

**Funny Noises**  
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***What's Wrong with This Picture?***

Amateur Radio administrative bodies, and the “industry” in general, have been concerned for some time about the apparent decline in the number of licensees in this country. To make one part of this story really short, there was a consensus that the Morse Code requirement was a barrier to entry, and that numbers would increase if it were easier to get a license. As so often happens, the bureaucrats, politicians, and merchants jumped to a conclusion based on erroneous suppositions.

Consider:

Getting an amateur radio license is not difficult or expensive. The license costs nothing, and the exam questions can be memorized if one doesn't care to actually learn the material. There are approximately 700 thousand amateur radio operators in this country, and the number is declining.

Getting a private pilot's license is difficult and it is very expensive. Examination and certification fees run into the hundreds of dollars, and the prospective pilot will spend on average of 5 to 7 thousand dollars on instruction, which requires considerable effort over a period of 6 to 18 months. There are approximately 1.2 MILLION private pilots in this country, and the number is growing.

Conclusion? If people really want to do something, they will devote the necessary time, money, and effort to it. If people are dropping out of amateur radio, and newcomers are not coming in, there must be some reason other than “barriers to entry.” If the barriers are not the problem, removing or reducing them is not the solution.

That was easy, wasn't it? Just a few numbers to illustrate what common sense should already have told you. Why isn't it so obvious to the “administrators?”

The first problem is that bureaucracies tend to focus on numbers. They get the number of licensed hams (and a couple other “key statistics”) from the FCC and infer a decline, which may or may not have any real meaning. Unfortunately the numbers that are available from the FCC database don't really tell us very much. The critical number should be the number of ACTIVE hams, and there is simply no way to measure that. When the database included dates of birth, it was possible to see that the average age of hams is increasing, but what does that really mean? It is possible to assume that children aren't coming into the hobby at the rate they did a couple

decades ago, but it is unwise to assume that that's where the problem is, and that we need to expend an enormous amount of effort to try to attract kids to the hobby. It would be just as useful (if not more so) to conclude that mature age entrants are the bulk of the newbies, and therefore our recruiting efforts should be focused there, where it's apparently an easier sell! A fundamental principle of business is that you can't make decisions based on the numbers unless you are confident that they are accurate, and you know what they mean.

We can only guess at the real meaning of some of the available license statistics. Those who make decisions based on them can be wildly wrong, but there's no way to argue with them. How many came into the hobby as no-code Techs, for the simple reason that a license gave them access to 2M repeaters and autopatch? How many let the license expire because they (and their XYs and harmonics) now have cell phones?

I tend to be a little skeptical whenever someone tells me the sky is falling. If someone tells me that license numbers are dropping, and we have to go out of our way to recruit more hams to the hobby, I want to know why one follows from the other. Where are the numbers that prove that we "need" more hams? What is the right size for the amateur radio population? Personally, if I can find somebody to talk to I'm happy, and couldn't care less if the rest of the band is empty. And any time it takes me more than five minutes to find an empty frequency, I'll complain that there are too many hams out there!

In looking at the reasons for insisting on continued growth, I like to ask one of the fundamental questions from Criminology 101— who benefits? The publisher of an amateur radio magazine will benefit. The manufacturer of mass produced transceivers and related equipment will benefit. The people whose job it is to "administer" some small part of the hobby will benefit. The active ham radio operator, who is the real heart of the hobby, probably will not benefit. The hobby as a whole will not be better off if large numbers of newbies are dragged in for all the wrong reasons.

It's probably fair to say that all human activities tend to generate bureaucracies. And we know that bureaucracies develop their own corporate cultures and are driven to perpetuate themselves. Too often they lose track of their roots, and try to become their own reasons for being. This is just a fact of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it will happen with any organization, be it a university, a church, a government department, or an amateur radio club. But a hobby is just that— something that people like to do, because it is fun and somehow rewarding to them. The future of the hobby is in the hands of those who practice it, not those who administer it. With that in mind, I think I'll turn the computer off and go see what's happening on 20.