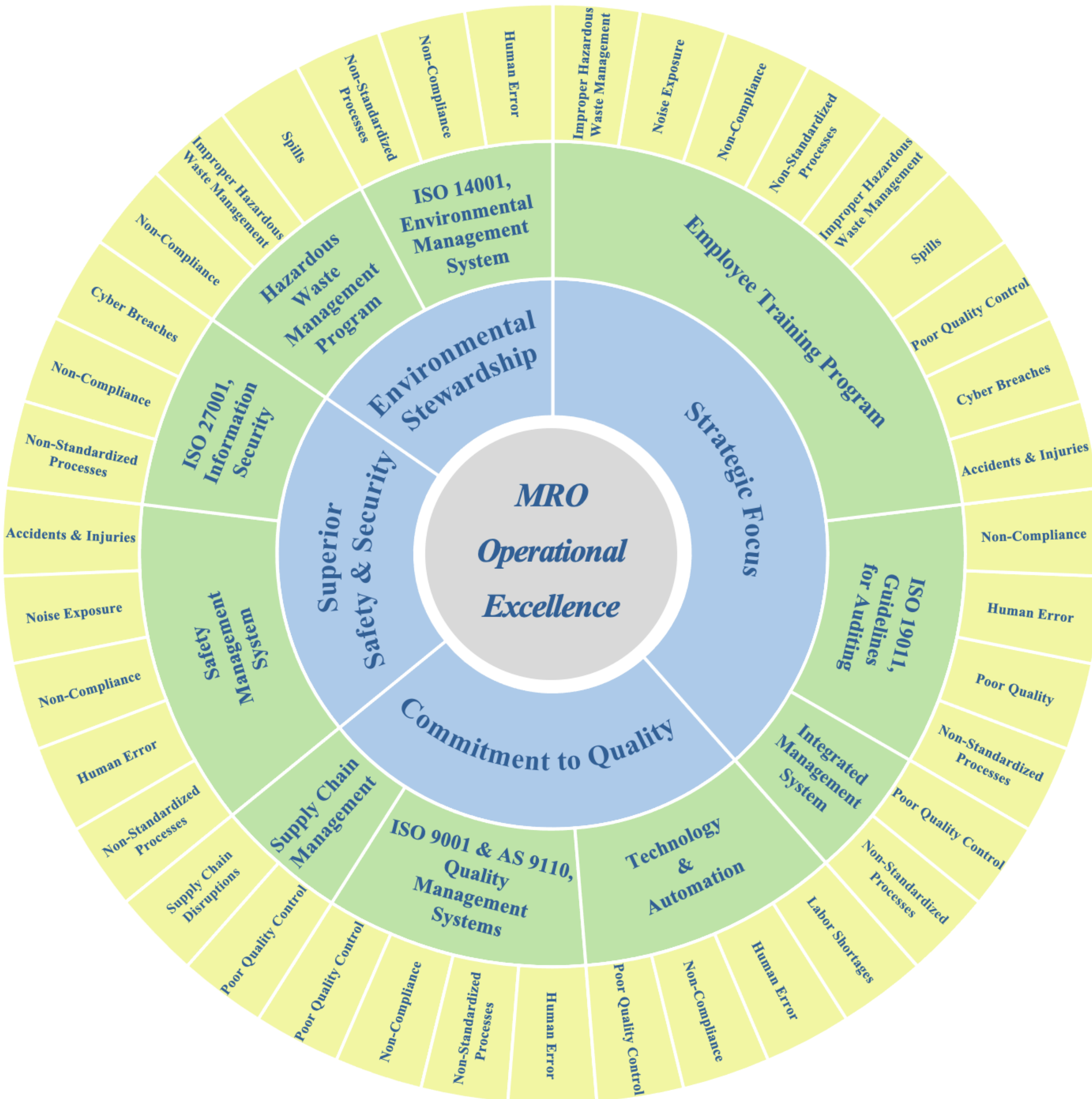
The aggregated analysis of MRO hazards and management programs reveals that a holistic approach is essential for achieving regulatory compliance, reducing risks, enhancing performance, and promoting sustainability across the organization. Figure 1 presents a comprehensive, MRO-specific model designed to serve as a roadmap for operational excellence and long-term sustainability. The model organizes programs into four overarching categories: safety and security, commitment to quality, environmental stewardship, and strategic focus. Each category contains embedded programs and standards aligned with the three pillars of sustainability—economic, environmental, and social.

- **Safety and Security** ensures that flight safety remains paramount while also safeguarding employee health and digital resilience.
- **Commitment to Quality** focuses on efficiency, reliability, and customer satisfaction, thereby strengthening competitiveness.
- **Environmental Stewardship** emphasizes responsible resource use, hazardous waste management, and emissions reduction to protect natural ecosystems.
- **Strategic Focus** aligns training, audits, and integrated systems with broader sustainability and business objectives.

Each category integrates an ISO standard or a management system to ensure conformity with international requirements. Together, these pillars provide a viable roadmap for MRO organizations to achieve operational excellence while advancing sustainability objectives.

Figure 1

MRO Theoretical Sustainability Operational Model



The proposed MRO Operational Sustainability Model (Figure 1) integrates regulatory compliance, risk reduction, and sustainability across four strategic pillars: Superior Safety and Security, Commitment to Quality, Environmental Stewardship, and Strategic Focus. Each pillar is designed to embed sustainability principles while reinforcing operational excellence. To complement the visual framework, Table 1 defines each pillar and provides contextualized examples of performance indicators relevant to MRO operations. Unlike fragmented approaches, this model emphasizes cross-functional coordination and continuous improvement. Each pillar incorporates programs and standards that support the three sustainability dimensions—economic, environmental, and social—ensuring that MRO organizations pursue a unified vision of long-term viability. The model also includes built-in feedback mechanisms. Audits identify compliance gaps and inform corrective actions, training programs strengthen workforce competence and introduce emerging practices, root cause analysis prevents recurrence of errors, and leadership reviews align strategies with organizational objectives. These iterative feedback loops allow the model to evolve alongside changes in workforce composition, digital maturity, and regulatory requirements. By integrating these elements, the model provides both a theoretical framework and a practical roadmap, enabling MRO organizations to strengthen resilience, enhance compliance, and achieve sustainability outcomes across all operational domains.

Table 1

MRO Operational Sustainability Model Pillar Definitions and Performance Indicators (alternative option)

Pillar	**Definition**	**Example Indicators**	**Supporting Process Improvements**
Superior Safety & Security	A proactive culture of risk mitigation ensuring employee well-being, flight safety, and digital resilience.	- % incidents reported and resolved - Safety audit completion rates - Cybersecurity breach frequency - PPE compliance rates	- Five S of Lean - Root Cause Analysis
Commitment to Quality	A structured goal to consistently deliver quality services that meet or exceed customer expectations and regulatory requirements.	- Rework rate - Customer satisfaction/NPS - Quality audit nonconformities - Turnaround time consistency	- Five S of Lean - PDCA Cycle - Cellular Manufacturing
Environmental Stewardship	Intentional and measured reduction of the organization's environmental footprint through responsible resource use.	- Waste diversion rate - Chemical spill incident reports - Hazardous material recycling percentage - CO_2 emissions per maintenance task	- PDCA Cycle - Root Cause Analysis - Cellular Manufacturing
Strategic Focus	Alignment of operations, training, and auditing with long-term sustainability and business goals.	- % employees trained annually - Management system integration level - Internal audit scores - Sustainability reporting frequency	- PDCA Cycle

The MRO Operational Sustainability Model is designed with built-in feedback loops; audits to identify compliance gaps and update processes, training programs to reinforce and recognize safe, efficient practices and introduce new approaches, root cause analysis to prevent recurrence of incidents and nonconformities, and leadership reviews to evaluate strategy alignment and consider objectives annually. This ensures the model evolves with the organization's scale, digital maturity, workforce composition, and regulatory environment.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to address a gap in aviation research by proposing a holistic, sustainability-focused operational framework for MRO organizations. Drawing on peer-reviewed literature, industry reports, international standards, and case studies, the study introduces the MRO Operational Sustainability Model, which integrates four strategic pillars—*Superior Safety and Security, Commitment to Quality, Environmental Stewardship, and Strategic Focus*—into a cohesive framework. Evidence from multiple sources reinforces each pillar. ISO 9001 and AS 9110 quality management studies align with Lean and Six Sigma applications in aviation, substantiating the model's efficiency and quality claims. Environmental stewardship recommendations are supported by ISO 14001 case applications, ICAO environmental guidance, and hazardous waste management studies, all converging on the necessity for standardized environmental controls. Similarly, research on supply chain resilience, automation, and ISO 27001 cybersecurity protocols collectively substantiates the Strategic Focus pillar's capacity to mitigate operational disruptions and digital threats. The model's contribution is both theoretical and practical. It offers a scalable, standards-aligned roadmap that bridges the gap between regulatory compliance and sustainability performance, enabling MROs to strengthen resilience, reduce risk, and enhance reputation while meeting economic, environmental, and social goals. Unlike prior siloed approaches, it operationalizes continuous improvement tools across all pillars to instill sustainability into daily workflows. This research is not without limitations. The model's validation is grounded in secondary data and literature-based triangulation rather than direct empirical testing. Future research should pilot the framework in live MRO environments, conduct longitudinal performance measurements, and assess adaptability to different MRO sizes, geographies, and specializations. However, by aligning operational excellence with the aviation industry's sustainability imperatives, the proposed model provides MROs with a tangible, strategic pathway toward long-term viability, regulatory resilience, and contribution to the broader Sustainable Development Goals. In an era marked by evolving risks, resource constraints, and heightened sustainability imperatives, the proposed framework provides MROs with a tangible pathway toward resilience, regulatory compliance, and alignment with the broader Sustainable Development Goals. Sustainability in MRO operations is no longer optional; it is a prerequisite for ensuring long-term competitiveness and success within the aviation sector.

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