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PREOCCUPATIONS

From Wall Street to Control Tower



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Stephen Abraham, 48, of Mamaroneck, N.Y., says he has thrived on his high-stress job as an air traffic controller at Kennedy International Airport.

By STEPHEN ABRAHAM

Published: March 20, 2010

I'VE been an air traffic controller at [Kennedy International Airport](#) for 20 years. Most people would call this job high-stress, but I thrive on it. You either love this type of job or you quit, or you never get into it in the first place.

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You'd think I was the type of kid who loved excitement or always took

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chances. I wasn't. I could never be a firefighter and go into a burning house. That would be stressful. It's just not in my makeup.

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There are other jobs you could characterize as stressful, too, such as [food safety](#) managers who have to worry about food-borne illnesses. Probably most corporate jobs are stressful today. It seems that everyone is asked to do the work of three people and those who haven't been laid off are wondering if they're next.

Jobs involving people's health or safety can add a whole other level of stress if you let them. Most of these jobs, however, have some downtime. We're busy every single minute we're actually working.

It takes a certain kind of person to do this job — you can't mind shift work. The schedule changes all the time. Some people would have a hard time with that. You work a lot of holidays, so you have to have a spouse and children who understand.

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Air traffic controllers are responsible for thousands of lives. People expect to arrive at their destination safely and as quickly as possible. I know that. I'm definitely aware of my responsibility. I've been trained, I'm experienced and I'm confident about my ability.

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In the 1980s, I was in institutional fixed-income sales on Wall Street, and I hated it. I quit and thought I'd be a pilot, because I was always interested in aviation. I felt that I was too old to try, so I took the rigorous test for this job. It was timed and it was difficult. I could tell they were looking for people with quick responses.

After I was hired, I was sent to Oklahoma City for what I thought was training. The first day, one of the speakers told the group that 70 percent of us wouldn't be successful in the program, and he was right. They culled a lot of the 400 or 500 trainees in the first two months.

Some jobs in the control tower are more stressful than others. We rotate responsibilities. Some of us direct planes taxiing from a terminal to a runway, or from a runway to a terminal, and others determine the routes that planes will fly.

In one hour, some of us may direct 100 planes taking off and landing. We're supposed to keep them three, four or five miles apart when they're in the air, depending on the size of the aircraft. They're not supposed to be as close as 2.9 miles, or as far apart as 6. There is no gray area; everything is black and white.

While we're working, we're "in the zone." We work for two hours and then take a break. It's mandatory. I don't care how good someone is, after directing busy traffic for awhile, you

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need to decompress. At the end of those two hours, you know you've done a good job if the planes assigned to you were within the limits. I like that instant feedback.

In some jobs, even some high-stress ones, people can probably go out for a few drinks at night and go to work the next morning a little fuzzy-headed. They can still perform their job, although maybe not so well. They might be able to get away with it, but we can't. I would never go to work like that. And if we showed up at work inebriated or on drugs, we would lose our jobs.

As a group, I'd say controllers have a low tolerance for ineptitude. We try to work at 110 percent efficiency. Everything we do involves saving time while paying attention to detail, so if a few of us go out for a bite to eat and the service is slow, we're extremely annoyed. When I leave work, I have to turn that off. I can't expect my 7-year-old twins and my 10-year-old to be at peak performance the way I am at work.

I LEAVE work at work when my shift is over. I don't know how; I just do it. Maybe some employees run, or work out or vegetate in front the TV to wind down.

Some people toss and turn at night from job stress, too, but that's not what disturbs my sleep. My 10-year-old daughter's health sometimes keeps me awake. She has pulmonary hypertension, a disorder of the blood vessels in which the heart has to pump harder for blood to reach the lungs. You can't imagine the stress of seeing your child on a heart and lung bypass machine, which happened once, or in an intensive care unit.

Now that makes me anxious.

As told to Patricia R. Olsen.

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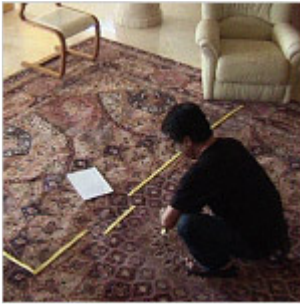
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