

Survey of Northern Air Operators

A Survey of Northern Air Operators

The Human Resource Study of Commercial Pilots in Canada (ATAC 2001) identified a training standards and skills gap, as well as potential shortages in the future numbers of qualified commercial pilots across the country in 2001. The follow-up study (Sypher:Mueller 2003), indicated aviation industry growth across Canada would be seen in smaller, modern turbo prop and jet aircraft operations serving high frequency regional markets.

In northern British Columbia, and throughout northwest Canada, air services requiring commercial pilot licenses are vital for serving remote areas, not only for passenger transport, but also for medevac, fire, cargo services, etc. The global financial crisis has disrupted all corners of the globe, leaving one to ponder if northern aviation will stay as it is, or rebound to the forecasted pilot shortages from the beginning of the decade.

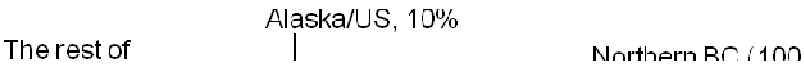
To assess the current need for commercial pilots and gauge the mindset of those operating aviation businesses in northwest Canada, the College of New Caledonia conducted a survey of air operators listed on the Transport Canada Air Operator list for 2008. The capture area for this survey included northern BC (north of Bella Coola and 100 Mile House), the Yukon, southeast Alaska, western Northwest Territories, and northwest Alberta. The delineation of the capture area was chosen because of the shared northern lifestyle within the five regions and the similarities of air operations and geography there vs. the operators and geography to the south and east. Although this is a vast area, pilots in Northwest Canada frequent the same limited number of airfields and interact with the same businesses supporting these airfields. Thus, they operate within the same Northern Pilot Network as their contemporaries and trade information accordingly.

At the time of the survey, a total of 134 companies were registered with Transport Canada in the capture area, specializing in fixed-wing (aeroplane) operations and/or rotary (helicopter) operations. Of this number, 120 companies were found to be valid contacts (not associated with a disconnected phone number or a duplicate or partner of another company already listed).

An attempt was made to contact all valid air operators in the capture area by phone to participate in the study during January and February 2009. Some companies declined to participate, others asked the survey be emailed to them, and others were unavailable after repeated contact attempts. In the end, 41 full surveys were completed, for a total respondent rate of 34% for the non-random population survey. In addition to those completing the survey, eight companies partially filled out surveys, sent emails, or called to discuss issues facing northern air operators. All of this supplemental input was collected, as it is valuable in helping assess the current state of aviation in northwest Canada and adding to this feasibility study. With the supplemental input, a total of 49 companies provided some form of feedback after being contacted, for a total response rate of nearly 41% for the survey capture area. **Appendix** provides details of key survey results at the back of this study.

Air operators from all regions within the capture area responded to the survey. Northwest Alberta had the highest response rate (66%), followed by northern British Columbia (43%), southeast Alaska (36%), western Northwest Territories (29%), and the Yukon (25%). The response rate from northwest Alberta surpassed that of the local northern British Columbia

Figure 1: Geographic Operating Area



Discussion of Company Operations

Based on the feedback from the survey, respondents from the capture area primarily operate in the Canadian northwest and Alaska, with a few branching out to the rest of Canada. Typically, these operators are small, employing a handful of pilots from year to year, both full-time and seasonally. Yet, there are a number of larger operators in the area, many of which employ pilots year round. The average wage range for a new pilot would seem to be under \$29,000, but could range to \$60,000 annually, depending on the amount of work and flying time a pilot could be expected to obtain in a given year.

At the present time, the supply of new pilots into the region is seen as adequate, but some operators admit their geographic location is a limiting factor in hiring and feel there are not enough pilots applying from rural areas. Other operators state they need more high-time pilots applying for bush jobs, as insurance company standards are a limiting factor during their hiring process.

Most Northern Air Operators rely on their own personal networks within the Northern Pilot Network or referrals from an existing employee when recruiting new pilots to their operations. Some northern operators offer incentives or bonuses for new pilots to join their operations, while the majority does not.

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One of the objectives of the Northern Air Operator Survey was to gauge how operators viewed the current economic downturn and how it might affect the aviation industry in northwest Canada. To that end, respondents were asked to disclose how many pilots they might be hiring over the next one to two years, as well as the next three to five years.

Results of Questions Regarding Five-Year Planning

The majority of respondents (69%) anticipate hiring pilots in the next one to two years. The majority of those who anticipate hiring (73%) would hire one to three pilots, followed by four to six pilots (18%). .69288(.)-5.15007()5.74033()-5.1503(n)0.590251(d)0.59

Supply and Demand

As stated previously, the current supply and demand of pilots in the capture area is seen by some operators to be influenced by geography and lifestyle in their region. To obtain a clearer picture and help determine if this perception is that of many or only a few, respondents were asked questions regarding their hiring practices and the retention of their current employees.



Figure 9: Importance of Personal Initiative Affecting

Likewise, the applicant's interpersonal and communication skills are important, as is his/her potential compatibility with the prospective company's culture. The applicant's educational background and familiarity with the latest technology was important to nearly 60% of respondents, but these did not seem to be as important as the applicant's overall attitude, his/her ability to communicate effectively, the number of hours he/she had logged, or his/her familiarity with the operator's geographic area and regional lifestyle. Other factors respondents feel play an important role when hiring a new pilot include a drive to work on other things on a day when there is no flying and a willingness to take direction and adapt to the situation at hand. One operator stated he/she would rather hire a lower time pilot who is willing to adapt vs. a higher time pilot set in his/her ways and not willing to adapt.

When asked about factors affecting the career advancement for pilots, an employee's personal initiative is unanimously seen as important by respondents. Also viewed as important is the opportunity for a pilot to log more hours, followed by the ability of an employee to hold a position with a "living wage" salary and his/her access to an upgrade facility. Other factors respondents feel play an important role in affecting career advancement are the lifestyle and seasonality of the work, competition during lay-off's, company safety management plans, and family commitments. One respondent noted age and weight can be a problem that affects career advancement, as an operator might have limited flexibility around a 40+ year old pilot who weighs 300+ lbs and operates helicopters that can only take a 500 lb load.

Interview

To get an idea of the training Northern Air Operators are looking for in applicants seeking employment with their companies, respondents were asked about specific types of training they preferred, and whether or not they had seen any training skills become deficient in applicants during recent years. Respondents were also asked to share their thoughts on two-year aviation diploma programs vs. traditional flight school training.

Results of Questions Regarding Training Preferences

The great majority of respondents (93%) stated some preference for applicants to have conventional cockpit training, while only a small number did not really prefer it, or it was not applicable to their operations.

A majority of respondents stated a combination of glass cockpit/moving map display AND conventional cockpit training was preferred or somewhat preferred (69%), but training in ONLY the glass cockpit was not applicable, not preferred, or somewhat not preferred by the majority of survey respondents (60%).

Over half of respondents stated float training was

Figure 43: New Pilots Need "Do It All" Attitude

Figure 43: Advantages of 2 Year Diploma vs. Bachelor

not consider this stated they needed more experienced/seasoned pilots for their operations. Twenty seven percent of respondents did not know if they would consider hiring graduates from a Vanderhoof program.

The majority of respondents (54%) stated they saw a potential advantage as a Northern air operator in having a two-year commercial pilot program in Vanderhoof, BC. A third of respondents did not know if it would be advantageous to them or not.

A third of respondents preferred Vanderhoof offer a fixed-wing program, under half preferred a fixed-wing and helicopter program, less than ten percent preferred a helicopter program, and just under 20% did not know what type of program they would prefer. Those who stated a preference for a fixed-wing program felt it was less expensive and it might be easier for graduates to f

