

New Norms

What is different in your control room or workplace these days? I suspect some norms have changed and may never be the same again. My norm since February has been staying at home due to some health issues and the pandemic. I have been telling my colleagues I may never leave home again, and this sheltering in place may lead me into retirement. I think I have been alone too much and am thinking in rhyme about control rooms and new norms. Here is a silly poem:

*Some control rooms are prideful showplaces; others are usually messy places.
A few have consoles that appear pristine, most are abused and seldom clean.
Controllers breathe, talk, cough, sneeze, and may even expectorate; when trying
to squelch a pandemic, none of that is great.*

*Some have room to maintain a respectful physical distance; others cram people
closely which will lead to fussing and resistance.*

*Installing barriers may provide a degree of comfort with little trouble; maybe it
would be better to put each person in a bubble.*

*No matter what is done, there will have to be regular cleaning and sanitizing,
will everyone do that regularly and professionally without tempers rising?*

*All of these things and more will be new norms for essentials like you,
continue to fight the Filthy 15, avoid COVID-19, and work safely too.*

Pipeline companies are figuring out what to do to keep employees well, while keeping a 24-7-365 operation going safely. Therefore, there will be new norms in a time when advice can be both confusing and contradictory. I know that control room managers have been collaborating through their industry groups. It is the same in any crisis. People want to know what others are doing so none do anything that is not helpful or not required. Yet each control room is unique in its staffing, physical space, and ways its people accept changes. It is not enough just to tell people to wash their hands and to maintain a distance. Most people will do neither of those things regularly. This time and the future will require changing physical spaces and the current systems of work practices.

What would you have done 18 months ago if you knew with certainty that a highly contagious virus would affect your control room or workplace? Here are a few thoughts for what to consider now:

- Reconfigure the existing space and console layout to provide adequate space between people. It's interesting how often we have told managers their consoles were too close, and they said they needed the space for offices and meeting rooms.
- Hire additional personnel now since it usually takes months to train people. I suspect those managers who relied on overtime hours by their staff of controllers might get support for having adequate staffing now.
- Take appropriate steps to ensure that the backup control center is suitable for long term use and occupancy. Some companies do not invest properly in the backup control center since "we only use it when there is a problem and we don't ever have any problems."
- Take steps to keep the control room and the backup control room clean since many were not sanitized often. Consider UV lighting and improved ventilation. I don't think relying on controllers to keep all areas clean is a viable long-term solution.
- One Gas Control manager wants to let the controllers work from home. I thought that was crazy until I talked with a controller at another company who is working from home with the same setup as in the control center. That, my friends, is a new norm!

