

WORK EXPERIENCE ROBERT WILLIS

A business where time is money

An engineer by trade, Robert Willis is the owner and founder of Canada's Airstart. The company supplies spare parts for the world's commercial airlines, MRO and leasing firms – and a quick turnaround is critical for all

Have you always been interested in aviation?

Ever since I can remember, I played with airplanes, built models of airplanes, flew and usually crashed said models. I was that kid that should have been on the soccer field on Sunday mornings, but was at the local airport with my dad spotting and filming the McDonnell Douglas DC-8s, Boeing 707s and Lockheed Tristars.

Tell us about your career

I had always wanted to be a pilot, but I grew up in the middle of the first oil crisis, and common sense took over. "Why be a pilot?" I said to myself. "There won't be airplanes in 30 years, as there won't be jet fuel in 30 years. Pick a job that will pay the mortgage." So I went to school to become a professional engineer and had a relatively gratifying career designing highways, urban systems and airports. Not long after that I decided to get my private pilot licence, fell in love with flying, and left my job as an engineer to become a bush pilot in Northern Canada. I did that for several years. On a ski vacation I ran into a Cathay Pacific 747 pilot at the pub at the bottom of the mountain. He convinced me to apply to Cathay, saying my flying experience and training as a professional engineer was just what they were looking for! Well into the application process they told me I was three months too old to be considered as a pilot. That was my cue to try to stay in aviation but perhaps not as a pilot.



The cost of grounding an aircraft can be huge, so every second counts

After moving around in management at FedEx, I founded Airstart in 2000 and we now proudly support over 75 airlines, maintenance, repair and overhaul and leasing companies.

How do you remain competitive in such a crowded market?

In a recent survey, our customers said they were impressed with how quickly Airstart responds to their queries, whether they require a component for a grounded aircraft, status on an order, request for an expedited turnaround time for a critical component, or just simple information or perhaps a referral to another service provider. The aviation industry is unique in that every second counts. The total cost of a grounded aircraft can be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars per day for an airline, so there is no messing around and no time to mull

things over during a coffee break. When I started the company, Airstart was the only company that I was aware of that used a system on smart phones for instant replies to its customer base – regardless of the time, day or night. During our early days I was able to master the art of waking up on the first ring of our AOG [aircraft on ground] mobile phone and sound wide awake at 3:00am. In addition, our inventory is excellent. We stock practically every in-demand part for the fleets we support, and due to our forward stocking locations, the part can be delivered in hours, sometimes minutes, to locations around the world.

What does a typical day involve?

I would love to say "my day starts when..." and "ends with" but in this industry calendars and clocks melt into one another and you find yourself immersed in avia-

tion from the moment you wake until the moment you drift off, always in discussions, email, BBM, Whatsapp, whether in the boardroom or at the dinner table. Typical days involve a healthy dose of routine, combined with new customer pitches for component support, marketing updates (we display and attend roughly 10 trade shows per year – each with a different theme), pricing strategy sessions, and always inventor acquisition meetings, daily – whether it be bidding on an aircraft for leasing or part-out – or purchasing the rotatable /consumable inventory from an airline that has just changed fleets or liquidated. I try to stay fit by engaging in Canada's national pastime – ice hockey.

What are the most enjoyable aspects of your job?

For sure, being able to interact with hundreds of people every month that share one common passion – everything aviation.

The least?

This is an all-consuming business we work in and it is difficult to disengage. On more than one occasion I have dropped my BlackBerry from a ski lift while on vacation with my family. Work-life balance can sometimes be a mirage. ■



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