

Sounding Board: Five Minutes With Lindsey Oliver, MD, BBGA

Angus Batey February 29, 2024



Credit: Mike Rivett / SaxonAir


If proof were needed that business aviation is a sector that is open to and welcoming of those with skills and experience gained in other industries, Lindsey Oliver’s CV might provide it. A farmer’s daughter from Buckinghamshire, England, she studied agriculture and animal science at university, and one of her first jobs was with NFU Mutual, the insurance arm of the UK’s farming union. The company also acts as a de facto trade association for Britain’s farmers, so when Oliver spotted a vacancy at the British Business and General Aviation Association (BBGA) in 2009, she thought her skills might prove to be a good fit.

Fifteen years later, Oliver is the BBGA’s managing director, and has played a pivotal role in the business aviation trade group’s work on behalf of members through years of practical, political and economic turbulence. She spoke with the Weekly ahead of the BBGA’s annual conference in March.

Q: What are the biggest differences between the role of a trade association in aviation and elsewhere?

A: The knowledge required to understand the industry itself is huge. Maybe that’s the problem I had in terms of coming from an agriculture background—that was my family, that was my knowledge from when I was a child. There is so much to learn in aviation.

My understanding of aviation now is that the scheduled aviation sector is a much simpler sector to understand. The business aviation sector is a really tricky industry to understand, which makes it very interesting. There’s such a variety of aircraft types, therefore the engineering requirements, the people skills requirements—huge variety. And then you’ve got all of that to fit into regulation that is blasted out by government or CAA [the UK’s Civil Aviation Authority] or EASA [[European Aviation Safety Agency](#)] for aviation as a whole but doesn’t necessarily fit perfectly into a business aviation world. So, it’s a complicated but very fascinating industry, and that’s why I enjoy it. No two days are the same.

 I can only do my job with the support of the board. All of the people on the board have got their own skills and knowledge, and they’re brilliant people who support me brilliantly and they support the association brilliantly. We’d like to get members more involved in the working groups and bring the

breadth of expertise that's out there in the industry to us.

Q: As someone without an aviation background, are there things you've seen that bizav does well to encourage diversity and bring in talent from other areas?

A: Two comments I'll make on that. The gender inequality, if you like, I don't feel it perhaps as much as others do because I already came from an industry where women were massively underrepresented, and I felt as though I was given opportunities where they were deserving of me. So, coming into aviation didn't feel like a big shock in that area at all. But what I will say is since 2009, I feel like the world has changed dramatically within our industry and there's a far greater percentage of women at all different levels within the industry. The people I meet day to day at meetings, at lobbying events or social events within aviation, there's a lot more women than there ever used to be, and a lot more diversity. Now, don't get me wrong, that still needs improving—but it has come a long way since I first started.

[Among] the really great work that has happened since I've been with BBGA is the Aviation Skills Recruitment Platform [ASRP]. [It was] a way of funneling redundancies due to COVID in the aviation sector; funneling those people into a place where we could keep them involved in aviation so that when business grew again after the pandemic, we'd know where to grab those people from. We also wanted to understand where, if a person would be made redundant in business aviation, would those skills transfer into green energies? Would those skills transfer into construction, nuclear? As the COVID pandemic drew on, it then became a more well-organized recruitment platform for aviation, and watching that grow was very satisfying.

But what was really interesting out of all of that work is, as always with your careers and your jobs, it's the people you meet. Some of the people that we were put in touch with via the ASRP were some really fascinating women leaders involved in recruitment in aviation. And all of a sudden there's this group of women that were talking about retention and recruitment in aviation and actually making a really big difference. Those are the people that I'm dealing with on a day-to-day basis now, and you didn't see that commonly in 2009.

Q: You entered the industry during a global financial crisis; you've mentioned COVID's impact; there's also been Brexit. What do you think the sector in the UK has learned from these shocks to the system?

A: I think what's really been highlighted—particularly out of COVID and, I would say, Brexit as well—is how resilient we are as an industry and how easy we can adapt. In terms of Brexit, there were so many queries and questions that came out of that. And, actually, we were never more busy. We had so much work to do in terms of talking to regulators and the DfT and the government about making our industry fit for purpose in a new regulatory world. But while we were busy campaigning and lobbying for what was needed, industry naturally adapted very quickly, very efficiently, and without too much fuss. That was very satisfying.

And then when it came to COVID: enormous amounts of panic around the world, and all sorts of industries in huge panic, but we carried on. We changed the layout of our aircraft, we moved people around where they needed to be, we created a service that was invaluable in the end. And there was an enormous amount of positivity that came out of the way that we as an industry adapted to the needs and the concerns of that time that I don't think has ever been written about enough.

Q: What are you hearing from your members about their key areas of concern?

A: I've always thought of my job at BBGA as a bit like being a spider, and I'm in the middle and each leg points to a different area of concern, a different group of people within the industry that have got a problem—whether that be an FBO problem, a ground-handling problem, an operations problem, a training problem, a regulation problem. There's so many different areas and they're all very valuable and they're all very important to that group of people at that time, so it's really hard to pick out particular issues. What I say today would be superseded by what I say tomorrow.

So much of our job at BBGA is creating a relationship with the aviation minister, the transport minister, and the civil servants that feed into them—because they end up in their roles without any knowledge of what we do, no knowledge of how there's different sectors of aviation that have different needs and concerns. So, we spend a lot of time building those relationships. My main concern, I suppose, on a day-to-day basis is making sure that we're not rehashing the same conversations with a different group of people. Our job is to make sure that the relationship and the understanding in DfT is there. There will always be changes within personnel within government—that's just a fact. Is it frustrating? I don't find it frustrating. I find it time-consuming. But I enjoy building out those relationships, and I enjoy the surprise on the face of a civil servant that feeds directly into the minister when I send them a press release about a particular piece on sustainability that one of our members has achieved, because it doesn't even enter their head that there's some really good new technologies, new testing, new piloting, if you like, of sustainability technology happening within our industry that will be fed into other areas of aviation later.

Q: Business aviation professionals often say that the sector could do a better job of highlighting its progress on sustainability. What are the areas where you think improvements could be made?

A: There was a massive piece of work done by EBAA [[European Business Aviation Association](#)] a few years ago on public perception. We're taking some of the lessons learned, but the world has changed a lot since then. We've got this whole new world of social media education. Like it or lump it, it is here, and our industry is probably a little bit guilty of sticking their heads in the sand in terms of how we communicate our message to our own age-group



demographic, without really recognizing the fact that it's not us that we need to be talking to; it's the younger generation and new people that have no knowledge of aviation, full stop. That's the target audience that we should be working on because it's those people who are putting pressure on their local MPs about the poor perception of private jets.

We've launched our "Did You Know?" campaign, and we have the #BizAvEnables work on Twitter, or X. But what we're looking to do is gain some funding to run a social-media video campaign, [taking that message and putting it] in a format that's absorbed in a different way to potentially target different demographics. You have to then learn how to get the message you're trying to get across in a short, concise video. We have to learn how to do that, and we have to generate subject titles and the video type that's going to be absorbed in the right way, and then we have to learn how to connect with the various influencers that create the greatest output from that. It is a new way of communicating, a reasonably new format of media, and we're having to learn how to do that very quickly.

The BBGA's 2024 conference takes place in London on March 7.

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