TORQUED: HIGHER ED NEEDS TO ADDRESS LOOMING PILOT AND MECHANIC SHORTAGE

News / Airlines, Business aviation

by John Goglia

I don't know how much more dire the predictions about pilot and mechanic shortages need to get before action is taken. Reading Boeing's annual pilot and maintenance technician forecasts tells me the alarm bells are ringing, but no one seems to be listening. And Boeing's 2015 forecasts once again predict an unprecedented demand for personnel to fly and maintain the tens of thousands of airplanes the company expects will be placed into commercial service over the next 20 years. According to its predictions, the aviation industry will have to provide "more than one million new airline pilots and maintenance technicians between now and 2034." The greatest projected need continues to be in Asia, where Boeing predicts demand for 226,000 new pilots and 238,000 technicians. In North America, the projected demand is 95,000 and 113,000, respectively. (The projected need in Europe is similar to that in North America: 95,000 new pilots and 101,000 technicians. The rest of the world is broken down by Boeing as follows: Latin America, 47,000 for both new pilots and technicians; the Middle East, 60,000 and 66,000; and Africa, 18,000 and 22,000.)

These are staggering numbers of new aviation personnel needed in the not-too-distant future. Especially when you consider that, at least in the U.S., we are not seeing the growth needed in the numbers of young people going into aviation as careers. For mechanics, there are many reasons. The most common one I see is that aviation mechanics earn significantly less than, say, automobile mechanics. But that is changing–and changing fast–as the number of qualified mechanics shrinks rapidly. For pilots, the two issues I hear most frequently are the high cost of

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college and flight training–especially when taken at the same time–and the low wages for entry-level pilots, particularly at commuter airlines.

I know many of you do your part to encourage young people to consider aviation professions, such as speaking at local high schools and participating in aviation days at local airports, but these efforts are just not enough. I know our own efforts with the Aviation Maintenance Skills Competition to include more and more high-school students at our annual competition (now held in conjunction with MRO Americas annual convention, taking place in Dallas April 5-7) are just not going to get us the numbers of new mechanics to meet the projected 20-year demand. As an industry, we need to encourage–maybe it's time to demand–significant changes in higher education, or else we are going to find ourselves suffering the consequences of severe shortages of skilled labor. And for those of you who don't think we have a looming crisis, I haven't found anyone who can dispute Boeing's forecasts with their own data. I can't think of a reason Boeing would have to exaggerate these numbers.

SERIOUS RETHINK NEEDED TO KEEP PIPELINE FLOWING

So while I think we should all continue our individual efforts to get young people to consider aviation careers, some significant changes must be made in higher education if we want to span this skills gap. The first suggestion requires no upfront costs; it is really more a change in expectations of when students go to college. I was thinking about this as I considered the costs of college and flight school for many pilots. In the past, people who wanted careers as pilots learned to fly first–many in the military but others at civilian flight schools–got jobs and, if they went on to college, earned their degree while working.

Somehow that all changed and the pressure on pilots was to learn to fly and go to college at the same time. This means that would-be pilots are saddled not only with high college costs (and in many cases the high student loans that go with them) but also the high costs of flight training. This is an expensive proposition for many young people who dream of flying and certainly deters many I have spoken to over the years. Of course, it's not just the high cost of college and flying lessons, but also the pay scale. For pilots right out of school the pay at some commuter airlines is frequently not much more than for working at McDonald's. In fact, it might be significantly less than the $15 per hour recently awarded to some fast-food workers.

Others are making the same point about changing the typical path of high school to college to work. In "Alternative Paths to College Education: First Learn a Job," a writer at *Forbes* makes the case that with the high cost of education and the difficulty of finding jobs that pay enough to cover high student debt, prospective college students should consider an alternative path, such as getting job skills first and then rounding out their education with a college degree. While his article doesn't touch on the aviation field, his comments are applicable to this industry. The major airlines that require a pilot to have a college degree to be considered for hiring should take note. The looming shortage needs to be addressed now. Creating a pipeline of pilots who earn college degrees as they work might be a better alternative to facing a severe shortage of pilots in the future.

The other area that I believe needs immediate educational attention is the shortage of mechanics. Returning to the days of vocational schools for students interested in a skilled profession–such as aviation maintenance–is critical. An article by another Forbes colleague makes the case that while in the past vocational education might well have been used to track students by race or socio-economic conditions, encouraging college for all high-school students has hurt students and the economy by creating a skills shortage in challenging and well paying jobs. While the author's focus is on manufacturing jobs, I would argue that the same is true for many careers in aviation,

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including maintenance, where vocational schools begun at the high-school level and continuing with apprenticeships or two-year community college programs would benefit both the student and the aviation industry.

To address the looming shortages we need to accept that the aviation industry is not as attractive a career choice to young people as it once was. The glamour days of air travel have ended and with them much of the excitement of working in this field. Salaries and working conditions have not kept pace with those in other industries. Attracting students in high school and providing them an affordable career path will be critical to addressing the projected shortfalls.

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