

SAVVY MAINTENANCE / OPINION

Mechanic crisis

There are no longer enough A&Ps to maintain our GA airplanes

BY MIKE BUSCH



“THE ANNUAL I scheduled more than a year ago got cancelled on a five-week notice,” read a recent post to the Beechcraft Bonanza Owners Facebook group. The unhappy owner went on to say that it was going to be impossible for him to find another IA to do the annual inspection of his Bonanza, which was coming due in just five weeks.

The Bonanza owner posted the cancellation notice he received from his shop’s director of maintenance. In it, the director of maintenance said he was just not able to hire, train, and retain enough A&Ps to keep up with the shop’s scheduled workload. He also cited supply chain issues that delayed completion, and not enough hangar space to accommodate aircraft that were “in limbo” awaiting needed parts or outside work.

“Sometimes I just look at the shop schedule and sigh,” the director of maintenance wrote. “I have a hard time saying no, and that has led to working seven days a week for far too long. I cannot do that anymore. I need to cancel some upcoming annual appointments.”

Critical A&P shortage

This post by the Bonanza owner triggered a vigorous discussion among some of the 30 veteran A&P/IAs on Savvy Aviation’s technical team, quite a few of whom own and operate GA maintenance shops.

“We are struggling with the same issues,” said one who operates a shop in Pennsylvania. “Too much work, not enough help, and trying to regulate it. Our turn times for anything other than what used to be a normal annual have been unacceptably

long. Most clients have been understanding but some have been downright abusive.”

He said the shop started asking regulars to book their annuals a year in advance when they pick up their airplanes. “With the exception of a few small holes we are booked solid for the next 13 months. I managed to hire an additional A&P but to do that I had to increase my shop rate from \$110 to \$130 per hour.”

“A shop schedule doesn’t mean anything anymore because it is impossible to stay on schedule and things just get backed up more and more,” said another shop owner in New Jersey. “We provide maintenance for a couple of flight schools who operate 24 aircraft between them that flew over 1,400 hours last month. We give preference to flight school airplanes and to our other high utilization customers, and push the weekend flyers to the bottom of the list. The Continental emergency AD is not going to help!”

“We’re in the same boat,” said a shop owner in Tennessee. “We schedule all our regulars a year in advance when they pick up after annual. We had to stop taking on new clients for a while. We need more A&Ps but recruiting has become almost impossible. Hoping the schedule will lighten some due to customer attrition.”

Hard way to make a living

“Workflow is chaotic,” said the director of maintenance of a California repair station. “My maintenance hangar is 10,000 square feet and we have six full-time and four part-time mechanics on the shop floor plus two more handling parts and administration. When aircraft get stuck waiting for parts and components, I have to move the mechanics to other jobs. I’d really like one technician to stick with an aircraft from start to finish, but this never seems to work out. It’s expensive to let an aircraft sit without making progress. The overhead of tying up precious hangar space with stuck ‘project’ aircraft results in us losing money on them. We’ve had to raise our shop rate to \$165 an hour and there has not been one complaint. Our best A&P/IA got a raise, but is

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making noises about retiring and moving out of California.”

“Last year we had five prop strikes pop in as well as a major Cirrus composite repair that took over 400 hours,” said the DOM in New Jersey. “Things like that can really destroy your schedule.”

“My hangar is also about 10,000 square feet,” said the Pennsylvania DOM, “and it’s always jammed full of airplanes. I’ve worked here for most of my career. Twenty years ago we had between seven and 10 technicians, mostly A&Ps and several who were IAs. Now I’m down to two A&Ps and I’m the only IA in the shop. Recruiting qualified mechanics has been very difficult.”

“The parts situation is often desperate and has pushed us in directions I could never have imagined 10 years ago,” he continued. “We are building a machine shop so we can fabricate parts we need and can’t get anywhere else. Machining our own landing gear bushings is very labor intensive, but it beats purchasing new bushings that have an indefinite lead time.”

“A ‘normal’ annual inspection now takes about one month to complete, but normal annuals are becoming rare. We have far too many airplanes coming in for an annual inspection that turn out to need 100 to 200 hours of labor to make airworthy. The fleet is just getting old and tired. Our most difficult clients are the ones that just bought their airplane and didn’t know what they were buying and don’t understand the current maintenance environment.”

“There are quite a few days where I think about doing something else,” one shop owner told me, “but I’ve been working on airplanes since I was a kid. Other people who aren’t as into aviation as I am would probably have left a long time ago. From the looks of things many of them have.”

How do we solve this?

I have been watching this mechanic shortage worsen for years, wondering when it would get to the point of being intolerable. I think that time has come.

I have long believed that a big part of the solution is for the shop rates to go up, which will enable mechanic pay to go up, which will hopefully help the recruiting problem. As things presently stand, a good mechanic can make more working in the automotive

industry than in general aviation, and that is an absurdity given the increased level of liability that aviation involves.

Aviation shop rates need to be higher than automotive ones, and A&P pay needs to be higher than automotive mechanic pay. Aircraft owners might not be thrilled with the rate increases, but it’s better than having an out-of-annual airplane that can’t fly for months because nobody is available to do the inspection. I’ve talked to several shop owners who agree with me in principle that shop rates and mechanic pay are too low, but are afraid to raise rates for fear of sending their customers to the competition. Shop owners need to face the fact that the status quo is a prescription for bankruptcy. We need our maintenance shops to prosper and grow, not decline and eventually go out of business.

It used to be that the throughput of a maintenance shop was limited by the square footage of its maintenance hangar space. Not anymore. Now it’s limited by the number of mechanics the shop has. Most shops no longer have enough mechanics to work on all the airplanes they can fit in their hangar.

Given the current extreme A&P shortage, I think another part of the solution is that more owners are going to have to start doing their own oil changes and other preventive maintenance in order to avoid intolerable downtime. I also think that owners are going to start to have to take maximum advantage of the FAA’s “Coleal interpretation” that expands the scope of what an owner can do. By any measure, this is a major crisis for GA, and it’s going to get worse before it gets better. In the September 2020 issue of *AOPA Pilot*, I wrote a column titled “The Looming Mechanic Shortage.” Well, it ain’t looming anymore! ■
mike.busch@savvyaviation.com

▶ savvyaviation.com

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