

Business aviation companies fly ahead of looming pilot shortage



Epps Aviation pilot Wes Baggarly does a pre-flight inspection.

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Faced with a shortage of pilots and technical professionals in the near future, the business aviation industry isn't sitting on the ground. It's going wheels-up for the future.

A recently published report by the Boeing Co. stated that over the next 20 years, “804,000 new civilian aviation pilots, 769,000 new maintenance technicians and 914,000 new cabin crew will be needed to fly and maintain the world fleet... The forecast is inclusive of the commercial aviation, business aviation and civil helicopter industries.”

That demand stems from “a mix of fleet growth, retirements and attrition,” according to the report. Meet that demand will require “a collective effort from across the global aviation industry,” as several hundred thousand pilots and technicians are slated to retire over the next decade. The Boeing report calls for educational outreach and career pathway programs to inspire and recruit the next generation of aviation employees.

“Not only is there a pilot shortage today, but there is anticipated to be a significant shortage in the years to come,” said Dan Hubbard, senior vice president of communications for the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) based in Washington, D.C.

Two years ago, the NBAA, which claims about 11,000 member companies, created a mentoring network to help steer aspiring aviation professionals from college studies programs into business aviation. The NBAA offers an Internship and Career Guide, which provides instructions on supporting the next generation of business aviation employees through partnerships between companies, collegiate aviation degree programs, regional business aviation associations and government entities.

The annual NBAA Business Aviation Convention & Exhibition, which includes a day of student-focused programming, takes place Oct. 22-24 in Las Vegas. Over the past five years, the event has drawn more than 5,500 students, according to Hubbard.

“We call it a ‘talent gap,’” said Sheryl Barden, president and CEO of San Francisco-based Aviation Personnel International, which helps corporations and high-net-worth individuals find permanent professionals to fly, maintain and protect the value of their business aviation assets.

“Everyone is competing for a finite amount of talent and trying to hold onto the talent they have,” Barden added. “Everyone is competing for a finite amount of talent and trying to hold onto the talent they have,” Barden added. “The problem is, we can’t make a pilot overnight. We can’t make one that fits the requirements in a year or two.”

To retain existing aviation staff, business owners are offering higher compensation and better benefits packages, including increases to 401(k) contributions. Barden estimated that pilot compensation has increased in “double-digit percentages” over the last three years. Some companies are increasing pilot head count, which allows for flex-time and time off for regular staff.

To attract and retain pilots, Epps Aviation, based at DeKalb-Peachtree Airport since 1965, offers a “robust benefits package, including a good medical and 401(k) profit-sharing program, along

with paying good wages, said Pat Epps, the company's president. Epps Aviation is a Corporate Aircraft Association (CAA) fixed-base operator (FBO).

One aspect of Epps operations, which, in three company's view represents a competitive advantage, falls under Federal Aviation Regulations (FAR) Part 135, Epps explained. This category of flying, which applies to operational control over certain types of aircraft, includes on-demand charter flying and an opportunity to fly to a variety of airports, even those not serviced by large commercial airlines.

"This type of flying is appealing to some pilots," he said.

An open-door policy allows public access to Epps facilities at PDK, "in hopes of inspiring individuals to become a part of the aviation industry," he added. Also, the company routinely hires high school and college students during the summers and stages youth-oriented aviation events.

The pilot shortage began during the financial crisis," said Jeania Uplinger, regional manager at Ultimate Air Shuttle, also has a base at Peachtree-DeKalb Airport. The Cincinnati-based company operates jet shuttle service between multiple cities including Atlanta via PDK.

When commercial carriers and general aviators pulled back on routes, Uplinger explained, pilots were furloughed. Wages declined, which precipitated weak demand for new pilot candidates. As the economy improved, many furloughed pilots found new carriers or did not return to the industry while aging captains timed out and retired.

Uplinger said that, although the pilot shortage has not yet significantly impacted Ultimate Air Shuttle operations, the company regularly attends university job fairs, recruits through its current flight staff and hires retired captains from commercial operators and the military. Ultimate for training and certification, offers schedule flexibility such as one-week-on/one-week-off, and overtime, Uplinger said.

"Keeping our existing flight teams is a priority," she added.

New pilot demand by region over the next 20 years:

- Asia Pacific region: 266,000 pilots
- North America: 212,000
- Europe: 148,000
- Middle East: 68,000
- Latin America: 54,000
- Africa: 29,000
- Russia/Central Asia: 27,000

Source: Pilot & Technician Outlook 2019-2038, published by Boeing

Read the original article (subscription required):

<https://www.bizjournals.com/atlanta/news/2019/10/18/business-aviation-companies-fly-ahead-of-looming-p.html>

