

The Value of Face-to-Face

By Mike Hirschberg, Executive Director

In today's wired society, we can be easily fooled into thinking that coordination and collaboration can be done without the need for actual human contact. But, when coordinating with potential customers, partners, suppliers and other stakeholders, there is no substitute for face-to-face interactions to ensure a common understanding of a problem or opportunity, especially at the early stages of planning when the terms and issues are hard to describe and impossible to document clearly.

A 2009 *Harvard Business Review* report, "Managing Across Distance in Today's Economic Climate," noted that "Face-to-face communication is the broadest bandwidth communication you can have in professional life." AHS offers many forums throughout the year to help facilitate dialogue between representatives from various government organizations, industry and academia, and between operators, technologists and decision makers.

Having disparate groups and individuals with different expertise and perspectives coming together is the best way to tackle tough challenges. Author Frans Johansson notes that innovation comes at the intersection of established domains. It's not enough just to remain in our workaday boxes – that leads to "Groupthink." In order to engender breakthroughs, we need to be exposed to perspectives of others working in similar and dissimilar areas – different disciplines, aircraft, applications, companies, countries, etc.

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) has repeatedly stated they want to have more collaborative interactions with industry for precisely this reason. Gone is the stereotype of the government developing its requirements in isolation and "throwing them over the transom" to industry. Taking full advantage of the untapped potential of vertical flight technology within austere budgets can only be achieved by customers and developers working together effectively.

Having a conference on specific technical disciplines or



topical areas allows individuals working on common or related areas to come together and exchange information, share ideas and develop or strengthen relationships – exactly what is needed in a collaborative environment. The improvement in information flow from having a conference is orders of magnitude more efficient and cost effective than having hundreds of individual meetings that would be necessary to gain insight, feedback or consensus. In addition, the Wakefield Research Fourth Annual Business Travel Survey (2012) noted that "Travelers estimated that 1 hour of face-to-face contact equaled 5 video conferences, 10 telephone calls, or 20 emails." Often the unplanned discussions at meetings are much more valuable – for industry, academia and government – than the formal planned presentations.

AHS – with the Army Aviation Association of America (Quad A) – had planned a conference on Helicopter Military Operations Technology (HELMOT) for October 30 through November 1, 2012. HELMOT organizers chose the theme "Vertical Lift Technology: Mission Performance Now - Flexibility for the Future" because of its relevance to the vertical lift community including warfighters, operators, government, and industry. HELMOT was to focus on "how the mission was being performed in today's environment with current technology and also to focus on the plans and ideas for performing those missions in the future with changing mission requirements and restricted budgets."

However, the U.S. Secretary of the Army issued a directive on October 17, 2012 "suspending Army attendance at non-DoD conferences between now and 31 December 2012 unless ... an exception is granted."

As a result, the AHS Hampton Roads Chapter was forced to cancel the 15th biannual HELMOT symposium. There was not sufficient time (only three business days) to get a waiver approved by the Army Secretary or Assistant Secretary. HELMOT had 100% government speakers, with about 80% U.S.

Army employees, so it was a unique AHS conference in its vulnerability to this new policy.

With nearly all of the government speakers either local or within easy driving distance, the total cost to the Army for its speakers and local attendees was estimated to be less than \$20,000. Many of the Army speakers from outside the area were traveling there for other meetings, so when HELMOT was canceled, much of this travel expense was still incurred.

The meeting was organized by AHS Hampton Roads Chapter members in the Williamsburg, Virginia area, many of whom work for the U.S. Army's Aviation Applied Technology Directorate (AATD) at nearby Ft. Eustis. In addition to 12 months of hard work that did not come to fruition, cancellation fees and lost revenue may total as much as a \$50,000 loss to AHS, restricting the Chapter's ability to provide scholarships for future rotorcraft engineers, and limiting its ability to advance the state-of-the-art of vertical flight technology.

HELMOT was a golden opportunity to resolve questions about military requirements as the DoD develops its next generation rotorcraft acquisition programs and technology development roadmaps. Here was a forum for industry, academia and various government organizations to come together at the doorstep of the Army's Aviation Applied Technology Directorate (AATD), to improve the understanding of current threats, hear what other operators are experiencing, get updated on the military's modernization plans, etc. – not to mention the planned opportunities for unplanned interactions.

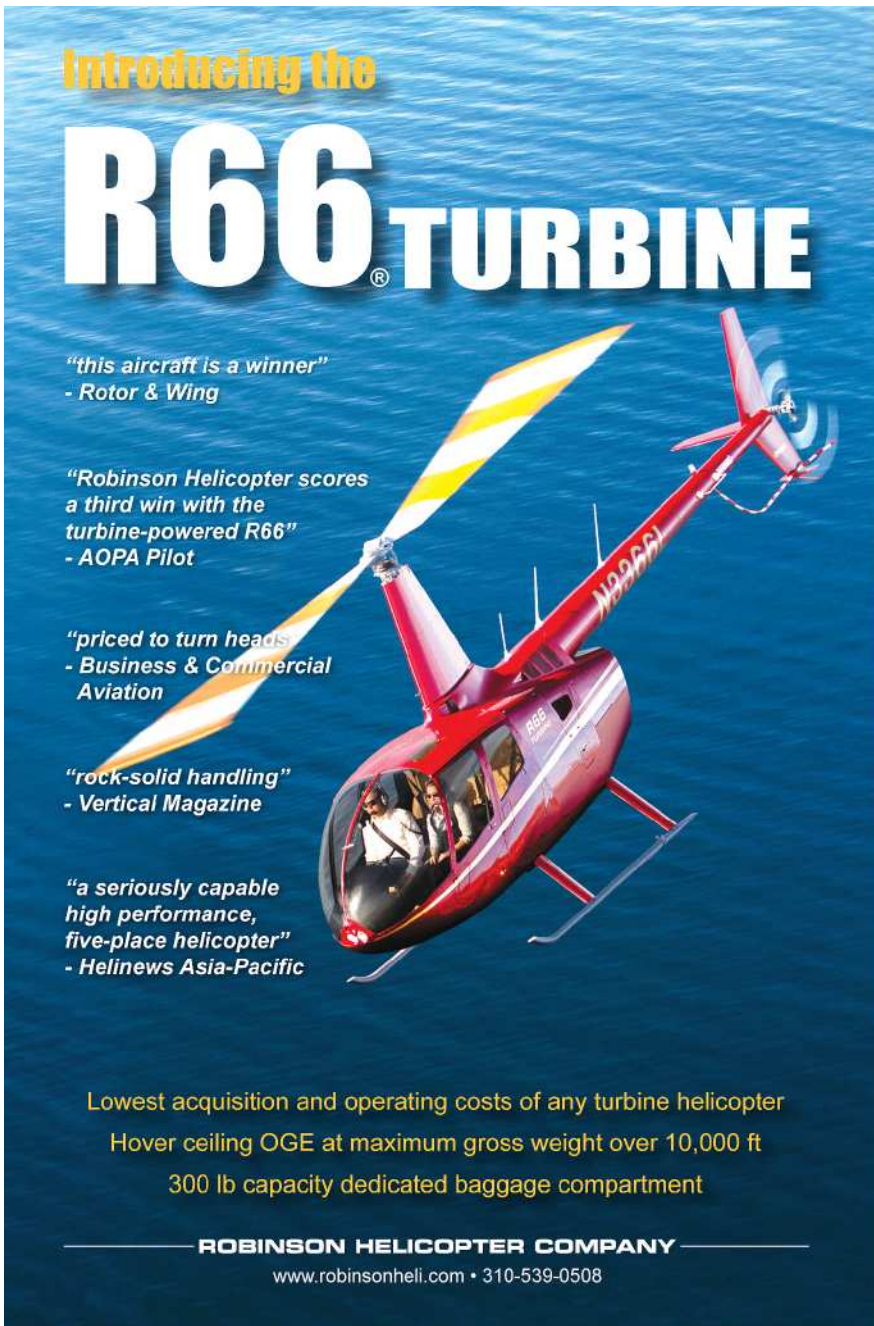
One passage in the Army directive is particularly disturbing: "We must continue to implement more cost-effective and efficient methods to train, plan, collaborate and disseminate information. Experience has shown that conferences are an expensive means of accomplishing these goals...." This claim flies in the face of the facts associated with the professional and technical meetings sponsored by the AHS.

For less than \$20,000, it's hard to imagine a more cost-effective impact to improve the future of military rotorcraft than to have government briefing industry, academia and other agencies on current problems, threats, opportunities and program plans. For an outside organization like AHS to host a meeting like HELMOT at such a small cost to the Army is an indisputable value to the government that would pay much larger dividends to Army modernization efforts, the Joint Multi-Role (JMR) Technology Demonstrator and Future Vertical Lift (FVL) acquisition plans. Conferences like HELMOT provide huge benefits for participants at very little cost.

Fortunately, AHS will still be able to assist the Army meeting being held in conjunction with HELMOT, the JMR Technology

Demonstrator Industry Day. Holding this meeting concurrently was originally suggested by AHS since so many of the expected participants would already be in Williamsburg for HELMOT. That's what AHS does – provide a forum for technologists and users from governments, industry and academia to work together towards tackling the toughest challenges in vertical flight.

In these times of austere budget environments, governments, industry and academia must choose how best to reach long-term objectives. Investing wisely today will pay dividends in the future. Making rash top-level decisions without understanding the consequences or empowering domain experts can be a "penny wise, pound foolish" strategy. Having face-to-face discussions with disparate groups, such as at AHS technical meetings, is a low-cost means for establishing common understandings and reaching creative, cost effective solutions.



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