

Virtual Airlines



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On the Cover: Great Lakes Express (GLE) B1900D

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GREAT LAKES EXPRESS



My name is James Kohan. I am the Founder and Managing Director of Great Lakes Express, a regional VA serving the Great Lakes region of North America. I appreciate the ability to share my story with you, and share what I believe has made Great Lakes Express such a successful and long-running Virtual Airline.

My interest in Flight Sims started in the very early 1980s when a family friend, Bob Booher, let me try my first flight simulator. It was a 737 Simulator with 80% of the screen being a very rudimentary view of the instrument panel.

I had the limited flight simulator offerings for our family Commodore 64 computer. As I got more and more

interested in PCs and Flight Simulation, a friend in the tech industry helped me build my first computer by sending me his spare components, which I had to figure out how to put together. Eventually I ended up with a nice 8086 PC (with a 286-12 Accelerator Card!), 640Kb of RAM, and a 5.25" floppy drive. All of the early Flight Sims were purchased and

thoroughly enjoyed, assuming I could tweak the autoexec.bat and config.sys files to free up the necessary RAM. I can safely say that I would not have gotten into computers like I did without the desire to use flight simulators to drive that process along.

My two main passions in life have been Aviation and History. This led me to my first professional job, working



in the Archives Division of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air & Space Museum. Starting in 1990, it was a true dream job for an aviation buff. With family commitments and a desire to finish my college education, I resigned in 1992.

By June 1993, I'd moved back to Ohio, graduated college, and was a History major looking for a job. Because of my experience with PCs (again, driven by my flight sim hobby), I applied for a technical writer position with a local software developer. I was hired, started moved through different

roles, and 14 years later was named VP of Operations. In 2011 I resigned to take a position with Hyland Software, a leading developer of Enterprise Content Management (ECM) software, where I am still employed as a Solution Architect today.

To any young readers out there, whose parent might be asking them to spend less time playing with the computer, I can honestly say that I am a true example of how PC gaming (flight sims in this case) can eventually lead you to a very successful technology career path. Just make

sure to spend the time to really learn how the computer works, in addition to mashing those buttons.

When not working, running GLE, or spending time with my flight simulators, I've been active with Ohio's 2nd largest aviation museum, MAPS Air Museum for the past 20 years or so. Have managed their membership process, run their website, published their monthly newsletter, and even sat as Trustee / Chairman of the Board for a while. If you are ever in NE Ohio, and have an afternoon to spare, come see our

B-26 Marauder (one of the last 6), our Sopwith Triplane, or our collection of Cold War aircraft!

I have a wonderful, patient wife of 20+ years, and two teenage sons (16 and 13). Neither of the boys are interested in Flight Sims at this point (they're into shooters, Skyrim, and Minecraft), but they are both very technically savvy.



About My VA, Great Lakes Express (GLE)

Like most VA pilots, I got into Virtual Airlines to give me a 'reason' to fly. After years of up-and-down local flights from Chicago Meigs, Boeing Field, or whatever the default airport was for the Flight Simulator I was using at the time, I was getting bored and needed structure. I soon joined Noble Airlines, based out of their Chicago Hub, and was eventually transferred to their Philadelphia Hub. While there, I noticed two things: 1) I didn't like the 'long haul' flights,

and 2) take-off and landings were the exciting/challenging/interesting part of the flights. To that end, I started focusing on Noble's regional flights, but quickly exhausted the options there. That fact, plus some internal management issues with Noble (basically, the PHL Hub Management team up and left) soon had me looking for other options.

Finding none that interested me, and starting to travel more for work and experience real-world regional op-

erations, I decided to try my hand at running a Virtual Airline. And so, in January 1997 I started Great Lakes Express. Focusing on the Great Lakes region, we are a feeder airline with hubs around the Midwest United States. I over time added other regional airlines, including Appalachian Airways (Virginia/Maryland area), Tidewater Express (North Carolina), and even launched a major carrier, Voyager Airlines. (NOTE: a quick search in the FlightSim.com File Library for "James

Kohan" and you can see some of my early fleet, and very rudimentary aircraft repaints). I ran these airlines until the mid 2000s, when work commitments forced me to hand operations off to Chuck King, one of my GLE pilots, and a local friend. He operated these airlines until his own work commitments (he founded and runs a local computer store) forced him to hand off operations of GLE to Paul Herman in 2009.



Above: Carenado's Beechcraft 1900D in GLE Livery – photo credit to James Kohan GLE001



Like most Virtual Airlines (myself included – see reference to Appalachian, Tidewater, and Voyager Airlines above), feature creep started to set in, and Paul and team added additional GLE hubs outside our 'area of operations' (Boston MA, Washington DC, Hartford CT). This expansion, and folding GLE into Paul's other VA offerings, including Premier (West Coast US and Southwest US operations), Premier North (Canada), special-

ized Charter carriers (in the Bahamas, Virginia, and North Carolina) and Cargo operations did two things, in my opinion: made GLE lost its focus, and what made it special, and probably made managing any one of these offerings a lot more difficult.

One hidden blessing of this expansion was that when Paul took over he converted GLE to using VA Financials (VAFS) as the ACARS system. When I started GLE, Admin operations were manual, using an

Excel spreadsheet and eventually an MS Access-based VA Pilot system that I developed and shared with the community. With VAFS, it's all automatic, and so much less stress.

Paul ran GLE and a few other regional airlines until spring of 2013, when his focus was pulled towards re-vamping Premier Airways into a highly realistic VA focused on operating the PMDG 737 and Ma-jestic Dash 8. Not wanting GLE to disappear, I asked for

and was given the airline back in April 2013.

Since retaking control of GLE, I did a major reboot, taking the airline back to its roots as a feeder and regional service. We presently have 4 small hubs: Cleveland (KCLE), Rochester (KROC), Chicago Midway (KMDW) and Minneapolis (KMSP). Except in special flights, none of our fleet seats more than 80 passengers, with 19 seat Beechcraft 1900D making up most of our flights.



Routes are a spoke-and-hub system, typical for real-world regional carriers, and while completely customized, are based on real-world flight operations. Except for feeder routes to the major real-world US hubs, none of our flights extend outside the Great Lakes area of operations. I do plan on limited growth, and may be adding some maintenance hubs to the network, partly to

give pilots additional destinations, and partly to mimic real-world operations, where the regional carriers do operate small maintenance bases in the region.

Our current 'official' fleet consists of the Beechcraft 1900D, Embraer 145, DeHavilland Dash 8-Q400, Canadair CRJ200, Canadair CRJ700, and Embraer EMB-170. I say 'official' because I

have a very relaxed policy about what aircraft can be used on GLE flights.

GLE's Primary Area of Operations

GLE as it stands today has 50 active pilots, and since starting to use VAFS in 2009, has flown 16,493 flights, carried 1,013,122 passengers, and loaded 116,466,231 lbs of cargo. According to VAFS, we have liquid assets of \$281,876,757.34 and a VA

Market value of \$368,465,416.33.



VA Operations – My Take On Operating A Successful VA

In this section I'd like to focus on lessons learned and suggestions for what I believe will help make a VA successful.

Start Small – one of the biggest issues with any endeavor is to take on too much, too soon. Start small, and grow only when you are comfortable with how things are growing. At both the 1997 launch and 2013 re-launch of GLE, I started out with 1 hub (Cleve-

land) and 1 aircraft type (the Beechcraft 1900D). Only when I was comfortable with the coverage and operations at KCLE did I add the Rochester (KROC) hub.

Expand Slowly – anyone who's ever started or run an VA has experienced the desire to 'get there' as quickly as possible. My suggestion and experience is that starting small, and expanding slowly will leave you with a much more fo-

cused offering. Only expand when a) your current offerings are solid, b) you know you can handle the additional workload, and c) when there's a valid reason (be that pilots are asking for it or 'you just really want to')

Be Creative – One of the things I wanted to do when setting up GLE was be unique. There are a number of VAs out there that mimic real-world carriers, from their name, design, hubs, route,

livery and fleet. I've found that coming up with your own concept for a VA is much more rewarding and offers more to the pilots. For building routes, I have described the process I use to base my routes on real-world operations, but still allow for some creativity and flexibility. This process has been documented and can be downloaded from;

http://www.gleairlines.com/Building_Routes.pdf



Engage Your New Pilots - Every new GLE pilot gets a personal email from me. This is partly because I haven't automated things yet, but also allows me to talk directly to the pilot, welcoming them to GLE and letting them know that there is someone on the other end when they have questions, comments, or suggestions.

Get Input - Speaking of questions, comments, and suggestions,

you can have developed the greatest VA in the world, with the best hubs, routes, and fleet, but if it only appeals to you, it's not gonna work out. Seek input from both your Pilots and the public (who hopefully will become your Pilots if they see something they like). To that end, make sure you...

Start a Forum - an online forum allows you to easily communicate with your pilots, and allows them to

share information, photos, and get assistance. Failing having a forum, pilot interaction a) won't happen, or b) must all go through you, making you the bottleneck and single point of failure. And with other real-world commitments, fail you most likely will.

Communicate regularly with your Pilots - during the 'old GLE', I would send out an email newsletter every Sunday evening, listing new pilots, promotions, up-

coming events, and news. I haven't done that yet with the 'new GLE', and quite honestly I can see the effects. During the 'old GLE' when I handed off control I had 287 active pilots (active meaning they had at least 1 flight per month). With the 'new GLE' I have 50 active pilots (active meaning they have a flight this year, or a flight within 90 days of joining). My use of the Forums, or even the VAFS new section,



to push information out works great assuming the pilots are taking the time to come to the Forum, or launching the VAFS client. An email newsletter is much more 'in their face' and quite probably gets and keeps pilots more actively involved.

Advertise - There are a number of different vehicle to advertise your VA's offering to the public. Some paid, some free. I have only used free advertising offerings to this point, but I find that it gives me a good rate of return.

Automate - as mentioned, during the days of the

'old GLE' all PIREPs were received via email, manually entered into an Excel spreadsheet (eventually automatically imported into an Access database). With the number of ACARS systems out there, if you do not have someone dedicated to keeping pilot data updated, find one of these systems that works for you. Some of them are free, some are not. VAFS is \$60.00 USD per year, but well worth the time savings that I used to spend keying in PIREPs.

Change Things Up A Little, part 1 - some pilots are perfectly happy

doing their regional flights, while other may want or need some additional options. How to do this without breaking the fundamental concept of a regional carrier can be a real challenge. A separate Charter service may be an option, but I believe dilutes your offerings. What I've done for 2 years now is offer seasonal Charter flights. Best way to do this? Use the NFL Football season. What I've done is setup Charter flights where GLE will ferry the Cleveland Browns, Detroit Lions, Chicago Bears, and Minnesota Vikings

to their away games for the football season. I lease 737 aircraft and offer these flights on a first-come, first-served basis to my pilots. Each flight is a one-time use flight, deleted shortly after completion, and when the season's over, the leased aircraft are returned. This allows those pilots with an occasional desire for the long-haul, heavy metal flights to partake, but doesn't disrupt normal GLE operations. I've had requests to do Baseball, Hockey, and Basketball Charters as well, but haven't gone down that path yet.



Change Things Up A Little, part 2 - Another option to give your pilots an occasional change of scenery is to set up code sharing. With my 4 airlines (GLE, Appalachian, Tidewater, and Voyager) I created a concept called PartnerFlight, which allowed VA Pilots to fly partner routes and get credit with their 'home' airline. This 1) kept an individual VA's routes down (minimizing that creep we talked about) and 2) gave pilots some

change of scenery without having to be on multiple rosters for multiple VAs. VAFS has a code-share option that I personally have not used yet. Build a Team, or Work Alone - I've been involved with VAs managed by a team, and in my opinion, things often don't work out. Whether it's personal differences, people working at different speeds or capabilities, or the impersonal nature of Internet communications, the VAs I've belonged

to that required team management had issues. To that end, I run GLE as a single man shop. Could I get more done with a team? Most likely yes, but at what cost to the vision of GLE and to my frustration levels? Keep It Simple, Keep It Fun - Please remember that this is all for fun, and in my opinion, the more rules and regulations you tie to your VA operations, the more you will limit participation by casual pilots.

If rigid adherence to regulations and operations is your aim, that's fine too, but I think you will find your pool of active pilots will be small.

Here are a list of my current requirements / practices with Great Lakes Express.

A GLE pilot must:

- Have at least one flight within 90 days of joining
- Have at least one flight per year
- Conform to VAFS-mandated 250 knot IAS below 10,000
- Not use Slewing during an active VAFS flight

A GLE Pilot can:

- Fly any route they would like - other than the single-use, first-come, first-served NFL Charter flights, GLE pilots can fly any route, from any hub, they would like.
- Fly from any airport they would like - like the routes, GLE pilots are not limited to their 'home' hub, and can jump between hubs when selecting flights.
- Use any comparable aircraft on any GLE route - in my early days of business travel, I can't tell you the number of United BAe ATP flights I took from KCAK to KORD. The ATP is still one of my favorite regional aircraft, and occasionally substituted in on my GLE flights to this day. I specifically state comparable because it seems VAFS will base the route's profits on the aircraft tied to that flight (meaning # of passenger seats available and # of lbs of cargo capacity), but bases the flight costs on the actual aircraft used. For example, a Beechcraft 1900D flight can carry 19 passengers and hold ~ 2000 lbs of cargo. That's your revenue capability. If you decide to substitute in an Airbus A380 on a B1900D flight, which I had one pilot that liked to do, your revenue is still based on filling 19 seats, and carrying ~ lbs of cargo, but your costs are based on the fuel burn, etc., of an Airbus A380. As you may imagine, fuel burn on an A380 is a bit different from a B1900D.
- Quit or take a Leave of Absence at any time.
- Rejoin at any time, with the previous hours, rank, etc., fully reinstated.

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