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Taking flight

Many business professionals are finding a lot of benefits to having an airplane available without a schedule attached to it

BY SARAH COX

No longer is it solely the heavy hitters who travel by private airplane for business. According to Lynchburg's Virginia Aviation owner James A. Lampman, the profile includes executives in manufacturing companies, retail sales, banking, finance and construction companies. "Charter for business is a wonderful alternative to flying on [commercial] airlines," says Lampman.

And the cost is not a serious factor. Attorney John Rocovich of Moss & Rocovich in Roanoke says he doesn't really have an alternative. "It's essential to me to provide the service I need to provide for my clients, so I don't really have a choice. Our goal is to break even on the airplane, but to give us the transportation efficiencies to give good work for our clients."

This firm owns its own airplane and, unlike others who also own their own, Moss & Rocovich doesn't even have the time to lease it



Roanoke lawyers Bill Gust (right) and plane owner Matt Broughton

out. Attorneys fly, says Rocovich, between 500 and 550 hours a year, all over the United States. Since 1977, Rocovich has been piloting his own airplane, but he says he wasn't one of the first to do so in Roanoke. "If I remember correctly, First National Exchange Bank and the Krish motel chain had [aircraft]."

The question for business travelers is, can they afford not to?

Bill Gust, an attorney with Gentry Locke Rakes & Moore in Roanoke says it's an efficiency issue, "partly in light of the service from Roanoke. We're a regional law firm with clients in a five-state regional area. We need to fly to where we need to be and be back the same day. Air connections from Roanoke leave something to be desired. All we're interested in is being able to get there when we want, safely, and return on our time frame."

Gust doesn't own his own plane, although a partner, Matt Broughton, does. Generally, their law firm charters the type of plane it needs from a number of different places, such as Executive Air and Roanoke's Piedmont Hawthorne Aviation.

Karen Roberts, general manager and vice president of Piedmont Hawthorne Aviation, says it is a full service operation providing fueling, aircraft maintenance and parts, loading and unloading services for freight businesses, and aircraft charter. The charter service, she says, is the alternative when commercial airline schedules are not convenient or do not provide service to your destination.

"We will provide a pilot and airplane," she says. "We own some airplanes, and we also enter into lease arrangements with other owners who want to realize some profit from their aircraft. A lot of

businesses want to own one but can't justify it, so they buy one and lease it back to an operator." Roberts says her company charges by the flight hour, as does Virginia Aviation, with a wait time charge of \$50 per hour up to a maximum of \$500 per day.

"You pay for the airplane, not the seat, so you can take the whole team with you for the same price," she says.

Lampman points out that the price of a round trip to Atlanta, flying commercial, is \$1,146. A charter, he says, is \$3,200. "So, with the fourth person, there's a great savings."

Roberts says all types of people inquire about it, although it's the larger companies that use private airplanes more. But, she adds, the service and convenience are incomparable. "We will always beat them, hands-down, because we can get them to the airport they want to go to. We

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can line up ground transportation. We go to a private terminal. They get more specialized attention. It's the difference in riding the bus and riding the limo."

Although food, drink and phone service are the same as on a commercial airline, Roberts says the customers' needs are met; Rocovich says all he wants is to get there and back, and that the perks are a non-issue as he's piloting the airplane, anyway. "The only time I [fly commercial] is when I go to Europe," says Rocovich.

Sarah Cox

In 1977, when President Carter decided deregulation of the airlines was a good idea, says Rocovich, it was immediately clear that it would ruin air travel as we knew it. "Prior to that time, flights were plentiful to almost any destination, and they were affordable. Once Jimmy Carter caused the deregulation of aviation, the flights became far fewer, and travel became a lot more inconvenient and expensive. It became clear to me that if I were to provide good service to my clients, I would have to provide the transportation part of it myself."

And he does.

From mid-November to mid-December, Rocovich flew to Pittsburgh, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sioux Falls, New York, Phoenix, Richmond, Atlanta and Philadelphia. And he can take off at a moment's notice. "We file a flight plan that takes two to three minutes, and you can file that while you drive to the airport, or when you get there. Other than that, it doesn't take any more time than a brief in-flight inspection to make sure any pieces haven't fallen off since the last time you flew it," he says.

Rocovich's plane does



John Rocovich with his plane: 'I don't really have a choice'

not rest in Roanoke, but in Delaware, because of what he says is an unfriendly atmosphere in the Commonwealth.

Delaware, he points out, has no sales or personal property taxes. "There is no tax of any kind in buying and selling aircraft, owning an aircraft, and many thousands of airplanes like ours are tethered in Delaware. We can fly it down here in 30 minutes."

Rocovich has maintenance done to the plane at Piedmont Hawthorne.

Lampman says he has recently done a cost comparison. "Campbell County has restructured its tax laws. Corporate airplanes now have very favorable rates," he points out. "If a plane is worth \$100,000, under the new rates, over a 10-year period, an owner would pay \$3,200. If it were in Roanoke City, he would pay \$3,180. In Danville, it would be \$3,000. That represents only about \$300 per year."

Rocovich says Roanoke Mayor Ralph Smith led the movement to reduce the personal property tax on airplanes to encourage more airplanes to reside in Roanoke.

Speed is also not a factor. Although it varies by aircraft, Rocovich's plane is comparable to a commercial airplane. And, taking into consideration that there is no waiting in a terminal and no interminable baggage and person-checking, speed is considerably increased. Lampman says safety is not an issue at all.

"It's a no-hassle affair. There's no luggage checking, no lost luggage, and we fly point-to-point. We have to ensure that the people are who they are, but business customers are 90 percent repeat customers. There's never been a breach of security in a general aviation airplane," he says, adding that general aviation 135, or air taxis, is generally safer than commercial flying.

"Last year, there was not a single aviation accident involving a general aviation aircraft that was turbine powered. And most of the time, the air crew is more experienced."

The next time you're cooling your heels in a commercial terminal, wondering whether all the bolts on your plane are screwed in tightly,

you might think about the alternative, right down the road.

(Sarah Cox is a Vinton-based freelance writer.)