

COULD A BIRO (OR TWO) MAKE YOUR DAY?

How many operational staff take time to reflect and write down what they have learned during a debrief at the end of the shift or set of shifts? **Bartosz Gicala** argues that the humble pen should be used more often to help learn from everyday work.

Years ago, during my ATC *ab initio* course, one of the instructors really stood out. He was a demanding type, always emphasising the need to avoid complacency (his attitude would perfectly suit the idea of *'expect the unexpected'* found on EUROCONTROL leaflets). He would make sure that the simulation exercise under his supervision would check not only our prior preparation, but also our ability to think on our feet.

Midway through one exercise, at a time when paper flight progress strips were still in use, he announced to the trainee that his pen was experiencing an irreversible malfunction. Being left without any means to note down the essentials of each flight's progress, the confused trainee soon lost the picture; the whole traffic situation turned into a big, spinning mess. The lesson was learned, and the next day, not a single trainee turned up at the simulation facility without the possession of two fully operational biros.

This lesson – while quite unusual – was part of structured *ab initio* training. However, the way we learn from everyday work is still left very much to itself. We become experienced in a sort of natural manner, and learning becomes similarly unstructured.

This brings a risk of complacency when it comes to learning as a professional. What proportion of ATCOs devote any time to perform a sort of individual debrief on his or her last shift? I'd bet that very few of us do that.

Of course, experience is gradually accumulated, but it is also forgotten and

not shared. Perhaps we could learn much more from everyday work if we took time to reflect and write some notes in a journal. Take a few moments to consider our performance at the controller working position, and make a critical but fair brief written assessment. For instance:

- What were the pros and cons of my work performance?
- What other solutions could have been applied to solve the issues we had been faced? What might I avoid next time?
- Is there anything to make a reminder of?
- Does a skill or any knowledge need to be rehearsed, revised or gained?
- What surprised me?
- Was there any pivotal moment that requires deeper thought?

These are just a few questions that could be asked. And how about jotting down a couple of conclusions from a such a debrief? That could truly become a book of wisdom gained from reflection on day-to-day experience, available to sift through at any time, perhaps before resuming work after holidays.

Such individual, informal learning is limited only by one's willingness to reflect, record and incorporate lessons into one's professional activity. But then there are the organisational layers of learning. Our individual reflections could inform ATCO meetings (both formal and off duty), safety reporting systems, and team resource management. But do you get regular meetings at your ATS working unit aimed at discussing current

safety issues, changes in operational environment or simply sharing "front line" experiences? Does your reporting programme encourage learning from everyday work, adhering to just culture principles? Are reported issues dealt

with promptly, with all the involved parties being kept aware of the progress and result of an investigation? Is the reporting system overly concentrated at addressing faults while marginalising the need to gather and promote examples of good practice? Are conclusions

implemented into the organisation, without undue delay?

The cunning instructor could only use the pen trick once. Then he had to pick some other trick from his wide array. While many of us don't use pens for flight data recording any more, perhaps we need them for learning from everyday work. **S**

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