

## **Technical Human Resource Solutions      Aug 10, 2009**

At one time or another we have all heard managers say that human resources are one of their organization's greatest strengths and one of their biggest challenges. In this article I will attempt to give an overview of the challenges and potential solutions.

### **History**

One of the few times when human resources were not foremost in the manager's mind was during a surplus of Aircraft Maintenance Engineers and technicians. This occurred after the First World War, Second World War and perhaps again after the cancellation of the Avro Arrow program.

The romance of aviation attracted many people during the first 75 years or so. These were the hearty types who would sacrifice the comforts of the urban life to work in the arctic, deserts and mountains. Others who were not dissuaded by the shift and weekend work and sometimes poor pay sought a career in aviation. The improved prosperity of Canada in the last half of the twentieth century made it more difficult to attract people to aviation. This happened in conjunction with an ever decreasing air element in the military which meant less aviation trained ex-military types entering civilian life. The advent of technical schools and community college programs added more opportunities to gain an education in the aviation maintenance trades. Attending colleges was a two edged sword for aviation because students who were interested in working in a technical field were exposed to many other fields of work other than aviation.

Immigration was an important tool in maintaining the Canadian industry technical labour pool until the immigration patterns changed from Europe to Africa and Asia. Europe had a large pool of skilled trades who were prepared to immigrate to Canada as Europe had a large aviation industry. Africa and Asian industry at that time were producing few surplus technical workers who were ready to immigrate to Canada.

Selecting and keeping skilled worker's loyalty was never easy but the economic factors of the first 75 years or so of the industry history made it attainable. Since about 1980 industry managers have had a more challenging time due to the changing dynamics of technical training, immigration, and economic deregulation. The demise of legacy carriers and their good pensions and benefits left the skilled trades with more difficult career decisions.

### **Human Resource Challenges**

Some of the issues may be as old as work itself but they are still worth thinking about. Aviation, like health care, requires its workers to work weekends, variable shifts and significant overtime. Aviation has always used overtime to compensate for skilled worker shortages as it is cheaper than maintaining extra staff during slow periods. A lot of aviation work requires major effort which is followed by a slow period while waiting for aircraft to return or depart.

Time away from family and friends can be a barrier to aviation employment for many. For some, the attraction of world travel is the appealing part of aviation. It certainly was for me but for others though it is a major drawback because you can spend a significant part of your life in hotels and camps.

The time requirements and the cost of training, especially basic training, is a deterrent to some from the aviation field. The necessity of at least four years education and on the job training to become qualified to the Aircraft maintenance Engineer Licence standard can be onerous.

Probably one of the most difficult subjects is that of adequate or attractive compensation. Outside of trades such as air traffic where once you are trained you can earn a good salary, most aviation personnel face a long and sometimes difficult climb up the salary scales. Not all are willing to do that or can afford to do so. Add to this, in good times the competition from other industries can afford to pay better than small aviation companies. Many human resource studies and lecturers will say money is not the key motivator for people. Personally, this statement is only true if your salary at least covers your basic needs and allows for a reasonable standard of living. Other factors play into it such as how interesting

is the work and do I find it fulfilling. Aviation trades also carry a large performance liability as the work is exacting and done under a comprehensive regulatory umbrella. This is not just from the aviation safety regulator but from environmental and workplace safety regulators as well. In addition to those agencies there are the numerous others willing to question your work in the case of accidents and incidents.

In spite of all the drawbacks, fortunately individuals still come forward in both military and civilian aviation to be trained and employed in the skilled trades.

### **Possible Solutions**

There are a series of steps that the aviation industry has or can take to mitigate any human resource shortages in the future. One of the fastest growing populations of young people is among Canada's First Nation's peoples. Some efforts have been taken by northern operators and colleges to attract and retain people from First Nation communities. Operators have found that the retention level is higher if people are trained and hired in their local area.

Immigration is still a source especially now that the countries that were formerly in the Soviet orbit are now free to allow emigration. However, as aviation continues to expand in other parts of the world the competition for skilled immigrants is tough and may get tougher.

The expanding system of colleges across Canada and military training still provides most of the workforce. The real question is getting teenagers to think of aviation as a career. CAMC and other organizations have done some good work in the high schools promoting this career choice.

Another group to consider are those called "mature workers". These are people that normally would have retired but for various reasons such as longer and healthier lives or retirement funding issues want to work longer. They provide a good source of experience and stable work ethic. There are few training or discipline problems as they enjoy working and are not looking for a social life.

The other matter concerns are working conditions, salaries and facilities. Working conditions have steadily improved to the point that aviation pioneers could not have imagined. Heated and air conditioned hangers were unheard of in many parts of Canada and that was not so long ago. Salaries seem to be comparable to other groups with the exception of the boom and bust types of industries like the oil patch and construction. Aircraft Maintenance Engineers and skilled aviation technicians do have an advantage in that their skills can be transferred to other work. The demise of the legacy carriers created a lot of worries about long term employment but most technicians seem to have continued in aviation. In spite of the new age thinking of people wanting to change jobs every five years, my experience is that technicians like to have steady employment. For the more adventurous there is also work overseas.

### **Societal Challenges - Status**

Prior to the formation of the Canadian Aviation Maintenance Council some work was done on the image of aviation technical work in Canada. Similar work had been done in the automotive sector with the same findings. The issue was why do so many Canadian parents encourage their children to bypass skilled trades in favour of university degrees in engineering, medical or legal fields. The findings indicated that the technical trades were not well respected in Canada in comparison to countries like Germany and even the USA. One reason was the image, working in dirty surroundings, lacking good, solid technical education, shift work and so on. This perception has changed somewhat due to work by sector councils supported by industry advertising. Arrange a quick visit to major aviation and automotive maintenance facilities and you will see modern, bright and clean facilities and technicians well dressed in smart work clothes.

We will all have to work to ensure we do not support the old image of technical work so that young people will be proud to work in our industry.

### **Benefits of Aviation careers**

Some of the original romance is still there. You do get to work with some very interesting people from different walks of life and places. Aviation offers the

opportunity of world travel and of travel to far flung parts of Canada. The technical work is interesting and challenging. There is always something new and exciting. Even after all these years I still enjoy the thrill of flight and in particular, watching air shows. While pilots do get their share of the glamour they also take a lot of the risk. AMEs and technicians, who keep it all operating safely, can take pride in their work. It is understood that a lot of talent is needed to keep aircraft flying and that is where we come in.

Yes, there are human resource challenges in civil aviation but there is still a good future in it for young people. They and their aviation managers will work through the issues just as those who came before them. Work safe and fly safe.