

# USA TODAY – *Demand for Airline Pilots Set to Soar*

By Charisse Jones, USA TODAY

For as long as he can remember, Costas Sivyllis has dreamed of becoming a pilot.

"There was no specific moment," says Sivyllis, 20, a junior at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. "I've grown up my whole life knowing this was it."

Sivyllis hardly could have picked a better time to enter his chosen profession, and he knows it. "I'm very excited about the future ... because we've never really seen anything like this," he says.

After nearly a four-year drought of job openings, the airline industry is on the brink of what's predicted to be the biggest surge in pilot hiring in history. Aircraft maker Boeing has forecast a need for 466,650 more commercial pilots by 2029 — an average of 23,300 new pilots a year. Nearly 40% of the openings will be to meet the soaring travel market in the Asia-Pacific region, Boeing predicts, but more than 97,000 will be in North America.

"It is a dramatic turnaround," says Louis Smith, president of FltOps.com, a website that provides career and financial planning for pilots. "Pilot hiring was severely depressed in the last three years. The next 10 years will be the exact opposite, with the longest and largest pilot hiring boom in the history of the industry."

The demand for pilots will be so great that the industry could ultimately face a shortage, sparking fierce competition among airlines across the globe vying for candidates qualified to fill their cockpits. "We're already seeing in some spots around the world a shortage of pilots ... and if you were watching this a few years ago at the last peak, you had airlines stealing from other airlines," says Sherry Carbary, vice president of flight services for Boeing Commercial Airplanes in Seattle. "It's a global marketplace for pilots, and ... we'll not have enough if that growth trend continues over the next few years. That's something the industry needs to come to grips with. Where is our pipeline of new pilots going to come from, and how are we going to finance them?"

The hiring surge is being fueled by several factors:

- The rapid growth of travel in Asia, which is on track to surpass North America as the largest air travel market in the world;
- A looming wave of pilot retirements in the USA;

- Proposed changes to rules that could increase the time pilots must train, rest and work;
- And increasing demand for air travel within the USA as the economy improves.

U.S. carriers had 4.9% more pilots in 2010 than in 2009, with much of the increase fueled by low-cost carriers that are continuing to expand, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

Low-cost airlines such as Southwest, Virgin America and AirTran increased their pilot staffing 11.2% in 2010 over 2009, while regional carriers increased their pilot numbers by 4.9%. Major network airlines, however, saw their pilot workforce drop 1.3% last year, the bureau says.

"The cost of the fuel has spooked a few carriers," Smith says, noting that the massive earthquake and tsunami in Japan have also had some impact. But, he says, the industry-wide hiring explosion is "still on track."

### **Finding jobs over there**

Many new pilot opportunities are in Asia, particularly China, where the rapidly growing economies are spurring a demand for air travel.

Beijing became the second-busiest airport in the world last year, and Boeing projects that the region will need 180,600 pilots in the next two decades, 70,600 for China alone. In March, Boeing announced that Hong Kong Airlines was planning to buy 38 aircraft.

Air China, pending government approval, plans to buy five 747-8 Intercontinental jets. Bigger fleets mean "more resources needed to support those planes," Carbary says.

U.S. airlines, many of which are expanding their reach into Asia, also will need to widen their pilot pools to handle the lengthy flights.

"Say you wanted to start a route from Chicago to Shanghai," says Les Westbrooks, a former commercial pilot who's now an associate professor of aeronautical science at Embry-Riddle. "That one route alone could require an airline to hire 40 additional pilots" because of the staffing and equipment requirements for such a long journey.

Across the USA, the need for pilots will be sparked by increasing passenger demand, and perhaps most significantly, an exodus of senior pilots that is expected to start next year, as a large wave of pilots hits the age of 65, which is the mandatory retirement age for airline pilots under federal law.

The mandatory retirement age "is starting to catch up with us," says Westbrooks, noting that many of those scheduled to retire joined their airlines during hiring booms in the 1980s and '90s. "The large-

scale hiring we had then is now turning into large-scale retirements, which will require replacements to maintain the status quo."

The increasing need for pilots is almost all the flying community talks about, Sivyllis says. "That's definitely the big news around not only our campus but (among) anybody who's a flight instructor or entering the entry level of the industry," he says. "The top level of the industry is going to open up, and when it does, it will open fast."

A full-time student, and a flight instructor with 600 flight hours under his belt, Sivyllis' goal is to be a captain, flying to Europe for a carrier such as Delta or United.

But flying for a commercial airline is far from the only opportunity that will be tempting such young pilots as Sivyllis, says Westbrook. "There's competition from other types of pilot occupations, such as ... corporate flying, that's going to limit the supply."

### **Come fly for us**

As worldwide competition for pilots begins to heat up, some overseas carriers are making dramatic overtures to fill their cockpits.

Emirates, the Dubai-based carrier, will hire more than 500 pilots by April 2012, says Michael Keating, the airline's flight crew resourcing specialist. The carrier already employs roughly 300 Americans as pilots, and is visiting job fairs in New York City and Las Vegas to seek candidates. "As a rapidly expanding carrier, with 153 aircraft ... plus another 200 planes on order, and options for more, the need for flight crew professionals continues to grow," he said in an e-mail.

The compensation package for these pilots includes perks such as a chauffeur-driven car to and from work, an education allowance for the pilot's family, and profit sharing.

Though English is the international language of aviation, Westbrook says Spanish-speaking students also are being sought by Latin American airlines. "We have airlines knocking on our doors," he says. "If you can speak Spanish fluently and can fly an airplane, wow, you can write your own ticket."

There are concerns whether there will be enough pilots to meet the industry's needs.

Airlines, struggling in recent years to stay afloat amid a global recession and rising fuel costs, weren't focused on cultivating new pilots. Many young people who might have sought a career in aviation a generation ago turned their attention to software companies or other industries, turned off

by a field in which opportunities were scarce, benefits were eroding and starting pay at regional carriers was low, some analysts say.

"We've got to attract qualified people, smart people into the industry and you're going to spend \$50,000 to \$60,000 on flight training, plus your college (costs)," Westbrook says. "You've got a guy who'll walk out \$100,000 in debt, and we're going to tell him, 'We'll pay you \$22,000'? The airline industry has relied on passion for years — that people love to fly and will do whatever they have to do to fly. But there comes a time when it's a matter of dollars and cents."

The average starting salary for a pilot at a regional carrier is roughly \$21,000 a year, while the most senior captain, flying the largest plane at a major airline, typically makes more than \$186,000 a year, according to FltOps.com.

Carbary adds, "You're seeing kids coming out of school wanting to go to Microsoft or Google, and frankly, the technological developments going on in aviation are now as ... robust (as) that in some of the software fields. So part of it is reminding people of that and trying to attract them back to aviation."

Sean Cassidy, a pilot for Alaska Airlines and first vice president of the Air Line Pilots Association International, which represents more than 53,000 pilots in the USA and Canada, says that "whether or not we could meet those (pilot hiring needs) domestically depends on how robust the hiring process is, how lucrative it is to attract new entrants into the industry, especially at the regional level."

### **Small airlines, big losses?**

Smith believes that regional U.S. airlines, which often are the first rung on the career ladder for pilots, could be hit particularly hard as their ranks are recruited and depleted by larger carriers in the U.S. and overseas.

"We suspect they're going to lose thousands of (pilots) to the folks above them," he says. Roger Cohen, president of the Regional Airline Association, disagrees.

"Today, flying for a regional airline for many individuals has become their career," says Cohen, noting that while opportunities at larger carriers have decreased amid several mergers, pay is rising in the regional sector, and pilots are able to fly larger and more sophisticated aircraft. "They make lifestyle choices to stay at regional carriers because benefits, compensation, (and the) type of flying suits them well."

"This notion Americans are going to all of a sudden, because they're trained pilots, are going to go fly in India; it's still not the good old USA," he says. "What we just need to do is open up the mouth of the pipeline even wider, attract more people, get them into the programs and trained. This is really where the government has a major stake."

For those already in the pipeline, the sky may literally be the limit, as pilots possibly win back benefits and perks that airlines cut in recent years amid restructuring efforts.

"My son just got hired by a regional airline, and I told him, 'Your career is going to be explosive,'" Westbrook says. "It's going to be a pilot's market."

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