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Air Traffic Controller

You have clearance, Clarence. Roger, Roger. What's your vector, Victor?

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One thing immediately struck me when I walked into the room: how calm and serene everything appeared. It wasn't dark, but the lighting was definitely dim; there were no windows present to let in any natural sunlight. Partitions divided the room into several sections and people in various stages of recline were sitting in front of numerous monitors. Half-empty coffee cups, doughnut boxes and cookie containers could be spotted scattered on tables throughout the room.

Somewhat surprising considering I was on the Operations Floor of the Area Control Centre (ACC) at the Edmonton International Airport. The relaxed atmosphere and composed disposition of the air traffic controllers was astounding given the nature of their job—coordinating the safe and efficient movement of air traffic. As professionals, their top priority is to ensure the safety of each flight. That they can accomplish such an important and weighty assignment with such confidence and ease is a tribute to the intense training these individuals receive and to the individuals themselves.

Air traffic controllers are an integral part of the air travel industry but, due to the nature of the job, are largely unseen. We may notice the air traffic control towers at the airport but don't really give them or their occupants much thought.

Air travel is a huge part of everyday life and will continue to be a major source of transportation in the future. At Pearson Airport in Toronto, Canada's busiest, there were 417 000 movements (take-offs and landings) in 2006. That's over 1100 per day. Locally, at the Edmonton International Airport, there were 124 000 movements in 2006. Air traffic is continuing to grow and that, combined with the large number of air traffic controllers retiring or about to retire, means there is an on-going need for qualified individuals.

NAV CANADA is the private sector capital corporation that owns and operates Canada's civil air navigation service. They are responsible for safely moving aircraft within Canada and employing the individuals that make that happen. All civil air traffic controllers in Canada are employed by NAV CANADA.

Air traffic controllers specialize in one of two areas: Instrument Flight Rules (IFRs) and Visual Flight Rules (VFRs). IFRs work at one of seven air control centres and monitor enroute flights. VFRs work at one of the 42 airport control towers and monitor the approach and departure of aircraft in the area around the airport. An aircraft is always under the supervision of one of the two types of controllers.

NAV CANADA does not require any aviation experience or knowledge, or a university education. All recruits undergo extensive training to equip them with all the necessary skills. There are some basic requirements however. Applicants must be at least 18 years of age, a high-school graduate, a Canadian citizen or landed immigrant and proficient in English or fluently bilingual. They must also be willing to undergo four to 14 months of intensive training, a medical and a Secret Level security check.

So what does it take to become an air traffic controller, one of the individuals who get us to our destinations safely and effortlessly (or so it seems)?

There are a few key traits that NAV Canada looks for. Because of the nature of the job, applicants should be confident, decisive, good with numbers and good problem solvers. They should also have good hearing, memory, spatial orientation and judgment. A clear voice is also essential as they are in constant communication with other air traffic controllers and flight personnel.

If you are over 18, age is not a barrier. However, NAV Canada finds that most applicants are in their 20s. The demographics just seem to be right for that age group. Parents can help out with the tuition (\$3500 for IFRs and \$2500 for VFRs), the time commitment is not an impediment, family obligations are usually minimal and the brain is in its prime. There are older applicants though, some close to 50.

Once you submit your application, SHL, the recruitment consulting firm, will contact you to participate in a testing session. It consists of a behaviour questionnaire and some ability tests. This isn't a test you can study for, but there are sample questions available on-line that you can look at. Essentially, you either possess these qualities or you don't. Be prepared to pay the \$200 testing fee. An upcoming testing session will be held in Edmonton on April 29.

Once the test is completed, top ranked candidates are invited to take part in an interview. Marlow Kulak, an air traffic controller at the Edmonton International Airport, described the interview as lengthy but didn't consider it grueling. You're asked to give examples of how you have handled real-life scenarios in the past.

"They just want you to be yourself," according to Wayne Nyman, the manager of IFR training in Edmonton. He says that because "training is horrifically expensive," selecting the right candidates is extremely important.

If selected, applicants have to undergo a very specific, very intensive training program. It can last anywhere from 10 months to two years. VFRs undergo initial training in Cornwall, Ontario but IFR applicants train at the control centre where they would work, so Edmonton prospects would train at the Edmonton control centre.

Before formal training is started, you need to get an aviation physical, security clearance and complete a computer-based training module which contains about 55 hours of background lessons.

Everyone undergoes the same generic training in the first three months. It's in a classroom setting and runs from 8:00 in the morning to around 3:30 in the afternoon. Expect to work hard and expect homework, the amount varying depending on the individual. After the first three months, candidates enter a specialty specific module that lasts anywhere from six to nine months and is composed of both classroom training and simulation. Marlow, who already possessed a

Bachelor of Arts, found the training much more specific than University.

In Edmonton, they typically run two classes a year, each consisting of 12 to 16 students. The next class starts in September of 2008, but there isn't a regular schedule for upcoming classes. They use in-house people for the training so the schedule varies, working around the peak seasons for air traffic. They are also constantly developing and redeveloping procedures to maximize the training success.

If a candidate is successful, they then become an official NAV Canada employee and start "on the job training", earning approximately \$33 000 a year. An instructor sits directly behind them in the simulation room where real-life situations are presented. This lasts about eight months, after which successful students are "qualified" and issued an Air Traffic Controllers License.

Training is definitely intense. Official figures indicate that just 40 to 50 per cent of recruits who enter training receive their Air Traffic Controllers License. In Marlow Kulak's case, 12 people began the training in 2004 and three of them are now controllers. It seems like a daunting percentage but Marlow described it as definitely "doable." Her advice to potential students is that it should be their "main responsibility," which requires they to "put in the time studying."

Once you are licensed, it is definitely a better position. IFRs at the Edmonton Area Control Centre start at an annual salary of approximately \$87 000 and receive increases every year to a maximum of about \$123 000. Controllers work 36 hour weeks and start at three weeks of vacation a year, with an extra 11 in-lieu days added on because of the shift work. The benefits, pension, and leave programs are also extensive.

Turnover is extremely low. "It's not the type of job you want to leave," Marlow explained. "It's not hard to go to work so why give it up?"

Wayne Nyman agreed, saying that while he didn't have any statistics available, he couldn't think of anyone who had left the Edmonton Area Control Centre in the last few years. Relocation, while a possibility, is not as common as you might think. Wayne has been in Edmonton for 15 years and only anticipates moving if it is his choice. The training is very specific so a change of locale often means additional training.

While Marlow says that "there are a lot of really great things" about being an air traffic controller, she does acknowledge that the downside to the job are the early morning shifts.

Personally, she doesn't find it stressful even though people's lives are in her hands. Marlow says she does things outside of work that keep her sane, and if she wants a change at some point there are other areas she can move into. She loves her job and describes herself as "a lifer". In fiscal year 2007, 89 controllers were licensed and another 80 are expected to be licensed in 2008.

If this sounds like a career you may be interested in, check out NAV Canada's website at navcanada.ca or call 1.800.667.4636.