



LEARNING FROM EVERYDAY WORK IN AVIATION: LESSONS IN A TIME OF COVID

Everyday work in aviation COVID-19 pandemic has been affected almost beyond recognition, and with it how we feel about work and the future. *HindSight* Editor-in-Chief **Steven Shorrock** asked air traffic controllers and professional pilots about their experiences.

“The current situation presents a ‘skills fade’ challenge for all controllers”

Without regular application, the high level of aerobic fitness achieved by athletes can evaporate in a fraction of the time that it took to attain. The same can be said of ATC competency. Those of us working in procedural and technical roles are acutely aware of the challenge of maintaining competency despite periods away from the operation. The current situation presents a ‘skills fade’ challenge for all controllers. When traffic levels increase, we must ensure that we avoid the ‘frog in the pan’ scenario, and we are working with our training, technical and competency teams to ensure we have robust strategies to get back to full ATC fitness.

Ady Dolan, ATM Procedures & Development Controller (Heathrow), UK

“The importance of building relationships and trust in good times”

I’ve learned that no matter how confident you are about the path you’re on, and how resilient you think you are, managing your resilience over time is quite challenging, especially if you are in a situation that has no clear outcome over time. As a leader, it has shown me the importance of empathy and compassionate leadership in navigating a team through an already challenging environment and on the importance of balancing emotional needs with mission objective within a team. Finally, it has shown me the importance of building relationships and trust in good times that will sustain the team in bad times.

Paul Reuter, Captain (Boeing 737NG), Luxembourg

“ATCOs were affected by isolation, loneliness and uncertainty”

During the COVID period, besides the disease anxiety, ATCOs were affected by isolation, loneliness and uncertainty. Isolated in our control centre, we barely had news or contact with anybody for days. We felt useless: no aim nor any working perspective during our duty. Used to being ‘in control’ and to anticipate, we experienced motivation loss, weaker commitment and passive behaviour, including disengagement on changes integration and on documents updating efforts. This wellbeing and safety drift may create new holes in the James Reason Swiss cheese model.

Sebastien Follet, ATCO (TWR/APP), France



"The sense of community has been heart-warming"

Prior to the pandemic, simple interactions at work were taken for granted. As humans we (mostly) thrive and depend on face-to-face contact. Needed for our mental health and wellbeing, it is this aspect which has impacted the way I view work in the current situation. With no clear idea of what the short-medium term future holds for the industry, I've found myself cherishing every opportunity to work and try to really interact with everyone I come into contact with during the course of my duties. The sense of community has been heart-warming in these difficult times. The professionalism demonstrated with an ever-present threat of redundancy has been nothing short of inspiring.

Pilot, Captain (A350), UK

"People are willing and capable to adapt and adjust their work"

The pandemic changed everything in a way I have never experienced during almost 40 years as an ATCO. During these last months, I have learned that even when conditions change dramatically and outside of the system's normal boundaries, people are willing and capable to adapt and adjust their work so that production can continue, and the work gets done while maintaining safety. And this was done without too much action from management.

Anders Ellerstrand, ATC Centre Watch Supervisor, Sweden

"Returning to flying after many months off was a daunting prospect"

Returning to flying after many months off was a daunting prospect. Would I remember everything I needed to? What elements of my skill set would return easily? It became apparent that motor skills – the actual flying of the aircraft returned very quickly – it was like I had never left. However, cognitive processes took a little more time. In

fact, a few flights in, small things were forgotten. I suppose I began to relax more. However, mitigations included keeping things 'SOP', taking things slowly, and ensuring the operation was kept as simple as possible.

Ben, Captain (A320), UK

"An extra dose of care and attention...has been necessary"

The COVID-19 pandemic has faced us with an unprecedented scenario. Some issues have come up strongly. 1) The importance of the team. It has become clear that it does not depend on an individual performance. An extra dose of care and attention to each other and to the operation has been necessary, and a strong stress reliever. 2) The uselessness of 'the super controller'. Today, the super controller is the one who knows his or her limits, accepts help, and asks for help. 3) This crisis has highlighted the enormous interference posed by 'the ego', and how it underlies many of the main operational problems.

David Garcia Hermosilla, ATCO (ACC), Spain

"My ex-colleagues showed little or no degradation in pure piloting skills"

Planning licence revalidations for my ex-colleagues after the bankruptcy of our previous employer, I was little nervous the evening before the first check. What to do, if your colleagues perform insufficiently? The worst would be if you have to fail them.

Surprisingly, my ex-colleagues showed little or no degradation in pure piloting skills. It perhaps took a minute longer to get used to the aircraft again after half a year on the ground but flying skills seem to be quite resilient. What definitely showed degradation was scanning skills and overview in general. These are the skills required in complex and unexpected multiple failure scenarios.

Wolfgang Starke, Dash8-Q400 Captain, Germany

"We have to take care of our mental wellbeing"

The lack of certainty and the scarcity of tasks let the mind run, while equilibrium is essential. I had never felt anxiety but there were different and opposite reactions (from panic to refusal). Although measures to protect airport workers from infection were taken immediately, the emotional impact caused by the pandemic was not taken in equal consideration. One morning during a break, I was walking in the airport and the only sound was ambulance sirens and bells announcing deaths. I have noted the immediate resilience (mental and logistic) of most of my colleagues. But this exceptional situation has confirmed that if we look for high performance at work, we have to take care of our mental wellbeing, as well as physical.

Marcello Scala, ATCO, Italy

"I learned about adaptive capacity"

Resilience is nothing new in the world of safety science. However, I learned the importance of extrapolating the concept to business strategy and operations. In fact, it can even be reduced to the level of household or individual resilience. While some organisations like Amazon had business models that were already aligned for success during COVID, I learned more about adaptive capacity watching my airline transform their passenger aircraft into freighters by utilising cargo netting, seats, and existing anchor points in a novel way. Innovation like this is driven by front-line field experts collaborating with managers, engineers, and regulators to drive change.

Brian Legge, Training Captain (Boeing 777), Hong Kong

"Problem-solving took place again during lockdowns"

One of the key factors to manage air traffic is problem-solving, and even when traffic decreased dramatically,

controllers have to face new challenges. Problem-solving took place again during lockdowns to keep teams working together, despite all limitations. It was incredible how the system worked because of the definition of the system itself: 'a group of interacting or interrelated entities that form a unified whole'. COVID-19 posed new way of interacting, but problem solving made it work again.

Oliviero Barsanti, ATCO, Italy

"COVID-19 has changed our lives as pilots utterly"

COVID-19 has changed our lives as pilots utterly, mainly for worse, although in other ways for better – sleeping in my own bed instead of spending two or three nights per week in hotel rooms. After the initial five weeks without flying, I've since flown almost weekly, enjoying quiet airports and airspace. In 20 years of flying into Heathrow, I had never before been given "Direct centre-fix and high speed approved. Let us know when you're slowing down!" from 80 miles out. Then back out early (what's a slot?) with pushback to airborne in four minutes. (Pity about the pay cut, though.)

Niall Downey, Airbus A320 Captain, Ireland

"I wasn't aware of how important wellbeing is"

Up until the beginning of the pandemic, I wasn't aware of how important wellbeing is to personal happiness and to those around me. Everyday work and family life unfurled in a routine way. Then air traffic stopped. Wellbeing is not something we think of every day, however, through anxiety over competency through lack of traffic, for the first time worry over job security and potential economic measures, it is something that has become important – much more than I could have imagined. It is omnipresent, something that we take home, even if we pretend that these things shouldn't affect us.

Jules, ATCO (Geneva TWR/APP), Switzerland

"ANSPs could study the system to be ready when the traffic resumes"

In the European ATM system of a few months ago, the only problem that seemed to exist was the lack of capacity and the lack of controllers. Then the black swan, COVID-19! Traffic suddenly dropped from one day to the next by 90%. So how does the ATM system react? ANSPs could study the system to be ready when the traffic resumes, or could dedicate this time to select new staff and train them to be available in

a couple of years (the time it takes to train a controller). Unless we do this, when traffic starts to grow, we will ask ourselves how to deal with the lack of controllers and the lack of capacity of the European ATM system, again.

Marcello Di Giulio, ATCO (ACS-RAD, Milano), Italy

"Our job as air traffic controllers is much more akin to that of athletes"

The current pandemic has reminded me and my colleagues how our job as air traffic controllers is much more akin to that of athletes and sports people than to that of office workers. Every day, we have to perform to the best of our ability, applying the skills acquired during our training and perfected through experience. The drastic reduction in air traffic has brought the problem of skill fading to the fore, whose effects we must minimise in preparation for when air traffic returns. In the same way that athletes practise competition scenarios during their training, it will be important for air traffic controllers to have access to simulators so they can hone their controller skills back to their peak level.

Luis Barbero, ATCO (Heathrow Approach), United Kingdom