



By Matt Johnson

At any given time it is common to hear one of two different helicopter pilot employment situations. The first mantra is the already employed pilot, ranting about all the overtime he is working and how his company is deeply short on pilots. The other extreme is the “lower-time” pilot, struggling to find work in the “pilot shortage era.”

THE PROBLEM

Not long ago I had the opportunity to hear the president of HAI, Matt Zuccaro, speak to a group of pilots at an educational session prior to the start of Heli-Expo. Mr. Zuccaro spoke of a company that was short on pilots, and the youngest pilot on staff for this company was in his mid to late 50's. The discussion continued with the idea that we do have a pilot shortage of sorts in addition to comments on the current state of affairs on the training side of our industry. Mr. Zuccaro was spot on, we have a problem and fixing it will take much thought, effort, time and a common sense approach.

REALLY?

Do we really have a pilot shortage “problem”? I say yes, but I also say it

doesn't have to be as bad as it really is or at least as bad as it is perceived. My humble opinion of a “fix” is rather simple: Companies should have more say in whom they can hire. Often companies are limited in who they can hire for reasons beyond their control. These limited factors often include insurance companies and third-party organizations. The most well-known “limitation” that comes to mind for most is the hiring of air medical pilots. Accreditation organizations such as CAMTS (Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems) have standards that dictate minimum pilot requirements. Now, if you think this article is a slam on CAMTS you might as well stop reading, because it isn't. It takes two to tango! And in this case it appears that employers are not getting involved in the dance. While I 100% unequivocally disagree with the CAMTS hiring minimums, I put a large chunk of the blame on employers for allowing this stagnant standard to be set, and not being more involved in setting the tone when it comes to hiring requirements.

In speaking with Mrs. Eileen Frazer, Executive Director of CAMTS, she was surprised of my opinion that a shortage of pilots was upon us, and the CAMTS hour requirement could be part of the problem. Mrs. Frazer informed me that their organization hasn't been informed by any company at any time that there could be a

problem with air medical hiring practices in place. That is sad!

Unfortunately, third-party minimums doesn't guarantee quality, it just promises quantity. And “quantity,” in this case, the number of flight hours, can be a major impairment to safety. It absolutely amazes me that several cumulative factors cannot be considered in the hiring of an air medical pilot applicant.

Here's an example. An applicant comes to a company seeking employment as an air medical pilot, she has 1,500 hours of flight experience that includes many different flight profiles, including low-level confined operations, night flying, busy airspace navigation and other positives to add, including being a local to the area in which she is seeking work. As an added bonus, this pilot applicant is current and fresh on regulations, airspace and the recency of experience is from flying nearly every day. Can she be hired? No, not in accordance with the current standard. Now, on the other hand you have an applicant that has 2,001 flight hours, he hasn't flown helicopters in nearly 15 years, and is far from being current in anything aviation related. Can he be hired? Yes, under the current standards, he can. What gives? Employers wake up!

In another sobering example I'll describe “Mike” (named changed to protect the innocent). Mike has been active in aviation for the better part of 20 years, with full time flying duties. He comes in with more than 10,000 flight hours, has “practical” experience that would benefit HEMS related flying profiles, is current, proficient and, like our last applicant, has local area expertise in the area he desires to work. Although Mike has the gray hair and an assortment of filled-up logbooks, he only has about 250 hours of turbine experience. Can he be hired? No, not according to the current hiring standard. In addition to the required standard (CAMTS – air medical), the “turbine-requirement” always seems to come back to remind us just how much the insurance industry impacts our industry. Again, this is sad. It is sad that applicants of this caliber are being passed over for something such as this. And again I ask, have the employers challenged the third parties that set “hiring

minimums” and the insurance companies that dictate a number? I have news for you, if you haven’t figured out how to start a turbine aircraft or the concept of turbine lag and power management in 50 flight hours, you probably shouldn’t be flying. But a 500 hour requirement? Really? What is even more amazing are the companies that want “better pilots,” so they raise the hiring minimums on their own to require 3,000 flight hours total or 1,000 turbine hours minimum to be hired. Are more flight hours really better, or is this just a competitive dog and pony show? I suggest the later. If you believe “higher-time” pilots are statistically safer, I suggest you are out of touch with reality.

EPILOGUE

So, do we have a pilot shortage? Yes, to some degree; but does it have to be this way? I say no! With input from hiring authorities, insurance companies, third-party “standards” organizations and the assistance from other invaluable resources like Helicopter Association International, working together I strongly feel a more logical common-sense based approach could be taken for hitting the so-called pilot shortage head-on.

In an era of having to do more with less, it is sad that many good applicants are being passed over by standards that could use some serious review.

In light of the many discussions, news stories and testimony regarding the recent “1,500 Hour Rule” affecting the airline industry, I think William R. Voss, President and CEO, Flight Safety Foundation said it best during his testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce. He stated, “Mandating an arbitrary number of hours experience required to be in a cockpit makes the dangerous assumption that specific knowledge will be obtained simply due to hours in the air. This leaves too much to chance.”


CONTRIBUTING EDITOR’S UPDATE:

This article was originally authored in the spring of 2012 and has been pending publication. Since the inception of the

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original draft of this article, the Commission on Accreditation of Medical Transport Systems (CAMTS) recently released its 9th edition of standards. Ironically, and a bit mysteriously, the new standards describe new minimum hiring standards (hours) for HEMS pilots. A cursory review of the new standard indicates that companies may be able to hire potential candidates with less than the previously required 2,000 hours. The new standard appears to lower the minimum hour requirement for those that hold an ATP rating. For some, the change(s) may be a step in the right direction. However, some of the sub-section hour requirement caveats leave a lot open for discussion and this recently released edition does very little justice to help the pilot shortage.

It isn’t hard to figure out the turbine hour requirement is probably the #1 roadblock for the potential HEMS applicant. It appears that number hasn’t changed and the standard even goes on to add “1,000 hours turbine time is highly recommended.” Where this arbitrary number, with no statistical support for safety came from, is beyond my comprehension. As opposed to lowering the total overall hour requirement, a more practical approach would be to examine the turbine hour requirement.

In my initial writing I made it clear that employers should be more involved in the hiring minimums. Apparently someone tried -- and kudos to them! If CAMTS wants to be a part of the solution to the pilot shortage, then I strongly recommend they go back and reexamine the turbine hour requirement and commence a “turbine hour reform” standard of sorts. 

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