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Why passion isn't always best

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CURBING CONTRAILS

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The price of passion

Getting ahead in the aerospace field has long depended on who can show the most passion for aircraft, satellites and rockets in and out of the office or lab. The obsession with passion is counterproductive and should stop. Engineer **Sylvie DeLaHunt tells us why.**

BY SYLVIE DELAHUNT

During a recent media interview, I was asked, “Why are you passionate about aerospace engineering?” Instead of conjuring up inspired visions of space exploration, search and rescue helicopters, or acrobatic fighter jets, my mind immediately initiated a downward spiral of panic. I felt guilty and embarrassed for not having an honest answer.

Is my work developing guidance algorithms and flight control systems for missile interceptors interesting, challenging and important? Definitely. Is it my “passion”? Not really. Despite this, I expand my technical knowledge, solve interesting aerospace challenges and bring a strong work ethic to my job each day. I am also dedicated to advocacy for diversity and inclusion in engineering and enjoy numerous hobbies, such as travel, sports, pets, reading and leadership.

Impassioned engineers constitute a crucial component of our aerospace teams; however, our industry’s expectation and valorization of passion for aerospace can hinder retention efforts by alienating those with diverse backgrounds and interests.

Aerospace, more so than other industries, expects passion of its students and professionals. This is often characterized by devotion to one’s career with a love for the field and an all-consuming desire to learn more that often extends beyond work hours. During interviews and while employed, professionals are consciously and unconsciously evaluated on their displayed passion: Does one know enough aerospace facts and history? Stay up to date on aerospace current events? Spend one’s free time amassing new technical knowledge, skills or hobbies? Love watching and discussing the “right” shows and movies?

This pressure to both have and demonstrate a singular focus on aerospace can disproportionately disadvantage underrepresented communities in the industry. Professional interests are often sparked at a young age. Due to gender norms, boys are more likely than girls to have defining experiences that lead to a fascination with aerospace and related disciplines, such as playing with model planes or rockets, fixing cars or building computers. This can cause women, and others lacking early exposure to the field, to feel like misfits relative to their more “passionate” peers who shape perceptions of who will succeed. Even for students and professionals who are enthusiastic, impostor syndrome may lead them to anxiously question whether their drive is enough. Additionally, how passion is displayed and perceived is subjective and can be influenced by cultural norms.

Furthermore, passion is often at odds with balance. Some managers within the aerospace industry, which is not known for work-life balance, view a willingness to work late hours as demonstration of commitment and excitement for one’s career. This metric can be detrimental

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to the career prospects of those who are the sole or primary caregivers of children, parents or relatives, even if their work is completed efficiently.

The pressure to demonstrate passion can also discourage people from pursuing other interests that are personally enriching and beneficial to our teams and industry. Well-rounded engineers make critical contributions to their technical work — as well as leadership, team building, onboarding, sponsor and customer relations, outreach, public engagement and more. Although I am still early in my career, my enthusiasm for diversity and inclusion has enabled me to influence strategy and policies at all levels of my organization. Unfortunately, engineers pursuing supplemental interests may appear insufficiently committed to aerospace compared to their more singularly focused peers, due to the time each new activity takes away from technical work.

During the recent AIAA SciTech Forum, the Women@SciTech panel stressed the importance of empowering people to be their authentic selves in the workplace. Authenticity increases personal happiness, fulfillment, motivation, confidence and creativity while promoting employee engagement and meaningful, trusting relationships. The subjective nature of judging someone’s passion risks disadvantaging a diverse subset of our industry and may also disproportionately discourage those with a variety of interests, instilling a fear that their authentic selves are inadequate.

Going forward, each of us in the industry should commit ourselves to promoting belonging. We should speak up and express caution when others seem to value passion over demonstrated performance and impact. Ask about and encourage pursuit of diverse interests. Reward all contributions in performance evaluations and interview criteria. Feature people with diverse backgrounds and experiences on panels. Highlight team members who bring different perspectives or have broader impacts. Recognizing the unique value of our members improves recruitment, retention and employee satisfaction while facilitating the diversity of thought that fuels innovation. Next time, instead ask: “What do you enjoy about your field?” or “What motivates you to go to work each day?” The answers you receive might surprise and inspire you. ★



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