



INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLERS' ASSOCIATIONS

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IFATCA Background Paper on Air Traffic Controllers Staff Shortages 2008

Introduction

Following our annual conference 2008 in Arusha, Tanzania IFATCA has published a press release on the lack of Air traffic Controllers around the globe and the safety and capacity challenges this lack creates currently and in the future. This paper is explaining some background information. This paper is meant for wide distribution.

IFATCA firmly believes that there is worldwide shortage of Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs). This opinion has been arrived at through feedback from our Members Associations (MAs), research of available data and publications and statements made by Air Navigation Service Providers (ANSPs). We believe this shortage to be in the magnitude of 3000 ATCOs worldwide.

There are many factors influencing this situation, including, but not limited to:

- The ability to attract new trainees into profession
- The willingness and capability of ANSPs to carry out sufficient ATCO training
- The increasing age profile of the existing ATCO workforce
- Major initiatives requiring extra ATCO staffing for their implementation
- A reliance on overtime to sustain 'normal' operations
- Booming Asian economies, resulting in rapid infrastructure expansion

Discussion

IFATCA recently conducted a survey of its Member Associations. The results revealed a significant disparity about the perceptions of staffing levels between the MA and the ANSP. Most MA's reported that the staffing numbers and/or principals reported by their ANSP are insufficient or incorrect. Traffic in most cases is increasing at double the rate compared to the staffing increases for last year. Some ANSPs are opting not to replace retiring staff at this stage. Planning for staff by ANSPs is lacking and it is only realised there is a critical shortage when it is too late. It seems like accurate preplanning is lacking and ANSPs do not like acknowledging to the public and users that there is a staff shortage and keep it hidden up to the last possible moment. Last minute drastic measures are implemented to try and correct the staff shortage and most of the time it involves the remaining ATCOs to help safe the day. This situation adds more pressure to the current system and can lead to tiredness and potential sickness due to a lack of adequate rest periods.

The MAs also reported significant amounts of overtime being required just to sustain normal operations, where staffing levels have fallen below normal.

While IFATCA has no direct access to actual staffing numbers maintained by ANSPs, it is evident from feedback from our MAs the ANSPs may be using various 'accounting methods' to mask the full extent of the problem. For example, in the United States, trainees are frequently being rated on just one position and left to work only that position, rather than progressed through full development. This can indeed be a false economy, and in fact prolong the overall training time.

There is incidental evidence to suggest that many prospective recruits to the ATC profession are being discouraged from applying due to the widely held views about the deterioration of ATCO wages and conditions and the chronic staff shortages requiring considerable amounts of overtime to be worked. It is also our view that most ANSPs, due to their different perceptions about staff numbers, are not doing enough to recruit and train sufficient numbers of trainee ATCOs to sustain current operations, much less address the shortfall.

Major initiatives, such as SESAR, will require extra staff to develop and implement those changes. For example, at a recent Eurocontrol meeting it was stated that 500.000 man-days are required for validation for SESAR IP1 & IP2. This will essentially double the expected staffing shortfall from 10% to 20% in Europe. Our estimate for Europe is that there is a shortage of 1000 ATCOs below the number required for current normal operations. The shortage of ATCOs will inevitably jeopardize major initiatives such as these, and thus delay the benefits they can bring.

IFATCA is convinced, and has previously stated, that even with advanced automation starting to be introduced widely, through various projects such as SESAR and NEXTGEN, that in the future there will be a need to have traditionally trained and selected ATCOs in the system until at least 2020. A potential reduction of workforce per movements will not become a reality before 2030 (it is not likely that the numbers of ATCOs will decrease, but rather each ATCO will handle significantly increased numbers of aircraft). So, industry has to accept, and be prepared for the scenario, that a potential reduction in ATCO numbers due to automation will not be possible until after a further generation of ATCOs; (the ATCOs working the future system are currently in pre-school or primary school age or are not yet born!).

During the transition phase from the current to future systems, there is a need for more than the minimum numbers of ATCOs (we have never seen optimum staffing levels) to handle the day-to-day traffic. If SESAR and NEXTGEN are to be introduced in a promising way, then there is a need to involve the current workforce in validation, "modeling", conceptual work and simulation, which all require work outside of the control centers. Further, the introduction of Safety Management Systems and the moving from the current 'technology driven' to a

'performance driven' approach to ATC will require more experts with an operational background outside of the control centers. We estimate that there is a need for at least an additional 15% above the minimum staff numbers required just to handle the traffic.

A number of Asian economies are still experiencing significant economic growth and thus are rapidly expanding their infrastructure. The Asia/Pacific area requires more than 1700 ATCOs (as estimated by the Asian institute for aviation research). China alone has plans to hire 3000 ATCOs before 2010.

The increasing age profile of the ATCO population worldwide, but especially in some areas, will further exacerbate the problem. For example, in the United States it is 11,000 ATCOs are eligible for retirement between now and 2011, out of a total workforce of 14,000 ATCOs.

Attrition of staffing numbers due to sometimes hostile social dialogue issues in some of our bigger member states, (eg the US), will have a large impact on the air transport system if not addressed immediately. The short terms wins in cost cutting exercises for the users will result in bigger capacity backlogs and longer introduction of promising new technology

Conclusions

IFATCA is firmly of the belief that there is a worldwide shortage of qualified ATCOs, and that this deficiency is not being adequately addressed by ANSPs. IFATCA believes that the current reliance upon significant amounts of overtime being worked by ATCOs is neither safe nor sustainable. IFATCA respectfully requests that ICAO raises this topic as a "flag of warning" with States. IFATCA stands ready to provide any further information or input that may be required, and is of course, willing to participate and assist in future discussions about the matter.

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IFATCA is the worldwide organization representing more than fifty thousand air traffic controllers in 133 countries. Amongst its goals are the promotion of safety, efficiency and regularity in international air navigation and the protection and safeguarding of the interests of the air traffic control profession. www.ifatca.org

