

**“Looking Forward: The Future of America’s Aviation Maintenance
and Manufacturing Workforce”**
Statement of Delta Air Lines before the Aviation Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
February 11, 2020

Thank you, Chairman Larsen and Ranking Member Graves, for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am Joe McDermott, a Managing Director in the Technical Operations division of Delta Air Lines, or TechOps. I am responsible primarily for the strategy surrounding recruitment, training and cabin maintenance.

I’ve spent my entire civilian career at Delta, having joined the company in 1991 after leaving the Air Force. All that time has been spent in TechOps: from a licensed aviation maintenance technician (AMT) working directly on flight controls and landing gear to overseeing Atlanta’s line maintenance with responsibility for 1,000 personnel. Throughout my career I’ve had the opportunity to learn and grow at a company that truly invests in its employees.

As the largest aviation maintenance repair and overhaul (MRO) group in North America, Delta TechOps employs more than 10,000 highly skilled technicians, engineers, and other support employees. Together, we provide full-service maintenance to more than 875 Delta aircraft, and more than 150 other airline, military and government customers.

Though Delta has a more complex fleet than other commercial carriers, our maintenance teams do an incredible job getting our customers safely to their destination, on-time and with a great onboard experience. The dedication, skill and hard work of our employees drive Delta’s industry-leading operational reliability. Delta TechOps employees truly are the best in the business.

My nearly 30-year tenure at Delta is not unique to me – our people are proud and passionate about what they do and the company they work for. This loyalty is the result of a strong Delta culture grounded in the belief that our employees are at the core of our success. Delta invests billions annually in our people and the technology they need to achieve the highest levels of safety and operational excellence.

Delta’s maintenance workforce receives industry-leading total compensation and benefits. Top-of-scale mechanics make an average base salary of more than \$100,000. And they can achieve this pay after 7.5 years of service – approximately 75% of mechanics currently earn top-of-scale pay, a reflection of the seniority of our workforce.

This compensation does not include Delta's robust profit-sharing program. In fact, this Friday, our profit-sharing program will pay out \$1.6 billion to our employees, which equates to 2 months additional salary per employee. For each of the past six years, we have returned more than \$1 billion in profit sharing to our deserving workforce.

Our culture, commitment to employees, and of course, our compensation are all factors in the loyalty that our workforce demonstrates through long-tenured careers. Once we start at Delta, we stay at Delta. And while that loyalty results in a highly skilled and experienced team, it also deepens the broader workforce challenge faced by the entire industry - a large portion of our TechOps workforce is nearing retirement. More than 50% of our skilled and trade TechOps workforce will be eligible to retire this year. This challenge is reflected in similar statistics across the industry; the 2019 Boeing Pilot and Technician Outlook projects demand for 632,000 commercial aviation maintenance technicians worldwide over the next 20 years¹.

To address this challenge, Delta has developed and deployed a multi-pronged recruitment and professional development effort. From middle-schoolers to seasoned professionals, Delta is working to build interest in aviation and train the best and brightest for these highly-skilled careers. For TechOps, Delta launched our comprehensive Pipeline Strategy. The strategy is an end-to-end approach focused on leveraging key partnerships for recruiting, building technical proficiency inside and outside the organization, and creating internal development and advancement opportunities.

I'd like to briefly touch on a few of the programs that comprise our Pipeline Strategy, beginning with how we leverage key partnerships. By working across the academic community, regional partners and the military, Delta can recruit and train individuals for highly-skilled positions that do not require a 4-year college degree.

AMT School Partnerships/Potential Full Time Employee

Perhaps the most robust element of the Strategy is Delta's AMT School Partnership program. Delta partners with 50 schools across the U.S., including Everett Community College in Washington State, Aviation High School on Long Island, and Minneapolis College in Minnesota, among others. Delta partners with these schools and technical training programs to identify and mentor the next generation of AMTs. Delta provides support for the school's curriculum, including participating on advisory boards and offering training opportunities for instructors, access for students to internal Delta training, and visits by Delta representatives for job shadowing and career guidance.

¹ https://www.boeing.com/resources/boeingdotcom/commercial/market/pilot-technician-services/assets/downloads/2019_pto_infographic.pdf

Delta also donates serviceable parts, engines, and airframes to schools for real-world, hands-on maintenance experience.

Our school partnership program ensures the student curriculum is aligned with the on-the-job skills mechanics use most, while Delta branding provides a recruitment tool for the school. Providing a clear career path, however, is critical for recruiting well-trained AMTs. Through Delta's Potential Full Time Employee program (PFE), the best students from these partner schools receive additional vocational training and contingent employment at Delta. The PFE program offers a chance for the new graduate to refine their skills and determine whether Delta is a good employment fit. At the same time, it provides us the opportunity to observe a potential candidate's performance, qualifications, and work habits before offering them a permanent position.

To supplement these efforts, in 2018, Delta Air Lines Foundation disbursed grants totaling \$350,000 to nine aviation maintenance training programs across the U.S. The grants allow the programs to enhance their curriculum development, projects and material support, increasing students' awareness, knowledge, and skills in the areas of Avionics/Electrical and Composite/Structures.

Regional Airline Partnerships

Delta TechOps also works closely with our regional airline partners on workforce issues, a natural connection given our interlocking workforce needs. Delta's regional partners are critical to our broader network structure, so any issues they have will ultimately affect our mainline operations. Rather than competing for talent, we collaborate to improve AMT schools, enhance recruiting opportunities, provide mentoring opportunities, and establish a progressive employment flow between the organizations. Partnering in this manner exponentially increases the efficiency and effectiveness of hiring strategies for Delta and our regional partners, bolstering the broader pipeline of experienced skilled employees to meet our combined workforce demands.

Military Potential Employee (MPE)

The military is a key part of our recruitment strategy, and we are extremely proud of our veteran workforce at Delta. Across the company, we employ approximately 12,000 veterans; veterans comprise 20% of the TechOps population. Our Military Potential Employee (MPE) program provides structured vocational training – job training and hands-on experience – and mentorships for Service Members within the final 180 days of their enlistment.

We are pleased to share with you today that after months of hard work and a rigorous application process, Delta has been accepted into the Department of Defense (DoD)

SkillBridge program. This unique effort, along with the Army's Career Skills Program, builds on our MPE program. Service members continue to be paid by the military while Delta provides housing and on-the-job training. Both the MPE and Skillbridge are a "win-win": facilitating the transition to the civilian sector with rewarding, well-paid jobs, while helping Delta to recruit hard-to-find skillsets directly from the military. Delta is proud to be the only commercial air carrier in the program and to be listed on the Skillbridge website, an important tool for service members to learn about job training opportunities.

Other Elements of the Pipeline Strategy

All three of these programs focus on expanding the recruitment pipeline. However, to ensure we truly can meet future workforce needs, we must also provide advancement and development tools to our current employees.

The Externship Experience is an entry-level mentorship program for active employees who have an airframe and powerplant (A&P) license or are enrolled in an approved Delta Partner school. This program gives participants hands-on practice and aircraft touch-time in the operation, providing experience that connects to their curriculum and prepares them for the tasks of the Aircraft Support Mechanic (ASM) role. Similarly, the Apprentice Program provides a year-long mentorship opportunity, including quarterly coaching and skills training, for current ASM employees with an A&P license.

Delta's progressive leadership development programs offer structured development opportunities and coaching for high potential employees to develop leadership skills and business acumen. These include on-the-job training, self-paced learning, job shadowing, and leadership mentoring to prepare for future leadership roles. For example, Delta TechOps College Achieve Pathway (CAP) Program seeks to enhance lifelong learning among Delta TechOps employees worldwide through alliances with universities. The program identifies affordable online degree programs that are relevant to career enhancement at Delta.

Engaging the Next Generation

As the current workforce ages and retirements increase, the ability to meet future workforce needs requires a steady supply of newly certified mechanics. Unfortunately, estimates show that technical schools are operating at only half of their capacity. Approximately 17,000 more students could be accommodated without any school expansion². Often, stigma associated with technical colleges deters young people from pursuing skills-based training. Building interest in careers in aviation maintenance at an earlier age now is pivotal to developing a large pool of skilled applicants in the future.

² <https://www.atec-amt.org/pipeline-report.html>

The TechOps Outreach program seeks to educate our potential workforce on the benefits of a career in TechOps while they are making critical life choices as high school students. It offers these students the ability to interact with and be encouraged by AMT role models, who can give them a realistic day-in-the life overview as well as hands-on practice with tools, aircraft parts and some of the problem solving that is part of the job. The Outreach program also provides a venue to reach the influencers of the next generation, such as parents, teachers, and school counselors to help shape their perception of aviation maintenance as a rewarding, stable career.

This effort promotes aviation maintenance as a quality career choice – and highlights Delta as a desirable employer. More importantly, however, it changes the narrative of a technical career from an alternative to college to that of a pathway into occupations supported by postsecondary degrees, certifications and credentials. A recent internal survey shows that over 50% of TechOps employees have earned an Associate's degree or above, and an additional 20% hold a certificate of some kind.

What Can Congress Do to Help

Delta is proud of our efforts to recruit, train, and retain employees. And this extends beyond TechOps: Delta has implemented similar programs in other workgroups, such as the Propel Program for pilots. In 2018, Delta launched this effort to meet our needs for trained pilots; we expect to hire 8,000 pilots over the next decade as our current pilot workforce reaches the mandatory retirement age. Through partnerships with schools and the military, Propel helps aspiring pilots overcome barriers such as career path uncertainty, a shortage of flight instructors and the cost of quality flight training.

The workforce challenges ahead, however, can't be solved by the airlines alone. We are proud to advocate for changes at the federal and state level that will expand access to skills and training needed to meet tomorrow's demand. In Georgia, Delta successfully advocated to place Aviation Technology on the list of programs deemed as a High Career Demand Initiative. This allows those pursuing a career as an aviation mechanic to receive free tuition through the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG). Additionally, Delta is collaborating with TCSG to modernize the Aviation Technology curriculum to ensure graduates are job ready upon graduation.

And there are measures Congress should take to support the industry. We appreciate the establishment of a grant program for AMT schools in the last FAA bill (Sec. 625), along with the subsequent funding provided through the appropriations process.

From Delta's perspective, however, the more critical measure in the FAA bill is the provision to modernize AMT training regulations (Sec. 624) – FAA's Part 147 requirements. The current regulations were put in place decades ago and everyone agrees they are woefully out of date. They have not kept up with the changes in the industry and retain requirements that serve no purpose (e.g. wood and cloth aircraft materials). Without reform, Part 147 regulations will continue to be a drag on training.

The FAA bill required a final rule modernizing AMT training requirement by March 2019. While FAA issued a Supplemental Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (SNPRM) in April 2019, it is still not clear when a final rule will be issued. Ensuring FAA issues this rule quickly is the best and most immediate measure Congress could take to address AMT workforce issues.

Thank you again for holding this important hearing, and I look forward to your questions.