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Bruno Dobler.

We face stiff competition with airlines for pilot recruitment

March 1, 2006:

The worldwide shortage of qualified pilots across all aviation sectors is already well documented, but I believe that the business aviation industry is teetering on the verge of a disaster unless it tackles the issue now.

Traditionally, pilots head for the airlines first and then move into business aviation. What looks likely to happen is that there will be more pilots flying for the airlines and there will be fewer top calibre pilots available to the corporate sector. As an industry which is dependent on its reputation, this could have dire consequences for safety, unless it does something now.

Middle Eastern airlines, for example, are demanding pilots at a rate of knots. Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways all regularly recruit and local private operators, such as National Air Services or the region's various royal flights, are constantly looking for pilots.

Thanks to huge growth in the region's aviation sector, the local fleet is expected to grow by around 600 aircraft over the next 20 years, according to Boeing, which means that around 4,800 extra pilots need to be recruited or trained to fly them.

Europe has supplied a large number of pilots to the region, as well as filling the void created by massive growth in China and India. This flow may soon start to dry up, as the airline industry begins to recover. A recent conference organised by the British airline pilots union, BALPA, found that 700 new flight deck crew will be needed for 2006 to fill vacancies caused by expansion and retirements.

Coupled with the lack of pilots, business aviation is set to grow. A survey by Honeywell in October found that the long-term future for the growth of business aviation is very positive. The outlook forecast demand for 7,600 new business aircraft over the next five years. By 2012 the fractional ownership fleet will comprise 10 to 12 per cent of all active business aircraft in the world (compared with around 7 per cent today).

Possible solutions

So what can the industry do to protect itself? Several key areas need to be looked at, the first being recruitment and how to pitch the profession to attract suitable candidates.

The industry has to apply itself carefully to the screening process. Not only that, it needs to promote itself to attract students in the first place, and to tackle some of the difficult issues, such as rostering. Business jet pilots often don't know their schedules until the last minute, unlike airline pilots, who are aware of theirs two to four weeks in advance. This obviously has a negative impact on people's lives and it can be resolved with careful planning.

To tackle the problem of experienced business aviation pilots defecting to the airlines, I believe it is vital that the industry promotes the advantages of working in the sector, such as opportunities for rapid career development in smaller teams, flying some of the world's most sophisticated aircraft to destinations all over the world and staying in luxury hotels.

The business aviation industry could take up the model adopted by many airlines, where companies work with training organisations to pre-select student pilots, who then pay for their own training, perhaps with a loan or a contribution towards the costs of their training from the company.

The company then tracks its students' progress and they stand a better chance of being hired by that organisation on completion. This would dramatically reduce the screening process for a business, as it will have tracked candidates through their training.

To resolve the pilot shortfall problem, the corporate aviation industry must act now, or find itself with serious difficulties in the very near future.

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Useful contact details from the Handbook of Business Aviation in Europe

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