



A CULTURE OF CARE

For Duncan Aviation, responding to the needs of its workforce has been good for families, communities and their business

ABSTRACT

Amid an ongoing child care crisis, Duncan Aviation has listened to experts and its team members in seeking solutions, part of an overall company culture rooted in empathy.

Nick J. Buckley

2024



GOOD FOR FAMILIES. GOOD FOR BUSINESS.

[Duncan Aviation](#) has a workforce of 3,000, each of whom is designated as a “team member.”

The Lincoln, Neb.-based aircraft service provider has grown considerably since the late Donald Duncan started the company in 1956, with additional facilities in Provo, Utah, and Battle Creek, Mich., to lay claim as “the world’s largest privately-owned business jet service provider.”

The family-owned company has long understood the value of supporting the needs of its workforce beyond a competitive salary, opportunities for advancement and generous benefits.

And in the traditionally male-dominated aircraft service industry, Duncan Aviation has adapted to meet the changing needs of an increasingly more diverse workforce, many of whom are parents.

Amid the ongoing child care crisis – a national lack of access to quality and affordable early child care and a dearth of educators who make up the field – Duncan Aviation sought input from regional child care experts and team members before enacting potential solutions.

In addressing the issue of child care for its workforce, Duncan Aviation is demonstrating a responsiveness to the needs of its team members in a holistic way that boosts talent retention and attraction efforts while simultaneously supporting the local early learning and care sector.

For the aircraft service provider, employee satisfaction is not only good for business, but beneficial for its families and the communities where they live, work and play. It’s an approach that’s rooted in a culture of empathy among its 3,000 team members.

“This company would not be what it is today without the team members,” said Leon Holloway, vice president of team member services for Duncan Aviation. “It’s imperative that we listen to what’s working and what’s not working. What they would like to see the organization provide and do for the team now and into the future.”



PULSE PROPELS SYSTEMS CHANGE

In examining the early learning and care landscape and the needs of its workers, Duncan Aviation-Battle Creek found a partner to help navigate the child care crisis in southwest Michigan.

[Pulse](#), a project of the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research based in Kalamazoo, Mich., works to increase child care supply, advocate for best practices at the regional and state levels and help employers navigate child care opportunities.

Kathy Szenda Wilson, co-director of Pulse, said the child care crisis is a “wicked problem without a singular solution.” It requires recognition of the systems holding problems in place and how multiple players – such as business leaders – serve important roles in systems change efforts.

Pulse believes business leaders can subscribe to the ADKAR model (awareness, desire, knowledge, application and reinforcement) to create tangible change within their organizations and in their communities.

“There is a bigger movement afoot,” Szenda Wilson said. “We can simultaneously support your workforce and be working on changing the system, because the current system is set up to get the outcomes we’re getting.”

In 2024, Pulse completed a comprehensive early learning and care plan for seven counties in southwest Michigan, including Calhoun and Kalamazoo counties where most Battle Creek Duncan Aviation team members live.

Partnering with the RAPID Survey Project at Stanford University, Pulse found that 56% of families in the region use early learning and care on a full-time basis, with 31% of respondents reporting use of center-based care for at least five hours per week, and 48% reporting use of a friend, family or neighbor for at least 5 hours per week.

Pulse developed an employer “roadmap” to share with corporate partners to create conditions for working families to thrive in the workplace. The roadmap offers insight into the best options for addressing the early learning and care needs of a workforce, including flexible scheduling; employee assistance or employee resource programs; backup care; vouchers, subsidies and dependent care; onsite care; and public advocacy.

In establishing the roadmap, Pulse hosted CEO roundtables and summits around Michigan to help business leaders better engage with the child care sector and provide feedback to analyze current needs.

Andy Richards, executive vice president and chief operating officer at Duncan Aviation’s Battle Creek facility, has been an active participant among the business leaders dubbed “child care champions,” helping Pulse assess the area’s needs while advocating for potential solutions.

Richards and Szenda Wilson first connected after he listened to her speak about childhood trauma while on a community initiative panel. That chance encounter led to the two collaborating on the creation of a leadership development curriculum they’d eventually co-facilitate for Duncan Aviation’s leaders. Resilient Leadership is currently in its fourth year. In addition to their collaborative efforts within Duncan Aviation, Richards goes above and beyond in support of Pulse’s regional and statewide work tackling the child care crisis.

“(Richards) was part of a core group of business leaders that came together regularly to explore what the options were and helped give us feedback on the roadmap as it was being rolled out,” Szenda Wilson said. “He looks for ways to be strategically bold in this space. He’s trying to push other strategic partners to think differently and he appreciates that we’re trying to create systemic change.”

In March of 2024, Richards accompanied Szenda Wilson to testify in Lansing at a joint hearing of Michigan’s Labor and Economic Opportunity Appropriations Committee and the House Labor Committee on the issue of the child care crisis and its impact on labor.

“The lack of reliable, high-quality child care in our local area prevents many would-be job seekers from entering or reentering the workforce after they have started a family,” Richards testified. “In addition, those current team members with young families may not be able to fully engage and focus while they are at work if they are constantly worried about who is taking care of their young kids. It can be a matter of productivity loss due to distracted workers making excessive mistakes while on the job or being unexpectedly absent from work due to child care that falls through at the last minute. Many of our team members, in lieu of using established ECE centers, are relying on friends or relatives to take care of their kids. What happens when those caregivers get sick or have another schedule conflict that prevents them taking the kids?”



CHILD CARE CHAMPION

Richards has worked for Duncan Aviation since 1997, when he started at an entry-level position building aircraft cabinet at the Battle Creek facility. A native of southwest Michigan, he and his wife raised their two daughters while he advanced in his career, becoming the executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Battle Creek facility in 2019.

“I was just looking for benefits and a paycheck and didn't expect to be here more than five years, let alone 27 and be in this particular job,” Richards said. “They invested in me, and I'm not alone.”

Duncan Aviation's Battle Creek team members describe Richards as friendly and approachable. He deliberately makes time to walk around the facilities to make small talk, seemingly knowing the names of the nearly 800 team members (though he admits he's still getting to know some of the newer hires).

Richards said he considered leaving the aircraft maintenance provider in 2006, shortly before the economic downturn left the company reducing its workforce for the first time since it began in 1956.

“I started looking around, applying for jobs, got a few interviews and then something pivotal happened,” Richards recalled. “I attended a six-day work leadership training event that Duncan Aviation grew in-house and taught in-house to develop future leaders... At the end of that I said, ‘If Duncan's willing to invest this much time, effort and money in my development, why would I go anywhere else?’ And so, I stopped sending out resumes, stopped applying for jobs and pushed all my chips into the middle of the table for Duncan Aviation. And it paid off.”

While his daughters are now adults, Richards understands what working parents of young children go through, recalling his own experiences.

“It was a challenge for sure,” he said. “My wife and I worked different shifts... Then I went to the weekend shift because of my wife's work schedule. So, we would always have somebody taking care of the kids. It makes family life a little stressful. I did that for three years, until they all got into full-day school. And so that was our solution. In lieu of expensive child care back then when the resource was more available... But things have totally changed.”

In its assessment of the early learning and care landscape for southwest Michigan, Pulse found that there is child care capacity for only 56% of the population aged 0-5 in the region. Affordability is an additional burden for working families, with more than half of respondents in Calhoun and Kalamazoo counties saying they pay more than 10% of household income on childcare.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services says [7% of household income](#) spent on child care is considered affordable, while the national average is closer to 24% of household income spent on care.



DUNCAN TEAM MEMBERS SEEK CHILD CARE, PEACE OF MIND

Like much of the nation, the southwest Michigan region is faced with a severe early childhood workforce shortage and struggles to meet the child care demand following the pandemic and the subsequent return to in-person employment for many parents.

Liz Van Dussen is an eight-year team member at Battle Creek Duncan Aviation as its human resources manager. She's also a married mother of four, navigating the typical challenges of being a working parent.

While Van Dussen and her husband found early child care for their three daughters through “patchwork” due to alternating work schedules, she said that following her husband’s job change they began to explore options for their 2-year-old son.

“I was very open, but very nervous,” Van Dussen explained. “You are putting your most prized possession into the hands of somebody else and trusting they will provide the best care for that child. So, I was nervous.”

Van Dussen met with Bright Light Early Care and Education owner and director Lindsey Potter, who helped assuage those concerns, demonstrating how her child would be cared for in a safe and

nurturing environment. The early learning center checked off additional boxes in that it was local, affordable and had a reasonable waiting list.

“You establish that trust with the caregiver and their team, and you feel much better about it,” Van Dussen said. “To this day, I can honestly say Lindsey and her team have provided exceptional care for Cade.”

Stephanie Alexander has worked for Duncan Aviation for eight years, now as its airframe scheduler. The married mother of three shared that finding child care solutions for their children – ages 5, 3 and 11 months – left her family with some tough decisions.

“With my first (child), we started looking at daycares around the Kalamazoo area and it was a nine-month waitlist for an infant and about \$300 a week,” Alexander recalled. “I was due in early 2019 and this was July/August of 2018, and they were like, ‘Get on a waitlist now.’”

“My husband worked third shift, so between my mom and husband, they were able to tag-team care for the week... As time progressed, my mom went back to work. We found there was an opening at (a home-based care center). Things just have worked out really well, but there was a time where we were on a year-long waitlist for a second and it was going to cost us \$550 a week for two kids to be at full-time daycare. For my husband and I, that would almost be a wash.”

Alexander added, “It was months of touring and getting on waitlists. It was not my favorite, that’s for sure. And we had it easy because things worked out for us. There’s a lot of people who are still struggling with it.”

Frédéric Zallé has worked for Duncan Aviation for eight years, beginning as a paint assistant and advancing to paint shop team lead. With two school-age children (ages 7 and 3), he said child care has been an issue at times, but Duncan Aviation has offered flexible scheduling that allows him time for parental duties.

“Sometimes (my kids) are sick so me and my wife sometimes do half days,” Zallé said. “Now my daughter is going to school and my wife works 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. School is 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., so somebody has to be home at 4 p.m. to get her off the bus. I talked to the manager who said I could come at 5 a.m. and leave at 3:30 p.m.”

“Me and my wife have been really good, sitting and talking about it, ‘Can you take today off?’ Her mom and dad are retired, so when we both can, we ask them to take over. Right now, school is over (for summer) so we have to send my daughter to daycare because what do you do?”

Zallé added that he was hopeful the company would one day develop an in-house child care center, saying, “A lot of parents could appreciate it because if your kid is close, everything is connected.”

Some southwest Michigan companies, such as Kalsec in Kalamazoo and Whirlpool Global Headquarters in Benton Harbor, have opted to invest in developing and implementing on-site early child care centers for their employees. While this approach offers convenience and provides companies with [improved employee performance, retention and attraction](#), it requires a big financial investment and a large enough workforce of parents to be sustainable.

Szenda Wilson said Duncan Aviation followed the Pulse roadmap in addressing the unique needs of team members with children by being respectful of family choice when it comes to early child care.

“The best option or most equitable option is to put money and time in people’s hands to be able to do the things they need for their family,” Szenda Wilson said. “People make choices because of their circumstances.”



LISTENING AND FINDING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

About every 18 months, Duncan Aviation contracts a third party to conduct culture audits. Team members are offered an opportunity to participate in an anonymous survey and share feedback on a Likert scale. Senior leadership then analyzes the data and shares results with team members and puts them to action as part of strategic planning. The most recent culture audit garnered an 80% participation rate, the highest in the company’s history.

“It’s a very formal way of listening,” Richards said.

A previous culture audit provided the impetus for an employee choice program. Through the program, team members are offered financial incentives based on years of service and can choose to invest it back into a health savings account (HSA), a 401(k), a dependent care flexible saving account (DCFSA), a lifestyle account or buy more vacation time. Those discretionary funds can also be used for child care costs.

“At the end of the day we’re always digging in to see what’s innovative, what can we do to help our team members and their families,” Holloway said. “That’s just an ongoing care that we have for our work family.”

Another example of formal listening took place in 2022. With support from Pulse, Duncan Aviation surveyed its Battle Creek employees about child care and found that 60% of respondents reported that a lack of child care caused them to miss work at least once each month, and even higher (65%) for workers with children under the age of 5.

Working with Pulse, Duncan Aviation analyzed the results of the survey and responded by developing an agreement with Bright Light Early Care and Education. Under the agreement, team members are offered priority on a waiting list, with slots reserved to remove access as a barrier to quality local child care.

Potter explained that the agreement between Bright Light Early Care and Education and Duncan Aviation boils down to access, as the care facility cannot guarantee enrollment due to the high demand for services.

“They’re accessing the waitlist in the name of their to-be-determined or yet-to-be-hired employees,” Potter said. “We really think that this is a way for corporations to make it equitable across their staff benefit process, and not over promise, instead, over deliver... They are in the driver’s seat when it comes to financial allocation and how long they are holding it. I think it will really give them routine, regular and predictable access.”

Duncan Aviation has reserved their first waitlist spot, with one family awaiting the next opening.

“I think that they’re willing to take risks with ideas... they’re willing to try something,” Potter said of Duncan Aviation. “Even if it isn’t the right fit, it’s the first fit. And then you can edit from there.”

Julia Cwiek is a five-year team member at Duncan Aviation, where she works as an airframe Gulfstream and Embraer team leader. Her husband also works at Duncan Aviation and the couple share four children in their blended family.

While the Cwiek’s found reliable and affordable home child care for their 2-year-old, Julia said she’s grateful for the understanding and empathy her fellow team members display whenever she needs to leave work to tend to her children’s needs.

“My daughter has, I think, more needs than other children do as far as she’s in physical therapy... she has a lot of doctor’s appointments,” Cwiek explained. “And (Duncan Aviation is) super helpful with letting me take time off or leaving early or making up time throughout the weeks and months... They might even see me the next day, after she has an appointment, and they go out of their way to ask me about it.

“They always talk about being a family company, but they really show it when they do that kind of stuff.”

###

CAPTIONS

TOP: Aircraft inside Battle Creek Duncan Aviation’s new 46,000-square-foot hangar. The facility is part of “the world’s largest privately-owned business jet service provider.”

PAGE 2: Duncan Aviation-Battle Creek, located at Battle Creek Executive Airport at Kellogg Field in Battle Creek, Mich., is one of the city’s largest employers with a workforce of nearly 800.

PAGE 3: Kathy Szenda Wilson is co-director of Pulse, a project of the W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research that works to increase child care supply, advocate for best practices at the regional and state levels and help employers navigate child care opportunities.

PAGE 6: (L-R) Andy Richards, executive vice president and COO of Battle Creek Duncan Aviation, stops to talk with team members David Lidman and Jason Henry inside the new 46,00-square-foot hangar in Battle Creek, Mich.

PAGE 8: Liz Van Dussen, human resource manager at Battle Creek Duncan Aviation, drops off her 2-year-old son Cade at Bright Light Early Learning and Care before heading to work.

PAGE 10: Bright Light Early Learning and Care in Battle Creek, Mich. has entered into an agreement with Battle Creek Duncan Aviation to offer priority to Duncan Aviation team members on the center’s waiting list to improve access to early child care.

SOURCES

-Pulse: <https://pulseroadmap.org/>

-Duncan Aviation: <https://www.duncanaviation.aero/>

- Pulse/Community Profile: <https://pulseroadmap.org/supporting-materials/community-profile/>

-W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research (why businesses should care about child care): <https://www.upjohn.org/research-highlights/why-businesses-should-care-about-childcare#:~:text=Business%20cost%2Dsavings%20due%20to,which%20saves%20significant%20labor%20costs>

-Mom’s First & Boston Consulting Group: Child Care Benefits More Than Pay For Themselves At US Companies:

<https://www.bcg.com/publications/2024/childcare-benefits-pay-for-themselves-at-us-companies>

-Care.com (child care costs): <https://www.care.com/c/how-much-does-child-care-cost/>

-US Chamber of Commerce: Understanding America's Labor Shortage: The Impact of Scarce and Costly Childcare: <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage-the-scarce-and-costly-childcare-issue>