



ATSAP ALERT



September 27, 2010

Do you know how tired you really are? Are you taking an unjustifiable risk?

We all lead busy lives. Whether it's a scheduled quick turn around, your son's or daughter's late athletic event, an unexpected family illness, or a multitude of other things, we all feel the effects of fatigue. For this reason, a joint workgroup between NATCA and the FAA has been established to study the effects of fatigue on our workforce. This workgroup will strive to identify and to recommend mitigation strategies to battle the effects of fatigue. As with any new endeavor, the results will not be immediate.

Recently, ATSAAP has received several reports that reference the impact of fatigue on our National Airspace System. The reports cover a wide range of cases, from cases as simple as discussing schedule shift rotation, to more extreme cases of claims of controllers not being fit for duty while working on position. In fact, in one case, the fatigue appeared so extreme that the ERC had a difficult time reaching consensus to accept the report because the controller sounded "impaired" which automatically would have excluded the report from the program.

As individuals and as an organization, we must learn to recognize when fatigue is affecting our work or that of our peers or employees. We must be open and fair in dealing with this issue and find ways to help manage work-related factors and individual behavioral choices that may lead to fatigue.

The risk of fatigue-induced cognitive impairment is most pronounced at night, between the hours of midnight and 6:00 am. Our internal body clock regulates our human need to sleep during this period. However, in any industry that operates around the clock, some employees must be awake and working during these hours. The natural vulnerability to fatigue that comes with our nighttime circadian rhythm is then increased by the high work demands of the 24/7 organization, as well as the normal demands of life during off-duty periods that can compete for time to get restorative sleep.

Compounding the problem, fatigue research has established that individuals are not able to assess their own current level of personal fatigue and potential impairment accurately. One of the ironies of the circadian rhythm is that it reaches its peak between 6:00 pm and 8:00 pm, which is the time when many employees have to make the decision to nap or continue preparations to report for duty. Unfortunately, our circadian rhythm tends to mask our true fatigue at the time of day when we are

making the decision to nap or stay awake. We are prone to over-estimate our current functional abilities and not take into account our ability to perform necessary work related duties within the next 8 to 10 hours. While we may feel able to work at 6:00 pm, we do not foresee our levels of fatigue during our shift at, perhaps, 4:00 am.

Additionally, many employees in demanding fields like air traffic control have an almost overwhelming sense of duty to get the job done, no matter what obstacles stand in the way at a given time. When we begin to add up these factors, i.e. back side of the clock, high-demand duties, commitment to get the job done, the inability to self-assess the impact of fatigue, and more, we can begin to see the magnitude of the problem. These issues are ones currently being faced by many of our employees every night in 24/7 facilities around our system. They are issues that we must resolve.

The ATO has committed to creating a safety culture. As the ATSAP program shows, the culture within the FAA is evolving beyond the beginning stages of a "reporting culture," where employees are encouraged to identify risks, to an ultimate goal of a "just culture," which embraces the principles of learning, openness and fairness, designing safe systems, and helping to manage behavioral choices. One of the fundamental tenets of a just culture is the duty to avoid unjustifiable risk or harm. This duty applies all of the time and it is owed to everyone we encounter. It is the general duty that we all owe not to put each other at unjustifiable risk – whether that risk is economic, reputation, or physical safety. This duty is considered the higher obligation and takes precedence over the other duties.

As we work toward more education and change in the area of fatigue-related risk, it is imperative to remember that all employees must report to work fit for duty. Be conscious of personal issues that may interfere with your ability to rest in the times between your shifts and incorporate personal strategies to obtain restorative rest (ideally eight hours of sleep per day) in your off-duty time. These strategies will include discussing your sleep needs with your family members, scheduling off-duty appointments at times that will not interfere with sleep time, configuring a space for daytime sleep, and more.

It is critical that employees report for duty sufficiently well rested and able to perform the duties of their job safely. It is also critical for the ATO to create an appropriate environment for employees that recognizes work related factors that lead to fatigue. Therefore, NATCA and the ATO are currently in the process of creating a Fatigue Risk Management System (FRMS), because managing and mitigating fatigue is a shared responsibility between the organization and their employees.

This ATSAP Alert is intended to raise awareness within the workforce in an effort to improve safety - **please distribute within your facilities.**