

White Paper:

FAA Air Traffic Organization
Employee Engagement Captains

The Employee Engagement Journey



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1. Introduction

Imagine an organization responsible for the safety of over 2.5 million passengers and more than 42,000 flights each day in the United States. Imagine an organization transitioning its major systems from ground-based to satellite-based communications, the introduction of drones, and commercial space travel. Imagine how much an organization such as this must continue to evolve and change to keep pace with the accelerating changes in the world around them.

Now, imagine what this organization would look like with a more engaged workforce.

Over the last three years, Employee Engagement has taken center stage within the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA's) Air Traffic Organization (ATO) leadership as a strategic initiative to improve performance. Key activities and goals have been incorporated into business and performance plans. As a result, employee engagement has created a more open, collaborative, innovative, and

forward-thinking organization that is ready to meet challenges in the coming years.

The FAA's ATO Employee Engagement Captains have been champions for creating change. As a group, they have recognized the critical importance of clear lines of communication, employee engagement, knowledge transfer, accountability, and training, building innovative programs and strategies to transform service for ATO employees, customers, and stakeholders.

2. Benefits

Major FAA programs and initiatives such as NextGen and Workforce of the Future point to employee engagement (EE) as a key element of their future success. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) has found that the key driver for strengthening employee engagement (and what matters most) is valuing employees—that is, an authentic focus on their performance and career development, and inclusion and involvement in decisions affecting their work. In May 2017, GAO reported that high-performing organizations have found that the life cycle of human capital management activities—including employee engagement—needs to be aligned for the cost-effective achievement of an organization's mission.

Overall employee engagement has many benefits:

1. **Increased Employee Safety** - Research has shown that 70% fewer safety incidents occur in highly engaged workplaces.

2. **Happier Employees** - Highly engaged organizations use practices like employee recognition, one-on-one meetings, and 360 feedback to drive performance to reduce stress.
3. **Lower Absenteeism** - Highly engaged workplaces saw 41% lower absenteeism.
4. **Higher Retention** - When employees can't utilize their strengths, don't feel challenged, or don't enjoy their work (all hallmarks of low engagement), they're more likely to leave their current employer.
5. **Greater Employee Loyalty** - 46% of employees would accept another job offer if the opportunity arose. Employees don't leave when they care about the success of the organization and they are appropriately challenged by (and compensated for!) the work they do.
6. **Better Customer Service** - When employees are engaged, customers are more likely to be well served; engaged employees care deeply about their jobs, and thus, about the customers.
7. **Better Quality** - In a recent study, highly engaged organizations saw 40% fewer quality defects.
8. **Greater Productivity** - Research shows that engaged employees are 17% more productive than their peers.

3. Business Challenge

The ATO is a culturally diverse and geographically dispersed organization. Over the last several years its mission has evolved to include not only aircraft but also commercial space travel and autonomous flying vehicles or drones. In addition, the FAA is migrating to a new way of managing

aircraft. The Next Generation Air Transportation System, or NextGen, is the FAA-led modernization of America's air transportation system to make flying even safer, more efficient, and more predictable.

NextGen is not one technology, product, or goal. The NextGen portfolio encompasses the planning and implementation of innovative new technologies and airspace procedures that will move it from a ground-based to a satellite-based system.

In 2016, the ATO committed to ensuring that employee engagement was as critical as the technical modernization efforts they were undertaking. However, there was no infrastructure in place to focus on employee engagement. The ATO had to rediscover what employee engagement meant to them, identify its benefits, and then establish a baseline for improvement. This required a commitment from leadership, as well as the energy and enthusiasm of every ATO employee.

4. Solution

ATO leadership met to establish an Employee Engagement Strategy, which included four essential elements:

- Executive Leadership
 - Communicate the value of employee engagement to ATO
 - Provide subject matter expertise
- Launch Multilevel Communication that reaches all levels within the organization
 - Create a team of service unit captains plus internal captains

- Produce the “ATO Minute” to highlight individual leaders, employees, and programs that are making a difference within the ATO
- Establish Clear Accountability
 - Commitment by Officers Group
 - Captain’s action plans specific to each Service Unit
 - Defined Service Unit business plan activities that are measurable and monitored
- Manage and monitor through solid governance
 - COO Approval of Strategy and Methodology
 - ATO Business Plan Monitors Action Plan Implementation

The ATO also established key messaging from leadership, which clearly stated they were committed to improvements that will make the FAA a place where employees want to work. A keystone initiative to ensure its success was to improve our employee engagement efforts.

The ATO created an inclusive framework, which included participation from all Service Units. Each Service Unit was asked to assign a “Captain” who was passionate about employee engagement and understood the culture within their Service Unit. Due to the captains’ success in FY 2017, the Captains’ role was further expanded within each Service Unit to include Field Captains to cover the full spectrum of directorates and broaden their impact on employee engagement activities.

The Captains have proven their positive impact by improving employee engagement and allowing a free flow of communication,

transparency, and openness. This has fostered stronger relationships among different service units as well as employee associations, corporate human resources, and leadership. It has also acted as a blueprint within each service unit. It allowed them to develop employee engagement programs unique to their own culture while still collaborating and coordinating with the other ATO captains. This increased visibility has also allowed an elevated conversation around employee development as each organizational goal is developed and implemented.

To ensure organizational change success, transition management is the process of planning and implementing organizational change in such a way as to minimize employee resistance and cost while simultaneously communicating the value, employee roles, and new process changes.

Woven into the fabric of each organizational goal are considerations that impact workforce performance, since it is clearly understood that success cannot be achieved without high-performing and engaged employees. Major FAA programs and initiatives such as NextGen and Workforce of the Future (SIG) point to employee engagement (EE) as a key element to their future success.

Throughout the last three years the Captains have worked with ATO leadership and they have come to understand the following:

- Employee Engagement must be a continuous activity and not just an annual event;
- Incorporating organizational strength activities in the service unit business

plans ensures attention and follow-through;

- Each service unit has a unique culture which requires tailored communication and activities;
- Not all service units mature at the same rate;
- Not all service units embrace organizational strength programs such as employee engagement, customer experience, organizational health to the same degree;
- Competition works in the ATO;
- Employee Engagement needs to be explained in a way that each service unit understands; and
- Survey results need to be linked to actionable improvement activities to encourage participation and buy-in.

ATO has seen renewed interest and passion by all service units around employee engagement. The service units now better appreciate the intricacies of the ATO and the differences between the service units. This has provided all employees with a greater respect and understanding of each service unit's role in the success of the ATO.

The ATO captains have been instrumental in developing both this cross-organizational communication and employee-focused activities that not only improve understanding of the ATO but also of its mission, goals, roles, and responsibilities. One area where this became apparent was the 2018 OPM Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (FEVS). Through the ATO Captains' hard work, the ATO was able to boost their response rate to hear from more employees than ever.

5. About the ATO Employee Engagement Captains

The ATO Captains are a coalition of representatives from all eight ATO Service Units, which contain 35,000 employees, who understand their Service Unit goals and strategies. The ATO employee engagement initiative allows the Captains to advocate, influence, and champion internal change to improve employee working dynamics.

The Captains work collectively and collaboratively to communicate the values and goals of a coordinated employee engagement program. They were trained not only in industry best practices, but also on previous ATO employee engagement initiatives to understand lessons learned and how variations in service unit cultures impacted the solutions implemented. These Captains have developed and implemented communication and activity plans that connect each service unit employee to their organization's mission, creating a direct line of sight.