

MAKING IT BIG IN MALE-DOMINATED AVIATION MAINTENANCE WORLD

Aircraft technicians repair and perform scheduled maintenance on aircraft. They diagnose and repair mechanical or electrical problems and replace defective parts. Another important aspect is testing aircraft parts with gauges and other diagnostic equipment against manufacturer performance standards, while keeping records of maintenance and repair work. Meet West Air Aviation's Gabriela Kamaahene, an ambitious and energetic Aircraft Technician. This is her story.

CHILDHOOD DREAM

Born and raised in Windhoek, Gabriela attended Emma Hoogenhout Primary School, where friends and teachers got to know her as a typical tomboy, always eager to join the boys for a football match. "My mom says I was extremely hyper active. So, they signed me up for ballerina lessons, hoping it would make me more feminine and girly", Gabriela chuckles.

Growing up in a family environment where granddad was a keen automechanic, her aunt a flight attendant and her uncle an aircraft engineer, Gabriela cherished dreams of qualifying as a pilot. "Becoming a pilot was the dream, yes. And so I worked very hard in Mathematics and Physical Science while at the Windhoek High School. I wasn't a top performer, but my grades were not too shabby, either", she shares.

"I made it a point to read everything I could find about aircraft and flying. And often I would daydream and imagine myself all dressed up in my pilot uniform, taking charge of a big Airbus aircraft, speaking to my passengers over the intercom, doing all the pilot things", adds Gabriela.

NEW DIRECTION

After completing Grade 12, Gabriela applied and was shortlisted for a pilot training bursary at the Namibia Civil Aviation Authority. However, the compulsory psychometric and aptitude tests that formed part of the application process revealed that she was more mechanically inclined, and as such, better suited for a career in the aircraft technician field.

"These tests uncover aspects of your personality that you don't know about. Somehow, I didn't feel disappointed for not being accepted for pilot training; somehow I seemed to agree with the outcomes and recommendations thereof; I wanted to give it a try", Gabriela notes. Her parents and family too agreed to the recommendation that Gabriella enrolls at the Port Alfred 43 Air School in South Africa, a reputable flying training organisation, catering for the private, general commercial, airline and military sectors.



My colleagues appreciate me as someone who assigns a high premium to quality workmanship. They know I don't take shortcuts. I do everything by the book.

Gabriela Kamaahene

Aircraft Technician

“The training is intensive, but fun. You gain the required industry specific aviation maintenance knowledge and skills. It’s a good combination of theoretical and practical training. You need self-discipline in spades for the 12-month theoretical part. You cover all the basics, which serves as a good foundation from where you then get into all the intricacies around structure, mechanics and fluids. You can’t afford to let your guard down. You need to stay on top of your game”, she stresses.

FIRST JOB

Upon successfully completing the 11-month theory course, 2 800 hours of on-the-job training and a trade test, Gabriela acquired her certification and soon thereafter, landed employment at West Air Aviation, in the capital. “I’ve been very fortunate to have landed this opportunity at such a leading and trend-setting aviation company. The local aviation sector is quite small, and I could not have asked for a better opportunity to get my career off the ground”, she stresses. Aircraft technicians need to possess a good sense of visual awareness, a high level of attention to detail, and the ability to work under pressure. Gabriela, although still relatively inexperienced, is already proving her mettle in a cutthroat environment.

“My colleagues appreciate me as someone who assigns a high premium to quality work and workmanship. They know me as someone that doesn’t take shortcuts. I do everything by the book. When I’m done, I double-check. And after I’ve double-checked; I ask my seniors to come and pressure test, as well”, Gabriela says.

“The feedback from my seniors has been very encouraging. I know that I still have a lot to learn about this line of work, but it is very reassuring, nonetheless, to know that regardless of my lack of work experience; seasoned technicians already value my work, dedication and thoroughness, and what I bring to the table”, she adds.

RESPONSIBLE WORK

Thoroughness is indeed the name of the game in this dynamic trade area, where best practice and safety standards continuously evolve. “The safety of our aircraft, and by extension the safety of crew and passengers, is essentially what this work is all about. There is no room for error, and perfection in all we do, is a must; because lives are at stake”, highlights Gabriela. “My supervisors inculcate this important and overriding aspect of our work, all the time. It’s our workshop mantra: We do not compromise on safety. Never. Every



time you work on an aircraft, all the lives that will be stepping on that aircraft are in your hands. As aircraft technicians and mechanics, we are the first step of safety, and after that, the pilot”, she highlights. Safety comes with integrity and dependability, on the part of aircraft technicians.

Equally adept in completing tasks on her own, or working in a team on more complex assignments, the go-getting and no-nonsense Gabriela ticks all the boxes. “Our hangar is a pressure cooker, really. Our flight schedules are busy and demanding, and our aircraft need to be safe and ready. You must therefore work with utmost focus and concentration. An incorrect installation results in pressure on our workflow and unnecessary delays”, Gabriela emphasises.

“Things change, as well. Aircraft manufacturers often update us on new developments and technologies, especially as far as safety is concerned, and we need to adapt accordingly”, she adds.

ONGOING TRAINING

From basic certification, aircraft technicians enrol for further training to obtain certification to work on specific aircraft manufacturer brands. Gabriela is gradually working her way up the ladder, having obtained three such licenses already.

“It takes about six months to train and get your first aircraft license. You then can perform work on that type of aircraft only. So, depending on how you manage yourself and your time, you can obtain a new license every six months. Once again, it is all about self-discipline and commitment”, Gabriela notes.

“Furthermore, you should take into account that things evolve quite fast in this line of work. Manufacturers effect upgrades on their aircraft and you often need to complete refresher training at set intervals to keep your licensing. If you don’t, they expire”, she adds. Gabriela embraces the importance of keeping her skill set relevant and appropriate. “I’m so fortunate and lucky in that my parents are so supportive. My mother is pushing me all the way. We’ve set our goal on a further three licenses this year, whereafter we go for the bigger 55-seater Embraer jet. And once that one is under the belt, I’ll move on to bigger and more advanced aircraft”, she shares.

“Aircraft technicians are lifelong learners. That’s just the nature of our work. Luckily, just as I don’t mind getting my hands dirty in the workshop, I also don’t mind getting my nose into the books to study”, says Gabriela.

CAREER AMBASSADOR

Gabriela does not allow negative societal perceptions around the work she does in a male-dominated environment, to bring her down. On the contrary, she embraces it as a challenge. In fact, it motivates her to always give her utmost to the job at hand. “I can do anything my male colleagues can do. I can remove a propeller and I can install an engine. The only difference is size, really. I’m only 1.5 meters tall, but I fit into places they don’t. You underestimate me at your own peril”, she warns.

“I’m proud to play a part in breaking down the negative societal perceptions around women taking up jobs in male-dominated environments. Mechanically inclined young girls passionate about the aviation sector and who do not shy away from manual labour should consider these options. If your Mathematics and Science are on point, you too can make it and enter this exciting and rewarding career path”, Gabriela highlights.

“On a more serious note, I think we need more women to join the fray. My manager observed the other day that I brought a female touch to our work; a touch of perfection, a touch of persistence, a touch of class. Yes, definitely, this trade needs more women in making our aircraft even more safer”, she adds. With more international airlines adding Namibia to their routes and with plans to expand the international airport, the local aviation industry is set for growth, and more employment opportunities for aircraft technicians are sure to arise.

“Give it a go. I don’t hold a university diploma or degree, but I find myself on a viable and rewarding career path with excellent growth prospects. University is not for everyone, and often we overlook rewarding technical options, simple because we think of them as dirty work only men can do”, she concludes.

Gabriela Kamaahene: Courageous, assertive and spirited; a true champion for women in a cutthroat male dominated environment. Her story inspires us to recognise the powerful potential of the girl-child and to have the courage to direct their potential towards good ends. She is living her dream. She is living her passion.

**University is not for everyone,
and often we overlook rewarding
technical options, simple because
we think of them as dirty work only
men can do.** ”



Scan here
to watch my
episode online