

Recruit & retrain

Are we on the verge of a major skills shortage in the business aviation sector?

Words | **Saul Wordsworth**

The current business aviation sector as a whole is robust, with emerging markets such as Brazil, Russia and even Nigeria showing growth. Technological advances, population growth, lower oil prices and a spurt in entrepreneurship all support a mostly buoyant industry that remains rich with glamour, variety, flexibility and possibility. Despite this, qualified personnel are becoming more and more difficult to find. "We are starting to be challenged to find top talent at the levels we have become accustomed to," says Sheryl Barden, president and CEO of Aviation Personnel International, a business aviation recruiting firm. "I believe that the charter companies are finding hiring more challenging. We receive many fewer replies to jobs advertised online than we did a year or two ago."

Fewer and older

Brian Humphries, president of the European Business Aviation Association (EBAA) says that certain talents are difficult to find: "Based on interviews we ran among

**WE ARE
HIRING**



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Marc Bailey, CEO, British Business and General Aviation Association (BBGA)



Above and left: The European Business Aviation Association offers both classroom and on-the-job training programs for potential and current employees in the business aviation industry

our membership, the positions that are the most difficult to fill today are captains, maintenance technicians and dispatchers, with longer recruitment times for the best people. The situation is expected to get worse because of the forecast growth in commercial aviation, with a commensurate increase in demand for specialized aviation professionals. Though low attrition rates and high levels of employee loyalty may be lessening the immediate impact, continuing developments in aviation technology will place higher demands on key professionals such as pilots and technicians. All signs point toward a future shortage of skills in business aviation.”

The reasons behind the current shortfall are many and varied, from lack of promotion as a sector and the lack of company-sponsored training programs, to unsocial hours and loss of appeal. During the global credit crisis, business aviation companies failed to invest in recruitment and training, the effects of which are now being felt. Meanwhile the number of STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) students continues to fall. All this is compounded by an aging workforce in the sector.

“The demographics are more than a little concerning and the sparse data we have from the CAA on licensed aircraft engineers suggests that position is stark,” says Marc Bailey, CEO of the British Business and General Aviation Association (BBGA), the UK’s national trade body representing general and business aviation. “The average age for aircraft engineers is 54 and that tapers off very quickly to just below 40, with very few coming in below. The position is the same throughout all engineering activities – crafts people, technicians, airworthiness staff... In practice we are finding it increasingly difficult to attract people into business aviation in all our disciplines.”

Jonathan Shooter, a UK pilot and chief flying instructor at Oysterair, believes one of the reasons for the skills shortage is that people are more attracted to the commercial aviation sector. “The large aviation training schools cater for careers in the airline industry, with courses primarily focused on flying in the commercial sector, with the background support that airlines have in place,” he says. “Business

World-class academy

Training facility planned for London Biggin Hill to meet aerospace skills shortage

Plans for a new world-class training facility to be established over the next decade at London Biggin Hill Airport were unveiled in September 2016. London Biggin Hill, in conjunction with partners London South East Colleges, has agreed in principle the terms for a shared ambition to establish a leading aviation college at the airport.

To be known as the London Aerospace and Technology College (LATC) the initiative brings together London South East Colleges, working in partnership with the London Borough of Bromley and Biggin Hill Airport, to create the state-of-the-art facility.

The vision of the creators is an industry center of excellence for education, skills development and

training. LATC will provide pathways to accreditation and professional qualifications as required for progressive careers in the business aviation industry.

Recognizing the current global shortage of aero-engineers, the new college will give early attention to the training of mechanical, electronic and service engineers and technicians. This will commence with current entry level offerings already provided by London South East Colleges at its Bromley campus, then progressing to specialized courses co-designed with key industry partners, including business aircraft manufacturers, leading to degree and higher-level apprenticeships at the LATC.



aviation pilots traditionally come from general aviation or the military, both of which are shrinking sectors.”

The business aviation industry remains skewed toward mid-to-late career employees, especially in the pilot ranks. This comes from the need to hire professionals with greater experience. Although some young people are entering the industry, it takes time to gain the knowledge and know-how necessary to compete for jobs – time that a dwindling number seem prepared to give up.

Grab the millennials

Better education about the benefits of working in the business aviation sector may be one solution to the skills shortage challenge. “Business aviation is not widely known or understood,” says Barden. “I think that we need to educate high-school careers guidance counsellors about the opportunities in this sector.”

In order to rectify this limited awareness, London Biggin Hill Airport has invested in supporting the fly2help charity’s Aim High scholarship for 14- to 18-year-olds. Free-to-join scholarships are undertaken at Biggin Hill, among other airports, where students are able to gauge the range of career opportunities in the industry and the skills required to develop a career. Biggin Hill staff are also set to deliver seminars to local secondary school students on the structure of the company and how best to prepare for the market.

“We have to work harder as a sector so that we have a better picture of what our requirements are region by region,” says Bailey.



The EBAA says that aircraft maintenance technicians are one of the most difficult positions to fill

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Jonathan Shooter, a UK pilot and chief flying instructor at Oysterair

“Planning must be undertaken to develop training in ground operations, flight operations and airworthiness. We are helping to develop industry-led apprenticeships under the UK government’s Trailblazer program to design high-quality apprenticeships. The point is not to overproduce, but to try and match requirements so that employment is close to the ideal level.”

Shooter also believes that better education is needed. “Young people are attracted to business aviation in part by the stereotype of what they think the industry is like,” he comments. “However, when they realize the cost of training to become a pilot is upward of £100,000 [US\$124,000] and the salary they might expect, they look to other industries such as engineering and finance.”

Salaries vary depending on country and company.

What seems a lot in one country may seem little in another. The highest wages for pilots are currently to be found in China, for both commercial and business aviation roles. A commercial airline captain there may earn US\$20,000 per month, for example. Pay and stability are key drivers that may force staff to transfer to commercial airlines, which offer higher salaries and more benefits. According to Irma Sadlauskaitė, senior sales manager with Aviationcv.com, remuneration and a flexible roster are the most important factors when attracting new employees. “The roster – one that gives employees the chance to fly home and see their families – being the more important of the two,” adds Sadlauskaitė.

Barden believes that due to the growth of the commercial aviation sector, business aviation companies need to provide more competitive packages to attract employees. “As the airlines are actively hiring again, we need to learn how to compete with them and their published contracts for compensation and schedule. We haven’t had to do this for a long time. I do think that for some operators, adjustments will need to be made, especially to attract younger talent,” she says.

Self promotion

The business aviation sector offers greater variety than traditional airlines and this in itself is an attraction, but industry experts believe that it is now essential for the sector to attract interest and promote itself to the outside world.



Above: In its 2016 Pilot and Technician Outlook report, Boeing predicts a need for 617,000 new pilots worldwide over the next 20 years

Right: Aim High scholars during their recent visit to the Heritage Hangar at London Biggin Hill Airport





Women in aviation

A female pilot is embarking on a solo flight around the world to encourage women to look at careers in business aviation

Dreams Soar was founded by Shaesta Waiz with the mission to inspire a new generation of female aviators. Central to this is her attempt in spring 2017 to become the youngest woman ever to fly solo around the world.

Even without this epic voyage, Waiz inspires through her life story. Born in 1982 in a refugee camp, she and her family fled to the USA in 1987 to escape the Afghanistan war. Despite being raised in poverty she held onto her dream of flying. At 28 she became the first certified civilian female pilot from her country. "I started Dreams Soar to share my story with women around the world, to let them know it is possible to achieve their dreams regardless of the challenges and traditions they may face," she explains.

Through her 90-day flight, during which she will visit 18 countries, Waiz hopes to draw attention to the paucity of female airline pilots, a number that currently stands at 4,000 out of a worldwide figure of 130,000. Her

message is one of encouragement to women to follow careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and aviation.

"Waiz's Beechcraft A36 Bonanza has been fitted with the latest in avionics technology from some of the leading aerospace manufacturers and has been on several flights across North America in preparation for a spring 2017 launch of the solo flight," says Lyndse Costabile, board chair at Dream Soar. "She continues her preparation. With a global flight that will cross five continents, one cannot be too careful. We are in conversation with some very exciting partnerships that will enhance our ability to make our flight and the STEM scholarships we want to award post-flight a reality. The global solo flight is only the first chapter of the Dreams Soar program. We aim to be the first non-profit organization to award scholarships on a global scale to youth pursuing STEM and aviation education," Costabile adds.



"Most employees in the business aviation industry face more interesting and diverse situations on a day-to-day basis"

Brian Humphries, president of the European Business Aviation Association (EBAA)



An augmented presence at recruitment roadshows, more public advertising and a reminder that the business aviation industry is not just for males (see *Women in aviation*, left) are all good starting points.

"The business aviation sector offers great career opportunities but needs to advertise itself better to attract the right skills and quality of employee," says Barden. "It must heighten awareness of the potential skills shortages in the sector, make itself a more visible and attractive career option, increase in-house training and educational opportunities, and enhance human resource management, especially in smaller companies."

In order not to fall short on demand the industry has to articulate the differences between itself and the commercial world. It tends to be more agile and flexible, and the nature of the organizations and the people supporting them more diverse. The commander on a business flight will have to be adept at client management and dealing with operational changes, as well as ensuring the safe operation of the aircraft. That type of changing environment would not necessarily suit an established airline pilot flying several legs on a roster each day.

"The sense of intrinsic reward, as opposed to extrinsic, which may be more achievable in commercial aviation, is an important factor," says Natalie Smith, HR manager at London Biggin Hill. "The value that employees place on outcomes that are obtained from the more-specific world of business aviation contribute more than the tangible motivators that may be rewarded in a large multinational corporation in commercial aviation. Handling agents, for example, have a multifunctional role, servicing the clientele from start to finish and assisting with all the requirements of passengers and crew. This leads to better job satisfaction, less monotony and faster-paced learning and development."

EBAA's Humphries concludes, "Most employees in the business aviation industry face more interesting and diverse situations on a day-to-day basis, with more authority to solve them, compared with those in commercial aviation. This is vital to delivering the flexibility that is key to the success of our sector. In short it is fun, satisfying and competitively paid and we need to ensure we stay that way to deliver continued success." ○

Right: Business aviation in Europe will need 101,000 additional maintenance technicians by 2034, according to the Hay Group

