

## **NATS PROJECT MANAGEMENT FLYS HIGHER**

National Air Traffic Services is recognised internationally as a world leader in the business of air traffic control. NATS provides air traffic services throughout the UK at the busiest airports and over a million square miles of North Atlantic airspace. Last year it was responsible for the safe handling of nearly two million flights – well over 5,000 a day.

During the year more than 20 performance records were broken at NATS' four air traffic control centres and at seven of the 12 airports it operates in the UK. These include Heathrow, Gatwick, Stanstead, Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. As a business, NATS employs 5,300 staff and has an annual turnover of more than half a billion pounds.

Much of the success can be attributed to the systematic development and measured application of advanced technology, but the human element is crucial. At the sharp end of this round-the-clock operation are flesh and blood air traffic controllers, performing reliably under very considerable pressure.

Working with engineers, planners, scientists, managers and a host of other highly skilled professionals, they are part of a team that requires an exceptionally high level of project management ability. This is no mere profit and loss operation. If business or technology processes fail, people may die.

While standards of project management are recognised as excellent, the increasing complexity and volume of air movements throughout the UK means that there is always pressure to hone project management skills ever more finely.

A case in point is NATS' Prestwick centre within the engineering disciplines. "We need to develop a variety of system for major engineering projects," says Bob McPike, Head of Oceanic Development, and we felt that the project management performance of some engineers needed improving so examined available training and Associates courses that would enhance the managers' skills. We found that the conventional courses being offered commercially were too short and unlikely to provide the depth of knowledge and facility for hands-on practice. Most such courses were standard packages and we felt that the special requirements of NATS needed a tailored approach".

"The three main challenges we faced – prompting the need for training – were improved ability to customer expectation to tighter timescales, better management of day-to-day projects to budget, and actually meeting to the full the expectations of controllers using the equipment. After reviewing the various training options we chose a solution from Stehle Associates who had already run courses for us in the past. Their approach was flexible. After analysing our needs, they took one of their standard project management courses and tailored it more precisely to our needs – developing what had been a two-day programme into three days".

Held at a local business centre in Prestwick, the course was run for six engineers who support air traffic control systems and are tasked with responsibility for delivering fairly complex projects. The course started off with background, good practice and why effective and professional project management skills are so important. “There was a high degree of synthesis on the course between the trainees and course leader,” says McPike. “The engineers explained the processes we have in place and the instruction responded directly to the real situation not hypothetical.”

This was then followed by hands-on project management practice relating to a simulated project that was used as a model for practical work. All the way through, the approach was to identify a real need, discuss theory to attack the challenges, followed by practical application of new skills to reinforce the learning process.

“We followed this up ourselves through discussions with trainees,” says McPike, “and received very positive feedback. The strongest factor was considered to be the opportunities for hands-on simulation in what was conducted as a real project, with all the real life pressures – in contrast to what is often an academic approach”.

“An underlying problem that the course addressed was that engineers – not just our engineers – often feel they know how to manage projects through their experience, and sometimes it is difficult to get people to acknowledge the need for formal training and skill transfer. The Stehle course addressed this assumption and persuaded the trainees otherwise, effectively squashing the ‘not invented here’ syndrome that can often negate training programmes. I think a key factor in this was the way the course was tailored so precisely to our real life situation and got to grips with the actual problems and pitfalls that the engineers faced in their day-to-day work. The actual relevancy of the course material – and the hands-on simulation work – got the trainees’ attention and respect. I suppose the bottom line is that the course had authority”

Following the success of this course NATS repeated it a few months later for another six engineers, with equally effective results. The benefits? “Significantly improved insight into risks involved in working on and managing complex projects, improved commercial understanding of the need to deliver results on time, and enhanced awareness of the need to get it right first time,” says McPike.

How did the performance of the engineers change after the course? “They became more systematic in their approach, both in application of good practice and in day-to-day practical problem solving. There’s now a closer and more natural affinity between instinct and methodology – with a closer focus on the critical path. But as Macmillan said when asked what he found most difficult as premier (Events, dear boy. Events), problems often appear from nowhere and bite you on the bottom. A key element the engineers took to heart was how to expect the unexpected and look out for problems before they impact a project”.

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