



Bringing Youth to Aviation Trades

by Roger Beebe

How can the aviation industry attract young workers? Specifically, how can we attract youth to aviation technical trades? Pondering this dilemma, I also began to wonder just what constitutes youth: is it age or is it attitude?

Background

We have all heard people expressing concerns about supplying young technicians for the future. This is not a new concern. In every generation, aviation leaders have seen the necessity of encouraging youth to join the aviation trades. In the last 30 years, many organizations including the Canadian Aviation and Aerospace Council, Transport Canada and the FAA along with many North American industry associations have tackled this issue. The aviation colleges across North America have been heavily engaged as well as they are busy recruiting for their aviation schools.

Traditionally the aviation maintenance industry relied on large numbers of military trained youths leaving the forces after a few years training and work. This was the norm for my generation and many before that. However, in the nineteen eighties the military sources dried up. In both the United States and Canada as well as in many European countries, the military shrank, the working conditions improved, and salaries increased to the point that accessing this source became more difficult for civilian firms.

Let us consider possible reasons for a future shortage of aviation technicians. Perhaps it is because of the low birth rate in the United States and Canada; or maybe because recent immigrant youth are not choosing to work in aviation, many coming from countries which are not large aviation manufacturers or operators. Ditto for the large, young, first-nations population; ditto for young women. I recall working on a project to entice young First Nations people into aviation. Regionally, Transport Canada tried partnering up with a northern community college and First Nation's bands. We were not very successful because the petroleum industry was recruiting from the same groups and were paying much higher wages than aviation technician entry-level jobs were. And, young women are certainly

advancing in many of the old male dominated professions and trades, but they are not joining in aviation technical trades as much as they are in the professions and flight operations areas. So what are the challenges and what can be done about them?

Challenges

We all know that aviation trades face competition from other industries: just look at the attraction of the high-tech industry. The automotive industry tackled this issue by improving the shop environment and work hours many years ago. You will notice how clean and comfortable many modern automotive dealers are compared to some of the older hangar work shops. I recall one old time AME manager telling a conference of woman and men that women did not join aviation because the work can be dirty. Well, he was corrected quite quickly with many examples of where women work under conditions that are much dirtier. So be careful of stereotyping the work and who can do it when recruiting

Aviation also has a strict accountability structure; few other industries are so regulated and scrutinized. High accountability normally produces high wages, a fact not common enough in aviation trades. Add to that, job requirements for weekend and shift work, and aviation becomes a tough sell. Aviation being a service industry trying to sell a time limited product, transportation, has distinct disadvantage in offering competitive wages and working conditions compared to some industries and even governments.

Opportunities

One way forward may be to find and persuade youth that are not already committed to a future career, perhaps focusing on First Nations, immigrant and female youth. Youth brings vitality and enthusiasm to the workplace. Youth also brings the results of the latest education and training. What it lacks in experience, youth compensates for in eagerness to learn and curiosity.

There was a time when the governments recognized that a strong aerospace and aviation industry was a critical part of national economic and military strength, and supported it by funding flying clubs, airfield construction, air cadets and other activities; the sort of activities that often led youth to find a career in aviation trades. That level of financial support does not exist today. Some of the larger operators have done their bit by running major ad campaigns pointing out the valued role of maintenance technicians, A&P mechanics, AMEs

and so on. We may need more of that type of publicity. A national advertising campaign might bring attention to the careers available in aviation trades. Perhaps industry associations and media such as DOM could be the vehicles for that. PAMA and Canadian AME Associations can also play a role.

Reality

We have to face reality about training requirements, working conditions, safety and security regulations, job security, and work/life balance in the aviation trades. But we also need to stop the purely negative commentaries we see so often on aviation web sites. Young people surfing the net do read those comments. Recently, I read on a website where a person was asking questions about a career in aviation and being bombarded with negative answers from current aviation employees. Perhaps those employees have reason to be bitter and disappointed, but let's also hear from the people who love their work.

There can be great job satisfaction on completing major operations, concluding large aircraft checks, solving difficult troubleshooting challenges and the general good comraderies in aviation. In addition, there is the opportunity to work worldwide and travel all over the globe. In my own experience, one thing I really enjoyed was meeting all the very interesting people in aviation from test pilots, military pilots and technicians, research and manufacturing experts and so on. I met people who salvaged aircraft in Africa, the Arctic and Antarctic, worked in war zones and lived some very exciting adventures. I know that meeting interesting people does not pay the grocery bills but certainly adds to an exciting and fulfilling life.

The aviation industry is by its nature operational seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, which necessitates shift work. Shift work does have some advantages. For example, a worker can have three days off mid week when recreational, educational and shopping facilities are not so crowded. One working an evening shift can have the day time to get personal things done such as banking and shopping and for the most part avoid the rush hour traffic problems.

The cyclical, or "Boom and Bust", nature of commercial aviation does make it difficult for companies to plan for and meet long-term employee financial goals and adequate pensions. I believe that financial rewards need to reflect actual responsibilities and training requirements, but that is a matter which will need constant attention. That said however, an

aviation job well done is still deeply satisfying as you watch people depart on their trips and arrive safely at their destinations.

Future

Youth brings its own vitality and enthusiasm to the workplace. Competition has become tough and global. Countries around the world are competing for the same small supply of aviation technicians and engineers. I believe it remains an interesting challenge to try to attract and keep adequate well trained and motivated human resources in aviation and will be in the future. I feel sure that the attractions of the aviation industry will prevail, and we will see government and private initiatives succeed in encouraging youth to join North America's aviation industry.

Summary

And so, to answer my own question of what constitutes youth: I think that youth is a combination of age and attitude. And attitudes can be changed. Mine certainly has changed with age. It has been said that age can be divided into four groups likened to the seasons. Ages birth to twenty-five is spring, twenty-six to fifty is summer, fifty-one to seventy-five is autumn and seventy-six and up is winter. Now deep into my autumn, I recall a time when people had their life's career choice sorted out by their early twenties. Now, many do not do that until their summer, the early thirties. So perhaps recruitment strategies need to address that change. I have also noted that workers are entering into aviation later in life. Perhaps we cannot expect a fifty-year aviation career any more. Retention of our older workers can also help alleviate staffing problems as well as keeping experienced hands around.

I will confess that in my earlier years I thought human resource strategies and specialists were just people who could not be techs and pilots! As the years passed, I became a manager myself, and I realized that those folks are a key part of the team. Working closely with such specialists is a great method to recruit young people. This is something to keep in mind as you deal with a very human based issue. Human resource problems are not as easy to resolve as changing a hydraulic pump, I learned along the way.

It does not take long to develop prejudices, or norms, as the human factors training package says. I soon developed a 'norm' that anyone younger than me was not really well trained or

useful on a busy flight line. My boss hired a new person just out of college. I said, "What does he know?" My boss asked me then what I thought I knew at age 20! It was then I reflected on my early years when I thought I was the best technician ever. After all I was maintaining CF-104 Starfighters, a hot new aircraft!

The bottom line is we need the youth to replace us older types as the years go by. The industry needs a constant source of technically trained, well educated and well motivated people. Do your part by stressing the positive aspects of the aviation world, its benefits and explain why you made it a lifetime choice.