

Recruiting and Retaining Talent: The Key to Success in the Aviation Industry

The Predicament

In its brief to the Hermes Air Transport Organization, Airports Council International (ACI) notes that the aviation workforce contracted by 43% during the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving a significant labor deficit in the industry. Moreover, global passenger volumes are set to double by 2039 from their pre-Covid-19 pandemic levels. Thus, it is evident that the aviation industry needs to retain its existing workers and to hire and train new workers extensively over the next several years to meet labor requirements.

The African Civil Aviation Commission (AFCAC) brief notes that a shortage of workers in the industry raises potential safety concerns. The brief states that ICAO Aviation Safety and Security Audits have identified the lack of qualified aviation personnel as a common deficiency and root cause for low safety scores. Therefore, it is imperative that the industry retains its current workforce and recruits new talent.

In retaining and recruiting employees, the aviation industry faces considerable challenges. These include the following:

1. The need for employees with specialized skills: The industry needs employees with specialized skillsets that may require many years of education and training. Along these lines, the brief from the International Federation of Air Traffic Safety Electronics Associations (IFATSEA) notes that the industry requires “professionals”, not just employees, because of the specialization and skill levels needed in the workforce.
2. The nature of employment in the aviation industry: The Airport Services Association (ASA) writes that many employees in the industry need to work irregular hours, including weekends, evenings, and holidays, and that these schedules can deter potential job candidates. Moreover, the physical demands of the job, such as heavy lifting and exposure to various weather conditions, can further limit the pool of available applicants. The Civil Air Services Navigation Organization (CANSO) also notes that jobs, such as air traffic controller, may be perceived as stressful to potential job candidates, thus decreasing their attractiveness.
3. The low profile of jobs in the industry: Although some positions in the aviation industry are well known and highly sought after, such as airline pilot, others may not be on the radar of job candidates. The Latin American and Caribbean Air Transport Association (ALTA) writes that companies and organizations in the industry may suffer from lack of brand awareness. AFCAC states that many people do not know of the various job opportunities in aviation.

4. The workforce in the industry is aging: The European Regions Airport Association (ERA) states that a major reason for a skills shortage in the industry is the impact of an aging workforce and notes that many skilled and experienced pilots and engineers are retiring.
5. Perceived higher pay and better opportunities in other industries: IFATSEA states that other industries may have significantly better career paths and more rewarding salaries. ALTA cites competitive salaries as a major problem in attracting and retaining workers in civil aviation.
6. Government programs may prioritize other industries: AFCAC notes that States may not allocate funds for aviation training since aviation is perceived as a non-essential industry. Instead, States may prioritize funding to individuals pursuing careers in industries perceived as more important to society, such as medicine.
7. Training new employees is lengthy and costly with uncertain outcomes: The AFCAC brief notes that training for aviation professionals is usually very costly. CANSO states that the failure rates for air traffic control trainees range from 5 percent to as high as 60 percent in complex airspace, with an average failure rate of 18.8 percent. Moreover, the training process can take two to four years, depending on the complexity and location of the airspace.

Retaining and Recruiting Employees

The briefs presented by the international organizations provide many proposals for retaining current employees and attracting new workers into the industry. Several of the ideas are quite straightforward. These include increasing pay, providing better training opportunities, structuring positions with a healthier work-life balance, and increasing opportunities for promotion and personal growth. Moreover, quite a few of the briefs recommend greater collaboration with educational and training institutions to increase the pipeline of potential employees. For example, the Arab Civil Aviation Organization (ACAO) states that the technical and vocational education system needs to be aligned with current and future labor market needs. In addition, there should be an enhancement of the capacities of teachers, trainers, and administrators to facilitate the education of potential employees.

Some of the more specific recommendations to retain and recruit employees into civil aviation include the following:

1. Standardize job requirements: The ICAO Council President states that some aviation disciplines lack a harmonization of competencies and recognition of certification, which is an obstacle to workforce global mobility. IFATSEA suggests that companies and organizations collaborate on establishing standardized job requirements across the industry in the belief that greater standardization will ensure consistency and clarity in attracting talent. ACI states that there should be mutual recognition of training certificates, industry designations, and validation of competencies across States, as well as accelerated security vetting processes. This will facilitate the integration of workers into new environments in a faster and more seamless manner.

2. Enhance the technological capabilities of the workforce: ASA recommends investing in training programs to equip professionals with the necessary digital skills to ensure competencies in an increasingly technology-driven industry. Embracing automation, robotics, and digital tools can streamline processes, reduce manual labor, and enhance overall workforce efficiency. The ALTA brief further notes that the aviation industry is constantly evolving and incorporating new technology and innovations. By showcasing these advancements, the industry can attract individuals who are interested in working with cutting-edge technologies.

3. Broaden and diversify the employment pipeline: The briefs cite the need to diversify and broaden the pipeline of potential workers. For example, A4A describes a pilot training program initiated by a member airline that graduated a first class of 51 trainees with nearly 80% women or people of color. A4A cautions, however, that training programs can be costly, with tuition expenses out of reach for potential recruits. Therefore, organizations in the industry need to work with banking institutions, government agencies, and other sources to secure funds needed to support the trainees. ACI states that the industry must prioritize Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in its recruitment, training, and promotion practices to create a more equitable and inclusive work environment.

4. Strengthen awareness and enhance the image of the industry: The ICAO Council President states, marketing and branding should be enhanced, including through social media, speed networking, academic and career fairs, and mentorship. AFCAC echoes this view, recommending increasing awareness in civil aviation through social media, television, and other means. The AFCAC brief states that it is important to develop targeted messaging to appeal to students, recent graduates, mid-career professionals, and individuals from diverse backgrounds. CANSO states that recruitment efforts require the industry “gets it right on sustainability”. Surveys show that members of the younger generation want to work for organizations that align with their values. CANSO states that demonstrating aviation’s robust and ambitious plans to decarbonize is critical to attracting the skills needed in the industry. The ICAO Council President notes careers in aviation must be recast to focus on the social and sustainable development benefits of flight, highlighting the industry’s unique worldwide commitments to decarbonization, aviation’s role in connecting people and cultures of the world, aviation’s humanitarian relief role, and its other key positive influences on sustainable development and growth.

Working Collectively Toward the Goal of Retaining and Recruiting a Civil Aviation Workforce

Several of the briefs noted the importance of organizations in civil aviation working collectively through their trade associations, and together with governments and educational institutions, to promote the hiring, training, and retention of civil aviation workers. Proposals include the following:

ICAO/IFATSEA/ASA/ALTA/AFCAC/ACI/ACAO: Establish partnerships with universities, technical schools, and training centers to promote the profession and offer internships and apprenticeships.

A4A: Expand recruiting by partnering with aviation-focused collegiate institutions and Historically Black Colleges and Universities to broaden access to those in traditionally underrepresented communities.

ERA: Involve governments and policy makers in the implementation of policies and programs that encourage education and training. Governments can provide subsidies, tax incentives, and other benefits to institutions providing education and training to aviation professionals.

ICAO Council President: Encourage industry associations to provide platforms for pooling resources, including the provision of scholarship opportunities and financial support to underrepresented groups.

Recommendations

1. Promote recognition of the careers available in civil aviation. Promotions should be coordinated with industry associations, governments, and educational and training institutions. Specific targeting should be developed to broaden the scope of employees in the industry, including women and underrepresented minorities.
2. Develop funding sources to offset training costs. Work with governments, educational institutions, and private sector organizations to develop funding to offset training costs for individuals interested in pursuing careers in civil aviation.
3. Expand efforts to retain employees. Civil aviation organizations should offer competitive salaries, employ technology to facilitate operational tasks, provide better training and advancement opportunities, and offer a work environment with a better work-life balance.
4. Promote the standardization of job requirements. Work through ICAO and other industry organizations to develop standardized job descriptions and requirements to facilitate training programs and employee mobility within the industry.
5. Empower cooperation among training organizations. Offer opportunities to job candidates who may be unsuccessful in one aviation field (e.g., air traffic control) to continue in other, more suitable, positions in aviation.
6. Introduce and enhance proactive DEI practices. In this way, organizations can provide opportunities for employees to develop new skills and advance their careers regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability. Based on the implementation of such practices, bright and hard-working employees can progress to the upper echelons of their organization's hierarchy without facing explicit or tacit glass ceiling constraints.

2023 Hermes Recommendations Committee

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