



TOTI: Do the Right Thing (7/17/2015)

Distractions are inherent to all professions.

To keep the National Airspace System the safest in the world, controllers nationwide are teaching other controllers the importance of staying focused on the job. This peer-to-peer mentoring has developed with help from the Turn Off Tune In campaign, and has strengthened work relationships among air traffic traffic professionals.

"People don't necessarily choose to be a mentor; they choose the right thing to do and others follow because they are inspired to be like that person," said NATCA member Jenny Benjamin (Lincoln). "Experienced controllers need to continue to lead by example by turning off and tuning in, and ensure that the new generation of controllers understands how crucial it is to be fully involved while on position."

Research on distractions has shown that a three-second interruption doubles the rate of mistakes individuals make. Distractions cause us to forget where we left off and can cause tunnel vision, reducing by half the ability to see information.

NATCA members Omar Nicholas (Reading) and Chad Collins (Memphis), agreed with Benjamin that leading by example is imperative.

"That's step one—show what you want the work environment to be," Nicholas said. "Second, privately talk to the individual about the mission; ask them to participate."

"Peer pressure works," Collins added. "Do what is right all of the time."

Benjamin pointed out that it's not only important for controllers to turn their phones off and put them away before taking position, but also for family and friends to understand their availability and their need to turn off and tune in.

Mobile phones aren't the only issue. Distractions come in many forms that controllers may not even consider unless they are made aware.

"It's easy to get caught up in the non-work-related banter or chit-chat while working traffic," said Nicole Sparger, a controller at Chicago TRACON. "If you are late on a base turn or slowing an aircraft, it can



impact the operation. We stress how much distractions affect your focus and ability to provide safe and efficient services to your pilots."

The size of a facility and the amount of traffic it manages is irrelevant when it comes to the dangers of distractions. Controllers at small facilities with inconsistent traffic volume need peer support just as much as controllers at large, busy facilities.

NATCA member Rick Balinski of East St. Louis Tower, a small, level-5 facility, has been a major proponent of Turn Off Tune In at his facility by using what he calls a "stealthy" approach—slipping campaign materials into controllers' mailboxes and posting Turn Off Tune In signs strategically throughout the facility. With new controllers, however, he employs a more up-front style of mentoring: "I just give trainees my spiel and viewpoint right off the bat," Balinski said. "I remind them of the FAA's and NATCA's take on distractions in the workplace."

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