

**REMARKS BY
PAULA P. HOCHSTETLER
PRESIDENT, AIRPORT CONSULTANTS COUNCIL**

**"BEST PRACTICES? WATCH THIS!"
FAA EASTERN REGION AIRPORTS DIVISION CONFERENCE
HERSHEY, PENNSYLVANIA**

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LUNCHEON**

Introduction

Good afternoon and thank you, Bill, for your introduction. I'd also like to take this opportunity to publicly compliment Bill and others in the FAA Eastern Region for being extremely helpful and responsive to ACC's staff. We've called on the Airports Division about a variety of issues during the past couple of years and with their assistance we've been able to resolve several important matters with relative ease. Again, thanks.

As I look around the room I see a number of familiar faces. While I'm obviously not familiar with the details of your projects I know enough about the process to be impressed with all that you're accomplishing as airport sponsors, federal and state employees, and consultants. This is a demanding business that requires us all to work hard, but at the same time I hope you enjoy what you do.

The first FAA regional conference I attended was in Orlando shortly after I started in the business as an airport planner. Fifteen years later on behalf of the ACC I was a luncheon speaker at the FAA Central Region Conference, and today I find it particularly fun to be with you. Why? I suppose it's similar to pilots who like the smell of jet fuel. As I have a chance to talk with you about Part 77 versus TERPS, runway safety areas, the placement of NAVAIDS and what can and can't be shown on ALPs nowadays, it takes me back to a familiar place that I'll always enjoy.

In case some of you aren't familiar with the Airport Consultants Council, we're a trade association located in the Washington, DC area with nearly 250 members firms.

Our primary objective is to represent the concerns and interests of the airport consultant and supplier community and in so doing, we find ourselves frequently interfacing and sharing our expertise with the FAA, states, and airport sponsors on technical issues.

We're celebrating our 30th anniversary this year and recognize value in this event to the extent that three of us from ACC Headquarters are here in Hershey this week.

In addition to me, Cari Tate, ACC's Manager of Marketing and Membership, and TJ Schulz, ACC's Vice President, who specializes in procurement, legislation and regulatory matters, are here. Would you both please stand?

I encourage all of you here to get to know us. Who knows when a quick phone call to ACC will save you a lot of time and effort?

As for the topic that Bill asked me to address today, best practices, I'd like to ease into the subject by asking each of you to think back to your past for a minute. Did you at some time utter the words 'Watch this' to a sibling, a neighbor, or a colleague?

In 1982 a 33-year old truck driver from California named Larry Walters was one of those. He got the idea that it would be great fun to float above his house with a six pack of beer and a bb-gun in an aluminum lawn chair tied to 42 weather balloons.

He ended up surprising himself and several airline pilots when his improvised aircraft reached 16,000 feet. Eventually, Walters used his bb-gun to deflate enough balloons to return to earth.

And what were the consequences? The FAA cited him for four violations of the Federal Aviation Act, including operating a "civil aircraft for which there is no airworthiness certificate" and operating an aircraft within an airport traffic area "without establishing and maintaining two-way communications with the control tower."

The stunt earned Walters a \$1,500 fine from the FAA, the top prize from the Bonehead Club of Dallas, the altitude record for gas-filled clustered balloons (which could not be officially recorded because he was unlicensed and unsanctioned) as well as an appearance on "The Tonight Show" and the "Late Night with David Letterman" show.

The lesson here is that best practices can be a lot of fun, but when they've not been vetted they often end up with the meek postscript of 'It seemed like a good idea at the time.'

The best practices that are relevant to this conference and to your professional lives, are not quite as colorful, but have been vetted and do have value.

So, what do I plan to highlight for you today? First, the updated *ACC/FAA Best Practices* document that's scheduled to be released next month, and secondly, a series of suggestions pertaining to employee recruitment and retention.

ACC/FAA Best Practices

Concerning the ACC/FAA Best Practices update, the original document was compiled in 2001. During the past year a team of eight, including the Eastern Region's very own Lori Pagnanelli, have been updating the paper.

The overall goal of this document is to improve business processes, foster improved communication, and help the FAA and airport consultants to better serve their customers, the airport sponsors.

Certainly, interaction among FAA and ACC representatives varies considerably. Therefore, these best practices are not intended to be either definitive or mandatory. Rather, the document contains recommended guidelines. In addition, while some of the items specify actions by consultants or the FAA, they may apply equally to both parties.

Although this update focuses on the FAA and consultant community, the roles and responsibilities of airport sponsors and state aviation officials also need to be kept in mind.

Some state aviation departments provide much of the guidance and reviews normally provided by the FAA and are key participants in airport projects, particularly in Block Grant States. Because of this, the best practices set forth in this document can be equally applicable to those states that fulfill FAA's role vis-à-vis sponsors or consultants.

So what's covered in the document?

Interaction among individuals involved in projects is extremely important. Therefore, best practice opportunities relating to relationships, communication and conflict resolution are presented first in the paper. Don't worry; it's not touchy-feely stuff.

The rest of the best practice opportunities are identified according to the following project and airport development stages:

- Consultant Selection and Procurement,
- Planning,
- Environmental Processing,
- Capital Improvement Plan Development,
- Pre-Design and Project Formulation,
- Design,
- Project Implementation, and
- Project Closeout.

The section on consultant selection and procurement will be of particular interest to many here in the room because a number of enhancements and considerations for airport sponsors that are seeking to procure consultant services are addressed including:

- Advertising RFQs and RFPs
- Properly defining scopes and services
- Having an effective selection process, including suggestions on how to conduct interviews;
- Avoiding pitfalls that could jeopardize federal eligibility for federally-funded projects, for example, requesting cost information such as hourly rates in the selection process and broad form indemnification language in contracts.

The updated version of ACC/FAA's Best Practices document has already been vetted by the ADOs and Regions and is currently being reviewed by Kirk Shaffer and Kate Lang at FAA Headquarters.

As I previously mentioned, it should be ready for public release within a month. We will be sure to post it on ACC's website, and I believe the FAA plans to do the same. We're also talking about having a copy possibly emailed directly to the attendees of this event when it becomes available.

Employee Recruitment and Retention

The second aspect of best practices I want to touch on today deals with the recruitment and retention of qualified airport development experts.

The take away message of my remarks is that employee recruitment and retention is one of the most vexing challenges currently facing airport consulting firms.

- The number of seasoned, experienced airport experts is dwindling,
- There is an overall shortage of available talent, and
- Firms are having a hard time finding enough skilled workers.

If that weren't enough, once hired, organizations often have difficulty keeping these people onboard. Ask most senior airport consultants and they'll tell you they have open positions they are looking to fill.

But it's not only consulting firms that are being impacted. Some airports and FAA locations are similarly challenged when it comes to retaining staff long term. And for those who aren't directly impacted, take note because it's also becoming evident that these challenges can impact the efficiency and quality of work being accomplished at airports.

So what's going on?

According to Leigh Brahnham, Founder and CEO of a management organization called [Keeping the People, Inc.](#),

- There are fewer graduates available; and
- The pool of experienced design professionals is decreasing.

According to a survey by the Institute of Management & Administration, of the architectural firms grossing more than \$50 million, 100% agreed that recruitment and retention is a major concern.

A nationwide survey of 205 firms conducted by the American Council of Engineers Companies, report that

- The median turnover of professional and technical staff is 10 percent;
- At firms with more than 500 employees it 13.5 percent, and
- In comparison, administrative and support staff median turnover is just 6.7 percent.

Basically, there is a dearth of seasoned airport experts. Those with experience under their belts are in high demand, thereby forcing firms to provide higher and higher compensation. This makes the current market quite brutal.

Firms are also striving to recruit young staff, right out of college. But it can be a challenge to persuade these new employees to stay with a firm for 5 or more years.

Some of you may still be saying "Who cares?" Well, a tight market commands better compensation, and this can be a driving factor behind increasing fees and hourly rates. And you can well imagine that higher costs are exceptionally relevant to airport sponsors and the FAA!

What can we do about this challenge that faces our industry?

The first step is to better understand the real dynamics of employees and how they make decisions.

To begin with, according to 19,700 third party post-exit surveys compiled by the Saratoga Institute of California, the root cause of 88 percent of voluntary turnovers is due to factors other than better pay.

Mr. Brahnam gleaned from over 4,000 comments compiled during a separate set of exit interviews that there are seven general categories of hidden reasons employees leave. As you listen to the following reasons, consider which of them may be applicable to your workplace and to your job situation:

- The job or workplace is not as expected,
- There is a mismatch between the job and the person,
- There is too little coaching and feedback,
- There are too few growth and advancement opportunities,
- Workers feel devalued and unrecognized,
- The stress from overwork is too much and there's a work-life imbalance, and
- There is a lack of trust and confidence in senior leaders.

Meanwhile, 89 percent of managers surveyed thought that employees leave because of better compensation. This demonstrates a serious disconnect between management and their staff!

What conclusions can be reached?

The way to successfully recruit and retain employees is to provide what they are actually looking for in a job.

Some of the actions that can be taken during the interview process are be honest about the job, ask behavior-based questions, and check references with skill and persistence.

While on the job, with regard to coaching and feedback, get the employee's perspective first, then give your own, and lastly, merge the two into an agreement on next steps.

In terms of growth and advancement, give employees a chance to assess themselves and talk with them about their talents, needs and options within your organization.

To avoid a sense of being devalued and unrecognized? Ask your staff what they think and really listen, then implement as many of their ideas as possible.

As for the challenge of overwork, explore options that meet the needs of employees and benefit your organization.

Lastly, the only way to avoid a loss of trust and confidence in senior leaders is for those leaders to earn the confidence of their employees by following through on the actions we've just discussed and by instilling a healthy culture of trust, hope, worth and competence.

One last item I'd like to touch on is recruiting recent college graduates. We recently asked David Byer of Quadrex Associates who also teaches courses at the Florida Institute of Technology, for his advice. He offers the following five suggestions for consulting firms that want to enhance their success:

- Develop close ties with professors and instructors. These professors are interested in steering their “kids” to good firms that offer rewarding and diverse opportunities,
- Visit schools often. Perhaps volunteer as a guest speaker for classes,
- Proactively offer internships,
- Help universities develop their academic programs and curricula, and
- Consider offering financial or other contributions to college programs.

This seems like pretty reasonable advice.

The spring 2008 edition of ACC's magazine, *AirportConsulting* includes articles that expand on the employee recruitment and retention topics that I've talked about today. There are several copies of this spring edition in the center of your luncheon tables and if perchance none are left stop by ACC's booth in the exhibit hall. We have more copies available there.

Do keep the Airport Consultants Council in mind if you're seeking technical expertise relating to airport development and operations. Our members represent an incredible pool of talent and our association is looking forward to working with our partners here in the FAA Eastern Region, with airports and with consultants.

We look forward to joining with you as we sort out how best to serve our ultimate client, the traveling public, and through the use of well proven best practices it will be quite

satisfying for us to collectively and with confidence look at the traveling public, and say, "Watch this!"

With that I'd like to thank you again, Bill, for inviting me and thanks to each of you for listening.

End.