

Friday, September 26, 2014

Classification – 10 years after

November 1 will mark ten years since Deloitte, jointly commissioned by NAV Canada and CATCA, issued its first report changing the way air traffic controllers' jobs are classified. All levels became ATC levels, and OFP became ATC premium. But much more changed than just the labels.

What is job classification?

It's a method of grouping together different positions into higher and lower "levels" based on evaluating factors involved in each job, such as knowledge, decision-making, problem-solving, intensity, "impact", etc. Salaries are then negotiated for each level. Classification is not an exact science or a "one size fits all" exercise.

Before the creation of NAV Canada, job classification was not legally negotiable. Government (Treasury Board) made all the decisions. Those who knew the profession the best (controllers and their union) had no say as to the relative ranking of their positions. To make matters worse, there was no formula for assigning OFP levels. In his 2003 report, mediator Bruce Outhouse called this "a source of irritation and jealousy". Clearly, it was time for a change.

The first 5 years

The new classification system presented many challenges – negotiating salaries, transitioning everyone into the new system, protecting members against downgrading of salaries and/or premiums, trying to measure intensity and complexity with reference to traffic, handling appeals. It took time to do all this, and there were serious growing pains.

In 2008, NAV and CATCA agreed that a reality check was needed. We jointly mandated Joe Magee – a classification expert who has served as Air Traffic Services Advisor to both the European and the International Transport Workers' Federation – to do the review. His report identified defects and areas of employee dissatisfaction, but he didn't recommend scrapping the system and starting from scratch. Instead, he emphasized the need for regular review and fine-tuning. Perhaps most importantly, he proposed that the ongoing study be done by a "joint panel" of controllers and managers, whose recommendations could then be submitted for approval.

The last 5 years

The joint working group was established, and Joe Magee has continued in his role as expert resource and convenor. Some players have changed over the period, but today's members are, for the union: Mark Bernard (VR ACC), Jerry Fry (EG International Tower), Randy Hepner (WG ACC), Gordon Howe (Buttonville Tower), Jason Rose (YZ Tower); and for management: Bob Fiege (MACCO EG), Michel Leroux (Shift Manager Montreal FIR), Blair Miller (Manager Halifax tower), Norman Richard (Manager, ATC-VFR Safety Analysis), with assistance from Trevor Johnson (AVP Operations).

The working group has focused its efforts on some of the most difficult and controversial areas – such as complex towers, measures of “intensity”, the role of traffic counting, and the evaluation of ATC premium levels. The group functions via discussion, research, review of reports, and ultimately consensus, as reflected in its biannual reports (2010, 2012, 2014). One of its conclusions was the identification of “high-impact towers” (Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, and Montreal), which it determined ought to be paired with their respective ACCs. It was suggested that this could be accomplished through making the towers a specialty of what the report referred to as the “parent” ACC. There are many complexities to be considered in accomplishing that goal. Both NAV Canada and CATCA are in agreement that there needs to be much more discussion before such a step is taken. However, CATCA felt it was important to achieve the over-arching principle behind that recommendation, pay parity. All towers were previously graded at the ATC 6 level as a result of changes to the classification system recommended by Joe Magee in 2008. That only left ATCP to be addressed. CATCA recently achieved parity in that area for the two towers who were not already at parity with the ACCs. The recommendation of making the towers a specialty of an ACC will be the subject of future classification discussions.

The future

The working group is scheduled to meet again in October. The main question on the agenda: *Can we evaluate key job factors such as problem solving and complexity, decision making, and impact, without resorting to “counting” traffic?* Besides other difficulties, “counting” inevitably carries the risk of salary freezes or reductions when there are economic downturns in traffic. True job classification is supposed to be immune to those kinds of fluctuations. The working group has developed another model, and they’ll be looking at it closely in October.

CATCA supported this review process and we remain strongly committed to it. Besides whatever flaws may have existed in the new classification standard from the start, every scheme needs regular review and fine-tuning. Changes in technology and traffic patterns necessarily mean changes in the way our jobs are performed, and we need to ensure that they are compensated accordingly. And in studying those changes and making recommendations, there can be no substitute for the ground-level involvement of air traffic controllers who are experienced, knowledgeable, and engaged.

Whether it is in making changes to the system, or correcting defects, or hearing appeals, CATCA is determined to: 1) Look first and foremost to the conclusions reached by *our peers* – our fellow controllers on the working group; and 2) work harder to make the process as transparent and accessible to our members as possible. The only way to build confidence in a system which, inevitably, says that some positions are “worth” more than others, is to ensure that air traffic controllers understand what is happening and have a say in the outcome.

Stay tuned for updates, and don’t hesitate to communicate your concerns to us.

In Solidarity,

Peter Duffey
President

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Executive Vice President