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African MROs should Leverage the Youth to Avoid the Looming Critical Skills Shortage

A study published by recruitment consultancy AeroProfessional on their website shows that 27% of the aircraft engineering workforce is due to retire within the next decade. However, this study – and others like it – mostly pertain to countries in the global north. So one might argue that the challenges faced there differ from those in Africa.

According to the African Union, Africa has the youngest population of any continent in the world, with more than 400 million young people aged between the ages of 15 and 35 years. This is encouraging because we as a continent can leverage on this demographic to ensure that we do not fall into the skills shortage trap that many other regions are facing.

How then can we as an industry ensure sustainable workforce growth and retention?

We need to demystify the profession



Of all the facets of aviation, aircraft maintenance engineering is one of the least known by the flying public. Many a child will know they want to become pilots or cabin crew. However, when it comes to aircraft maintenance, not much is known to non-aviators of the critical role the engineers and technicians play in ensuring the safety of passengers and crew alike.

Greater visibility can be achieved by the industry being more vocal about maintenance professionals. For instance, airlines and Maintenance and Repair Organisations (MROs) could plug into the various career development clubs in high schools where young minds can be exposed to the various aspects of engineering and maintenance in aviation.

We need to invest in learning and development

As an industry, we need to invest by providing funding to universities and colleges that offer aviation engineering courses. In addition, both airlines and MROs can partner with universities and colleges to provide consistent on-job-training to the students of those partner institutions. This would provide mutual benefit to the organisations as it provides needed manpower the airlines and MROs, while ensuring the students graduate with industry exposure thus making them better suited to the market.

Further to this, MROs can set up their own apprenticeship programs – customised to meet the individual organisation's particular needs – to start to grow a rich talent pool of well-trained maintenance staff that would be up to industry standards upon completion of their apprenticeships.

We need to review remuneration of aviation maintenance staff

In the studies showing the dwindling industry numbers, a recurrent theme highlighted as the reason for low entry into the profession is the remuneration and working conditions – which are often not considered to be favourable by those already in the industry. Additionally, with a basic initial type course – e.g. for a Boeing 737 NG or A320 – starting at roughly USD 3000 (exclusive of travel and accommodation for weeks) the younger generation shy away from aircraft maintenance.

There should be a collective drive to improve the working conditions within the industry, a general review of the remuneration practices on the continent and minimisation of the barriers



to entry by subsidising the costs of training. At the same time, a more deliberate focus into the mental health of aircraft maintenance professionals – for example due to work related stress – will aid in reducing the brain drain that has wrought the continent for decades. All of these things will make the profession more attractive to the upcoming generations.

There is a Kiswahili saying that goes “Haba na haba hujaza kibaba” loosely translating to, small incremental actions result in the filling of reserves. The changes proposed here will in no way be a silver bullet that solves all the manpower shortages faced in the industry. However, if we take the steps to start in this way, little by little we will ensure there is continuity. And who knows, should we leverage the youth of our populations, in a few years’ time, we might just find our continent as titans of the aircraft engineering and maintenance industry.

[Source](#)

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Esleen Muniale is an aircraft engineer by training, having worked in various roles over the years from aircraft maintenance, quality assurance to safety. She started her career in 2010 as a trainee at an airline in Asia and has since worked in both the general and commercial aviation sectors in Africa. She has a BEng (Hons) in Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering, Diplomas in Aircraft Maintenance Engineering, Airline Quality Management and Safety Management for Airlines.