

Pilots flying high as airline travel increases

PARIS, France: An increase in global air traffic means pilots are in high demand and are now often in a position to choose to work for airlines offering better wages or working conditions, a situation that could crimp some low-cost airlines.



Photo by Kristopher Allison on Unsplash

The rising demand for cockpit crew is linked to a wave of retirements of baby boomers and the growth of air traffic, which the International Air Transport Association (IATA) expects to nearly double to 7.8 billion passengers in 2036.



The world will have to prepare for 7.8 billion air passengers by 2036

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"What is certain is that there is a shortage" of cockpit personnel and they are now "going to the airline which offers the best conditions" said Marc Houalla, who was head of France's national civil aviation institute (ENAC) until mid-October.

The crisis has already been felt at Irish low-cost airline [Ryanair](#), which was forced to cancel 20,000 flights between September and March as it found itself without sufficient pilots due to scheduling issues and a hemorrhaging of cockpit staff seeking better labour conditions elsewhere.

Pilots will go where there is a better offer

Currently "all airlines are hiring and in particular traditional airlines ... and as these firms offer better work conditions than those at Ryanair, so when pilots have the choice they'll go where there is the better offer," said Christophe Tharot, head of the French airline pilots' union SNPL.

So far this year, low-cost Norwegian has said it has recruited 160 pilots who have left Ryanair, a quarter of the more than 600 it plans to hire in 2017.



Ryanair CEO says won't bid for Air Berlin

31 Aug 2017



The shifting of the winds in the labour market began to be felt two or three years ago when US airlines sought to lure away pilots, including from Gulf-based airlines, said one pilot on condition of anonymity.

The captain left Ryanair for Air France less than a year ago after having failed to get a job with a Gulf airline.

"Today they are calling me to reconsider," he said.

Meanwhile Chinese airlines are offering "salaries that are a bit insane", he added.

China expected to dethrone US

China is expected to dethrone the United States as the world's biggest air travel market in 2022, according to the IATA

"I get emails telling me 'We've improved our conditions, we're paying more than 300,000' for a captain, he added.

He preferred to join Air France - even though he said it paid 1,500 euros per month less - because of the work-life balance.

The shortage of pilots has reached the point where they have lured away instructors at pilot schools like Enac, said Houalla.



Global pilot shortage could see SA pilots lured overseas

26 Oct 2016



Even Air France, an airline that had a hiring freeze for seven years as it struggled to reduce its costs to face the onslaught from low-cost airlines, has started hiring again.

It now plans to hire 200 to 250 pilots per year through 2025, according to its HR chief for pilots, Didier Nicolini.

The pilots it hires are attracted to the "overall benefits package" offered by Air France, he said, and come from not only Ryanair but easyJet and Emirates as well.

For Germany's Lufthansa, which has snapped up half of the aircraft of failed rival Air Berlin and wants parts of defunct Alitalia, the question of securing pilots has become an existential question.

Air Berlin files for insolvency but keeps flying





A sign of its desperation - it offered a signing bonus of 20,000 euros for the first 15 pilots that accepted to fly the aircraft it took over from Air Berlin in order to ensure it didn't need to cancel any flights.

However, with salaries among the top airlines in Europe at up to 200,000 euros per year before taxes, it has a narrow path to navigate if it doesn't want to weaken its competitiveness against low-cost airlines.

Over the longer term, Lufthansa has committed to hiring 700 newly-trained pilots through 2022.

But one pilot noted that bubbles tend to pop.

"Any increase in flights by low-cost airlines will be at the expense of traditional airlines," said Pierre Coursimault, an easyJet pilot and a member of the SNPL, pointing to the recent surprise collapse of Britain's Monarch airline.

Source: AFP

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