



No room for mistakes

Air Traffic Controllers cannot afford off-days

Marikka Metso
Editor-in-Chief
Vaisala
Helsinki, Finland

Air Traffic Controllers operate the air traffic control system to maintain a safe and orderly flow of air traffic and guarantee the required distance both in air and on the ground. They make sure each aircraft is kept apart from others in their area of responsibility and move all aircraft efficiently through different airspaces or responsibility areas on the ground. As people's lives are at stake, it is a role of great responsibility. An Air Traffic Controller's main working partners are other Air Traffic Controllers, pilots, and maintenance personnel, as well as sometimes rescue authorities. Most Air Traffic Controllers work in shifts, as the service needs to be available 24 hours at all major airports.

Active cooperation across borders

In Finland, there are approximately 300 Air Traffic Controllers. One of them is Olli Paloniemi, who works at Helsinki-Vantaa

Airport. Olli is also responsible for the PR and communications of the Finnish Air Traffic Controllers Association, which attends to the professional, juridical and social interests of its members and promotes safety and flexibility in air traffic. The association was founded in 1952 and represents over 90% of Finnish Air Traffic Controllers.

The Finnish Air Traffic Controllers Association hosted an annual Nordic Meeting in Finland in early September 2006. Approximately 28 people from Nordic countries attended the meeting, including EVP Europe from the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA). Vaisala acted as one of the meeting's hosts. Participants had the opportunity to visit the company headquarters in Vantaa, and were introduced to the role that Vaisala plays as an aviation weather solutions provider.

"There are good contacts and active cooperation on an international level

between Air Traffic Controllers. Cooperation with pilots is also active and working well, especially in Finland. The IFATCA European meeting is held every autumn, and a global one in the spring. Frequent communications are required to promote common interests and shared standards," Olli explains.

Weather data must be reliable

"The technological development in our field is fast and furious, and everyone must ensure that we constantly update our abilities and know-how in order to keep track of the development," Olli points out.

Weather plays a significant role in Air Traffic Controllers' routines. An uninterrupted flow of high quality weather data is vital. In poor visibility conditions, special measures are required to ensure safe landings and take-offs. Thunderstorms are another demanding weather phenomenon, not to mention snow and



Participants at the Nordic Meeting take a close look at Vaisala ceilometers.

“Weather data needs to be presented in a reliable and unambiguous way.”

ice in the winter. The choice of runway depends on wind conditions, as generally the goal is that that aircraft take-off and land into wind or as close to the wind as possible.

“Weather data needs to be presented in a reliable and unambiguous way. Perhaps in the future Air Traffic Controllers could participate in the design phase for user interfaces. We really have appreciated the possibility to comment Vaisala products when they have asked us to do so. After all, we are the end users,” Olli says. ■



Olli Paloniemi works as an Air Traffic Controller at the Helsinki-Vantaa airport in Finland, and is the person responsible for the PR and communications of the Finnish Air Traffic Controllers Association.