MEET TOM WILLIAMS, AIRBUS'S MR FIXIT

News / Personalities

Airbus chief operating officer Tom Williams has a reputation as a troubleshooter and he's got the aircraft manufacturer's supply chain in his sights.

Tom Williams is a man with a problem. Almost 7,000 of them, in fact, but all “good problems”, he insists. That is roughly the size of the order book – 6,818, to be precise – of pan-European plane-maker Airbus. As the company’s chief operating officer it is his job to make sure the jets get built.

“I’d rather have these problems than not have them,” says Williams, sitting in a nondescript meeting room at Airbus’s Bristol plant following a visit from Chancellor George Osborne. “My old boss Louis Gallois would say, ‘These are a rich man’s problems.’ I’m enthusiastic about them.”

The scale of the challenge facing Williams is immense. He needs to get production of Airbus’s latest A350 jet up to speed, introduce an upgraded version of the A330 and accelerate the rate at which the Toulouse-based company churns out its best-selling A320 series.

Image not found or type unknown

Chancellor George Oborne visits Airbus's Filton plant, accompanied by Tom Williams, second from right

Chancellor George Oborne visits Airbus's Filton plant, accompanied by Tom Williams, second from right

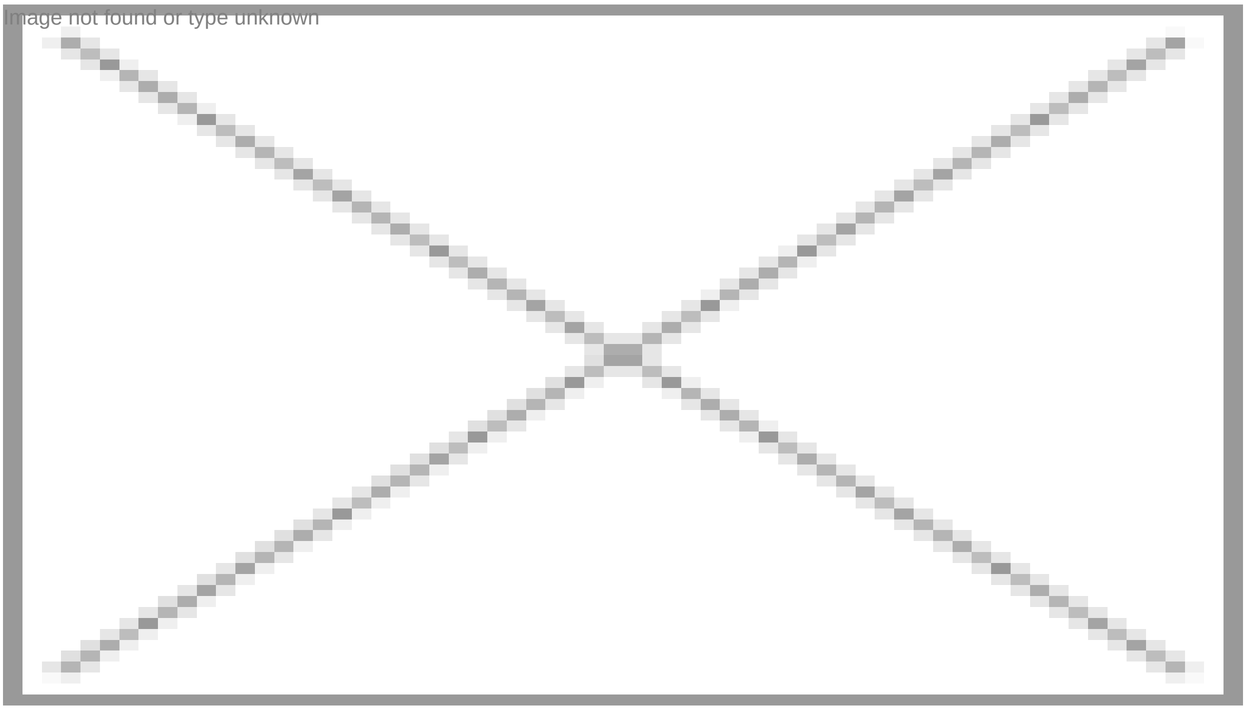
At the moment, just over 40 of these airliners – starting price $100m (£70m) – roll out of Airbus's four assembly lines in Toulouse, Hamburg, Tianjin in China and Mobile, Alabama, every month. Williams has been charged with taking this to 50 a month next year and 60 in 2019.

It's a task the Glaswegian relishes, his accent strengthening as he recalls how Airbus has grown to meet demand: "Ten years ago we talked about a rate of 20 planes per month. People came to us saying, 'Impossible, it's beyond the laws of physics, the supply chain will not stand it.'

"It reminded me of Scotty on [Star Trek's] Enterprise," he says, imitating actor James Doohan in the classic sci-fi series. "She cannae take it, Cap'n."

To make sure these targets become fact rather than a futuristic fantasy "is not rocket science – it's very detailed work in the supply chain", he says.

"We make sure the supply chain can take it," he says. "We do that by giving suppliers a long perspective. In what other industry can I tell which aeroplane I'm going to build in three year's time? It's exceptional."



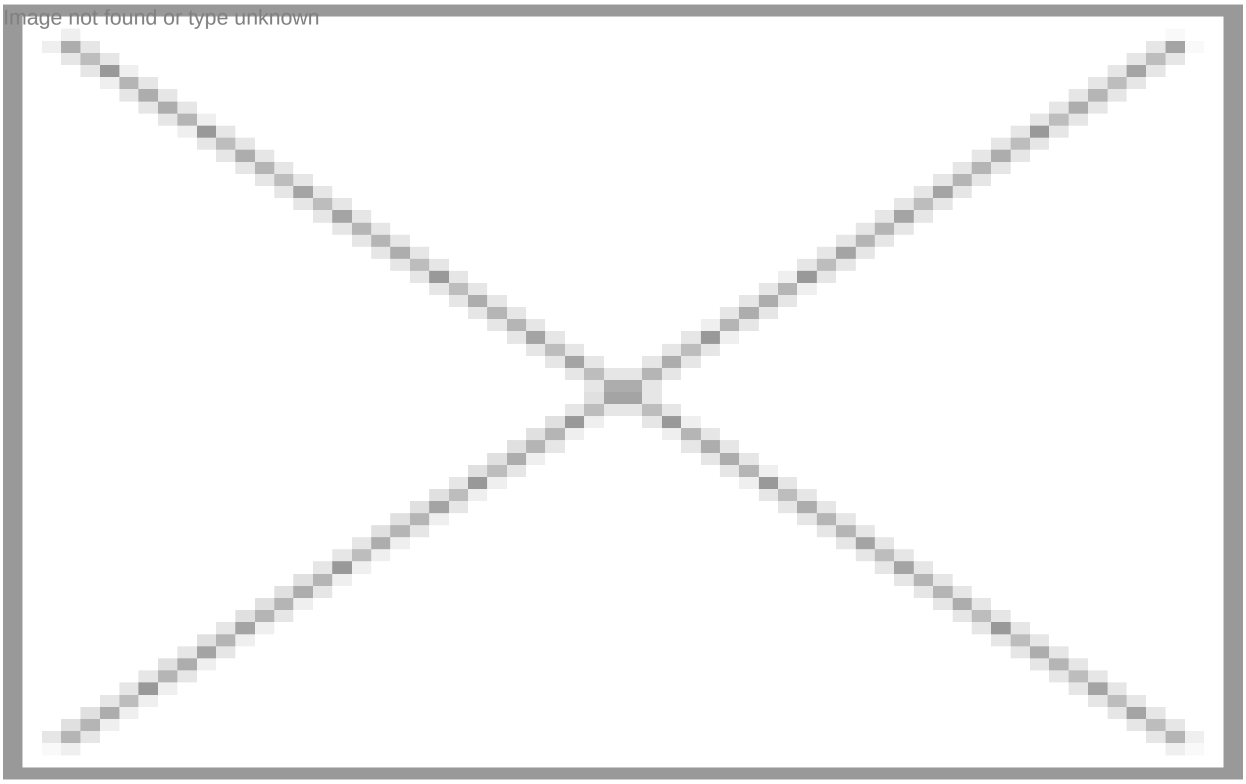
The challenges Airbus's order book present to Tom WIlliams

While an industry giant such as Airbus can manage such a big order book, it's among smaller suppliers that the problems occur, where small components are produced by equally small businesses. At Airbus's annual press conference last month, chief executive Fabrice Brégier publicly scolded one supplier, Zodiac, after its failure to provide toilet parts delayed A350 production.

A large part of Williams's time is spent on the road trying to head off such problems. Any analyst wanting to discover where Airbus has problems need only "get a copy of my diary and track where I was travelling to get a pretty good sense", he says.

Williams is an expert at finding and correcting these troubles – one very senior aerospace source described him as "one of only a handful of truly world-class production engineers, with a nose for sniffing out problems" – though the Airbus number two admits the job can be "frustrating and weird".

"If someone said we can't build the aeroplane because of the engine or the radar, some hi-tech product, I wouldn't be sympathetic, but I could understand," says Williams, who has a reputation for straight talking, unlike many of the slick operators often found in such senior roles.



Airbus missed recent production targets for the A350 because of supply chain delays

"But a toilet? It's not even the clever bit of the toilet – the vacuum system – it's the mirror or door," he says. "It's difficult for me to deliver an aeroplane without a toilet door. People are a bit conventional about these things."

Airbus's jets come together in ultra-modern assembly plants, and top-level suppliers' factories are also what Williams describes as "very sophisticated, a lot of automation – all sexy and good". But at the lower end, where relatively simple parts are made, it can be a different story.

"Say there's a problem with a part like an armrest cap, you visit them to see what it is," says Williams. "You turn up and the supplier is on an industrial site in Texas or Mexico, working in a garage and inside there's one man and his dog – and if the dog's off sick that day they don't make caps."

He is joking but admits the reality is "not so far away" from the picture he's painted.

GKN is cutting car jobs but the aerospace side remains robust.

Image not found or type unknown

Not all of Airbus's supplliers have large, modern factories like GKN, pictured, according to Tom Williams Photo: PA

How he sees both the bottom and top of the aerospace industry is an analogy for his career. Now the second most senior person at Airbus, he started as an apprentice with Rolls-Royce before gaining an HNC in production engineering and an MBA from Glasgow University. He worked his way up through some of the UK’s leading manufacturers, becoming operations manager for Cummins Engines in 1992, and three years later joined Pilkington Optronics, before moving to British Aerospace in 1997, where he later became Eurofighter operations director. British Aerospace – which became BAE Systems in 1999 – then had a 20pc stake in Airbus and it was through this link Williams became managing director of Airbus UK in 2000.

His career has given him an insight few of his contemporaries have. He says younger managers – “often straight up from university and on the graduate scheme” – need to be told the reality of industry.

“They explain to me how things work on the shop floor and I tell them it doesn’t work that way,” he says with a smile. “It’s a bit like the Army. The colonels may think they run the Army but it’s the sergeant majors who do because they are closest to the troops and have to persuade them to do the nasty things.”

Williams declines to say what “rank” his current job gives him but adds: “What happens on the shop floor in theory and what happens in real life are two different things.”

He seems to remain grounded despite his lofty position – refusing offers of drinks as he speaks, insisting on making his own tea – and this extends to his reputation as a “fixer” says one long-time Airbus watcher.

Final Assembly Line, of the Airbus A380 in Toulouse

Image not found or type unknown

Williams is determined to eliminate any of the kind of problems which affected the A380 Photo: Geoff Pugh

“Tom is exactly what Airbus needs: he’s a tough cookie and sorts out problems,” the analyst says, referring to Williams’s careful management of the complex processes involved in building aircraft. The introduction of Airbus’s double-deck A380 super-jumbo was beset by delays caused by engineering problems; rival Boeing’s 787 suffered similar issues. He is determined such events are not repeated, having stepped up from director of programmes to his current role just over a year ago.

“Companies in the supply chain all want to second guess us, and defer investment to the last possible moment,” he says. “My message is: don’t. They shouldn’t think that somehow working seven days a week or using more overtime will get them through it. All it needs is a breakdown and then there is no room to recover.”

When cracks were discovered in the wings of the A380 in 2012, Williams was put in charge of handling the response; many say his troubleshooting earned him his latest promotion.

A visitor stands next to models of Airbus A380 and A330 at the Aviation Expo China 2015, in Beijing, China, Sep

Image not found or type unknown

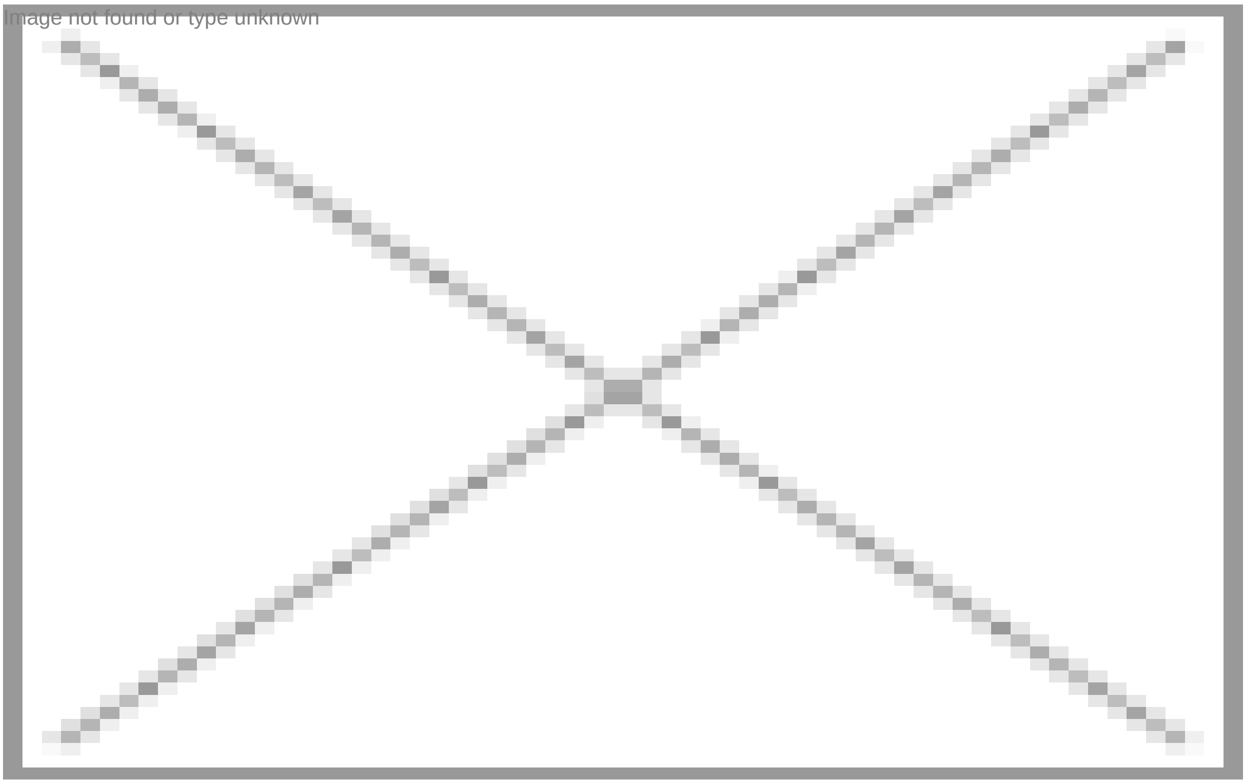
Airbus has struggled to sell the giant A380 Photo: REUTERS

The A380 remains an issue for Williams – not because of issues making it but because the company can’t sell enough of them. Analysts say it’s a case of “when, not if” Airbus decides to produce a “neo” upgraded version of the giant aircraft with more efficient engines and aerodynamic tweaks, but Williams is circumspect.

“There has to be a good business case for doing it,” he says, but concedes the company has had “some discussion” with governments about loans to help cover development costs.

“Loans," he is clear to point out,"which will be repaid allowing governments to make a handsome profit on them." The ongoing row between Airbus and Boeing evidently runs deep.

While Boeing seems on the verge of phasing out its rival 747, Airbus is pushing ahead with the A380, despite having only 139 orders, and delivered 180 of the giant jets.



Emirates is the biggest customer for the A380, with 140 of the jets in service or on order

The decision to go ahead with the A380, which Williams admits “he was part of”, may have been a mistake. The company is breaking even on each one it makes but after multi-billion development costs Williams admits the programme “will never be profitable”. However, he notes the decision more than a decade ago to make the giant jet came at a time when Airbus saw “Boeing making a ton of money on the 747, exchange rates were different, the oil price was different”.

Things have changed at Airbus since the company was set up in the Sixties with backing from European governments to take on US dominance in aerospace, Williams claims. “The days when we did some projects for ego, valour or pride are gone,” he says.

Was the A380 done for these reasons? “I don’t know but it was probably on the cusp,” he says.

Airbus as a company is also different – three quarters of the shares are in free float, BAE divested its 20pc stake a decade ago, though the wings for Airbu's planes are still made in the UK, and governments no longer hold such sway. “We are a profitable company but not double-digit,” says Williams. “Investors can quite reasonably look at us at and say we should be like our peers are.”

Members of Airbus' current management team, from left to right: Didier Evrard, Executive Vice President Head c

Image not found or type unknown

Airbus?s top team includes, from left to right: Didier Evrard, head of programmes; Tom Williams; Fabrice Brégier, president; and John Leahy, chief operating officer for customers

Williams says he's having "too much fun" to think about the fact he's the most senior Briton in what is now essentially a European business. "There's still some politics but when I compare it to when I started in 2000 and everything was done on passports, it's not like that," he says.

Although he has a home in Toulouse as well as Ayrshire, Williams denies having gone truly European but he's evidently a shrewd political operator: "Fabrice and Tom [Enders, boss of parent company Airbus Group] have done a great job of getting away from national arguments and focusing on the business, which is really refreshing as we can make sensible decisions for business reasons.

"It's exciting, diverse, there's something for everyone in engineering and aerospace. Sometimes I'm embarrassed at my salary – they're paying me to do something I love."

And with that, Williams is off, no doubt to harangue a tardy supplier.

CV: Tom Williams

• Age: 63
• ?Education: HNC in production engineering as Rolls-Royce apprentice; MBA, Glasgow University
• Career: Rolls-Royce apprenticeship; 1992, operations manager at Cummins Engines; 1995, manufacturing and business group director at Pilkington Optronics; 1997, site director and general manager at BAE aerostructures division, rising to Eurofighter operations director; 2000, joined Airbus UK as managing director, rising to become chief operating officer of Airbus in 2014
• Family: Married with one daughter
• Lives: Toulouse and Ayrshire

21 FEBRUARY 2016

SOURCE: THE TELEGRAPH

ARTICLE LINK:
https://50skyshades.com/news/personalities/meet-tom-williams-airbuss-mr-fixit

