

Finding Work/Life Balance in a 24/7 World

It's in everyone's best interest to staff adequately

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Establishing a predictable and acceptable work schedule for pilots in a small flight department can be a major challenge. The key is having company executives understand the need for adequate staffing so that everyone can enjoy their personal lives while also contributing fully at work.

If business aviation was more like most careers, it would be a lot easier for pilots to have a life after work. You'd just fly from 9-to-5 and then sleep late on Saturday morning.

But business isn't predictable. A West Coast client decides to finally close the deal. The phone rings. It's Thursday afternoon and a harried aircraft owner needs to get to a Friday morning business meeting. The phone rings. The CEO decides to visit four field locations, then it's five, then the plan changes and it's finally three. The phone keeps ringing. Or, maybe you're making the neighbors green with envy as you sit home all week with no flights while everyone else is doing the daily commute. Only you can't drift too far—you guessed it: in case the phone rings.

Sound familiar? For small operators, one-aircraft shops or even larger companies with a short list of pilots, being mentally tethered to the airplane can seem like being on the clock around the clock. Juggling these variables to keep pilots happy fliers is an endless conundrum and a scheduler's headache.

While the holy grail of schedules may never be discovered, years of tinkering with on and off days, flight hours and crew capacity have come close. The experimenting shows that while certain flight-hour and crew combinations yield quality time for life after work, arriving there is the biggest challenge. It requires good business diplomacy between owners and operators, pilots willing to do more than just fly and an ability to replace demands with détente.

Building attractive work schedules hinges on the aircraft owners' cooperation and an operator's abil-

ity to convince them it's in their best interest to maintain well-rested and content pilots. That's especially true where there's just one aircraft and a pilot or two.

"You have to consider the owner's personality," said NBAA Corporate Aviation Management Committee Chairman John Hatfield. "Some owners have the outlook 'my pilots don't work hard enough' while others insist 'I want my pilots rested.'" When scheduling can't be adjusted to make all parties happy, staff turnover may result. Replacing a pilot is a potentially expensive outcome, when salary, training, downtime, transportation and other factors are taken into account.

NextFlight in Manassas, VA, a company with just two aircraft, has experience in dealing with on-call complications. "At first," recalls Chief Pilot Rick Regan, "everyone was on call and the pilots assigned to the aircraft would work out their own schedules. We lost a few pilots that way.

"Although they were given five days off per month, it still wasn't enough time" for pilots to meet their family obligations. "It was a constant juggling act and difficult on both ends," he said.

By assigning four pilots to an aircraft, Regan created a schedule for five days off every 10 days. "Four pilots per airplane is a must if you want a set schedule," he said. And while the numbers seem to work, the program still centers on convincing the owner that having rested and happy crews is a prudent business consideration.

"Everything [in aviation] is focused on quality-of-life," he said. "This has been the biggest issue in exit interviews. You could be in the most beautiful place in the world with the rich and famous, but



MARK TWOMBLY PHOTO

you'll still miss your wife and kids."

But no schedule is perfect and glitches occur from time to time, said Regan. Sometimes a pilot may find there's no aircraft available after returning to work or sometimes a chance month keeps the same crew on the ground and another crew flying every time they return to work.

To keep such anomalies to a minimum Regan has to stay ahead of the changes and admits "the schedule occupies a lot of my time." About half of NextFlight's trips are booked up to two weeks ahead, which "helps tremendously" in planning, he said.

Another company using the four-pilot model is Strickland Insurance in Goldsboro, N.C. The company owns a Citation Excel, which flies about 500 hours per year. The crew averages 10 days off per month with plenty of flexibility. For example, when one of the crew had a birthday, the schedule was changed so the pilot could spend time at home.

"We're a family company, so that's important," said Jim Steele, chief pilot for the small 170-employee insurance company, where nearly all trips are scheduled. "This is very manageable."

Having a fourth pilot allows for vacations and dividing the overnight trips equally. Steele said the company pays for the fourth pilot's salary and insurance by chartering its aircraft about 250 hours per year.

However, there's one big difference that perhaps

sets the Strickland pilots apart from other business flyers: The company not only manages the Citation, it owns the FBO that runs Goldsboro-Wayne Municipal Airport. The businesses support each other by sharing resources such as fuel and maintenance, saving the company money.

Steele credits such progressive business practices and the company's willingness to add crew in creating some ideal working conditions.

"I didn't have to push the issue," he said. "The senior leadership brought it up. They understood what aviation brings to the company." When Steele and another pilot was the company's first crew several years ago, management suggested they hire another pilot. As demand grew, the company advocated a third pilot and ultimately realized a fourth pilot would be needed to ensure the crew could enjoy sufficient time off, he said.

When he's not flying, Steele is the airport manager and the other three pilots each manage airport security, airport safety and the FBO, earning extra money. In fact, the FBO is known for its monthly safety seminars and participation in the FAA's Wings program for the general aviation community, which Steele manages.

"We look for people who want to do more than fly," he said. "Flying is not all we do. When we're on a trip, instead of looking for the pilot's lounge