



SYSTEM WELLBEING

Wellbeing is not just an individual concern. It's about the system as a whole, as **Anders Ellerstrand** explains.

When I hear the word 'wellbeing', I connect it to an individual. Wellbeing is about me or about another person. As the final part of my studies for a Master degree in Human Factors with the Coventry University, I conducted a research project that made me realise that we should discuss wellbeing not only on a personal level but also on a system level.

The Malmö ATC Centre in Sweden

A background for my study was that the Swedish ATC Centre in Malmö saw a steady increase of air traffic between 2014 and 2018. The number of IFR traffic movements in 2018 was up by 14.5% from 2014, while the number of controllers remained the same. The main indicator of safety (the number of separation minima infringements per the last 12 months) showed a positive trend and the centre stayed well within the performance targets, which are set on a European level. Based on these data, it seemed like a good idea to look for the positive factors that enabled this. My research was based on interviews and a survey with controllers at the centre.

The ATC centre in Malmö handles an airspace divided into 12 sectors. A suite of two ATCOs can control from one up to five sectors. The executive controller is responsible for the sector and handles radio communication, and the planner controller handles coordination with adjacent sectors. The controllers are supported by a technical ATM system with a range of tools to facilitate conflict detection and resolution. Some tasks are fully automated. A total of about 175 air traffic controllers work at the centre.

Wellbeing

During the research interviews, I asked four questions. The answers covered a lot of areas but here I will focus on answers related to wellbeing.

Imagine a really good day at work, when you feel truly pleased with yourself and your work. Can you tell me about it?

Some controllers started talking about their own wellbeing, like "I'm well rested, with energy and a positive feeling" but many also said things like "there is a positive mood in the group" or "the colleagues matter, their mood, there is a positive spirit".

Working as a controller is not a one-person job; it is about teamwork, and the wellbeing of the group affects the work of the individual. You can get an idea of what the day will be like, based on the mood people are in, as they arrive to work. Group wellbeing is, however, also affected by the situation at work. A good day is when staffing is sufficient to give a good balance between work and breaks. Traffic matters as well – enough to keep you busy and challenged but not too much. There is also a sense of professional pride that seems to affect wellbeing, and controlling is a job that gives you immediate feedback – you can see it on the radar screen if you succeed.

What do you value most about yourself as a controller? What is your asset?

Apart from the technical skills of controlling, answers concerned cooperation and the ability to support fellow controllers. Some mentioned professional pride, how controllers like to be challenged and how they have high standards when it comes to providing good services.




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Among the first things mentioned was “colleagues”. Again, this tells us how controlling is not an individual job but teamwork: “we take care of each other” and “we have fun”. At the Malmö Centre, controllers always work two-by-two and the importance of this was emphasised: “you learn from each other” and “all planner controllers do everything to help their executive controller”.

The physical environment with a height adjustable workplace was mentioned: “it’s good to be able to stand up and work”. But support functions and management were mentioned even more: “former controllers in many positions, they understand us”; “there is a short distance between senior manager and the people on the floor”; “no hierarchy”; and, “the manager trusts me and listens to my opinion”. At the centre there is not a fixed roster. Instead controllers have the possibility to influence their roster to fit individual needs. This was mentioned by controllers: “we can schedule for enough rest between shifts”; “roster staff is very accommodating”; and, “choice of annual leave, I have influence”.

What is system wellbeing?

For me, the lesson from my survey is to look at the whole picture. Just counting the number of hours between shifts or how long you sit in position before a break will not tell the whole story. When I asked controllers about positive factors that help them do a good, safe job, the answers show that many factors explain it. You may change the rostering based on solid scientific proof that it will provide better rest, but if you at the same time create problems for the balance between work and family, you may achieve nothing.

One of the things I find striking in the results of my survey is the importance of colleagues. As a controller you rely heavily on your planner/executive, but also on controllers working other sectors. Having good relations and knowing that people around you are having a good day and are in a good mood may be as important as pure technical skills. 

What do you value most about being an air traffic controller?

Answers were about pride, for instance about the responsibility of the job and about doing a good job, “to make a difference”. People also value variation: “no day is like any other”. Controlling is also fun: “after 30 years, it’s still fun to go to work”. Now, isn’t that wellbeing? Another aspect was brought up: “the job is demanding and stressful, but when I leave the room, I leave it”. This may not be the case always, but several controllers mentioned it. Most days, you don’t bring your work to the coffee break or home to your family. Work is everything when you are in position but then you can leave it. Controllers also mentioned shiftwork and how their ability to influence the roster made it easier to balance work and family life.

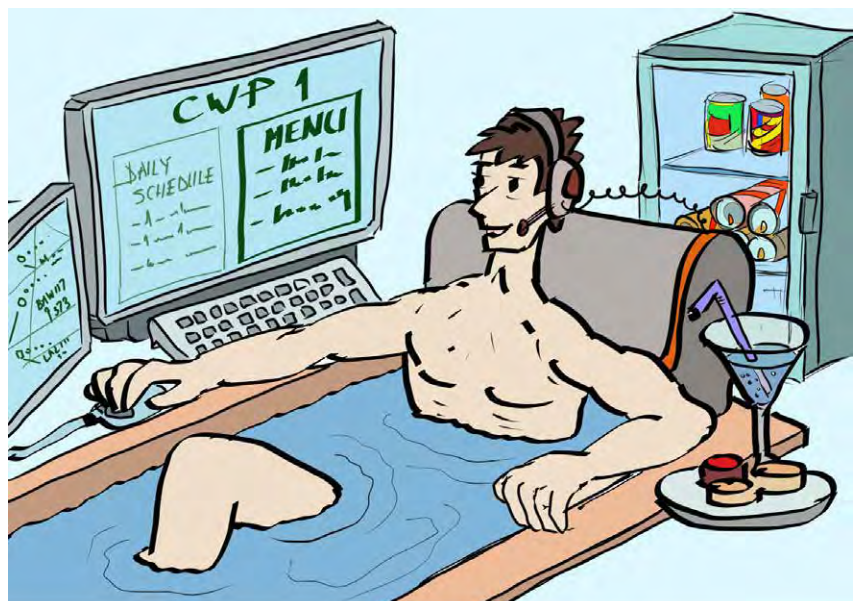
What is needed for wellbeing and can an organisation do something to create wellbeing?

What do you value most about Malmö ATCC? When Malmö ATCC is at its best – what factors contribute to that?



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