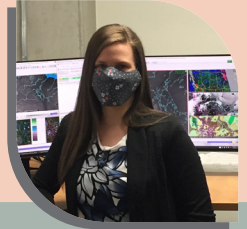


COVID BEHIND THE SCENES:

Keeping critical weather services running during the pandemic



For most of us, the past year has brought the challenges and opportunities of working from home – juggling for workspace at the dining room table, helping the kids log on to their virtual classroom, having furry co-workers suddenly join a call on MS Teams. All while moving the department's policy agenda forward, managing ECCC's IT needs, or keeping the operation running smoothly.

Members of the Meteorological Service of Canada (MSC) have a completely different set of challenges – working from the office to ensure Canadians have timely weather forecasts, monitoring sea ice from coast guard ships and travelling across the country to test new radar installations. Keeping a critical service working has meant navigating the safety protocols of different agencies and a variety of geographic areas, as well as finding new ways of working.

ECCC News gathered three members of the MSC – doing different jobs from different regions – to tell their COVID stories.

The participants are:

Erin Staunton

Operational Meteorologist from Edmonton

Alexandra Cournoyer

Ice Service Specialist based in Montreal

Peter Leibiuk

Lead Engineer working on the Radar Replacement Program out of Downsview

At the beginning of the lockdown, the majority of us were told to take our laptops and go home. What was your experience?

Erin: As far as I know, there was never a question that we would keep working our shifts from the office. Weather forecasts are critical services and they have to carry on.

Producing an accurate weather forecast involves a huge amount of data. The workstations we have in the office are really big and powerful and allow us access to the specialized software programs we use. We also have to be continually monitoring the weather, so I've got four or five screens in front of me at the office.

The weather office is staffed 24/7 – we work days, nights, weekends and holidays so we are used to being the only ones in the building outside of normal business hours. But we had all these new precautions to take and it was pretty hard to forget why that was the case.

Peter: I am able to work from home. It was the fieldwork that was the challenge.

There are elements of the job that require an onsite presence. When a radar is installed, we do a week of exhaustive testing on the system and that simply just can't be done remotely because we're taking things apart, plugging in test equipment and running a bunch of tests.



I remember having a discussion with my director in late January 2020 about how this could affect our project. There are some parts of the new radars that come from China and we already had indications that they were going to arrive late. When it came time to do the traveling and the installations, this was when health and safety measures came into place. It was a challenge to get all the procedures down and adapt to different measures in different provinces. It was changing week by week. There was great collaboration between the groups in MSC that do fieldwork to share procedures and best practices.

Alexandra: We do a mix of office and fieldwork in partnership with the Canadian Coast Guard. For fieldwork, we followed the protocols the Coast Guard had in place. Everybody was tested for COVID before we got on the ship for the Arctic season last summer.

“We had to be sure that everyone was negative because we were going to remote locations”.

What were your challenges and concerns?

Erin: It was unnerving for all of us to see how quickly the situation was changing from one day to the next. But it was reassuring to see how seriously everyone was taking the pandemic and following the precautions closely. That did make it easier especially at first when everything was still so uncertain. My manager moved quickly to keep everyone in the loop on what to expect and that definitely made the early days much easier for us.

Alexandra: Working remotely from home is not really the best. It's more efficient if you're in the office and can see and talk with people from the icebreaking program and take decisions rather than always having to phone or email everyone. It was all right but it's just not what we are used to.

One challenge we faced is that we hired new employees in September 2019 and new hires go through a training program that takes a year and a half. The courses would usually be given in a classroom with everybody together just as if you were going to school. Except this year, we had to give all of the courses online. It's hard when you are teaching in front of your screen. You don't see peoples' reactions and you can't tell whether they understand the course content or not.

What does it feel like now – a year later?

Erin: We have definitely had to adjust to our work routines on an ongoing basis. One of the precautions we have taken is to split up the forecast teams in two separate rooms.

I work on the aviation side and we cover all of western and northern Canada. It takes a lot of interaction and collaboration to produce a set of forecasts for an area that big. These days that definitely involves extra steps. I can't just walk up to somebody's desk for a second opinion.

Peter: My daily routine has changed. I didn't realize how much I used the daily commute to and from the office to wind up and unwind. Now I wake up and have a coffee, then I am at my desk. That time between waking up and getting on the computer is a lot shorter now and I realize I need to take a little bit more time in the morning to relax and play with the kids before I get on the computer.

At the end of the day I need to spend sometime to unwind and park all the work stuff. Someone had told me we have to be careful that we separate working from home from living at work.

Alexandra: We are back in the office for the operational portion of our job and for me it feels similar to what it was before. The only like weird thing is the building is completely empty.



Alexandra Cournoyer, Ice Service Specialist, Montreal.

We have seen many ups and downs over the past year. What has that been like for you and your colleagues?

Peter: Many of the staff have either spouses who work or children in school. If one staff member gets a letter from the school reporting a case of COVID there's the sudden uncertainty about them traveling. We have to do a lot of last minute tests. When I was in Newfoundland, I got symptoms two days after I landed. I had to rush to get a test. It was negative but I felt like a pariah and locked myself in the hotel room until I got my test results.



Erin Staunton, Operational Meteorologist, Edmonton.

Erin: The most challenging situation we had was when our sister weather office in Montreal had a COVID outbreak last spring. They shut down for two weeks and we took over a large portion of the aviation forecasts during that time. I had just started an acting assignment so I ended up being the shift supervisor on the second day of the shutdown – a role I had never played before. Everyone in Edmonton and at various offices across the country really rose to the challenge to take on that extra work.

Do you discuss the challenges you face with colleagues, friends or spouses?

Erin: We do discuss some of our concerns amongst ourselves and with our manager. We are all in a similar boat so it does help to know that other people share the same concerns. It's good to hear some different ideas and perspectives on the best way to handle things.

Peter: We discuss it all the time. We had a rule within the team that if anyone at any point had their circumstances change or became uncomfortable with the idea of traveling, they could just pull the plug even at the last minute. If you get a phone call saying there was a case at the school you're questioning whether you should be traveling.

What are you learning from this experience?

Erin: This whole situation really emphasized the importance of adaptability and flexibility and having a backup plan. Before the pandemic, we maintained detailed contingency procedures for a variety of scenarios to make sure we keep critical forecast services running no matter what. Those plans really came in handy during the closure in Montreal.

“ We were able to adapt quickly to the situation. We’ve been updating the procedures on an ongoing basis to reflect some lessons that we have learned ”.

Peter: I have learned to maintain a positive attitude and celebrate what you can get done. There will be obstacles to get around. Some work may just have to be set aside temporarily.

“ In 2020, we installed seven radars and no one got COVID. That was a huge achievement for the team ”.

We achieved our goal safely. We are not letting our guard down in 2021. The same protocols are in place, we know we can do it and we hope that it doesn't get more complex.

What advice do you have on the future of work after the pandemic?

Peter: This pandemic has been a successful experiment in mass work from home. I think it is worth reflecting on. One thing that really impressed me is how quickly the department rolled out MS teams and some of the Microsoft 365 products that help with online collaboration. Maintaining the momentum on those even after we're able to get back into the office would be something that is worth looking at.



Peter Leibiuk, Lead Engineer working on the Radar Replacement Program, Downsview. Note: This picture was taken pre-pandemic.

Editor's note: *Our thanks to Erin, Peter and Alexandra for sharing their stories with us! We are grateful to those employees on the frontlines of the pandemic – delivering critical services to Canadians, making sure our workspaces are clean and safe and tools like our network function efficiently and well. We salute you!*

Got a COVID-related story that you think we should feature?
Write to us at ec.communicationsinternes-internalcommunications.ec@canada.ca