FATIGUE RISK AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic has a number of implications for human and organisational performance. One of these is fatigue, as **Philippe Cabon** and **Fabrice Drogoul** explain.

THE COVID-19 pandemic has deeply disturbed ways of working, in all industries but especially in aviation. For a few months, aircraft mostly stayed on the ground and aviation personnel saw an unprecedented slowdown of their activity. In the context of limited hours of work and partial operations, fatigue and associated risk have been largely underestimated.

High levels of fatigue impacts air traffic safety as well as the health and wellbeing of the staff. But more focus on information gathering and monitoring can support organisations in recognising the fatigue levels of their employees. Particular attention needs to be paid to this in the context of reduced job security and increased pressure to support the organisation's survival, even more when resuming operations.

The air transportation industry has paved the way with data collection regarding fatigue monitoring. Fatigue reports sent to Member States are recorded in the European Central Repository. The graphs to the right compare the number and rate of fatigue reports in 2020 with the average of the previous three years. The number of reports has decreased, as might be expected given the reduced air traffic. However, the rate of fatigue reports in April and May was higher than the three-year average.

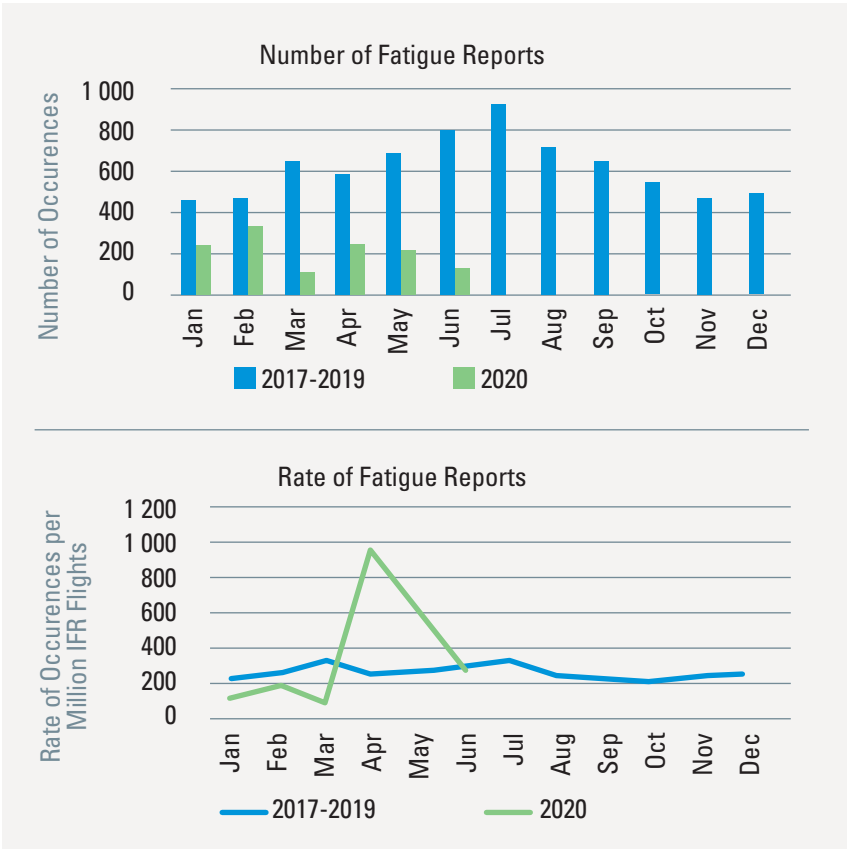
The analysis of these fatigue reports allowed us to suggest a few reasons for this increased level of fatigue.

Planning schedulers may have insufficiently considered fatigue. Many organisations experienced a significant reduction in work from March to June and as a result reduced their workforce, either through furlough or redundancy. The reduction in working staff has the potential to leave remaining staff working longer, more intense hours. Many organisations set up longer working hours, including increased work hours at night.

Reductions in staffing levels may lead to more tasks being accomplished per person. These tasks may be unfamiliar and are therefore more demanding of individuals, who may not be well suited, trained and qualified for the activities they are now performing.

COVID-19 impacts many aspects of personal life which may impact general physical and mental fitness for duty. It has undoubtedly increased uncertainty, anxiety and stress for people in general, impacting personnel's focus and quality of sleep. Increased use of smartphones and longer commute time (due to lack of public transport) perhaps also affected fatigue levels.

If most companies have partly resumed their operations, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact staffing levels and air transport organisations must improvise with a lot of uncertainty.



We have formed the following principles for managers to increase the focus on their employees' fatigue in this particular context:

- Foster your employees to acknowledge and communicate about their fatigue through fatigue reporting.
- Analyse fatigue reports to identify the main area of risk.
- Assess fatigue risks associated with duty rosters.
- Inform your employees about these increased risks (through normal communication channels and training), highlighting the difficulties imposed by the pandemic.

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