

# COMFORT AT WORK: A SPOILED CHILD'S WHIM OR CONDITIONS FOR SAFETY?

Sources of discomfort at work act like a constant toothache that affects wellbeing and performance, and appeals for comfort are not the 'whims of spoiled children', says **Emmanuelle Gravalon**.



Nowadays, we hear and read a lot about wellbeing at work. Most of the time, articles explain that to perform well at work, you must feel well in your head and body. Lots of advice is given. Think positive! Be active! Sleep well! Be nice to people! The advice is usually very individual. It is as if wellbeing were an external factor that everyone must bring to work, and as if individual wellbeing automatically induces wellbeing at work.

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Lack of wellbeing at work will have a negative impact on your performance. Long-term lack of wellbeing will induce tiredness, anxiety, boredom, and perhaps depression. It will also negatively affect physical health, which will lower again your performance. Most will acknowledge that lack of wellbeing is affected by 'bad' working conditions (including the physical and ambient environment), relations with colleagues and management, job security, salary, promotion possibilities, and so on.

And yet, 'good' working conditions are mostly perceived as 'comfort at work'. 'Comfort' is a taboo word in the workplace. Comfort is for your home, for relaxation. 'Comfort at work' seems to be a spoiled child's whim, even more

so when it concerns such privileged workers as air traffic controllers.


Like many other air traffic controllers, I have encountered situations where working conditions were affecting my performance: work in progress close to the control room, broken air conditioning systems, unergonomic working positions, a broken chair, a flickering screen, an unserviceable printer, and even such 'details' as a broken coffee machine. Other situations have involved tense relationships within the team or with managers, and unrecognised workload.

Many workers experience such issues. So what is the problem? One problem lies in how such accumulated sources of discomfort

affect those working shifts in safety-critical professions. When the air conditioning is broken in a nine-to-five office, one can find another place to work, or perhaps even go home to work. When the coffee machine is out of order, you can have a break elsewhere.

This difference also affects the way that requests are taken into account. Shift workers are sometimes made to feel guilty for asking for 'comfort at work' and have to continue with an attitude of 'the work must go on'. But cumulative disturbances take away part of your capacity, like a toothache. We air traffic controllers need to assign our cognitive resources to gathering and processing information, planning, making decisions and implementing them, monitoring

outcomes, and cooperating with other stakeholders. We need concentration, and we need it for the whole period we are working.

Air traffic controllers are trained to deal with unusual and uncomfortable situations. Our professionalism and adaptability allow us to overcome temporary annoyances. But when sources of discomfort pile up or last for a long time, they become like a toothache and endanger our cognitive processing, wellbeing and performance, and therefore safety. 



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