

Ground Clutter

Hunting Heads



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As the aviation industry grows in size and complexity, matching quality companies with capable employees becomes more important and more difficult. Enter the headhunter. Actually, nobody really likes the term headhunter. Jodie Brown prefers to be called a “body and soul” hunter. Jodie owns Summit Solutions, which specializes in matching aviation employers with aviation employees.

I met Jodie Brown and Johnene Vardiman, Summit Solution’s director of aviation recruiting and sales, at NBAA in Orlando. There and in follow-up telephone visits they filled me in on their role in aviation.

(I have always hoped that a headhunter, recognizing my true worth, would place me in an aviation position worthy of my qualities — something in excess of eight figures and unlimited perks, of course. One finally called, but he was hunting a salesman for recreational vehicles, not airplanes. Maybe you could make eight figures in that job with a FEMA contract for all of Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, but I doubt it.)

Jodie explains that Summit Solutions is what those in the know call a “retained” search firm. They work under exclusive contract with aviation employers to locate, interview, and screen candidates to fill “senior-level leadership and management positions.” They have been doing this for a dozen years, and placements include both the CEO and the VP of operations at Mooney, and the VP of sales and marketing for Stevens Aviation.

A second type of headhunter is the “contingency” firm. The employer seeking to fill a certain position is given a list of such candidates from the contingency firm’s database. It is up to the employer to interview, screen, select, and hire.

My first two questions were how do you find employers and how do you find candidates? Jodie and Johnene say the key is longtime networking and involvement within the industry. They cover the major conventions and know the players. In fact, employers often tease Jodie at conventions with, “Don’t you be stealing my employees.” Jodie’s answer is simple: “You can’t make happy people move.” She points to Duncan Aviation as a firm that treats employees well and is therefore “easy to recruit employees for, hard to recruit employees from.”

Jodie says her employer clients are generally midsize (Mayo Aviation of Denver as one example) and larger. Typical placements are marketing, maintenance, and flight department managers, plus top-drawer marketing and sales types. She points out that yes, these positions require people with technical skills, such as type ratings and certification, but it goes beyond that. Such positions also demand people who can build a team, inspire, lead, motivate toward a clear goal, understand the financial end of the department, and exercise good communication skills.

What keeps Jodie awake at night? “Where do I find the qualified person who wants this job,” she explains.