

STAFFING A SELF MANAGED FLIGHT DEPARTMENT



I have written lately about different facets of operations. The articles touched upon the types of leadership that a great department needs. I have described maintenance programs, management companies and all of the areas

that go to make up a well run, high dispatch reliability aircraft and department.

In this month's article, I would like to drill down into specific staffing requirements for self-managed flight departments. As the title points out, my slant will be to delve into the self managed department rather than the outsourced managed programs like TAG, Jet Aviation or EJM.

Often as we have stated before, first time buyers or operators that either need a charter component for tax strategy or desire that component for collateral income will often choose an outsourced 135-management company. Let's now look at what it means to feel confident in the process and bring the operation in house. How does one staff to maximize efficiency and maintain the high dispatch reliability and safety standards that are sought after?

When starting this discussion, I always try to outline what I call the "Culture" of a department. This means looking first at past and projected use. For instance, how many nights on the road will the department have? How many total annual hours will the department be tasked with flying? Is it a single or multiple plane operation? Is the aircraft small, medium or large body? Is there an overseas component to the department's annual schedule? All of these answers taken together will begin to form the backbone of staffing requirements.

Of course pilots are a must and then maintenance personnel must be debated

as well as peripheral hangar personnel. Lets start, however, with the scheduler.

Most flight departments fly an average of 350 to 500 hours per year per plane. I have seen some fly at the pleasure of the owners as few as 100 hours per year and we have all talked to the crews at an FBO that are lamenting about the 700-hour per year schedule!

Often the flight scheduling duty falls to an internal admin of the organization. In other words, it is not considered a full time job, so it is delegated to an existing staff person not directly related to the flight department, rather than a new flight department hire. There are great web-based scheduling software programs that allow for viewing both at the flight department and corporate levels. Unless a department has multiple aircraft with 350-500 hours per year flown annually on each, this staffing method of the scheduler is adequate.

Next would be the discussion of flight personnel. I am rather adamant about this. I have seen departments with anywhere from 100-hour-a-year schedules to 500-hour-a-year schedules try to make do with one full time chief pilot and a pool of trained pick up people covering the second position. The rationale of the 100-hour department is obvious. "We hardly fly!" The higher demand departments' rationale are never rational and are usually budget driven. It is like the old saying for Cadillac owners, "If you have to ask the price of gas, you should not buy the Cadillac." If a department cannot employ a second pilot on a full time basis, sooner or later many areas of a potentially great operation will suffer.

Dispatch reliability, maintenance scheduling, basic trip preparation and finally safety can all be compromised with only one set of eyes watching full time! Two pilots whose duties are divided along trip and operational priorities will deliver a far better product, more often at lower annual overall cost. I promise!

The next area of staffing is for maintenance. We just helped a client buy a one-year-old aircraft. Plenty of warranty left. In fact, in addition to the

warranty, the aircraft came with five years of free maintenance. This had to be performed at the manufacturer's service center. When we built the budget for the buyer we put in a salary for a full time mechanic (by the way this operation was a 450-500 hour per year department with an international component).

The buyer said, "If you put in the mechanic, you just negated the free maintenance!" Believe me, having a flight schedule that is as critical as his, with as much travel will require a full-time mechanic.

Ultimately, minimizing the downtime, maintaining dispatch reliability and limiting supplemental lift needs will more than pay for the mechanic's salary. To have a capable person at home for the flight personnel to call with problems while on the road is invaluable. That maintenance person can be communicating with the service center, reporting back to the crew on troubleshooting solutions, quite often alleviating the need for the service center visit.

This problem solving and scheduling can save the cost of the mechanic several times over through sheer use of the plane. While the plane is at the service center the mechanic should be on-site daily with the plane. I have seen this type of attention bring greater warranty benefits to the plane.

Finally the need for other hangar personnel is driven more by physical plant size than hours flown. This extra person can be stocking and cleaning, and creating faster turn times; particularly in multiple aircraft operations.

As always, aviation is an expensive and valuable tool. It needs to be managed and scrutinized carefully with a keen eye towards safety, efficiency and cost controls!

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