

THE ENERGY PROJECT @MUAC

The EUROCONTROL Maastricht Upper Airspace Centre has pioneered an approach to personal energy and resilience management for staff. In this article, **Marinella Leone** describes the journey of the 'Energy Project'.

KEY POINTS

- **Maastricht's Energy and Resilience Management Project (in short, 'Energy Project') is a pioneering effort in the entire aviation industry, to improve MUAC staff energy management skills and personal resilience.**
- **The project uses self-assessment combined with online personal development, coaching, workshops, communication and 'energy spaces'.**
- **The Energy Project has become more popular and is now used for personal growth by an increasing number of employees throughout MUAC.**
- **The benefits spread well beyond the workplace and there is international interest.**

In 2013, I moved to the Operations department in Maastricht UAC as Team Leader of Safety, Quality and Human Performance. In those days, I was busy integrating human factors tools and methods into safety processes in a structured way. The aim was to influence MUAC safety by focusing on human performance and satisfying the stress and fatigue regulation.

Those years were marked by greater-than-forecasted air traffic growth across the whole MUAC airspace, often outpacing growth across the rest of Europe. MUAC was working hard to adjust quickly to the increased pressures by introducing a many adaptations and more radical changes to technical systems and working practices. During this period, I observed that staff inside and outside the Ops room were suffering from stress and fatigue, in some cases leading to burnout.

It was at this point that I realised that we had been 'working around the human', forgetting the person in the middle of this system change. My dinners with Ellen Beckers and Ilona Bonten from the MUAC Training and Proficiency team became opportunities to dream about

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an integrated method, encompassing different disciplines, to counterbalance increasing pressures. The MUAC Energy and Resilience Management Project (the 'Energy Project') was born and thanks to this, my job has changed so that today

I can focus on Human Performance, from the individual up to organisation cultural changes.

What does The Energy Project involve?

The MUAC Energy and Resilience Management Project has implemented an integrated and structured approach to energy management to improve MUAC staff energy management skills and personal resilience. This approach aims to empower staff to manage the issues that affect their personal resilience and find ways to energise by balancing body, mind and emotions. The project includes different components, as set out below.

Self-assessment

We provided Ops Room staff with a self-assessment tool, based on the 'job demands-resources' model. This is a model of occupational stress

that suggests that strain is a response to an imbalance between demands on the individual and the resources available to deal with those demands. The outcome of the self-assessment helps to determine which personal development paths staff could undertake.

The aggregated results of the individual assessments are also analysed to validate the relevance of the development topics offered and to review organisation resources.



Figure 1: Topics covered

Personal development and coaching

Development paths are offered in different forms such as on-line development, and individual and group coaching. The topics addressed in the development trajectory can span different directions depending on personal needs. Some of these topics are shown in Figure 1, as we continuously develop new modules.

Workshops

Workshops are planned on Thursdays with different topics to attract different people. The sessions help people to improve self-awareness, refuel their own energy from their own strengths, and to understand their own rhythms.

Communication

Postcard-size 'Energy cards' were placed around the MUAC building, including quotes, advice and positive messages corresponding to the theme of the month. These were available for anyone to take and use. Videos are created and continuously shared to encourage people to adopt healthier behaviours and attitudes.

Energy spaces

MUAC already had a new recreational building when starting the project.

Now there is a dedicated Energy Room where one can spend a quiet moment, meditate, stretch, relax, or do yoga. The Energy Room has been successful in providing space for energy-related activities and to offer a different and safe environment to conduct innovative workshops and coaching sessions. Many people are now making use of the Energy Room for their own practice, or just to be in silence. It's also possible to get a professional massage (at one's own cost) or an osteopathy treatment, as the room has been equipped with accessories to provide relaxation or to facilitate stress and pain relief.

Who takes care of the project?

The Energy activities are nurtured and supported by the Energy Team. This is a team of people from different backgrounds and functions who make the MUAC's stress and fatigue risk management system work in practice. The team has expanded over time to include managers and specialists from welfare (for overall coordination),

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operations, engineering, HR, health and safety, communication, facilities, and medical, plus coaches from an external company who support the internal coaches in preparation and delivery of initiatives. From the beginning, the Energy Project required determination, persistence and patience from the Energy Team. These were qualities that the team learned to sustain. The team has a common purpose to make a difference for individuals, teams and the organisation as a whole, and we have been celebrating our successes so far.

What have been the obstacles and challenges?

The main obstacles were the initial resistance of "this is not for me" and "what would people think if I engage in these activities?". Often, people do not feel completely comfortable to access the Energy project in the beginning. Resistance was sometimes driven by scepticism, misunderstanding of purpose, fear of self-awareness, and fear of being seen as weak (if participating or supporting). Many were also concerned about confidentiality. It was more difficult to reach ATCOs compared to other staff mostly due to the inability to plan dedicated time for these activities in working hours. Only supervisors had the opportunity to be planned during working

time to attend basic training on stress management and burnout prevention, essentially in managing their teams.

Despite these obstacles, once staff understand what the Energy initiatives entail, they often start quickly moving from one workshop or coaching session to the next. ATCOs preferably engage in these activities in their free time and in an external location or via videocall, as they understand that these prevention measures will just make them stronger.

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How is it going now?

The project started slowly, with just a handful of operational staff actively participating, but over the years it has become more popular and is now used for personal growth by an increasing number of employees throughout MUAC. And for those who have the courage and curiosity, the benefits are proving to spread well beyond the workplace.

New faces and ambassadors have been raising awareness, correcting misperceptions, and raising the profile of the Energy activities from the (wrong) idea of being a 'wellness centre initiative' to a 'life-changing experience', both inside and outside of work. The communication campaigns involved many staff. The feedback of line management or colleagues, and their encouragement to participate in energy

and resilience management workshops or coaching sessions, has been key to connecting with staff.

The activities in the Energy Room have become popular, and staff keep requesting continuation of activities, as well as specific energising team activities outdoors. The Energy Room and other recreational spaces are now used by people individually and in small groups for several activities such as sport, relaxation, yoga and massage.

Today we benefit from the presence of a people-oriented MUAC Director and an increasing number of managers and staff who truly believe in the ambition of the Energy team and support this culture change.

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A sincere and warm "Thank you" is the recurrent feedback we usually receive from those people who had the experience of being involved in Energy activities, especially at the end of a workshop or a coaching path. Here are some of the quotes that I still remember:

- "I am not the same person as before."
- "We feel the vibe of this change in the organisation."
- "This growth path is surprising, like playing civilisation games. You start small with very little, and your awareness and the ability to master life grows into you like a new empire at every coaching session."

▪ "I love the Energy Room! Just 15 minutes of basic yoga and some breathing exercises in this relaxing space will calm me down and renew my energy levels. Perfect break to get ready for a few more hours in the hectic environment called 'the Ops Room'."

▪ "Coaching used to have an image for me that I would have to be in desperate need of help or that there would be something 'wrong' with me as a person. Working with a coach is an opportunity to advance both at work and in my private life and save a lot of energy by changing the rules of the game."

▪ "The workshops have helped me appreciate we are all in the same boat, it becomes a lot easier to develop understanding for colleagues when they are in a challenging situation."

What about the future?

The Energy and Resilience Support Network aims to engage even more staff to shift behaviour at all levels and in all departments. The Energy team will continue to innovate by offering new training modules with different formats, while keeping the overall approach that has delivered such good results. Alongside the current staff, ab-initios, new supervisors and newcomers receive training, slowly leading to a positive development in the MUAC culture. Maastricht's Energy and Resilience Management is an all-encompassing effort, available to all staff, working to build a healthy and happy group of employees. S



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