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CAE's  
**Hélène Gagnon**

*Champion of diversity  
and sustainability*

**A NEW  
YEAR**

*to focus on your*  
– **core strength**  
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Meet CAE's  
Hélène Gagnon, a  
champion of diversity  
and sustainability

BY SANDRA ARNOULT



# TRAINING TRENDS

**W**ith an eye to the future needs of aviation, CAE continues its robust support of aviation technology, training, and scholarships in spite of a global pandemic and dramatic setbacks in the airline industry during 2020.

“There’s no question we’ve been affected,” Hélène Gagnon, CAE senior vice president public affairs and global communications, says. The company quickly responded with innovations such as remote instructor programs and virtual classrooms. “We’ve been doing a lot to support our customers,” she says. “We know it’s going to take a long time for aviation to come back.”

CAE, a WAI Corporate member based in Montreal, is a worldwide leader in technology and in meeting the training needs throughout the aviation industry. The company operates 160 sites and training locations in 35 countries. CAE trains an estimated 220,000 civil and defense crew members including 135,000 pilots. In March 2019, CAE acquired Bombardier’s Business Aircraft Training business. The move enabled CAE to take over the training market for some 4,800 aircraft customers. The company is adding 12 Bombardier business aviation full flight simulators to its network.

*Hélène at ATAC's General Meeting in 2019, giving a presentation about the need to increase the number of women in aviation—specifically increasing the percentage of female pilots in the global professional population.*



Hélène came to CAE in 2015 from Bombardier Aerospace, where as a vice president she focused on environmental issues, corporate responsibility, and culture, along with various management-related issues. It's a good fit for Hélène, whose expertise ranges from public and media relations to her earliest professional experience as a specialist in environment law. As a member of CAE's Executive Management Committee, she manages the company's brand and reputation including public affairs, web and social media presence, corporate events, as well as issues and crisis management. Hélène also strengthens relationships and communications with key internal and external stakeholders worldwide including CAE's 10,000 employees, media, communities, and governments.

She ticks off some statistics validating the need for continued training for both male and female pilots. Over the next 10 years, the industry will require 260,000 pilots, she points out. "The demand will come back [as] there will be attrition and pilots reaching retirement age," she says.

But the mission needs to be greater than simply filling the cockpit with qualified pilots.

"We're not tapping into the full pool of talent," Hélène says. "We feel we have a duty and a responsibility to see this industry is more gender balanced. Only 5% of pilots are women. We're doing this for the right reason and want to be a leader."

Hélène notes the company did some research and conducted interviews with some 150 young women to ask why they did or did not choose to become pilots. Their efforts revealed that many young women are not even exposed at a young age to the possibility of being a pilot, nor do they see role models.

"If you don't see other women opening up

in front of you, you won't feel like you belong," she says. "We want to create role models. Selected candidates will share their experience with other women."

CAE was determined to move forward in other ways during the pandemic that proved particularly daunting throughout the aviation community. The company's engineers and scientists used their creative energies to design in 11 days a prototype for a ventilator for use in intensive care units. More than 500 CAE employees from 45 departments were able to bring the ventilator forward for certification. More than 130 Canadian suppliers were selected to take part in the project.

On April 7, 2020, the Canadian government placed an order for the development and production of 10,000 CAE Air 1 ventilators.

"We are a very agile company," Hélène says. "We are a high technology company and there are a lot of opportunities."

In September 2020, CAE reached a goal of becoming carbon neutral. The company had announced in November 2019 its commitment to become carbon neutral by the summer of 2020—the first aerospace company in Canada to take that stance. CAE managed to achieve carbon neutrality by its continued reduction of its own emissions and by investing in projects that offset its remaining carbon emissions.

### **Women in Flight Scholarships**

In March 2020, CAE announced its second phase of its Women in Flight Scholarship program at the 31st Annual International Women in Aviation Conference and revealed that Southwest Airlines is a new airline partner. A CAE Women in Flight scholarship will be awarded to one candidate of Southwest's Destination 225 program.



*Above: Hélène gives a keynote speech about diversity and inclusion and importance of the carbon footprint reduction in our industry during the 2019 Canadian Hall of Fame ceremony.*

*Below: Hélène at the Bombardier CSeries (now A220) first flight in 2013. The CSeries was a clean-sheet design and is the greenest aircraft in the single-aisle market.*



It takes two years to fully train a pilot,” Hélène points out. The training is conducted at CAE’s Aviation Academy in Phoenix.

The scholarship covers the cost of ab initio training, travel, and accommodations. After successful completion of the program, called Southwest Destination 225, the scholarship recipient has the opportunity to start as a flight instructor as a stepping stone to becoming a pilot for Southwest.

“One of the reasons Southwest Airlines introduced Destination 225 pathways is that we recognize for many, the barriers to entering this career field can be prohibitive,” Julie Weber, Southwest vice president and chief people officer, says. “It’s exciting to leverage our partnership with CAE to remove one of those barriers and make it possible for aspiring female aviators to pursue their dream of a career at Southwest as we continue building a pipeline of future talent.”

Partners in the program for the previous year included American Airlines, Aeromexico, AirAsia, Cityjet, and easyJet. Hélène says CAE continues to “knock on doors” seeking additional sponsors, and concedes it is not easy during a pandemic.

CAE and Southwest have a 10-year training agreement and part of the commitment includes support for the scholarship program. Five women will be selected to receive the latest scholarship opportunities.

There are sparks of optimism in the aviation community. Hélène says while training activities bottomed out in April 2020 to 20% utilization, that figure climbed to 40% by August 2020.

“At the height [of the pandemic] one third of our training centers were closed,” she says. “Now they are all open with reduced hours. We consider this an essential service—to have pilots certified and to ensure safety.”

Hélène says CAE has also reached out to financial institutions to secure options for young people to finance their flight training.

“Less than 10% of eligible aspiring pilots have access to direct funding,” she says. “Talent is left on the bench, and we can work as one to facilitate access to direct funding by helping the financial industry understand job outlook and the reality of pilot training,” Hélène explains.

With this CAE initiative, aspiring pilots are connected to banking partners that offer specific financing solutions for pilot training. Approved partners will speed up the application process and offer competitive rates. In addition, future pilots will have access to a dedicated team that understands the reality of future pilots and a centralized point of contact in each of the participating banking institutions.

“If we wait, 5% won’t move by itself,” Hélène says of the low representation of women in pilot ranks. “We want it to move 25, 30, to 40%. “We aren’t going to change the world by ourselves,” she says, “but I think we are doing something significant that is being noticed by our airline partners. We think being organized and proactive is the way to go to make a difference.” →

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*Sandra Arnoult is a seasoned aviation journalist covering regional and low-fare carriers, airports, and aircraft manufacturers.*