

Staffing & Operational Strategies with Souren Pourmalek

1. What actions are you taking regarding staff shortage or do you have staff shortage?

Not really. It's a little different for ABCoast. ABCoast is not your regular type of company that does one thing. We operate in a way of dynamic operational support.

General operatives can do carts and customer service and support, but general operatives with a clear pass can do security escorting, baggage, and general labor. Because of this, we've created a company that has a lot of different opportunities.

We have the luxury of never stopping hiring. If we can constantly move people around, then that means we always have the ability to onboard more people.

Generally, what happens is a lot of companies will do their hiring then they'll freeze hiring. Once they fill it out, after a while, they go short staffed because the cycle is happening. The ones that are going to leave, they all go through that cycle.

And by the time you start hiring again, you're too late. I would say there is a labor shortage in the market but it's not as easy as before. You just need a little more focus and pre-planning. As of right now, we're overstaffed.

2. Do you have any specific programs to support or attract women or indigenous people?

For indigenous people, we have a Memorandum of Understanding, an MOU, signed with the Musqueam. Basically, where we are sits on the land of Musqueam. We have an agreement with them that we're going to continue to work with them and hire members of the band to have employment opportunities here.

We have something called the excite phase where not only do we interview them, but we bring them into our work environment and show them what they can do. We give them some shadow shifts so they get a little more comfortable. It's a very intimidating thing for them right in the work area so we carry them in that step-by-step process. I think we have 15 members working for an indigenous group right now.

With females, it's a little different. I think we have a good mix at ABCoast. We are not necessarily targeting females. Some of the positions we have will attract more females than males. But what that creates for the environment is, you'll have a female working in customer service, but realizes that, hey, baggage looks really fun, right? Baggage is an industry that not many females work in. It's almost getting into a break-even in the IOC, which I love, we're getting more females in that leadership.

3. Has the government been involved with your hiring process?

No. I wouldn't know what they would do.

4. Do you have any contingency plans in case a shortage of staff affects operations?

At ABCoast we have two pools of resources. One is the Navy Coast and one is the ABCoast Agility. ABCoast Agility is a resource pool we have that is from different companies that currently work at the airport. They sign up to work on the ABCoast Agility side and they don't have to work any hours. In the event that they want to take on some shifts, they can. It's an open concept, it's more casual. It's not really for the contingency of being short-staffed, it's more for the contingency of us needing more staff for a last-minute outage or something that we have at the airport. We have a casual resource pool that we can always dip into.

5. Where do you advertise open positions?

Mainly Indeed. We've looked at different areas, but we're not having any problems with Indeed. A lot of our applications come through Indeed and a lot of them come through just word of mouth, people knowing about our company.

6. Do you personally have any recommendations to change your company's hiring process?

Well, I control the process so not at this point. We're equipped really well. We're meeting the living wages of Metro Vancouver. We probably provide the most flexible scheduling of any company that's ever been. We allow shift trades. We offer lots of opportunities to move up if you need to. So I think we're fine. There are some rules, but we want to make sure that it's flexible to your needs rather than our needs.

7. How is artificial intelligence affecting your company's hiring process?

Not for our hiring process. Maybe we can get it to change the way our ad is written, but nothing right now, really. I know there's lots of opportunities in it, but we're just not there yet.

8. What kind of mental health support does your company offer? Are there any gaps, do you think?

There could always be more. We have four individuals that are trained on mental health support. [name removed] being the main one. She has certain office hours where people can go and speak to her about certain things. It's all confidential. I don't even hear about it, and she deals with them as she's trained to do so.

9. What is the main cause of your company's turnover and what actions are you putting in place to mitigate turnover?

Our company, for a lot of people, is a stepping stone on their way to become a pilot. So they work at the airport to get their RAIC, and they're doing their hours. Once they get into the program, then they quit this company and they go on, and we're more than happy to help them that way.

Another turnover is really just a better opportunity that another company can offer, and they want to get a much different type of job at a higher level.

10. If your company is unable to attract local talent, would you look to international talent?

We haven't looked at international talent, but we have had people that needed some letters written and we helped them out because they were doing it on their own. We haven't really looked outside internationally. Maybe one day.

11. Does your company have a place for anonymous feedback regarding job satisfaction?

We had an anonymous feedback platform for a while, but I don't know what happened to that. So as of right now, no. But in every probation meeting, we ask them.

12. What do you think about the graduation of baby boomers?

There's two problems with the graduation of baby boomers. I feel like because of COVID, it happened earlier than it should. A lot of people that had five years left were offered to retire. What that did is created an experience gap in the entire industry.

If you look at the entire scope of aviation, all your safety issues are increasing. All your performance issues are increasing because there was a natural progression. As the experienced people would get more experience, they would train the younger workforce. But they left too early. The younger workforce is left to figure it out on their own. Myself included, I'm a very young general manager. The entire industry is suffering from a lack of training and experience. It's going to take a while for the new generation to learn from it.

13. Would you consider a facilitator that helps maintain a channel between job seekers and employers?

Maybe for certain levels. It doesn't necessarily need to be government-sponsored. Entry-level people we don't have a problem with. When it gets to the skilled level, someone that's just graduated from BCIT, let's say for example we need them to come into the company and do those higher level roles and projects. It would be really cool if there was a program that allows these students to come and get work experience and learn the day-to-day of ABCoast as part of a package.

Let's say, I need someone for operational readiness and solutions. There's a project, we're putting cameras all over the apron for a new tower. And I bring this person in who looks great on paper but has no idea what's actually going on, they don't have that experience. If there was a program that helped them learn that experience, I would partner up with the government to do this and use our company as the test product. Because we're so fluid, we're not just airlines, we're not just this or that. We do everything.

14. Are you ready for another pandemic crisis? Do you have any plans for this?

No. Well, obviously there's not much we can do in another pandemic, but one of the things we've done is the way our contracts work with employees. We don't guarantee any sort of full-time hours or anything. That's one of the things that really hurt us in the beginning. People were guaranteed full-time 40 hours while the entire terminal shut down.

We also work with the airport authority to understand that there's a base level of hours that we need as a company to continue to operate and still have a base level of employees. We can't go to zero, if we go to zero, we could never start up again.

If you look at the baggage system, we have one person just in the domestic west running everything. And during the pandemic, it became one person for domestic West, South and North. Three baggage systems went to one person and we created some added value to keeping that job.