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Flying their own planes saves time

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By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

Landscape architect Katie O'Reilly Rogers departs on business trips from her Santa Barbara, Calif., home without a worry about airport or airline snafus.

She climbs into the cockpit of her own small airplane and takes off.

The added hassles of business travel from tightened security and airline cost-cutting since the Sept. 11 terrorism has helped fuel an increase in the business use of personal aircraft. Encouraged by a growing economy and a generally favorable business climate, many business people — particularly those who live far from a big-city hub — are realizing that piloting their own planes saves time and, in some cases, money.

PHOTOS: [Business travelers take wing](#)

Rogers and other pilots cite other benefits to arriving at a meeting after landing your own plane: stronger business relationships. Clients love the pilots' stories, and sometimes they can even get a free joy ride.

The planes they're flying for business travel these days aren't necessarily sleek corporate jets or very light jets, the new category of planes hitting the market this year at prices starting at \$1.5 million. They're using single-engine piston planes that cost about \$400,000 new, or less if they're bought used.

The Federal Aviation Administration estimates about two-thirds of the hours flown by private planes are for business reasons. According to the agency's most recent numbers, hours flown in private planes for business reasons in 2005 were up 12.5% from 2001. Contributing to the increase: more business trips taken by individuals or small groups in small, piston-driven airplanes.

On her business trips around the Far West, Rogers, 53, flies her four-seat, single-engine Mooney M20J, which she inherited from her father. She earned her pilot's license in 2001 and would have done so regardless of the deteriorating conditions in commercial travel. Nonetheless, she's reaping big benefits from her decision to become her own pilot during a period when airport hassles are high.

"I don't have to get to an airport two to three hours ahead of time," says Rogers. "I don't have to go through security, and I don't have delays."

Gary Gongola, the 64-year-old president of a machine tools company in Menomonee Falls, Wis., stopped piloting in 1965 to concentrate on raising a family. But airline delays, cancellations and service bugaboos prompted him to get back into the cockpit three years ago and fly his own plane.

He says his four-seat Mooney Ovation — which cost \$440,000 — enables him to better serve customers, and company sales have skyrocketed.

"I should have done this 20 years ago," he says. "I didn't realize it until after 9/11."

Mark Miller, a spokesman for Piper Aircraft, the maker of several models of small airplanes, says his company has noticed "the surge" of business people becoming pilots. "Since 9/11, we're seeing a lot of people in their 40s and 50s who had a passion for flying and have gotten more disposable income making a business case for an aircraft."

□

Many small businesses are recognizing "the unique capability of small airplanes," says Katie Pribyl, spokeswoman for the trade group General Aviation Manufacturers Association. Small piston-engine planes "have evolved from primarily recreational and utility vehicles to an essential tool for business," she says.

Plane sales going up

U.S. plane manufacturers shipped 2,024 single-engine piston planes in 2005, up 19% from 2004. The industry expects an increase when 2006 numbers are tallied, and the same number or more this year.

Peter La Colla, a franchiser of more than 50 convenience stores in shopping malls, has become his own pilot, but it wasn't airline inconveniences that prompted him. He says it was too exhausting traveling around the country from his Topeka office in a minivan, visiting shopping malls in places as far-flung as Minneapolis, Atlanta, Nashville and Chattanooga, Tenn.

"Now, I can hit 19 or 20 stores in a week's trip, and it can be a lot cheaper than flying on airline flights," says the 40-year-old businessman who received his license in 2000 and has flown at least 250 times since.

La Colla opted for a used plane, buying a 22-year-old, four-seat Mooney 231 for \$92,000 in 2002. He and another businessman, who runs an engineering firm, set up a company that owns the plane. They coordinate schedules and rent it from the company.

In September, La Colla and an employee flew on the plane to visit 11 stores in five days. They visited eight cities at a cost of less than \$4,500. If they had taken airline flights, they would have spent more nights in hotels, rented more cars and eaten in more restaurants. The bill would have been much higher, La Colla says.

Like many business people who pilot planes, though, La Colla and his employees haven't abandoned the airlines. He carefully studies the cost of each upcoming trip and uses commercial flights when they're less expensive. Last year, company trips were split about equally between his plane and airline jets.

La Colla says he's developed "a much stronger business connection" with the clients he's flown in his plane. "Without exception, everyone is mesmerized with the marvel of flight."

La Colla calls his plane "a time machine." He can take off from a local airport 8 miles from his Topeka office and land in Chicago in the time it would take to drive 90 minutes and check in for an airline flight in Kansas City, the nearest big commercial airport.

Fewer pilots than in past

Though the number of general aviation planes shipped by manufacturers is increasing annually, the industry has never returned to its heyday in the 1960s and 1970s. Then, manufacturers delivered up to 18,000 planes in a single year.

The number of active general aviation pilots in the USA has dropped from 800,000 in the early 1980s to fewer than 600,000 today, according to Phil Boyer, president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, which represents private pilots. AOPA is promoting a new program, Project Pilot, to encourage more people to become pilots.

Boyer attributes the drop largely to "a sociological change in the household" that caused pilots who flew for recreation or personal use to instead concentrate on family responsibilities. Families with two wage earners became common, and men, who make up about 95% of all private pilots, began driving children to soccer games or doing other duties, he says.

Others cite the costs of flight training and operating and maintaining a plane as a contributor to the decline in pilots. It can cost \$8,000 to \$10,000 to train and to obtain a pilot's license, and then \$200 or more an hour to rent a plane, says Michael Miller, an aviation consultant for The Velocity Group.

It takes six to 12 months to train and get a license, according to AOPA spokesman Chris Dancy. Flying "is not something you can do in a heartbeat and not for the average person off the street," Miller says. Business people have a big advantage over recreational pilots because they can deduct from their taxes the costs of buying, renting, operating and maintaining a plane.

Construction executive Tom Craig, 40, flies his six-seat Piper Meridian from Naples, Fla., to Denver a dozen times a year. Each flight takes six hours vs. about 10 hours using connecting airline flights, he says.

Brandon Parker, 29, president of a software company, flies a Cessna 172 out of Montgomery Field in San Diego. He says the plane lets him "schedule a meeting or training session around my own schedule." He can meet a client the next day instead of having to plan in advance to get a low-fare airline ticket.

The advantages of piloting a plane for business "is the best-kept secret," says Randy Africano, a 51-year-old aviation consultant who flies on business at least twice a week from Peoria, Ill., in a seven-seat Mitsubishi MU-2 or a four-seat Beechcraft V35B.

It's not a secret to Allen Warner, 53, the Cleveland-based president of three transportation-related companies. Flying his own plane to "remote locations on a moment's notice" to visit his franchisees has given his businesses a competitive advantage, he says.

Just talking about piloting or giving a client a ride in a plane can also pay off. Rogers, the landscape architect, says she works in the male-dominated construction industry, and her plane has helped build business relationships.

"When I go to a job site, it takes awhile to gain their confidence," she says. "But when I say I've flown in on my plane, they say, 'OK, lady, we can take you seriously.' "


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