

WELLBEING: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY BETWEEN ORGANISATIONS AND PROFESSIONALS

EU Implementation Regulation 2017/373 introduces the concept of shared responsibility between organisations and their air traffic controllers. **Guadalupe Cortés Obrero** and **Marc Baumgartner** explore how this might look in reality.

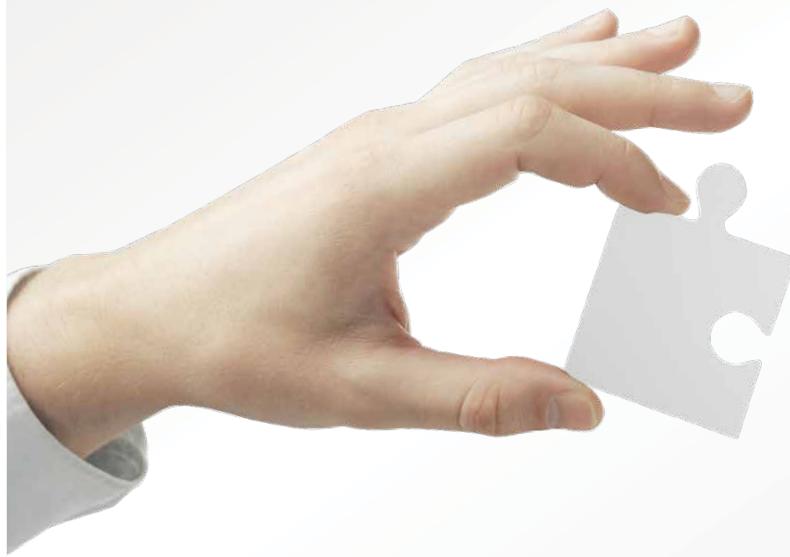
Wellbeing is a challenging topic for frontline professionals such as air traffic controllers. It addresses a topic which is seen as 'soft' and subjective. There are no common metrics (e.g., runway or sector capacity), nor is there a common approach to address the issue of wellbeing. So this article raises some key issues that may affect both air traffic control organisations and their professionals with regard to wellbeing, especially in light of the newly introduced EU Implementation Regulation 2017/373 (IR 2017/373).

Wellbeing is a holistic concept related to health. In 1948, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as "*a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*". Wellbeing therefore includes physical, psychological, social, organisational, environmental and economic aspects. There is an extensive European regulatory framework and there are published standards regarding workers' health management with respect to a variety of issues, such as the safety

and health of workers, work-related stress, working time and informing and consulting employees.

In air traffic control, as of January 2020, IR 2017/373 establishes the specific requirements for air traffic control organisations to prevent and limit the negative effects of occupational fatigue and stress on ATCOs, the impact of rostering system, and the exclusion of psychoactive substances abuse to ensure air traffic safety. Specifically, reference is made to the need to prevent and mitigate these negative effects from a wider perspective, considering both the individual and the organisation for safety purposes.

The truth is that the characteristics and culture of the organisation can impact employees' health, and stress is a clear example. For instance, Costa (1995) describes work demands, operating procedures, working times and tools, as well as work environment and organisation, as the main sources of stress of ATCOs. According to Costa, these stress factors might lead to long-term effects on the air traffic controller's health, contributing to hypertension, heart disease, diabetes, ulcers and psychoneurotic disorders. WHO reinforces this, stating that stress may impact individuals, and in turn affect the organisation (e.g.,

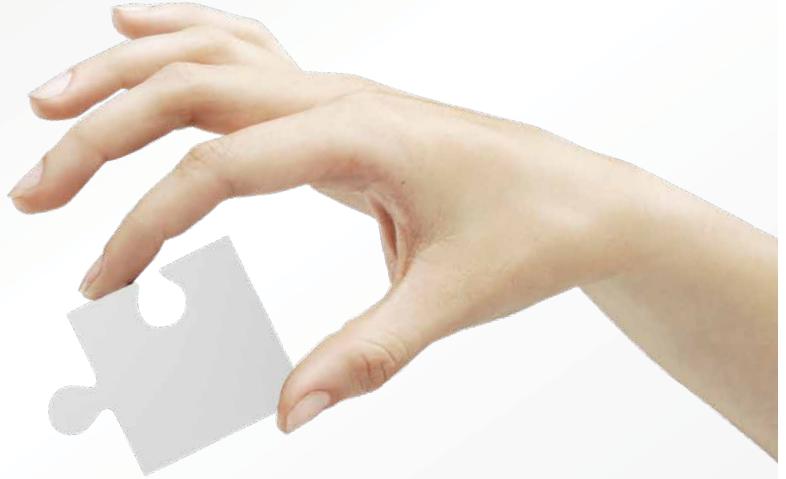


level of commitment, absenteeism, performance), as well as society in general (e.g., cost of health insurance, consequences to the public).

Compliance is the main driver for many activities in ANSPs. This can be traced to issues of accountability and liability. Since the introduction of Single European Sky legislation and the creation of EASA, many states and ANSPs have started comprehensive compliance work which has institutionalised certain aspects related to controller wellbeing. Managing employees' wellbeing effectively, including compliance with IR 2017/373, requires that ANSPs adopt a comprehensive long-term strategy, developing appropriate policies, and – more importantly – to develop and monitor effective practices, taking a holistic perspective.

Air traffic controllers perform their activities under specific formal and informal rules, in a particular cultural, social and legal context. Organisations need to focus on the human dimension and should be ready to invest in air traffic controllers' wellbeing, aiming not only for compliance but also to cherish their human capital.

ATCOs, on an individual level, must comply with the human dimension of IR 2017/373 to meet specific requirements and be "fit for duty". That is, they must be medically fit, rested for duty and free from psychoactive substances. In its published guidance manual, IFATCA explains that the Implementing Rule implies a shared responsibility between the organisation and the individual. ATCOs are responsible for certain 'hygiene' factors such as rest, exercise, and good diet, to be able to fulfil a very demanding job. This might also require a change of culture. It raises questions about what kinds of activities we should undertake before shifts, for instance, and about practices related to work (e.g., "Can I continue to change my shifts to work seven days in a row to have more days off afterwards?"). Some practices may have to change with the new framework, and some new trade-offs may be necessary.



The wellbeing of ATCOs is essential for safe and efficient ATM, and IR 2017/373 introduces the concept of shared responsibility between organisations and their air traffic controllers. ANSPs need to go beyond compliance, instead aiming for excellence in terms of mental and physical health at work for air traffic controllers. The prevention and management of the problematic use of psychoactive substances, and the negative effects of fatigue and stress-related risks, should not be the end of the road, but just the beginning to maximise the wellbeing of ATM personnel, for both safety and efficiency. 



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Reference

IFATCA (2018). *IMPLEMENTING REGULATION (EU) 2017/373 FOR ATM/ANS. General advice and guidance with regard to the new EASA requirements on stress, fatigue and psychoactive substances.* Version 1.0, December 2018. <http://bit.ly/IFATCA2017373>



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