



What more can business aviation operators do to increase job satisfaction and retain their staff in the long term?

Words | **Saul Wordsworth**

Staying power

According to the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA), retaining business aviation talent has never been more challenging. One reason is clear: the appeal of commercial airlines. A senior captain flying business jets will earn between US\$106,500 (£82,000) and US\$176,300 (£135,800) per annum. At American Airlines, a captain piloting a Boeing 737 or Airbus A320 averages US\$239,000 (£184,000). Although these particular remuneration imbalances relate to pilots, similar imbalances exist across the board. Furthermore, airlines offer consistent hours that help balance the demands of family, career and personal needs. This all plays out against the long-forewarned pilot shortage: according to a University of North Dakota study,

a 15,000-pilot gap is expected in the USA alone by 2026. How can business aviation compete?

Flexible workplace

“Competitive compensation is important, but it is not the only factor in making one opportunity more appealing than another,” says Gregory Adams, director of operations at charter company Jen-Air, LLC. “Quality of life, opportunities for continuing education and professional development, and being empowered to contribute to the department in meaningful ways, are just some of the items other than compensation that can make a job more or less appealing.”

“Most of us involved in business aviation realize we are not in a traditional 9 to 5, Monday through Friday career,” adds Jim Sparks, a business aviation educator affiliated with Global Jet Services. “Some

organizations have businesses that function 24/7 and as such require a workforce with a willingness to adapt to scheduled times, plus fill in as needed around fluctuations in workflow. The business should in turn consider personal needs of employees and make provisions to accommodate the impact of day-to-day life in a frequently fast-paced and often high-stress environment. In other words, reasonable job flexibility is a good employee motivator. For example, when the aircraft is on the road and the work caught up, there is no need to be at the hangar.”

In an effort to retain staff, a company can review its scheduling, training and benefits programs to see if there are opportunities to improve employee lifestyle which would heighten morale and retention. Some departments are already hiring additional personnel to improve the work/life balance of existing employees. Establishing a culture of independence can also have a positive effect.

“I believe that focusing on establishing clear direction, along with empowerment to make decisions, can provide a team member with a higher sense of value,” explains Phil Suglia, sales manager at business jet support company Duncan Aviation. “It’s important to find staff who have the integrity to support a self-reliant, self-motivated environment and then allow them to establish their own schedule, provided they can fulfill the requirements of the job and the goals put before them. This also requires investment in your leadership staff.”

The pay gap

Migration from business to commercial aviation has historically been the preserve of pilots, and the discrepancy of pilot pay remains a problem. With pilot shortages a very present issue, the option to make some kind of change – financial or otherwise – may help prevent any exodus.

“With pilots, you must take the time to evaluate your specific situation as it pertains to pay and expect to make

Below: **The difference in remuneration can make business aviation less appealing than commercial airlines to pilots**



adjustments in today’s market, or suffer the consequences and costs associated with high turnover,” says Jen-Air’s Adams. “Evaluate the competition – namely airlines – and make adjustments to salary, bonus and retirement compensation to be more competitive. When managed appropriately, this likely does not mean matching dollar for dollar what a 30-year 777 captain is making today. Rather, you must consider all aspects of the risk/reward profile of leaving business aviation for an airline job and communicate those to your team.”

The large number of airline pilots reaching the age of 65 and being put into retirement in the coming years can be viewed as a boost to the business aviation potential workforce. All will be highly experienced, and some won’t want to stop flying. Hiring a recently retired airline pilot, or indeed two, to fill one vacancy, thereby allowing them to ease into retirement, could yet be a boon to the industry.

What, though, of the other employees? While pilots may be seen as the kings of the air, other staff are just as keen to seek remuneration commensurate with their skills and experience.

Sheryl Barden, president and CEO of business aviation recruitment agency Aviation Personnel International, sees the bigger picture. “Rather than focus on discrepancy in pay, employers need to continue to sell the value of what they do against the value of an airline,” she says. “Some people just want to show up, fly, and go home, but for those who want to grow professionally, there

How to hold onto staff

Industry experts share their advice on how to keep staff happy

“Leaders and HR personnel must listen to the employees in the flight department, understand their concerns and not attempt to superimpose a rigid, corporate structure upon them”
Christopher M Broyhill,
 SVP of strategic development,
 Clay Lacy Aviation

“If business aviation companies pay more and allow for better time off, they’ll go a long way toward keeping quality people”
Christopher M Broyhill

“It is essential that employers recognize the unique role technicians play in sustaining the global economy”
 Jim Sparks, business aviation educator,
 Global Jet Services



are exciting projects to work on plus greater potential for personal development. It's about understanding your employees and what they value. You're giving them something money can't buy. For those who gravitate toward the more unpredictable yet exciting world of business aviation, we need to retain their motivations. The kind of camaraderie you find in business aviation is rarely seen in large airlines. You can use that personalization to your advantage and make people feel valued."

The technician

Technicians involved in business aviation differ from most in the commercial field in that they take ownership of the aircraft entrusted to their care. Many, with the right company, appreciate the challenges and opportunities, and also enjoy functioning in what can be more of a family environment. Technicians generally appreciate that these machines require maintenance at inconvenient times and, since the buck stops with them, are bound to ensure that aircraft in their care are fit for mission.

"It is essential that employers recognize the unique role we play in sustaining the global economy and not begrudge technicians their due," comments Global Jet Services' Sparks. "The question should also be asked by human resource departments: Why is the person responsible for 24/7 airworthiness of the company's multimillion-dollar

"Meeting needs for the next generation of business aviation professionals will take energy and creativity"

Suzanne Kearns, University of Waterloo, Canada



aviation asset of a lesser value than the mechanic taking care of the boss's car? In short, retaining high-value employees is not magic. Fair treatment and periodic recognition are generally the lubricants that keep aviation maintenance running smoothly."

Next generation

Young adults place a high level of importance on work/life balance. To attract and retain this generation, a job offer might include a benefits package that has flexible allowances for lifestyle services such as gym memberships, massages and nutritionists. Flexible benefits packages and schedules that support desired lifestyles, as well as finding the kind of person who is passionate about this world, will aid recruitment and 'stickability'.

"Meeting needs for the next generation of business aviation professionals will take energy and creativity," says Suzanne Kearns, whose research at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, focuses on aviation human factors and pilot training. "Increasingly it should become a part of every organization's activities to participate in outreach to the next generation, whether via community airshows, engaging with youth on social media, or through student clubs or associations. It is crucial that young people understand the opportunities available. A particular challenge for business aviation is that young people don't always understand the roles of professionals in this sector

"Structure competitive compensation to include some kind of vested benefit or 'hook' one has to earn"
Sheryl Barden, president and CEO, Aviation Personnel International

"Group outings are something staff value and adds to a sticky culture. It shows appreciation and enhances camaraderie"
Sheryl Barden

"Employees are multifaceted humans whose needs and goals change. Keeping in tune with these changes helps managers meet their employees' needs. People can't be put in a box – by age, gender or role"
Jodie Brown, founder, Summit Solutions

"Communicating with staff and showing how much they are valued goes a long way"
Sheryl Barden

"If you can create a culture and environment that matches or even exceeds team member expectations, pay becomes less important"
Phil Suglia, sales manager, Duncan Aviation

"Add fun into the workplace"
Jodie Brown

"Without a clear vision and direction, people won't feel purpose in what they are doing"
Jodie Brown



“People have needs, wants and desires, both professionally and personally, and it’s up to companies to support that”

Phil Suglia, sales manager, Duncan Aviation

as, unlike commercial air transportation, they may not have experienced it first-hand. This should be central to the way the business is sold to the young.”

“Find out what they want from a career that isn’t just a job,” adds Suglia from Duncan Aviation. “Ask what day-to-day working life looks like to them. Companies need to ask such questions of current and potential employees to crack the code on hiring and retaining people. Business aviation is no different to any other industry. People have needs, wants and desires, both professionally and personally, and it’s up to companies to support that. When they do, employees and their families have more of a sense of loyalty toward that company. I have seen wellness programs, health clinics, lunch cookouts, team outings, flexible benefit plans, clear career paths, connected leadership, clear goals and self-policed schedules. Many of these support personal needs and include the employee’s family.”

Conclusion

Business aviation is more diverse than many realize. It’s not all about the pilot. Every project manager, sales person, leader, engineer and certification specialist must be valued. The opportunity to develop and maintain a challenging, rewarding and well-paid career that supports personal goals is clearly there, but will only be enhanced by competitive remuneration, flexibility and personal development. By such means, staff will stick around.

“Business aviation is exciting every day and those of us who know about it need to help others see what experiences await them if they challenge themselves to stick with it,” concludes Suglia. ○

Right: Aircraft maintenance technicians should be viewed as important members of the team



Aviation leadership for women



Hillary O’Connor Mueri, chief legal officer at Intrepid Analytics and retired US Naval Flight Officer, discusses how women need to be better represented in the aviation industry

What is your background?

I have worked ‘in the trenches’ across a broad swathe of the aviation industry for the past 20 years. After graduation, I became a Naval Flight Officer with the US Navy. Simultaneously, I managed 30 aircraft mechanics and trained other aircrew in fighter weapons and tactics. After the Navy I went to law school, then practiced defending major aviation manufacturers after mishaps. Currently I work with Weisser Pardo AG in Zurich, providing consulting and legal services to aviation and technology clients. Based on my experience, I advocate for active efforts to improve the representation of women in aviation leadership, not only for the benefit of women, but because it is in the best interests of the industry.

How would you summarize attitudes to women in the aviation industry?

Beyond the different standards that women face across all industries, I believe women face additional difficulties in aviation, arising from our culture. Aviation is still seen as a manly endeavor, one where ‘the right stuff’ is a magical, mystical, intrinsic quality possessed only by certain men and necessary for business success. We live in a world where people will de-plane rather than fly with a woman pilot, and where a major aviation executive this year publicly ‘joked’ that his job is too difficult for a woman. Think-pieces abound on how women are destroying aviation culture and camaraderie. One need only peek at the comments section of any article on women in aviation to see derision and outright hostility to efforts to increase the number of women in the industry, complete with unfounded accusations of lowered standards or capitulating to political correctness at the expense of safety or profit.

How can the representation of women in aviation leadership be increased?

Aviation companies need to recognize and communicate the fact that increased representation of women

in aviation leadership is good for business. They need to treat diversity as a business strategy instead of a burden or charity, and make the proper investments in attracting, retaining and advancing female talent. Companies with more female leaders outperform those without them on return on equity, share price, net income growth, and price-to-book value. No matter how large or small an aviation company or department is, it stands to benefit from increased representation of women. Teams with more balanced male-female ratios produce results that are more sustainable and predictable than unbalanced teams, are more engaged, produce more satisfied customers, and generate greater profits. In addition, the industry must address the internal structural barriers that prevent women from rising to leadership positions in aviation. Women make up about 40% of the aviation sector workforce, but just 16% of board seats, 11% of executives and 3% of aviation CEOs – worse than the representation of women in general business leadership.

What can the industry do to help develop and advance women leaders?

Reducing or eliminating internal structural barriers for women in the aviation industry includes addressing pipeline barriers to women. A comprehensive program will necessarily include plans on how to develop and advance them and will need to address the many facets that make up pipeline barriers (including clustering women into non-leadership track positions and lack of advancement support, such as mentoring, training and career development opportunities). In addition, aviation companies should provide high-potential women with networking opportunities, particularly ones that break the barriers between company divisions and/or seniority levels – or, even better, ones that allow rising leaders to interact with clients, suppliers and other professionals outside of the organization.