

InterFAB Expert Talk: Managing traffic volatility in the aftermath of COVID-19

Industry experts discuss the challenge of unpredictable traffic demand and the importance of flexibility in the provision of air traffic services following the pandemic

28 June 2021: Traffic volatility has increased as a result of more extreme weather, geopolitical tension, demand shifts and changing airline preferences. Preparing for industry recovery in the aftermath of COVID-19, InterFAB experts discussed how to manage traffic volatility going forward and priorities for cost-effective air traffic services during the fifth InterFAB Expert Talk that took place on 24 June 2021 and was hosted by FAB CE.

ANSPs reduced their costs during the pandemic by introducing new rosters and multi-sector working arrangements to maintain critical air traffic services. Downtime was used to boost skills training and technological research continued in anticipation of returning traffic. However, predicting the volume of traffic, when and where it will grow fastest remains a challenge.

“Just in the last six months the STATFOR forecast has changed three times,” said Jozsef Bakos, HungaroControl Head of Air Traffic Services. “The most recent indicates demand could reach 90% of 2019 levels for the south-east axis compared with 60% three months’ ago, which makes it very difficult to plan.” Additional demand over and above 2019 volume would be hard to accommodate with existing resources.

According to Alexander Hanslik, Austro Control Director Corporate Strategy and International Affairs, measures such as improved trajectory planning, better slot management and crucially big data analysis are part of the solution. “The statistics we get now do not really tell the truth.” He added that efforts to manage demand and supply need to be developed in partnership with the airlines as part of a wider discussion where problem solving takes place at Network Management level, regional or even local level. “The more objective data we have, the better.”

Technological improvement is going to play a major role as a result of the digital transformation taking place in ATM, said Matej Eljon, FAB CE Aviation Services Director. “ANSPs have a much more elastic cost structure as a consequence of COVID, for example directing capacity where needed in response to the short-term forecast. Digital transformation will enable more data will be exchanged across borders, more static and dynamic sector changes, cross border optimisations and expanded free route airspace. All this will have a significant impact on ANSP flexibility. Now is exactly the time to start working with these concepts.”

The STATFOR forecast predicts a return to 2019 traffic volume by 2024. This leaves ANSPs three years to develop performance indicators which can respond to demand changes in the short term while still meeting the industry’s longer-term objectives. “Five-year plans are not wrong, but they are only part of the story. There has to be flexibility to respond to changes in demand,” said Alexander Hanslik.

InterFAB Expert Talks provide a platform where experiences can be shared and views exchanged on the key issues which relate to data and performance in ATM. For information visit: www.fabec.eu or contact:

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