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IFATCA cautions on post-COVID-19 air traffic recovery

The duration of the COVID-19 crisis is having a serious impact on the amount of air traffic since March 2020. All kinds of precautionary measures are being taken to protect operational Air Traffic Management (ATM) staff against spreading of the virus.

All these different measures, in combination with the relatively low traffic demand, may have affected the competency levels in air traffic service units around the world.

Though many national safety authorities acted within their jurisdiction to keep licensed staff at the highest possible level of competence, the combination of the low traffic levels and the duration of the crisis carries a clear safety risk.

Whenever and wherever traffic recovers to pre-COVID-19 levels, operational staff may reach a point, either in peak or in continuous traffic flows, where their ability to handle the traffic has not yet regained the required level.

As experience shows, such a temporary gap can only partly be trained for in simulations. If at the same time, social distancing and protection measures still have to be applied, the situation is likely to be even more complex.

Bearing in mind ICAO provisions and IFATCA policies on competency-based training and assessment and refresher training, full competence has to be rebuilt and maintained by both operational staff and assessors.

The current solution adopted by some regulators would suggest that competence can be maintained by merely working during a certain number of hours, regardless of the amount of traffic (even zero). While this may be compliant with the letter of the rules, it clearly does not meet the intent, as it does not fulfil the purpose for which competencies safeguards and thresholds were created.

Moreover, in their aim to keep their licensed staff at maximum (theoretical) competence levels, Air Navigation Service Providers (ANSPs) may be tempted to schedule more staff than the current level of traffic actually requires, which is doubly counterproductive: not only it does not help to consolidate competence, it also unnecessarily puts operational staff at risk during a pandemic as staff is exposed more than needed in close contacts in these units.

An additional concern is that many ANSPs have taken the opportunity to optimize traffic flows, enabled by the low demand and lower traffic complexity. As these optimisations have not been tested in high traffic situations, it is vital that when traffic levels recover, these changes are carefully monitored and, where necessary, reverted.

Lastly, IFATCA submits that the global pandemic has also likely had psychological and/or physical impact on some of the staff, which may, in turn, have compromised their ability to cope with pre-pandemic traffic levels. This aspect should not be ignored and needs to be carefully considered.

IFATCA recommends that ANSPs, in collaboration with their regulators and capacity managers, ensure that a relevant level of competence can be maintained. To mitigate some of the risks mentioned above, traffic levels need to be carefully managed and, where necessary, restricted to allow staff sufficient time to get reacquainted with increasing demand and complexity. Furthermore, IFATCA encourages ANSPs to engage with their staff and ensure mental and physical health support programmes are made available to help them meet the challenges that will undoubtedly present themselves during the recovery from this unprecedented crisis.