


HANDLING THE PANDEMIC

Park Air Systems successfully adapted its business to ensure it and its customers could continue to operate during the COVID-19 pandemic

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 Adaptability has been at the heart of the global economy going through the COVID-19 pandemic. With countries enforcing lockdowns and restrictions to global travel, many businesses faced unprecedented pressures to ensure the wellbeing of employees and continue to meet the expectations of their customers. For the UK, the March 23, 2020 marked a radical change to everyday life. The impact of COVID-19 has been felt on a global basis, with many countries now facing recession and industries striving to rebuild and restart.

The closing of flight corridors and travel restrictions have limited air movements to essential travel and the distribution of food and medicine. The number of flights dropped by 89% within Europe during May 2020, with a recovery not predicted until 2023. Maintaining business flow and reaching customer commitments during these times has been a challenge few could see coming.

Like many businesses Park Air Systems, a subsidiary of Northrop Grumman, had customer commitments to meet. By adapting working practices almost overnight to ensure the safety of its employees, the company has remained a trusted provider to some of the world's busiest and most remote airports.

Park Air provides best in class air traffic management (ATM) radio solutions to over 180 countries worldwide, supporting a global customer base with 24/7 support and product training. The manufacturing of radios is a highly skilled operation, which needs to be executed in a controlled environment. The company therefore re-organized to maintain business as usual during the pandemic but with a strong emphasis on the health and wellbeing of our employees, who were keen to continue our focus on meeting customer commitments.

Pandemic working

Early engagement with suppliers created a joint understanding of commitments and ensured delivery timescales were achieved. This approach has long been at the core of Park Air's business model, ensuring clear and



Park Air's radio systems are used in more than 180 countries, such as this installation in Chile

concise communication on a two-way basis has enabled all parts of the supply chain to remain functional and cohesive.

Within 24 hours of the UK Government's direction to stay at home in March, three quarters of Park Air's employees were set up to work from their homes. Employees were able to complete risk assessments to ensure their work location was safe and suitable. They were also encouraged to take equipment home to ensure they could complete their jobs. Pressure on IT departments and sudden global shortages of IT equipment soon followed and were met by Park Air's IT team.

A more flexible approach was taken to the standard nine to five working patterns. Often complimented for its 24/7 global customer support practices, Park Air employees further benefitted from the flexibility to work and home-school children and look after other dependents. Hybrid working solutions may now find themselves to be part of the new normal as a mixture of working from home and working from an office location has demonstrated to increase productivity.

The development and recruitment of staff has also continued throughout the pandemic, with new employees able to complete their induction via e-learning and meet their colleagues over virtual platforms. Multi-skilling staff and the use of internal

rotations have allowed the business to focus employees and staffing in areas that found themselves under additional pressure at different stages of the pandemic.

Continuous improvement is part of the culture at Park Air and the arrival of the pandemic facilitated the advancement of some working practices and procedures to a new level. Remote working renewed the focus on digital working with the use of online approvals, online meetings and video conferencing, as well as increasing communications via the company Intranet. A further benefit of these working practices includes increasing efficiencies as well as environmental benefits from a reduction in printing and paper.

With survival of the virus confirmed as no more than 72 hours on hard surfaces, the facility extended working hours to enable a reduced working week – meaning each weekend work stations could experience a deep clean and reduce the risk of virus spreading. Workstations were spaced to allow the recommended minimum working distance, with walkways becoming one-way systems and designated entry and exit points. Temperature checks are now part of the daily routine when entering the facility.

Remote acceptance testing

However, building Park Air Systems products is only a part of the story. Once built, the company's products go through acceptance testing. This is an opportunity for customers to see their finished items and witness testing to ensure the system is working as per their requirements. Usually done face to face, the team had to think quickly about how to continue this process in a world without access to travel. The most obvious choice would be a video call, not a new technology but one possibly under-utilized until the virus had taken hold. With a global audience, this presented several issues early on such as insufficient bandwidth, language barriers, camera mobility and time zone considerations.

After customer consultation, the business changed to pre-recorded testing supported

with the usual documentation to detail the tests performed and the results, normally provided at the end of the testing phase. The reception of this information has meant customers are able to better translate where necessary, watch and re-watch testing and evaluations, share with multiple colleagues as well as watch during their own working day. This capability to keep the business moving – and customers businesses moving – has been invaluable.

Supporting existing customers is also a vital part of Park Air's business ethos. 24/7 customer support and help desk accessibility has been unchanged throughout the pandemic, with customers able to speak to a human being and not an automated machine, no matter their location or time zone. The capability to offer personalized support with fast response times has long been part of the company's support package to customer and will always remain a key part of their support offering.

Post-pandemic

Returning to work, as the UK lockdown eased, presented new challenges and employees were again supported with communications targeted at dealing with the transition back to the office and the evolution of hybrid working practices. The company increased the number of in-house Mental Health First Aiders, making it easier for employees to access support if they needed it or if they were worried about a colleague.

The adaptability and resilience of Park Air's staff has been tremendous. Their ability to adapt to new working solutions along with their commitment to continuous improvement, has meant that many new processes are the result of their input. This has been achieved while also continuing their commitment to customer priorities and enable all areas of operations to keep flowing.

Taking care of employees' mental wellbeing during these unprecedented times has been a core concern. In addition to supporting working practices, the business also looked for additional ways to support their employees. One such way was to enable a grocery ordering service, with onsite delivery for employees that were needed within the facility. This was a vital source of essential items for employees that were unable to reach supermarkets before their shelves were emptied. As panic buying subsided, this service was reduced and eventually stopped altogether. It was also possible to offer the UK Flu Vaccine onsite,



Manufacturing at Park Air's facility in the UK continued throughout the pandemic



Left: The T6 Radio offers outstanding performance for VHF and UHF coverage
Below: C4 Cabinets are a compact and durable solution for integrating ATM equipment

as it is done every year. Employees are able to book an appointment and receive a free flu vaccine without needing to book and travel to their local clinic.

Training delivery

Park Air Systems designs, manufactures and installs complex ATM communication systems. Product maintenance training for customers is a regular part of the delivery process, and something that too has had to adapt to the global situation. Traditionally, this would be carried out through a combination of tutorials with a degree of hands-on practical training. With countries on lockdown and travel greatly restricted, the need for something different has accelerated the development of an online training portfolio for the business.

Customers can choose from a range of options, including video call training and purely online delivery, to suit their needs and time zones. As a UK-based business, being able to offer training to customers on a more than eight hour time difference in a way that suits them best has been vital to ensure the on-time delivery of some major projects. E-learning modules are available for customers to learn at their own pace, from to comfort of the current work location. These modules cover the maintenance and configuration of the Park Air T6 Radio, part of the Sapphire portfolio.

Available on an array of topics from configuration to maintenance, the training courses are specifically designed for people responsible for the acquisition, installation, support and maintenance of Park Air ATM communications systems. Park Air's technical experts, including product design specialists and field support staff, have



developed the courses. This T6 Radio Configuration and Maintenance E-Learning course is based upon the two classroom-based modules Introduction to Park Air T6 Radios and Configuration of Park Air T6 Radios. Each module has been adapted for a remote learning experience, including the addition of video clips demonstrating various practical web server elements.

Air Traffic Management communications systems are increasingly moving to digital platforms and becoming vastly more interconnected. The introduction of Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), increased use of data-communication and a shift to greater connectivity of all elements in the network can bring great benefits to both users and maintainers of equipment. These benefits can only be realized with a strong understanding of the ED-137 standards that underpin interoperability between the major ATC communications equipment manufacturer's products.

The ED-137 VoIP Principles and Practice (E-learning) course is based on materials prepared by Park Air's experts in ATM VoIP technologies. Park Air has specifically designed these courses to introduce ATM and network professionals - management and engineers - to the fundamentals of ED-137 VoIP, enabling them to better understand system requirements for operations using VoIP.

E-learning has also been developed to ensure customers are trained on other products within the Sapphire portfolio, for civil ATC, as well as the Park Air M7, designed for defense applications. The use of an online Learning Management System (LMS) means that courses and evaluations can all be delivered remotely and remain available to customers throughout the warranty period of their products. There is no limit to how many times a customer can view and review the information. This system ensures current, and future, customers can access training, no matter their location or time zone. If you would like to understand the e-learning options available, please contact your Park Air Systems sales representative. ❖