

INSIDE BUSINESS AVIATION

WILLIAM GARVEY



I WAS IN A DEEP LEATHER CHAIR

on the fourth floor of the University Club on San Francisco's Nob Hill viewing a downtown obscured in a smoke haze generated by the terrible Camp Fire, still smoldering 150 mi. to the northeast. At long last, it was finally raining.

Presently I was joined by my host and club member Sheryl Barden (see photo). I had taken a break from a family Thanksgiving visit to discuss the pilot shortage's effect on business aviation with someone who could provide insight, perspective and—possibly—a way forward.

By way of background, Barden is president and CEO of Aviation Personnel International (API), a business aviation-oriented placement, recruitment and advisory firm founded by her late mother Jan nearly 50 years ago. Sheryl Barden joined API in 2001 after holding a variety of executive positions in the paper goods industry. She was named president in 2003 and chief executive a decade later. Last year, she was appointed to the National Business Aviation Association's board of directors and now is also vice chair of NBAA's Associate Member Advisory Council. Barden holds a bachelor's degree in management from Penn State and an MBA from the University of San Francisco.

Quickly to the subject at hand, she confirms the shortage is real, causing major disruptions within business-aviation flight departments, altering careers and "is the No. 1 topic in every pilot lounge."

The draw by the airlines offering high compensation and predictable schedules is being countered by many departments with salary boosts—often considerable—for veteran crewmembers. Indeed, she quotes a colleague describing the increases as "intoxicating" and resulting in conditions likened to "a frenzy."

How much money? She says a "heavy iron" line pilot can command \$200,000-250,000 or more, and the calculation becomes more complicated in high-cost-of-living regions such as the San Francisco Bay Area. She cited one line captain whose new salary of \$220,000 was complemented with a 40% bonus and company stock. Such "extras" can surprise: For example, I know of one Dassault Falcon pilot whose decision between two otherwise equal job offers was eased by the added plum of free housing.

Such an environment, she explains, causes collective anxiety and restlessness among crews since "everybody's afraid they're going to miss out" if they fail to act. And while wealthy aircraft owners can adjust compensation or add pilots relatively easily, corporations have a more difficult time singling out their flight department personnel from other workers for substantial, unscheduled increases.

While the beneficiaries of current circumstances



NBAA

may not see things as problematic, Barden says it is what follows—or not, actually—that should be of concern to the industry. She says that beginning with 9/11, the professional pilot ranks became a "closed shop" with scant opportunities for newcomers. And those newbies who did make their way into regional jet flight decks got paltry returns on their piloting investments, which with a bachelor's degree might have tallied \$350,000.

Combined, those factors "made becoming a pilot unattractive," she maintains, and there are few replacements in the wings as a result.

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HILLER AVIATION MUSEUM

The solution? "If I had a magic wand, I'd have the FAA increase the airline pilot mandatory retirement age to 67 or 68 or even 70," she says. "That would release the pressure a little bit and provide time to replenish the pipeline."

Ultimately, she would like to see a national pilot training academy established with rigorous standards and financed by the aviation industry. However, she acknowledges such a concept is easily dismissed with: "Oh, that's Sheryl Barden, the crazy lady."

Regardless, the solution must include making aviation appealing to future generations. And during my visit, I saw clear evidence of what it takes, 20 mi. south at San Carlos Airport, site of the terrific Hiller Aviation Museum. Not only is the compact facility jam-packed with extraordinary and unique flying machines, but it is full of things to engage and delight kids in their introduction to flight. There are various simulators galore, a play area and a fun workshop where kids can fashion and fly simple paper helicopters. Evidence of its effectiveness was readily apparent. There were kids everywhere—laughing, gaming, pointing, climbing and just having a grand time in an aviation place.

That's the kind of California fire we can all welcome. ☺

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