OPINION: ROTORCRAFT SECTOR MUST GO BACK TO BASICS

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"There doesn't seem to be a strategy to expand the industry. We've been suckling too long on the oil and gas teat." However provocative, that stray comment from one of the organising team at the HAI Heli-Expo show neatly captures the state of the rotorcraft sector.

Hamstrung by a plunging oil price and allied to global economic uncertainty and shrinking government budgets, helicopter sales tumbled in 2015.

With orderbooks proving much less robust than originally thought, the big airframe and engine manufacturers shied away from product launches in Louisville.

Two phrases kept cropping up: that the downturn is actually a golden opportunity; and that service and support networks are being significantly expanded.

Virtually every manufacturer was keen to talk up their aftermarket or maintenance, repair and overhaul business, spare part provision or improvements to customer relations. Which is all very commendable, but it begs the question as to what the industry thought it was playing at beforehand.

For too long, the OEMs were guilty of looking to shift units, rather than delighting their clients. So while the customer service improvements are welcome, they are also long overdue.

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Perhaps the present downturn *is* an opportunity. But without fixing those structural issues, there will be no foundations to build on once the market rebounds.

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