INTERNATIONAL STANDARD ISO 11231

First edition
2010-08-01

Space systems — Probabilistic risk assessment (PRA)

Systèmes spatiaux — Évaluation du risque probabiliste (PRA)

Reference number
ISO 11231:2010(E)

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Published in Switzerland

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Foreword

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ISO 11231 was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 20, *Aircraft and space vehicles*, Subcommittee SC 14, *Space systems and operations*.

Introduction

Structured risk management processes use qualitative and quantitative risk assessment techniques to support optimal decisions regarding safety and the likelihood of mission success, as provided for in ISO 17666. The most systematic and comprehensive methodology for conducting these evaluations is probabilistic risk assessment (PRA).

Probabilistic risk assessment has, over the past three decades, become the principal analytic method for identifying and analysing risk from project and complex systems. Its utility for risk management (RM) has been proven in many industries, including aerospace, electricity generation, petrochemical and defence. PRA is a methodology used to identify and evaluate risk, in order to facilitate RM activities by identifying dominant contributors to risk, so that resources can be effectively allocated to address significant risk drivers and not wasted on items that contribute insignificantly to the risk. In addition to analysing risk, PRA provides a framework to quantify uncertainties in events and event sequences that are important to system safety. By enabling the quantification of uncertainty, PRA informs decision makers on the sources of uncertainty and provides information on the worth of investment resources in reducing uncertainty. In this way, PRA supplements traditional safety analyses that support safety-related decisions. Through the use of PRA, safety analyses are capable of focussing on both the likelihood and severity of events and consequences that adversely impact safety.

PRA differs from reliability analysis in two important respects:

a) PRA allows a more precise quantification of uncertainty both for individual events and for the overall system;

b) PRA applies more informative evaluations that quantify metrics related to the occurrence of highly adverse consequences (e.g. fatalities, loss of mission), as opposed to narrowly defined system performance metrics (e.g. mean-time-to-failure).

PRA also differs from hazard analysis, which identifies and evaluates metrics related to the effects of high-consequence and low-probability events, treating them as if they had happened, i.e. without regard to their likelihood of occurrence. In addition, the completeness of the set of accident scenarios cannot be assured in the conduct of a hazard analysis. PRA results are more diverse and directly applicable to resource allocation and other RM decision-making based on a broader spectrum of consequence metrics.

Through the PRA process, weaknesses and vulnerabilities of the system that can adversely impact safety, performance and mission success are identified. These results in turn provide insights into viable RM strategies to reduce risk and direct the decision maker to areas where expenditure of resources to improve design and operation might be more effective.

The most useful applications of PRA have been in the risk evaluation of complex systems that can result in low-probability and high-consequence scenarios, or the evaluation of complex scenarios consisting of chains of events that collectively may adversely impact system safety more than individually.