

HANDLING SMALL PROBLEMS IN A BIG PANDEMIC

In the face of a global pandemic, previously small problems may take us by surprise. In this article, **Raluca Tilici** reminds of the unseen impacts of factors that affect our performance in a way that we have never seen before.

As experienced in many other ATC towers, this spring was not only atypical, it was unimaginable. The spring traffic forecast from December for our airport was a traffic increase of 15%. We were delighted. But then the world changed with the arrival of COVID-19. All traffic ceased (both international and national). For a period, we only had humanitarian and hospital flights, at a maximum of one or two flights a day. We are a small airport and we don't have problems with too much traffic, but we never have problems with monotony either.

We didn't know what to do with all this free time. It was stressful, and felt uncomfortable, like a bad dream. But besides the emotional aspect of a lack of traffic and the world situation, what impact does this have on our performance as ATCOs? I really didn't ask myself this question until I had to handle an unusual situation in these conditions. After four hours of no traffic during one shift, in a row of shifts with no IFR traffic at all, we received a flight plan for an IFR technical flight coming to land at our airport. It was a happy moment but not stressful at all. We are all experienced controllers and it was only one flight. We know our jobs by heart.

But things didn't work as imagined. An aircraft entered our area and did not respond to our calls. We presumed that there was a radio communication failure (RCF). We had military traffic in the area, everything was coordinated, and the aircraft followed the local RCF procedure. After a few minutes, we discovered that our station was the one with the problem. We switched to another station, and everything was resolved.

In normal times this would have been resolved in seconds. This time, it took two minutes. So what happened? Why did it take us so long to resolve the situation, and why did we focus only on one problem? These were the questions that I asked myself after the aircraft landed safely. Perhaps because I'm part of the training team in my unit, and also a Human Factors enthusiast, I had to dig deeper.

This was just a simple unusual situation in COVID-19 low traffic. It was resolved safely, and just required an extra time until the solution was implemented. With learning as our focus, not blaming, we have to understand how this pandemic is affecting us as the human part of the system.

Until this situation, it didn't occur to me that there could be a problem with staying vigilant as an ATCO during COVID-19 traffic. We always perceived that the problem with vigilance related

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to night shifts, where you have to stay awake. But we have never dealt with a pandemic before. Our brains had to

overcome this 'stand-by mode' and this took a few minutes for this situation. So, how to help ATCOs maintain focus and overcome boredom or lack of vigilance? To improve and better prepare ourselves, we have to develop programmes, in the form of online TRM sessions or online group discussion to address these issues.

When considering our own performance, and learning from the new reality of everyday work, we should not forget that this pandemic has had an unseen effect in us as human beings. We experience worries and stresses

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without even perceiving them for what they are. And we are each in a different situation, even though we face the same pandemic. It is a period that may bring fear of us or our loved ones getting sick, or worries for our livelihood or income, or of boredom and isolation. And then there is the fatigue. While we usually think of human factors as most important for busy and stressful work, here it is especially important. Even when we are not busy in the usual way, work and life is particularly stressful. 



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