



THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

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Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder

While this proverb dates back to the third century B.C., it is most recently cited by Benjamin Franklin in his 1741 *Poor Richard's Almanac*. In it he wrote, "Beauty, like supreme domination, is but supported by opinion."

In Washington, one cannot attend a meeting without someone talking about "raising the bar." The question that must

14 CFR Part 65 is quite adequate to assure that technicians only accomplish those tasks that they are authorized to perform, with the proper equipment and the appropriate data. Part 147 contains a curriculum that is acceptable as a minimum standard for an apprentice technician. But, employers want more. Employers want apprentices with more advanced skills, better training and ex-

the argument that the FAA is the only entity capable of raising the bar. Why is it that aircraft maintenance should be different than non-aviation trades? It is our industry, let us raise the bar.

The FAA has a role in assuring the highest standard of aviation safety. But its role is specific: regulatory oversight of aviation law. They provide for a minimum level of safety through the development, maintenance and enforcement of aviation regulations. With few exceptions, the FAA does this well. But what about bringing the aviation industry to the next level by elevating the professionalism of the trade? That is the responsibility of the industry, not the government. Many trades are regulated by government, but none are promoted by government. That is not government's role.

This industry goes well beyond what is expected to advance the professionalism of the individuals, the companies and the industry. Why is it so difficult to recognize? There is research that indicates that if you eat at a five-star restaurant every day, soon the food loses its appeal, and you might as well be eating at the corner diner. Maybe the same is

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be asked is: "Why?" Is it because safety has been compromised, or is it that the industry norm is so far above the bar, and the regulations lag behind?

There are ongoing attempts to "raise the bar" for aircraft technicians, and the question has to be asked, Why? Is the aircraft technician "un-safe?" No, of course not. The regulations assure safety and airworthiness have not been compromised. It just feels good, so it must be right to raise the bar.

posure to more advanced equipment. Employers want the bar raised. Now the question to be asked is: Are we "raising the bar" as a matter of safety, or is it to improve productivity?

Advancing the aircraft maintenance profession requires raising the bar. Each new generation should be better educated, better trained and capable of higher productivity. Simply because the minimum standard is regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration doesn't support

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true for aircraft maintenance. We have done so much for so long that the professionalism we demonstrate has become common. Everyone looks to the forest to find faults, but forgets to look at the trees for the grandeur.

For years I have listened to (and often debated) “experts” who have demeaned my (and oddly enough, their) industry with their opinion of what FAA certificate data meant about the aircraft maintenance industry. And, that somehow the statistics were a condemnation about the professionalism of this trade and how outside people viewed this industry. They use this misrepresentation to support their views and their initiatives. The problem is, they focus on one statistic and dismiss all of the others.

They begin by citing that in the early '90s, we had well over 360,000 certificated mechanics but dropped to a low of 310,850 in 2001; a loss of nearly 50,000 talented people.

But there are a number of issues that these “experts” fail to take into account.

In the early '90s, the FAA's database listed all certificates ever issued. Have you ever heard that Charles Taylor was still listed on the FAA's roles back then? In the mid-'90s, the FAA started to clean up its database and removed everyone over the age of 70, assuming that they likely are not actively plying their trades

and enjoying a hard-earned retirement. So, immediately the database dropped some 30,000 certificates. The next database cleanup was the separation of repairmen from A&Ps. Another 25,000 or so names were rearranged on the pages. Today, the FAA counts 370,416 professional maintainers in the mechanic and repairman databases.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, aircraft and avionics equipment mechanics and service technicians held about 140,300 jobs in 2008; about 87 percent of these workers were aircraft mechanics and service technicians; the rest were avionics technicians. These actual employment numbers have remained relatively flat over the past 10 years.

Employment of aircraft and avionics equipment mechanics and service technicians primarily is concentrated in a small number of industries. Almost half of aircraft and avionics equipment mechanics and service technicians worked in air transportation and support activities for air transportation. About 21 percent worked in aerospace product and parts manufacturing, and about 15 percent worked for the federal government. The remainder worked for FBOs and independent maintenance organizations.

So, why all the negativity about our chosen profession? Among other

things, I think it's simply that some people focus on the forest and forget to look past the foliage and see the trees. Have the airlines shifted maintenance from in-house to independent repair stations? Sure, in some cases. Have the businesses in Wichita seen more than their share of the fallout from the economic downturn? Absolutely. Did business aircraft repair stations see the near collapse of their completion business? Yes, again. And the general aviation industry as a whole is seeing recreational flying and all of the industries that support it taking a beating. But, we are not the first industry to feel these pressures, and we won't be the last.

Let's get back to the men and women who support this industry, and why our numbers were reasonably flat over the past 10-year period. And, most importantly, why do the “talking heads” keep scheming to “make us professionals” instead of recognizing our professionalism and simply offering tools to continue our professional growth?

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Allow me to explain. In February 2011, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that labor productivity increased at a 2.6 percent annual rate during the fourth quarter of 2010, which is actually what got me thinking about the talking heads and their “we need them to make us a professional” message and the trees they are missing. You see, aviation, and aviation maintenance trades have consistently increased their productivity year after year for nearly 20 years. And, think about what you do, and how you use technology to do things better.

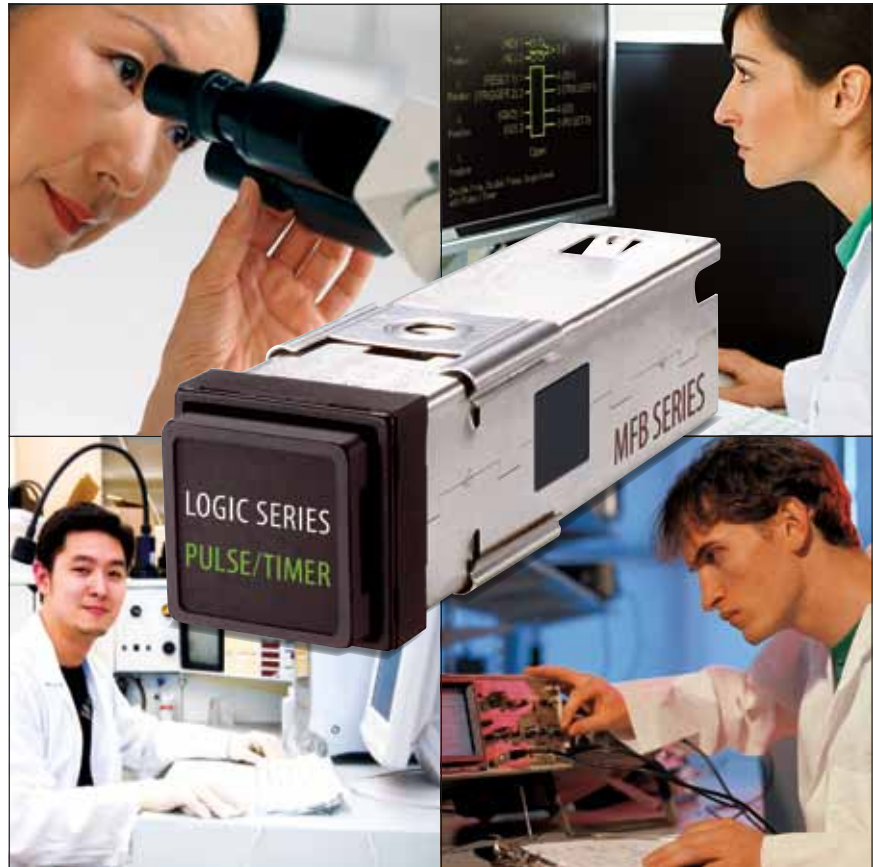
Think about the tasks you did 20 years ago that were labor intensive that today are performed more efficiently through consolidations and centrally located specialized facilities. What about the use of the Internet and how it has simplified ordering supplies and parts? Or, the communication mediums that we use today: the cellphone call from the ramp or run-up area back to the shop to check on an issue rather than shutting down and traveling back to the shop. How about the built-in diagnostics that modern equipment contains?

In nearly every facet of our industry, technology has made a huge improvement in our productivity. For those who choose to look at the forest and say we are forced to do more with less, I’d rather say that technology has allowed us to do more. By identifying, studying and understanding the benefits of technology, the professionalism in the aviation maintenance industry has created a super technician, able to leap tall empenngages in a single bound and be nearly 50 percent more productive than a technician 40 years ago when I started my aviation career.

And the final question: why can’t our talking heads recognize our professionalism? Maybe when they look

in the mirror they fail to see a professional: you can’t be professional if you don’t see a professional looking back at you from the mirror. You can’t see the grandeur of the trees if your eyes keep focused on the forest.

So to plagiarize Mr. Franklin one last time: Professionalism is but supported by opinion. In my opinion, you are the best. Thank you for being the professional you are and for being a positive role model for my chosen profession. □



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