

# LET'S WORK TOGETHER

An initiative to learn from everyday work before COVID-19 became even more important as the reality changed, but new questions about work had to be addressed, as **Sebastian Daeunert** reports.



## KEY POINTS

- During the COVID pandemic, we have to consider how to help controllers and trainees maintain an acceptable level of wellbeing and performance.
- Maintaining proficiency is a challenge, especially for new controllers who are not getting the practice without a coach.
- Learning teams made up of different age groups and perspectives can discuss their wishes and fears, and find solutions for performance and wellbeing.
- We need to plan now for when traffic picks up to help manage short term peaks and longer-term increases.

"What do you do as a trainee when your runway has turned into an aircraft parking lot for abandoned aircraft?"

"What a sight, what a beautiful sight." I am looking out of my office window in the early morning.

And here comes NEO the A320 glistening in the morning sun. No, we are not back to the high traffic numbers that we used to have at our airport. But the short and medium rangers are coming back, one by one.

This view would have been nothing out of the ordinary during all those years – a common sight. But now, something makes me happy. Finally, my 'friends' are on the move again. And it makes me think about what has happened during the past few months. Not the news, but what has happened here and how we made it happen.

All of us in aviation have gone through rough times during the past months. We've seen our industry in crisis, shattered by an invisible enemy called 'COVID-19'. And we all carry the big question mark – a mixture of hope and fear – on our faces. Being the Safety Manager and Head of Training at our tower, I feel lucky to belong to a group that has no shortage of work.

How can this be? It is not the number of incidents. How could it be, with the low amount of traffic that we have? No, a different question has arisen: how to keep my controllers and trainees at an acceptable level of wellbeing? Sometime soon we will need them at their peak again. This is an interesting challenge, but a rewarding one.

## Before Coronavirus

Let me explain the situation. Before coronavirus, due to a lack of controllers, we boosted the number of ATCO trainees up to what we could handle. Our training system, after the theoretical classes and the simulator training at the academy, comprises three phases of 'on-the-job training': start, middle, and final phases. Then there is a practical evaluation exam that finally results in the ATCO licence.

Due to the large number of trainees, some controllers complained that they would not be able to work enough time on their own (without a trainee), fearing for their proficiency. Young controllers who had just achieved their licence said that they were not getting the practice



to 'swim by themselves' without a coach, due to the number of trainees blocking the 'hot positions'.

I did some human factors interviews, trying to find those 'weak signals', asking the same questions but to different peer group members: young trainees, young ATCOs, experienced ATCOs, and ATCO coaches. A few examples:

- "If you were the king of this airport, what would you change and why?"
- "If you put production pressure on yourself, what is the motivation?"
- "How do you feel about training and coaching?"

The answers surprised me. I expected each interview to last for 15 minutes. Yet all exceeded one hour, as they had so much to say. Try it. It is really rewarding, and the information is valuable. However, I was unable to do interviews with all our people. It would have taken up too much time. So, I tried one person from each group. As

a result, some controllers who had not been interviewed appeared with a set of notes on several pages where they had written down what they thought was important. We gladly listened to what they told us. This was really something.

Now, we were not in a time of crisis. Things were working fine. This was simply a continuation of our interest in 'work-as-imagined and work-as-done' (see *HindSight 25*). "Never stop monitoring. Never stop improving," we thought.

Solutions were soon found and published. It was made clear and published by our local management that any controller – young or old – has the right to work on their own if required for as long as needed. This was not new, but the sense of duty towards our trainees had made some ATCOs forget this.

A learning team was formed, made up of different generations. How do we

integrate new age groups, different views, different needs, and different attitudes into our ATC family? What are the wishes, fears, and requests of controllers, coaches and trainees? What might we learn from 'new blood', perhaps in terms of ideas and attitudes?

All that was before COVID-19. Little did we know that our little workgroup would gain such meaningfulness.

## After Coronavirus

Then a virus erupted all over the world. Traffic stopped, and then trickled. Suddenly, what we had started to think about became even more important. What do you do as a trainee when your runway has turned into an aircraft parking lot for abandoned aircraft? How do you keep proficient when you drop from 1,600 movements per day to 40? How do you feel when your dream appears to be dying? And what about fear, boredom, distraction, and even a feeling of uselessness?

And then private pilots saw the chance to finally fly from the airport with Cessnas, Catanas, Pipers, even glider parachutes. This may be a dream for many, but it is a nightmare for the sole A320 that sits on the runway while four hobby pilots are meandering around.

But most importantly, what happens when traffic picks up? How do we manage short term peaks and longer-term increases?

The important part in all of this is to keep people as motivated and as happy as possible as a team, despite the situation that COVID-19 causes.

Many things were done. One was a safety briefing, a video which was put into the e-learning programme. The subject? How to cope with boredom when there is no traffic, keeping up the level of attention and maintaining situational awareness.

An example we used was a train accident on a German railway line (Bad Aibling, 12 casualties, 55 injured). According to the accident report, the dispatcher had played a game on his mobile phone during a period with a lack of traffic on the short line, and

played a part in causing the accident where two trains were approaching each other head on, crashing at full speed on the single-track line.

How do you remain attentive when there is little to do? How do you react when suddenly there is a very serious situation that needs full attention? The safety briefing was appreciated by our controllers, who did not only accept the content, but also felt that their concerns were recognised. It also made them think.

**"What happens when traffic picks up? How do we manage short term peaks and longer-term increases?"**

We gave tasks to the trainees too. We made sure they knew that they are still important to us and members of our 'family'. I wrote a new training concept, changing the old system from doing one long checkout to gain all positions to one single licence – a 'one position = one licence' concept. It is currently under evaluation with the workers' council and the authorities for possible approval.

Other questions emerged. Can we substitute on-the-job training with

simulation, at least partly? When can we do a checkout, and at what traffic level? We do not just try to find ways of coping with the immediate situation. We involve those who are affected and give them a say in the decisions.

### **The Bottom Line: We Care**

Most importantly, we let them know that we don't abandon them; we really care. Everyone knows the situation is a tough challenge. But 'my controllers' and 'my trainees' know that they are not on their own. They know that we are a family that is working together to keep this house safe and happy. The nightmare has become a collective task. This is productive and a major part of wellbeing: feeling safe, warm, needed, and wanted, during the scariest times that I have ever known. And maybe at the end of all this we will all come out stronger.

*Before when things go wrong, as they sometimes will  
And the road you travel, it stays all uphill  
Let's work together, come on, come on,  
let's work together  
You know together we will stand, every  
boy, girl, woman and a man*

Let's Work Together, Canned Heat (1970)  
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