

H-DAY: A SUCCESS STORY FROM 50 YEARS AGO

Major changes often bring unintended consequences, but there are examples of success. In this article, **Anders Ellerstrand** describes one such change in Sweden over 50 years ago and compares that with a major ATC system change. There are some basic but important lessons for how we manage major changes.

KEY POINTS

- Successful change requires thorough preparation and coordination.
- There must be people to bring about successful change, with extra staff during the implementation phase.
- Excellent information and training are needed.
- It may be necessary to reduce demand on the system during and for some time after implementation.
- We can and should learn from successes, and we need to spend some time doing so.



Figure 1: H-Day logo

This is a story about a very big change that happened more than 50 years ago in Europe and had the potential of becoming a carnage but instead was a success. I was there, right in the middle of it, as it happened.

Since I was only six years old then, I was in the back seat of my father's car. He was delivering morning newspapers and had special permission to drive that very early Sunday morning, 3 September 1967. This was the day that Sweden went from driving on the left side of the road to driving on the right side. Since 'right' in Swedish is 'höger', it was known as the H-Day.

In 1718, the Swedish king had tried to do the same, but in 1734 we were again on the left side. With all neighbours on right, there was a pressure and there was even a referendum in 1955. But fearing a carnage on the Swedish roads, 83% of voters said 'no'. Several years of international pressure followed and in 1963 the parliament finally said 'yes'

(but only for roads, Swedish trains and subways are still on the left side).

The main responsibility for the change was given to Olof Palme, then the Minister of Communication. The main objection against the project was safety, with years of increased fatalities expected. To mitigate the negative effects, meticulous planning was needed and a special commission was organised. Financing came from a special tax on vehicles, in place from 1967 until 1970.

One of the main tasks for the commission was information and the campaign is possibly the most ambitious in Swedish history. The goal was to reach 90% of the population through media (in those days newspapers, radio and TV). There were home visits to elderly, sick, lonely and handicapped people. Information materials were developed for the visually or hearing impaired as well as for different languages. During the

last weekend before the change, all major newspapers had full-page ads. TV broadcasted 12 hours of information programs, with 40 hours on radio, in ten different languages.

Roads were rebuilt, and mobile traffic islands and refuges constructed. 360,000 road signs were replaced and another 130,000 signs with 'H-reminders' were put up. Sweden already used cars with the driver sitting on the left side, but buses had to be replaced or rebuilt. During the last 24 hours, 20,000 people were on the roads putting everything in place.

Between 0100 and 0600 hrs only cars with special permission were allowed on the roads. My father was one of them and we had brought a transistor radio. At 0450 we were told to stop the car. We were then told to slowly reposition the car to the right side of the road and at 0500 we were allowed to continue, now driving on the right side of the road! One hour later anyone could try it, and many wanted to, by bike or car.

During the first days, 10,000 police and military staff were on the roads to check and assist the transition, and another 100,000 volunteered at 19,000 zebra crossings. During the first days, the maximum speed was reduced and then slowly increased during several weeks.

The expected panic and bloodshed did not materialise. The number of killed persons in traffic accidents was even lower than the year before. But this was in Sweden, on the roads and more than 50 years ago. What is the connection to aviation in Europe today?

There are similarities in how we manage big changes today. The biggest change I experienced was when we replaced the old Swedish-built ATM system. It was called ATCAS and was from the early 1980s. In 2005 we went from ATCAS to Thales Eurocat. The change included moving:

- from paper strips to lists and labels
- from manual/voice coordination to silent system-coordination
- from interpreting the strips to find out about routes to having routes shown on the screen, and
- from static flight plans to continuously updated flight plans.

It was a very big change, and, in some ways, you can compare it to the 'H-Day'.

Large resources were invested in information and training for the staff and for other stakeholders, resembling what was done for the Swedish people in 1967. Preparations were needed, just like the work on roads, signs and buses in Sweden 1967. One such adjustment was that in the old system we regularly worked one controller per sector but now it was decided to always work with both planner and executive controllers.

Like the extra staff on Swedish roads and at zebra crossings, the ATC centre had a help desk in the ops room, with experienced specialists available to answer questions and give advice and to hear about unexpected experiences.

From H-Day and some period after, maximum speed in Sweden was reduced for a period. In a similar way, the ATC capacity was reduced from the day of the new system implementation and then slowly increased to normal capacity. This allowed people to grow into the new way of doing things. It also allowed people to take care of the small

mistakes that are almost inevitable in the plans and preparations.

My experiences from six years of age and my experience from 44 years of age are of course very different. Still, there are similarities in planning, preparation, resourcing, and coordination. And both changes were successful. Looking back on them shows how much we can learn from what goes well, if only we take the time to do so. 



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Figure 2: Kungsgatan, Stockholm, on H-Day, 3 September 1967, during the night Sweden had changed from left-side traffic to right-side traffic