

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

I was recently at the Oil and Gas shin-diggy policy discussion thing-my-jig for the Transport Sector, hosted and presented by the Ministry of Transport and its associated agencies. Knowing that there was an Aviation component, I had to go. I actually cheated, I confess! I went to the opening and then to the relevant presentations, running away early. I would have really loved to be there for the whole thing – but if I went to all of the policy-development, work-shop, talk-shop, sit-and-discuss-shop and other dis-ding-shop-meetings, nothing would happen at my workplace!

Seriously though, this Ministry of Transport Policy thingy for ‘black stuff from under the sea’ industries was good – and the bit that got me most was that the Hon. Minister, Mike Hammah, himself stayed for the presentations – ALL of them! So did the Chief Director – Mr Selby! I am not sure if this a first but it demonstrates a real interest in the development and I am impressed! I m sure we all agree that this is good for development and progress, well done chaps.

The presentations I attended were not all as ‘stimulating’ as one would have hoped for – but some of the subject matter is rather ‘dry’. It was a common thread to slip in a last 30 seconds appeal for vast sums of money for projects – which is not what policy planning is really about, but it is normal everywhere in the world.

The most exciting words I heard, apart from the aviation sector (I am biased), came from our Maritime University (yes we have one) and the Rector, Captain Turkson, an energetic and technically aware chappy, spoke with passion about the sea – like in novels and the movies. In fact he appeared to have swallowed a nuclear submarine with a melt-down in its reactor at some points – the energy was bursting out of him. It was really something – and all in a good way. I hoped that they would dim the lights so that we could see if he glowed in the dark – but alas no.

What made me nod my head like a plastic dog in the back of a saloon car on a bumpy road, was when Captain Turkson spoke about his recent trip to an oil rig off of our coast. He noted that the average person working on the rig was an ONC-holder (Ordinary National Certificate), not an HND-holder or even a Degree-holder. In Ghana such talk could offend – but he went on. He intimated that what mattered most was experience and being hard-working in a physically challenging environment! The oil industry clearly has recognised that experience is requisite and qualification convenient. He went on about how the industry specific Health and Safety training was required by all – regardless of whether they were ‘riggers’, ‘engineers’ or ‘Master Mariners’, irrespective of their academic qualifications or dress code!

I asked whether he had spoken to the Minister of Education about getting the message out to the Ghanaian students in schools and colleges that experience and working attitude had more to do with getting and keeping a job than bits of paper – but he dodged the question with deftness of Azuma Nelson.

I did not get to meet the dynamic presenter, and have not visited the Regional Maritime University in Nungua – but it is on my list of to-do’s. They sound like my sort of people.

In aviation it is true that over 90% of pilots on the major airlines hold degrees – but mostly the study area has nothing to do with aviation. You know the type, Mum and Dad said ‘be a lawyer’ and so they paid for Jimmy to go to law school. He graduates to please his parents and then says ‘can I have \$80,000 to train to be a pilot!’ Does a law degree help when communicating with Air Traffic control? You do not get adjournments to discuss landing the plane in bad weather or which altitude to climb to – nor can you park on a cloud for ten minutes to ‘confer with a learned friend’. In aviation the number of hours and different types of aircraft flown matters more than the degrees, certificates, et al.

When people ask me what qualifications they need to become a pilot my answer is simple - ‘passion’, but it must be ‘accompanied by good English, maths, science, geography, foreign language and lots of experience in the cockpit’.

Coming in to land at Kotoka do you ever wonder how many degrees the chap up the pointy-end of the plane has? I would be surprised. You are more interested in ‘can they do the job’ – have they done it before and how many times!

When I get a degree holder apply for a position in our aircraft workshops I am sceptical, to say the least. Our factory is a hands-on place – nobody has a desk and we all collaborate to ensure that the quality is maintained in the building of each aircraft. I prefer those from SSS courses with high practical content! I have studied it a bit and have come to the conclusion (rightly or wrongly) that the students who ask lots of questions and are not happy to be sitting down for hours on end, are pushed into ‘practical’ SSS courses. In the real working world of production sitting down for long periods is not a useful attribute! Following instructions, being aware of the working environment and challenging how, why and when is more useful – because that builds true understanding and experience as opposed to rote learning.

I am always awe struck when I think about the development of heart transplants. In 1967 in South Africa, a famous surgeon, Christiaan Barnard, worked with a gardener (Hamilton Naki) – because of his experience – towards the first ever successful heart transplant. The story is fascinating with sad bits, controversial and though provoking - and is now narrated in the film ‘Hidden Heart’. The basic story goes that Hamilton was brought out of the garden (where he was good at grafting) to help with animal transplants, then helped develop the human heart transplant procedure and eventually went on to train many surgeons with big letters after their names on the procedure. Hamilton had no formal schooling and came from a poor community. Concealed from the world, at the time (1967) for inappropriate reasons (apartheid), the later quote from Barnard that "Hamilton had better technical skills than I did, he was a better craftsman than me, especially when it came to stitching, and had very good hands in the theatre." demonstrates that experience is key – more than colour, background or posh bits of paper on the wall!

I guess that we are all guilty of not looking hard enough at those around us with good attitudes and approaches to work - those with experience and exposure, and to being over-dazzled in the head-lights of the ‘degree and masters’ holders - which are often not related to the job anyway.

It seems to me, from my little cockpit, that it is probably better to have a person with basic qualifications, lots of passion, a good dose of relevant experience, a desire to learn on the job and an

excellent working attitude rather than a chap with more letters after his name than characters in the Chinese alphabet! Have a safe week and consider carefully who you give the next job to!

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