How Can Businesses Explore Using Drone Technology Without Breaking the Bank?

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In a previous blog post, I wrote about the projected increase in the number of commercial drones in the coming years and the key FAA rules that will impact growth of that technology for commercial purposes. Given some uncertainty in the regulatory landscape, a question asked by businesses interested in using drones is: how do I explore the usefulness of drones without spending a lot on the front end? Of course, an important part of that analysis is a budget, and three significant components of that analysis are: (1) equipment; (2) staffing; and (3) program development. This analysis could lead some companies to look at outsourcing parts of a drone program, at least as a way to test the waters.

Depending on the intended use of a drone, a single drone could cost between a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars. If specific sensors or cameras are needed, the cost can escalate quickly. Battery life can also impact the type and number — and thus cost — of drones selected. Third party vendors may already have the right drone, but the expected frequency of use will impact the decision of whether to purchase or rent.

Then there is the issue of staffing. At a minimum, an organizational program manager is critical for several reasons. First, when the company files papers with the FAA, that person must be identified. The point person is also necessary to handle the routine operation of the program, even if that is not a full time responsibility, as well as provide operational certainty and continuity. Even if outsourcing occurs, an in-house program manager will be needed in most circumstances.

But addressing the issues of cost and staffing will be the natural outgrowth of program development. Unless the company has experience using drone technology — and few do in these early years of commercial drone usage — the best first step is having someone analyze the potential program, which will include staffing

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and equipment decisions, among other things. Only then can the company decide whether the value of using drone technology outweighs the cost and time associated with implementing and running a drone program and, if so, whether to take on that task or outsource it.

The end result for many companies will be to outsource that work to a third-party provider, at least initially. The number of such providers is growing and stands to grow even more once the FAA establishes a clear landscape for commercial drone use, which is expected during the coming months. Like with any vendor arrangement, other issues emerge (contracts, indemnification, insurance coverage, non-disclosure, etc.), but that approach still may be more appealing than running a full drone program.

Outsourcing drone capabilities will be an attractive option for many companies to test drive drone technology. Do you think businesses will outsource drone usage? If so, why or why not? Post your comment below.

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