

Experts discuss employment in aviation industry

Flight instructors, maintenance workers among needed employees

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MT. VERNON — A choice in career is not something to take lightly, but even though the task may seem daunting, there are more options than just traditional pathways.

Aviation is one of those industries that the average person may not always think of, but is currently seeing a need in a variety of different positions.

Chris Collins, director for Mt. Vernon Outland Airport, said that the airline industry is seeing a lot of retirements.

"We are going to be seeing a tremendous shortage," Collins said.

Collins recently attended the Illinois Aviation Conference in Champaign, and he noted one statement made by a speaker.

"One thing he said that got the whole room buzzing was if the shortages continue, within three years this country won't have commuter service anymore, meaning service to the smaller airports, the feeder routes," Collins said, "because all of those pilots will be called up to the major airlines and there won't be any slots in the regionals."

Jay Grafton, assistant chief flight instructor for AirGo Inc., mentioned that this has caused an increase in pay for smaller commuter airports.

"It was unheard of to make much more than \$20,000 to \$22,000 a year at those places. All of those places have gone through contract negotiations and the wages have gone up,"

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Grafton said. "Something that was unheard of is they are paying these college graduates and people who have the flight time, they are paying signing bonuses now. And it is \$12,000, \$15,000, \$20,000 sign-on bonuses, and you didn't hear that just three years ago."

Turning to AirGo, Grafton discussed the changes he has seen within the company.

"Mainly it is training these days. There used to be a lot of sales going on, but we kind of focused the business more on training," Grafton said. "Our need, as far as employment, is flight instructors; that is always kind of the number one. The industry is such now that I will hire a guy as a flight instructor and if he has come from a college, I basically get him for about a year before he goes to the airlines."

Grafton said the issue with flight instructors leaving stems from getting their hours completed and moving on to bigger airlines.

"He is basically coming to me because I offer the ability for him to build flight time really quick. But, once he builds about 1,000 hours of flight time, he gets taken up by a commuter or regional airline," Grafton said. "And then I am back in the same boat again, looking for another instructor."

Grafton said that he currently has seven instructors,

which is the most he has had in a while.

"An instructor has to have a commercial license, a CFI (Certified Flight Instructor) and, typically, most people get that in the college environment," Grafton said. "It can be done locally. It takes about 250 hours to get a commercial license, and then it takes a few more hours for a CFI."

Collins said that there were also options through the airport.

"Or you go to an airport like Mt. Vernon and you obtain a private pilot certificate, then an instruction rating, then commercial, then flight instructor and you made those hours," Collins said. "It is costly, somewhere between \$7,000 and \$9,000."

He added that once a license is obtained, it is a federally recognized license.

OTHER POSITIONS

Maintenance personnel is also a much needed position.

"Right now we have a guy driving from the Olney and Vincennes area over here," Grafton said. "And we have guys that live up in Centralia that have some maintenance experience. There are just not many people in this area that are qualified for aircraft maintenance."

There are also various avenues to becoming qualified for aircraft maintenance.

"Again, you can do it through a college program. You can do on-job training, but you have to train under somebody that already has the

certification," Grafton said.

Flight instructors and maintenance workers are not the only positions in need.

"The other things are manpower for scheduling, needing somebody to move aircraft around and organizing and helping the students, those kind of jobs," Grafton said. "And it is like anything else, we really need to operate this operation seven days a week, but currently I don't have schedulers so I can cover seven days a week."

Unlike flight instructors and maintenance, people can become schedulers fairly quickly.

"Most of that can be done with on-job training," Grafton said. "You are basically going to learn how to move aircraft around, how to organize a schedule and how to work with certain computer programs that are geared toward that job. There is also a lot of checking and rechecking student records to make sure there are no mistakes. Some college is helpful, but organizational skills are the big thing you are looking for in that job."

Grafton said that now is the time for those interested in the industry.

"This is probably the best time in the last 40 years to become a pilot. The opportunities are just unbelievable," Grafton said. "You have so many people retiring that were Vietnam era and later, that the airlines are just desperate for pilots."

For more information, people can call Mt. Vernon Outland Airport.

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