

Mixed CULTURE

BY JOSHUA AMARA

Strained relationships between Nigerian and expatriate maintenance technicians interfere with common safety objectives.



There is no valid reason why aviation maintenance technicians of different races, tribes and cultures cannot learn to work together in a friendly environment, enjoying equal career opportunities within the maintenance, repair and overhaul facilities in Nigeria. However, in my country — and,

indeed, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa — a peculiar condition persists.

This condition originated partly from the historical inequalities of the labor system passed down from the time of British colonial rule, which lasted from the 19th century until Nigerian independence in 1960. Created to

benefit European colonial masters, the old system's legacy still has a negative influence on aviation safety culture from the perspective of human factors.

Nowadays, the norm for aviation professionals in the most developed countries is to work in harmony with colleagues from different parts of the

world. The working conditions are expected to be the same for all to ensure optimal performance and productivity of every employee.

The contrast in Nigeria is that maintenance technicians tend to be arbitrarily categorized and subcategorized. This troubling division separates the workforce into expatriate personnel and indigenous Nigerian citizens, who are differentiated as *indigenes* or *locals*. Moreover, the indigenes in these facilities create divisions among themselves on the basis of their majority or minority ethnic/tribal affiliation. The expatriates also tend to subdivide themselves into staff of Western European origin — including those from North America — and staff from places such as Eastern Europe, Russia, Asia and Latin America.

Today's system impedes both the advancement of individual Nigerian aviation professionals and airline industry progress by generating excessively high operating costs. The cost of keeping expatriate employees in the country is much higher than otherwise should be necessary, including costs of such things as risk allowances for those who agree to stay and work, monthly round-trip airfare to enable employee visits to their home countries during time off, local transportation with personal security services, and company payment of electric and communication utilities.

It has become normal for rates of remuneration and incentive pay under contracts of employment to depend

largely on a person's origin, not just a person's competence. It is also sad to note that the present compensation of the locals is much lower than their foreign counterparts, even if an expatriate has less qualification and experience. This is a great setback — one that, I believe, ultimately detracts from the safety of both the maintenance performed and flight operations.

The emphasis on qualifying expatriates to work in Nigeria diverts limited resources from training Nigerian staff. Company executives who set the priorities must realize that some Nigerian maintenance technicians have worked for years without opportunities for additional qualification or refresher training.

At my airline, we have tried as much as possible to ensure that there is no difference in treatment, that it doesn't matter where you come from — it's only a matter of what you can offer. We also have been educating maintenance employees, preaching the message, "If you work with the expatriates, you're going to gain more knowledge, and the more knowledge you have, the more opportunity you will have to develop in your career here."

In many places, however, several problems are common. For example, cultural differences are not accommodated. Yet culture binds people as members of a group and provides key clues as to how to behave in both normal and unusual situations.

Communication is impaired. Due to both language and cultural differences, there are bound to be not only errors in understanding but also some basic differences in the ways of reasoning. In Nigeria, English often is not the "mother tongue" (first language learned) of either locals or expatriates.

Language generates errors. Most errors discovered during maintenance

checks occur because of the "direct" or "literal" translations between the maintenance technician's first language and English. This is quite visible when going through maintenance entries in technical logbooks.

Language "barriers" become an excuse for staff to separate by ethnicity/language when possible during work sessions and breaks. Employees and supervisors also form teams limited to people from their category. I have even come across a conflict where expatriates chose to use different languages to write their job-sheet handover notes, with the team on one shift writing something in the technical logbook and the next team unable to read what was recorded about task status.

Maintenance technicians often face unfamiliar standards. This occurs although most of the aircraft now maintained in Nigeria are Western-built types. For the maintenance technicians most familiar with Russian airworthiness standards, today's Nigerian standards are significantly different, and their training time reflects this difficulty.

License endorsement/validation processes take too long. All expatriates must have their licenses endorsed or validated by the Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority to be authorized to certify the airworthiness of Nigerian-registered aircraft. Those who have licenses from the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, however, require additional testing to receive the aircraft type endorsements, a process lasting up to three months or longer.

If maintenance professionals perceive unfairness, resentment can grow into hatred. A Nigerian saying is that two can work together only if they agree. As evidence, I have observed staff sitting down and waiting for a so-called expert

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from a different category or subcategory to commit errors rather than speaking up or intervening in the interest of safety. With such a strained relationship, there is no safety synergy on the job.

One consequence has been unrest among the labor unions representing maintenance technicians, an issue that today affects most airlines in Nigeria. Sometimes the indigenes become so hostile to their foreign colleagues that their unions demand forced repatriation of some of the staff from foreign countries. Outside the workplace, in the worst cases, societal resentment has been a factor in expatriates and locals being targeted for kidnapping or robbery.

Security concerns work against shared safety culture. A group of expatriate specialists may arrive at work in large cars with security personnel, then after the day's job is completed, security personnel gather them for the drive home. This does not create an avenue for colleagues to interact. If I'm working with somebody who doesn't speak with me, doesn't joke with me, and the only interaction we have is while doing the job together, that does not encourage integration into one society.

So what is the way forward? In my company, we are aiming to create a culture where every employee is part of the system, has a sense of belonging and enjoys peaceful coexistence at work and a sense of safety on the street. We began with a competency matrix and job placement based on merit irrespective of factors such as race, ethnicity or geographical origin.

This means that for every position, there must be a written job description stating the entry requirements in support of equal employment opportunity. My company also has worked with the Nigerian airline entrepreneurs, advising them not only to focus their resources on their expatriate staff for the short term, but also to develop the locals; otherwise entrepreneurs will never see the long-term profits they intended to earn.

Education includes social reorientation for all subcategories of expatriate employees and all subcategories of indigene employees. Education helps locals understand that their counterparts from outside Nigeria are not "enemies" in the workplace. Rather, they fill a temporary vacuum

that locals cannot fill yet in some facilities. The expatriates did not cause the infrastructural deficiencies in the country, and they did not come to unfairly exploit their local colleagues or deny them job opportunities.

Employee consultative forums also have proved valuable for maintenance professionals of all nationalities, races, ethnicities and first languages to regularly get together to socialize, share ideas and understand each other better.

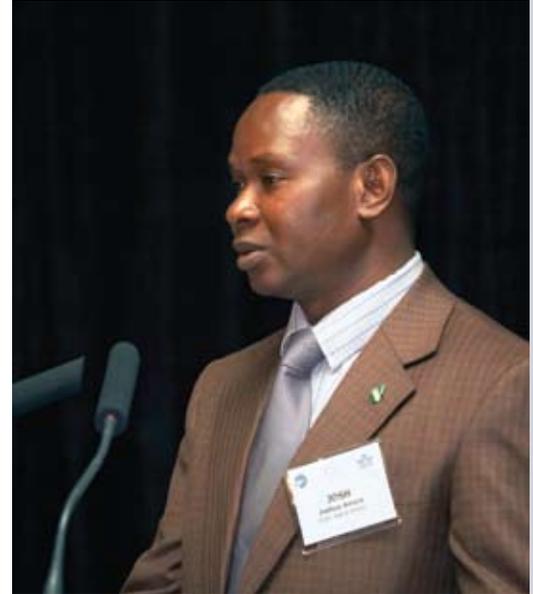
My experience has been that foreigners who mix and relate well with the locals

have no reason to fear for their personal security. Life is better when people learn to live and reason together. Envy and hatred, however, pull down even the good structures that already exist.

The global aviation community already has embraced principles of just culture, in which people are encouraged — even rewarded — for providing essential safety-related information, with a clear line that differentiates acceptable from unacceptable professional behavior. Extending these principles to labor relationships can be accomplished by complying with labor laws that ensure equal opportunity and on-the-job training for indigenes to grow in their profession.

For safety, efficiency, effectiveness and harmony, there must be total commitment to change by government, airline management and all aviation stakeholders. If we are all thinking in a productive way, these changes will happen gradually. I know they are not going to happen overnight. ➔

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