

WHEN EVERYDAY WORK IS NOT SO EVERYDAY

How can we learn from everyday work in the context of an unprecedented pandemic? Using the themes of previous issues of *HindSight* magazine, **Anders Ellerstrand** takes a look at human adaptability at work in Sweden.

I work as a Watch Supervisor at the ATC Centre in Malmö, Sweden. Using the themes from the most recent issues of *HindSight*, I will give some personal reflections on how the pandemic has affected my everyday work.

The *HindSight* 25 theme was 'Work-as-Imagined & Work-as-Done'. Every ANSP has well-documented and comprehensive procedures; our 'work-as-prescribed' which might also be people's 'work-as-imagined'. When these procedures meet reality, there is usually some kind of gap, but operational staff adapt to make things work, and the result is 'work-as-done'. It is considered good if the gap between these is as small as possible, but it is also realised that there will always be a gap.

As the pandemic hit us, my centre saw traffic volumes drop dramatically. Within a few weeks, we had less traffic during the day than we used to have during nights. To find guidance for how to handle this situation, it seemed natural and made sense to use the procedures for night-time work even during the daytime. This included reducing the number of open sectors to a minimum and manning each sector with one instead of two controllers. While new



daytime operations resembled old night-time operations in traffic volumes, there were other factors. Unlike night-time operations, there were still military traffic and military activities in restricted areas, and there was VFR traffic, parachute jumping, etc. In fact, the situation was in many ways totally new. The documented procedures, reflecting the 'work-as-imagined' of old, did not cover the new situation, so they had to be adapted to a new 'work-as-done'.

The *HindSight* 26 theme was 'Safety at the Interfaces: Collaboration at Work'. Outside of the ANSP, at a state-level, I have seen extraordinarily little of this. In summary, each country has tried to navigate the pandemic on its own. Suddenly, Sweden found borders closed without any pre-notification. I did not notice any significant change of cooperation between my centre and the centres bordering to us. The bright shining exception here is EUROCONTROL. So far, the EUROCONTROL website has been my best source of professional information, with frequently updated and nicely presented statistics. In a crisis, people want information, to understand what is happening and to try and predict what is coming. Thanks to EUROCONTROL, I have been able to provide such information to my controllers in the ops room.



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In *HindSight* 27, the theme was 'Competency and Expertise'. Controllers enjoy their work and the challenges they meet. For most controllers, the

main challenge is to handle a lot of traffic, but suddenly that challenge was gone. I believe a lot of controllers find this worrying; they wonder if they will be able to maintain their skill when they do not practise it. One way to handle this has been to close as many sectors as possible and to work one controller per sector instead of two. Controllers would rather work fewer hours in position but have some quality time when they work, to still meet a challenge every now and then. To maintain competency is still a problem and it will continue to be. The obvious solution is to use simulators to practise. I believe this will be done in many places.



Crises present problems but there are usually also opportunities. In this case, one opportunity can be found in relation to the many controllers that are not needed in the ops room. Some controllers that work part-time in offices have been able to spend more time in the office. It has been possible to take care of a lot of issues that would otherwise have been given lower priority. Other controllers that are not needed in the ops room have been given the possibility to stay home and increase their competency, e.g., through EUROCONTROL e-learning.

The *HindSight* 28 theme was 'Change'. I have been an air traffic controller for over 38 years. A lot of things have happened during these years. I have seen new technology being introduced, increasing traffic volumes, changes

in training and in organisation, but I have never experienced anything like the situation brought by the pandemic. It has been the quickest and most dramatic change I have ever seen.

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Through the last two years, the recurrent theme for ATM in Europe has been 'the capacity crunch'. Everyone was looking for things that could help us increase capacity, of course while maintaining safety. Then, during March this year, everything changed. We went from a capacity problem almost everywhere to a capacity problem nowhere. Maintaining safety while increasing capacity is a well-known goal conflict that we are used to and that we can manage. But maintaining safety while reducing capacity? That is not a problem at all, is it?

We have a safety management system with different elements to manage safety. One element is the management of change. Whenever we are informed of a change to our functional system, we assess it to understand how it will affect us, if there are new hazards, and if we need to mitigate these hazards. With the pandemic, there was no incoming mail informing about a coming change. I don't know if there has been a formal safety assessment of the pandemic. As far as I have seen, it just happened, and everyone adapted to make things work.

The *HindSight 29* theme was 'Goal Conflicts and Trade-offs'. The classic goal conflict in aviation is that between 'production and protection'. The idea is that if you increase production you risk losing protection; that is safety. Of course, most if not all ANSPs say 'safety first', but I believe the



pandemic has further revealed this as a buzzword. As I mentioned earlier, the general understanding has been that increasing capacity could be a threat to safety but reducing capacity is not. During the pandemic, the apparent conflict between the production and protection has not been a conflict at all. This crisis has been about managing production and economy.

Handling goal conflicts is everyday work for the Watch Supervisor, and the pandemic did not reduce this task. Rather, the opposite emerged. While controllers have been mostly very relaxed with few aircraft to handle, supervisors have been rather busy. The staffing has usually been more than enough, which is good from a safety perspective. On the other hand, it is better if people stay at home, doing e-learning or taking a day off. And sometimes controllers are needed for other work, at an office somewhere. Managing staff has been a large part of the supervisors' work during the pandemic: deciding who can do what, informing everyone, updating paperwork, etc. As most of the normal work (handling airspace, coordinating with the military and so on) has still been there, the goal conflicts have been many and trade-offs sometimes difficult.

The *HindSight 30* theme was 'Wellbeing'. In the initial phase of the pandemic, people were worried for their own health and for their family and friends. In Sweden, the problems with infection mostly stayed in the areas around Stockholm. My ATC centre is in the far south of Sweden, where we had very few cases, so there were fewer worries for health after some time. Later came the worries for the economic effects: will people lose their jobs? The financial situation was and is particularly worrying. Recovery is slow, it is obvious that the money coming in is not enough, and the information about the future is not there. Still, the social systems in Sweden are helping us. Even if the worst comes to the worst, there is good financial back-up that will last for a

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rather long period. Overall, I believe that most of our staff have been doing OK.

As a summary, the pandemic has shown that people's ability to adapt and get the work done in unusual situations is particularly important. No procedures were written on how to handle this pandemic. Top management prioritised the economic situation and the effects of decisions made at higher levels were dropped to the ops room manager, the watch supervisor. In an extremely dramatic period, with a lack of guidance and information, people still find ways to manage their work in a safe and sensible way. And of course, no automation was there to do it for us. People made it happen. 



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