

Three Keys to Building a Loyal Contract Workforce

By David Pearson, PlaneTechs President



The demand for qualified aviation mechanics has never been greater than it is today. With more planes coming back into service, deferred service schedules expiring, and commercial conversion projects fueled by industry consolidation, the market for these professionals will remain hot. The commercial and government MRO and manufacturing businesses are going to need people, and contract labor is a strategic part of the manpower plan for many of these organizations.

When it comes to strategic use of contractors, the challenge is two-fold: attracting contract labor to your site and keeping them with you.

As an employer of high-end contract mechanics and technicians, and as a partner to many of the aviation industry's leading MROs and manufacturers, we at PlaneTechs face the same challenges. Our business depends on quality mechanics choosing PlaneTechs as their employer and staying with us for the long term; our ability to service clients depends on building that loyal workforce.

Reputation plays a huge role in maintaining our workforce, and it has to be earned. We work hard to ensure our mechanics -- and our potential mechanics -- trust us to be a top-quality, fair employer that can provide good jobs working on the best projects. Like it or not, a big part of the contract employees' decision about taking a specific job is based on what they're hearing about your location and your business. In today's competitive job market, the MROs and manufacturers that are getting more of the people they need are the ones that have a good reputation.

To be fair, wages are a factor, but it is surprisingly rare how often that comes in at the top of the list when employees are asked what makes them loyal to an employer. Take pay out of the equation, and the ability to attract and retain the best talent -- to become the employer of choice -- boils down to three key practices that the best organizations are using as part of their strategy to make contract labor a part of their business. You can use these practices to make your organization an assignment of choice for the shrinking supply of top-notch contract mechanics and technicians.

1. Educate your permanent staff about the positive role contractors play.

Direct employees often initially perceive contract manpower as a threat or are concerned that contractors will take future growth opportunities away from them. The reality is that contract employees aren't competing with your direct staff; they're a resource that can help your organization and staff meet deadlines, keep projects on track and stay on budget.

By helping you serve customers and grow your business, contract mechanics help secure the future for your permanent

team members. When employees — from the top down — understand that contract workers are a way to build business and save permanent jobs, your business will gain a reputation as a friendly work environment that contract workers will seek out.

2. Treat contract employees like members of your team.

Our contract mechanics and technicians are often onsite with our clients for extended periods of time. We encourage customers to include them in communications to direct employees, such as your employee newsletter, and invite them to participate in appreciation events such as cook-outs and project milestones. You'll have a more cohesive team and stronger relationships that ultimately support your business goals.

A positive, welcoming atmosphere helps get things done, and it also builds momentum for the next job at your site. Admittedly, contract employees have a role in this, too. They need to be friendly and open with the direct employees they work side-by-side with every day. Contract employers like PlaneTechs have a responsibility to educate our people, create an attitude of partnership, and build teamwork on the floor.

3. Communicate honestly with contract employees.

If you hire contractors for a specific task, they're expecting to do that work when they arrive at your hangar. If you need to make a change, do so with advance notice and with respect for the contractor's talent. If a six-month job runs out in two months, deliver the message with honesty and compassion.

"Can we give you a call back if things change?" goes a lot further than, "You're just a contractor, job's over, we don't need you anymore." The reputation of your business as an employer, and the likelihood that you'll earn back contract employees for your next job, depends on honesty and courtesy.

Your reputation — positive or negative — will spread more quickly than you can imagine among the technician community and your potential customers. What's being said will largely determine whether you get the workforce and customers you need. Implementing these three simple approaches in your relationship with contract employees can enhance your reputation and make the difference in your organization's ability to have the mechanics and technicians you need for today's workload...and the increased workload to come.