



David Clark, global head of safety and security at WFS

Putting safety – and security – first

*On 27 February, David Clark celebrated a year in the role of global head of safety and security at handler Worldwide Flight Services (WFS). He talks to **Airside** about what has been achieved over the past year by him and his colleagues in these closely related realms, and of his priorities for the next 12 months*

When Clark moved to WFS last year, he did so with the benefit of nearly 20 years in the airline business, so the handling side of airside operations was by no means new to him. He knew the WFS name well, but at that time the Paris-headquartered firm, whilst big in cargo, wasn't seen as one of the world's big five or so ground handlers. So why was it his first choice for a new job? One reason, Clark recalls, was that WFS was clearly a company on the move – mainly through mergers and acquisitions, it was expanding quickly.

Something else that attracted him to the post of global head of safety and security at WFS was the handler's emphasis on putting just those issues at the heart of its business. Up to then, while safety and security had certainly been regarded as key issues for WFS, they had tended to be addressed separately by various components of the company, whether geographically or functionally; but the start of last year saw the handler seek to bring the twin issues of safety

and security together under one executive authority, while embedding these concerns as a core element of WFS culture and operations.

Another reason Clark chose to move to WFS, he says, was the news of Craig Smyth taking over as CEO of the handler in August 2016, just a few months prior to Clark's own move to WFS. Clark was aware that safety and security were a priority for the new CEO. Plus, in discussions with WFS's owners, they too made it clear that they regarded safety and security as the number one component of the corporate strategy and growth plans.

Prior to joining WFS, Clark had already made clear in his own mind some of the priorities he intended to drive when he took on the new role. Of course, his initial focus would be to get to know the business, and, crucially, the functional experts looking after safety and security in each area. Understanding customer expectations and the various regulatory regimes was also essential.

Bringing together safety and security under one function makes perfect sense to Clarke. He believes the principles of addressing both subjects are much the same: in both cases, it is about mitigating a threat to people, infrastructure and equipment, while the measures needed to mitigate those risks are all about putting in place the appropriate corporate culture, training, processes and resources.

Both safety and security are also an ongoing concern and a key part of everyday handling operations. While safety on the ramp must be at the forefront of any ground handler's mind whenever he or she is active on the ramp, security too must always be borne in mind. And, for a cargo handler, security has also become an integral part of his or her work – not only screening freight but also keeping security at airport perimeters and airside warehouses airtight.

Another immediate priority was to get to know the various areas of the WFS business and how they operated

under different safety and security procedures. Logically, the next step would be to standardise and upgrade where necessary the various SMS (an SMS is a systematic approach to managing safety, including the necessary organisational structures, accountabilities, policies and procedures) that WFS adheres to across its various component businesses and global stations.

The handler currently has five separate SMS in operation that meet International Air Transport Association Safety Audit for Ground Operations (ISAGO) standards, a legacy of previous organisational structures and acquisitions. Introducing an overarching IT system to record and assist with corporate-wide safety training and processes would be one aspect of this focus on standardisation and improvement. Another priority is to standardise GSE specifications across the whole of WFS.

Much has been achieved in these various areas over the past year, Clark informs, although the work is very much ongoing. Milestones achieved so far have included the introduction of 'best-in-class' security procedures for cargo handling at WFS's US stations in response to new TSA directives. Already a "big success" in the US, these new cargo handling practices differentiate WFS from the

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rest of the industry and will be rolled out beyond the North American continent to WFS stations elsewhere, he says.

Much closer links have been developed over the past year in terms of safety and security standards right across the WFS network, taking in WFS stations around the world, Bangkok Flight Services (BFS is a joint venture between WFS and Bangkok Airways) in Thailand and WFS ground handling subsidiary Orbital in Brazil.

In April 2018, a proof of concept (POC) will also be launched for a new IT system to bring together the different aspects of WFS standards and procedures relating to safety; two or three vendors are being assessed, Clark confirms.

Plus, he is also currently looking at ways of standardising WFS's training as regards safety and security, to meet and go beyond the requirements laid out in IATA's latest Airport Handling Manual (AHM). WFS's Airport College, located at Charles de Gaulle Airport opposite WFS's global headquarters, will play a key role in this regard, Clark says.

GETTING IT RIGHT

"Safety is vital," Clark insists, pointing to the tragic death of a British Airways engineer on the ramp at London Heathrow just a week before he spoke to *Airside* (in February, when two vehicles collided on the airfield). The ramp is an inherently hazardous environment, full of aircraft, vehicles and equipment that can cause harm, he notes, but it needn't be a dangerous environment if those operating on the apron have the right way of thinking, the right processes, leadership and equipment.

If they have been trained appropriately and the proper operating procedures are put in place, the potential hazards can be overcome, he believes, even though the pressures caused by ever-tighter aircraft turnaround times continue to increase.

Other operating environments of a similarly hazardous nature can offer models of how the threat to life and limb can be minimised, Clark suggests. For example, he points to US Navy aircraft carriers as being an object lesson in how the right training and implementation of standard operating procedures (SOPs) can mitigate the risk in what is an otherwise congested and potentially dangerous environment.

The nuclear and oil and gas industries also provide case histories of sectors that previously had relatively poor safety records but that have improved them massively, following the introduction of rigorous training programmes and SOPs.

Looking back over the years, Clark would describe the global handling industry as having had only a "fair" or "average" safety record. The record has not been excellent, and can certainly be improved. "There's a long, long way to go on this," he considers, noting that "the cost of doing safety badly is high".

That cost can be measured in human terms (in injury or death), but also in financial terms. Moreover, the benefits of having an effective SMS in place can also be measured in financial terms, Clark insists. The 'halo effect' of getting safety right is well-proven, he says: the right training and focus on quality across a business not only improves safety



standards but also has a knock-on effect in terms of efficiency and productivity.

Some help is being received from external sources. Thus, for example, GSE manufacturers are now offering equipment with much-improved safety features, which is of significant benefit to a handler such as WFS. Conversely, a weak point can be identified in some aircraft designs, Clark suggests. Some of the latest aircraft designs feature, for example, vanes and other protuberances at head-height, a hazard to the unwary handler. Similarly, cargo doors can only be opened by a handler near the door, at some height; how much safer would it be to have the door controls at ground level, he asks.

THE THREAT TO SECURITY

The terrorist threat has been with the aviation industry for decades, of course, but the tools to meet that danger have evolved. And the biggest change for handlers has been the awareness of that danger, Clark considers, especially amongst cargo handlers. They have become an integral part of the air freight supply

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chain and maintaining the security of that chain.

For ground handlers, too, it is vital for the companies concerned to stay at the forefront of the available technologies and to stay one step ahead of the threat. Just keeping an eye out for something on the apron that is different, or unusual, is key, he says. As is having a corporate culture that encourages any individual handler to report that potential threat to security, no matter how small it might appear.

This forms a key part of the WFS training process, Clark informs. Moreover, "We go well above and beyond what is required by law" in this regard, he concludes. ■

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