

while waiting for clients, we look for a conference room to work. We're planning an open house and the FBO is being renovated with new flooring and paint."

Steele stressed that safety always rules. If someone is scheduled to fly, no office duties are permitted that day. Clearly, their system is working: Steele has been with the company eight years, two pilots have been there six years and their newest crew member—the fourth pilot—already has two years on the job.

Perhaps so. But then there's GHK, a one-aircraft gas-exploration outfit in Bethany, OK, where things just couldn't be better. Chief Pilot Nick Verdea and another captain fly the company's Falcon 50 just about everywhere in the country and even the world. When things get real busy, they call on contract pilots. It's a small company; just 35 people, "very lean and mean," as Verdea describes it.

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Working for a small company has its advantages. You deal with the decision makers and get answers quickly, especially about time off. At GHK there are no set vacations or days off—it's simply "take what you need and don't abuse it," said Verdea.

"With a smaller company there's lots of flexibility," he said. But regardless of a company's size, it all comes down to the owner or your immediate boss—"how demanding they are," Verdea tells pilots to research a company's culture and business values before changing jobs. "Do your homework," he advised.

The flight schedule and expectations at GHK are not typical of business aviation: There are no pop-ups, most flights are scheduled a week out and the company strives to avoid long stretches away from home, so when the pilots aren't flying, they're enjoying life.

"I don't ask anyone to be in the office if you don't

have business here," he said. "Take the kids to Six Flags, go to a ball game in Dallas—just let me know. Take care of the family—just let me know."

Supporting that philosophy, the company limits time away to 30 days. "If it goes beyond that we'll change crews," Verdea explained.

Still, GHK pilots are focused first on the exploration business with attention to the details that give their employment value. "It's the simple things, the way you stock the airplane, a willingness to work with the FAA to obtain special approaches and get the ops specs for it or drive to headquarters to pick up some documents."

Since the flight department is an expense, said Verdea, it's critical that pilots always consider ways to do more. "You gotta think of the big picture. I'm a gas man."

Don Baldwin of Baldwin Aviation in Hilton Head, SC, uses many of these strategies and business models when he travels throughout the country helping flight departments improve their operations. He likes to consider himself a mentor rather than a consultant because "we actually provide the services to do the work."

A seasoned Gulfstream pilot who once ran Texaco's flight department, Baldwin believes keeping an open dialogue with aircraft owners is the best way to ensure a family-friendly work environment. Usually,

"there hasn't been a discussion with the principals about what's needed. The crew assumes they need to be available 24/7 and everyone's operating in a vacuum. This is more common than not."

For instance, when an owner insists that pilots be always available, he said the operator is obligated to show the owner what it would realistically take to offer that kind of service. "The department needs to tell the owner 'it's going to be difficult, but here are the options'. It takes understanding." In many cases, said Baldwin, it takes a willingness to consider nontraditional business solutions, such as having two companies share a pilot or creating a fractional share.

"If you have a good set of expectations it directly contributes to safety," he said. □

Paul Kosch, an 1,800-hour turboprop pilot for a Northern Virginia charter company, is a former newspaper reporter and editor.

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