Agenda Item: C.10.3   **INFORMATION PAPER**   LWP No: 164
IFATCA'25

Cut the Clutter: Eliminating Bureaucracy to Maximize ATCO Efficiency

Presented by Emirates Aviation Association (EAA)

SUMMARY

This working paper addresses the global shortage of Air Traffic Controllers amid rising air traffic demand, emphasizing the need to eliminate non-essential tasks that dilute controller focus and efficiency. Drawing on the UAE's "Zero Bureaucracy" initiative, it highlights how procedural and administrative burdens negatively affect ATCO performance, fatigue, and safety. The paper advocates for a structured audit of non-operational duties, automation of manual processes, and a cultural shift toward simplification. Reducing bureaucracy is a strategic imperative to sustain safe and effective air traffic management in an increasingly complex operating environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The aviation industry is facing a global shortage of licensed and operational Air Traffic Controllers (ATCOs), while air travel demand continues to surge. ATCOs are a critical resource, and their time must be protected from non-essential tasks.

1.2. This working paper highlights how administrative burdens and procedural inefficiencies reduce controller availability, focus, and effectiveness. Inspired by the UAE's Zero Bureaucracy Programme, we propose practical steps for ANSPs to streamline internal operations and ensure every controller minute is spent on what matters: delivering safe and efficient air traffic services.

2. DISCUSSION

The Problem

2.1. According to multiple industry reports many ANSPs are facing recruitment delays, training bottlenecks, and increasing retirement rates among ATCOs. At the same time, operational complexity is increasing due to growing traffic volumes, enhanced surveillance technology, and evolving airspace configurations. Yet despite this growing workload, controllers in many units continue to shoulder excessive administrative, procedural, and coordination burdens—much of which could be automated, delegated, or eliminated.

2.2.   ATCOs are often tasked with non-operational duties such as redundant reporting, manual coordination with adjacent units due to outdated systems, repetitive form-filling, or overly complex rostering and leave request processes. These procedural inefficiencies not only waste time but contribute to fatigue, reduce operational focus, and increase the likelihood of human error.

Learning from the UAE: The Zero Bureaucracy Model
2.3.   In 2023, the UAE launched its federal "Zero Government Bureaucracy" programme, with goals to:
–   Eliminate 2,000 unnecessary procedures
–   Reduce process time by 50%
–   Remove duplicate requirements

2.4.   Key to the initiative was a structured review of internal processes and requirements, and a mandate to simplify or eliminate anything non-essential. This model offers a useful framework for ANSPs seeking to optimize ATCO utilization.

3.   CONCLUSION

3.1.   ATCO availability is a finite resource in a time of rising demand. Eliminating unnecessary bureaucracy is not just about efficiency—it's about protecting safety, preserving controller wellbeing, and ensuring the sustainability of air navigation services.

3.2.   Adopting a "Zero Bureaucracy" approach can help ANSPs maximize the impact of every trained controller, today and into the future

4.   DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1.   It is recommended that IFATCA advocates for a Zero Bureaucracy Culture within ANSPs, promoting a mindset of simplification and operational focus. This includes conducting Bureaucracy Audits to identify non-operational tasks assigned to ATCOs, evaluating their relevance, and eliminating or delegating those that do not contribute directly to safe and efficient air traffic services. Regular reviews of procedures should also be undertaken to ensure continued operational relevance.

4.2.   It is recommended that IFATCA advocates for the digitization and automation of administrative processes, including the implementation of AI-enabled tools for reporting, rostering, and task management. This should be supported by the deployment of dedicated support staff where appropriate, to relieve ATCOs of routine paperwork and logistical duties, thereby allowing them to focus fully on their core operational responsibilities.

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