

# From Corner Office to Mobile Office

A look at the key strengths airport management experience can bring to the private sector

By Mike Cheston, consultant, Faith Group, LLC.

**t**he U.S. has the most sophisticated, advanced, and strictly regulated aviation system in the world today. This intricate system-of-systems demands continuous adjustment, dependable safety, and nearly constant improvement derived from the introduction of new and innovative technologies and procedures.

The increasing demand to provide safe, efficient and reliable air transportation services to an ever-increasing passenger base has been the impetus behind the Congressionally mandated Joint Planning and Development Office (JPDO) initiative that kick-started the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen) design effort, and has now evolved into a dedicated FAA NextGen Division.

A key element of successfully reaching the NextGen vision starts on the airport departure roadway, and ends on the arrivals curbside. While the vast majority of certified commercial air carrier airports (FAR Part 139) are publically operated, they tend to be managed under a “private” business model, self-sustained from revenue developed on-airport and meeting the needs of the customer: the public, the airlines, and the U.S. government.

This takes a unique mix of managerial skills and business best practices that cover a landscape between governmental bureaucracy and for-profit business processes.

## All Things To All People

Good airport directors develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet these challenges through years of experience in a variety of issues facing the daily operational demands of an airport. The depth and breadth of knowledge an airport manager/director/CEO must possess can vary somewhat from one airport to another, but all obtain exposure to a lesser or greater extent, to the internal business machinery that drives airports through

The airport director becomes all things to all people — an IT expert; aviation safety and emergency response expert; security guru; real estate baron; and environmental steward ... just to name a few.

growing pains, capital development, community issues and involvement, and all the daily demands of a city.

The airport director rapidly becomes all things to all people — an IT expert, aviation safety and emergency response expert; security guru; real estate baron and environmental steward ... just to name a few.

These exceptional skills developed through years of operations and management of complex airport operations creates both technical and managerial expertise usually resident

in senior subject matter experts (SME) found in leading consulting firms; and these very skills can prove to be highly valuable to the aviation industry in managing, designing, and supporting airport projects that demand the expertise of someone who has the “been there, done that” experience of an airport manager.

In other words, if/when an airport director decides to hang-up the spurs for something else, a consulting career is a viable option.

## Directors Turned Consultants

So, what key strengths does an airport director bring consulting firms that can support their business plan — what business do they want to develop and what market channel will prove to be their focus?

Of course there is personal reputation. Airport consulting firms are as much about the ability to develop healthy relationships with their clients as they are on building winning bids. For those who can jump right in as major league rainmakers — the highly influential, Category X, top ten airport director, industry association chairman, etc. — that part of the formula comes easy. A winning attitude and professional personality is the ability to convert that positive reputation into opportunities with prospective clients — to win business; less science and more personality.

Not everyone is destined to be a partner in a major consulting firm,

**about** the author  
**Mike Cheston** has over 32 years of aviation experience, most of which was spent in Part 139 airport operations and management, including tenure as an airport authority CEO. He is a SME in a broad spectrum of topics, including NextGen, aviation security, SMS, airport security program management, national security topics, emergency management, and unmanned aircraft systems; he currently works as a consultant with Faith Group, LLC.



find a natural home on that side of airport operations procedures, safety management systems, etc. If developing business and policy is the hot button, there is need there as well. When you start to get into more technical programs, such as airport pavement construction, IT system development, or environmental programs, it clearly helps to have an associated technical degree.

Finally, whether part of a firm or operating as an independent consultant, you have to have the following strengths: Detail-oriented, organization, flexibility, strong communications skills, problem solving to solution, and of course, a strong sense of humor always comes in handy. In essence, the blood, sweat and tears you've invested into a career of managing airports and

the associated systems can prove to be highly valuable to solving the problems airports will face in the future, and can translate into a 'second' career with little effort on your part.

Consulting has its advantages and drawbacks to holding a 'real' job with an airport. The things I miss most include a sense of belonging to a mission-oriented group, the excitement of the daily 'thing' that seems to be endemic at airports, and the dependable paycheck for doing something you love.

That said, there are real advantages to consulting — whether under your own colors or for a firm. They include owning your own hours, having new and interesting projects to tackle, and not necessarily having to 'marry' any particular board of directors, city councils, mayors, and governors, which can be interesting at times.

In the final analysis, few if any people in an airport organization can carry the ball on so many subjects as the director. Born from experience, both good and bad, the airport director is someone who can flex to almost any challenge.

ab

but can still enjoy an impressive practice by providing the expertise mentioned above. However, airport directors have a crutch of sorts that can prove to be a handicap when it comes to working as an independent member of a SME team of consultants: They need to do their own scheduling, word processing, graphic design, and other forms of administration.

It is very easy to get used to an efficient executive assistant directors enjoy to handle all the mundane tasks they don't have time to do. Making the plunge to consulting from the rarified air of the director's office can be a culture shock.

Most airport directors don't get to that lofty post if they are uncomfortable or otherwise don't like to write. But consultants spend most of their waking hours writing. The mastery of the English language is as critically important to consulting as technical prowess and experience.

## Facilitation and Technological Abilities

Successful directors also don't get to the corner office unless they have strong facilitation and collaborative skills. Sure there are those who are

more comfortable and successful with things happening in response to a wave of a hand, but when consulting, there is usually a number of key stakeholders who have strong opinions and 'votes' in the outcome of a particular program.

There's an art to helping a given vision solidify in active discourse, especially if there is a conflict of direction or expectation. The artful consultant is able to craft a solution that is not only best for the client and operation, but doesn't leave a trail of broken egos in the wake of 'success.'

**Making the plunge to consulting from the rarified air of the director's office can be a culture shock.**

Then there's the technological ability that an ex-director brings. Here's where some directors might be challenged. They all tend to be multi-taskers, over-achievers, jack-of-all-trades and masters of two or three. There is usually something that you love doing more than others.

For instance, a director that gravitates to operations and safety will