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In recent years, the process of handling surprises has become part of the 'new normal' for the aviation industry. In very little time, we all faced unprecedented events, from a widespread and prolonged global health crisis to large-scale geopolitical conflicts and associated skyrocketing fuel prices, and the devastating war in Ukraine. And these are only some of the disruptive events that have significantly affected our industry.


Back in the day as an air traffic controller, I was trained extensively to act quickly and decisively in abnormal situations. Air traffic controllers know that they must deal with a problem no matter how complex and unexpected it is, and how many unknown factors there might be. It is in their core and part of their professional mentality, in which they take pride. They know that they will not abandon their duty regardless of the challenges they are facing.

Speaking from such experience, I was confronted with several abnormal, even unprecedented events during my years at different positions in BULATSA. I recalled the instructor's mantra: *"Be prepared for worse than you expect."* I repeated this lesson to my air traffic controller trainees myself as an instructor. This lesson was deeply embedded during my years in the OPS room and I took it with me. As time passes, I have realised that this has proven very useful to keep me one step ahead of every situation.

When it comes to handling surprises, there is no silver bullet, but many

actions can be planned in advance. And a strong team of professionals helps to prepare for the next unexpected – perhaps unimaginable – event. Such a team has mutual trust in each other's abilities and acts as one when challenged with the next surprise hiding around the corner.

Again, my years of experience have taught me to accept that the only constant thing in life is change. The ability to adapt as quickly as possible to change builds the resilience needed to bounce back even from situations which at first appeared 'all doom and gloom'. Being comfortable is a good feeling but it does not always bring us closer to our goals. We sometimes gain more by learning how to feel comfortable with being uncomfortable.

The unexpected crises and challenges that we face are also drivers for embracing new technology. The technology of today is changing so rapidly that in ATM we are challenged to integrate new hardware and software safely. This has been our focus during the last decade. Our ATM systems now include workload analysis and prediction tools, ATCO-Pilot communication via data link, Mode S data downlink, satellite-based surveillance and many other tools which are gradually changing the workplace. However, the core remains the same – nothing beats the importance of the strong team spirit, human collaboration, expertise and open communication. This will remain the winning strategy in dealing with surprises at the sharp end in the years to come. 

Georgi has a master's degree in engineering from the Technical University – Sofia specialising "Operation of electronic aviation equipment (Air Traffic Controller)". He became a professional air traffic controller in 2000 and has extensive experience in the field of civil aviation and air traffic management. In 2014 he was appointed Director General of BULATSA and participates in the governing bodies of a number of international organisations in the field of civil aviation.