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## CHRISTMAS 2020: DR STRANGE

# Delivering human factors at Christmas: how does Father Christmas do it?

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During the festive period, Father Christmas (also known as Santa Claus, Saint Nicholas, and Kris Kringle) has the busiest 24 hours of his year delivering Christmas presents across the world. While this seems an insurmountable task, for him it's all in a night's work, facilitated by applying human factors (HF) in many areas.

However, as with healthcare, there is always room for reflection, learning, and improvement for the benefit of consumers.

Father Christmas is unique in having 364 days to prepare for an important job, and could be accused of taking work-life balance to the extreme. Even so, the Christmas task presents a considerable challenge, since staying awake for more than 18 hours leads to deterioration in cognitive function similar to being twice over the UK legal alcohol limit for driving.<sup>1</sup>

Quite how he manages to function safely at all remains a mystery given the customary glass of wine, sherry, or spirits left out for him by many households. It would be much better to leave a glass of water, as even small deficits in fluid balance can reduce physical performance and mental function, not to mention the unprofessional practice of drinking alcohol while on duty.

Environmental factors, humidity, and temperature influence rapidity of fluid loss, which can be further accentuated if Santa is wearing full personal protective equipment this year.

Looking after ourselves while working, including making provisions for adequate hydration and nutrition is sometimes overlooked but is very important.<sup>2</sup> Eating is not an issue for Father Christmas as he understands the importance of having breakfast before setting off. He knows how nutrients deplete and regularly need replacing.<sup>3</sup>

While the indulgence of regular mince pies undoubtedly maintains his energy levels during his flight, this cannot be condoned. Ideally he should be eating a more balanced diet because high carbohydrate and processed foods do not satisfy hunger, but raise insulin levels and paradoxically can lead to poorer performance.<sup>4</sup> He might be better off snacking on the carrot sticks left out for his reindeer.

Father Christmas recognises that regular rest breaks during periods of low workload (for example, while flying over empty oceans and deserts) improve overall performance and sleigh flight safety. As an effective team leader, he also ensures that his reindeer are

provided with adequate rest and food (carrots) while he is delivering presents at each house he visits.

While Father Christmas should be commended for his exemplary engagement with checklists, especially as he checks them twice,<sup>5</sup> his verbal communication skills could be improved. His familiar “ho ho ho” usually represents the sound of a deep laugh, but the Oxford English Dictionary also cites its use to show surprise, thereby introducing some ambiguity in interpretation.

With such a busy workload, high expectations, and the fear of widespread disappointment in the event of an error, the pressure on Father Christmas to deliver a superlative service must be immense. However, he appreciates the importance of maintaining good situational awareness, effective team working, and forward planning. He is fortunate to have vast amounts of SPA (Santa Preparation Activity) time throughout the rest of the year, enabling him to think about the many “what if?” scenarios that could occur on Christmas Eve.

In this way, he should not suffer from any unexpected startle reactions, which could raise the likelihood of a “Christmas Never Event” such as wrong stocking site delivery. When something does not seem quite right, Father Christmas will also know that the best way to regain both individual and team situational awareness is to stop the sleigh if safe to do so, step back, and reassess the situation with the whole team. However, Father Christmas himself is not infallible. There are many published Christmas card examples of him losing situational awareness, falling off roofs, and getting stuck in chimneys. No data are available on whether he seeks advice or support from others, but if not perhaps he needs to recognise his tunnel vision behaviour.

Although no evidence exists that he engages in a formal team brief, it would be naïve to think that Father Christmas does not take this vital aspect of work seriously. Important elements include introductions and confirming names, especially since his team works together infrequently.

Agreeing roles during a possible crisis is good practice, as is actively lowering hierarchy, and valuing all members irrespective of seniority, sleigh pairings, or characteristic features (such as a shiny nose). It is also important to empower team members to be able to raise concerns without fear.<sup>6</sup> Terms such as “Santa’s little helpers” could be regarded as derogatory and subordinate.

Father Christmas is a role model for the importance of sleigh and sack ergonomics in optimising his own

performance and those of his reindeer team. His sack must be immensely heavy, but Christmas cards do not show any evidence of back injury. Similarly neither Father Christmas nor his wider team (including the elves) shows any obvious signs of fatigue despite an unfathomable acute workload.

When their job has finally ended, it is likely that they will have a team debrief to confirm what went well, and what, if anything, could be improved for next Christmas. The power of thanking all on “team Christmas” cannot be emphasised enough.

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