

Nine keys to hiring pilots with the right stuff

by Matt Thurber

Hiring the right pilots for your company can be as tough as it is critical. Your flight department needs to make sure not only that its operations are as safe as possible, but also that its crews fit well with your corporate culture.

For advice on how to achieve those goals and recruit the best of the best, we turned to experts at two companies with decades of experience in pilot hiring. Atlanta-based FlightWorks has honed its recruitment process to ensure that its pilots are well-matched to its charter and management customers. Jet Professionals, headquartered in Teterboro, N.J., has been hiring pilots for 25 years, both for its own contract-pilot service and for its owner, charter/management company Jet Aviation.

Here's how they sign up the ones with the right stuff—and how your company can, too:

1 Set tough standards. “Only about 20 percent of the pilot community would qualify to work for us,” said Raymond Stebler, Jet Professionals’ director of staffing solutions. Pilots-in-command who will receive temporary assignments for the company’s clients must have 5,000 hours of flight time with 150 hours in the aircraft type. Second-in-command pilots need 3,000 hours and 50 hours in type.

Jet Professionals’ client companies can set their own standards for full-timers, but if they’re unwilling to pay the higher salary for a seasoned pilot, they may have to lower their expectations, Stebler said. In any event, he added, “we make sure the pilots meet safety [requirements].”

FlightWorks also has minimum standards, but these vary depending on the size of the jet. “We like to see 4,000 hours total time for a captain and 3,000 hours for a first officer,” said John Hatfield, vice president of operations. The numbers are lower for a small jet like a Cessna Citation.

2 Determine experience. Once you’ve set standards, see how the pilots you’re considering measure up to them. Check training, type ratings and currency in the aircraft.

Don’t rely on flight logbooks, though. Pilots record flight time in logbooks, and you might assume that prospective employers spend hours poring through them, trying to spot false or padded entries. That’s not the case.

“We don’t look through every page of the logbook,” said Stebler, who just scans

for questionable entries. “A 24-year-old pilot typically does not have 6,000 flight hours,” he said. “We have to verify those claims [by contacting previous employers].”

Hatfield, meanwhile, commented that “I never look at a logbook. There’s nothing I can do to validate that data without extensive research.”

Instead, he said, “I usually ask questions that can be leading.” For example, if a pilot says he has flown in China, Hatfield will ask for stories about that flight, including dates, people involved and other facts that would authenticate the experience. “I can tell whether they truly have had that experience,” he said.

Make sure you measure experience objectively. FlightWorks asks its aircraft owners about their expectations for the pilots they’ll employ. “Some of them say, ‘I like to see gray hair,’” Hatfield said. “[We ask], ‘What does that mean?’ Just because a pilot is older doesn’t mean he’s more experienced.”

3 Check criminal records. This must be done carefully, as both state and federal records exist. If you don’t check all the states where the candidate has lived, you might miss important information. Both Jet Professionals and FlightWorks look over the candidate’s state records for their last seven years of residence.





FlightWorks' John Hatfield

Contact previous employers. Commercial operators like FlightWorks and Jet Professionals' parent Jet Aviation must comply with the Pilot Records Improvement Act. The Act is intended to help companies review information about a new-hire's skills that previous employers have uncovered.

"We are required as a commercial operator to go to any company they've worked for and look back five years to see if there are any deficiencies in their training and if they ever failed a check ride," said Hatfield. "That operator is required by law to share with us any issues involving the pilot's training or [use of] alcoholic substances."

Scrutinize driving records. Besides checking a pilot's medical certificate, it's important to look at motor-vehicle records. "They get at character," Stebler said. "Some pilots probably don't realize how [poor driving records] could affect their opportunities. If they are reckless on the road, that's a good indicator, but we don't rely on that necessarily." Pilots are also required to report alcohol-related convictions or administrative actions—revocation or suspension of a driver's license, for example—and these can help highlight problem backgrounds.

Search FAA data. Many of the Federal Aviation Administration's records of aviation accidents, incidents and violations are on the public record and can be searched on the Internet (see box at

right) by airport, operator name, aircraft model or type.

Give weight to referrals. "The biggest qualifier is to have referrals," said Hatfield. "If an existing employee is willing to put his or her name on someone else's back, that says a lot." Many of FlightWorks' new pilots come from referrals made by its own employees.

Consider personality. So-called soft skills like teamwork, communication, time-management, creativity and interpersonal skills are important, according to Hatfield. Someone could be the best pilot in the world, but if the person is antisocial

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and has no interests outside of work, he or she might not relate well to passengers and coworkers.

Both Jet Professionals and FlightWorks evaluate the candidate's personality by asking questions during the hiring process and by using behavioral-assessment tools offered by international management consulting firms PI Worldwide and Profiles International, respectively. Those tools "[help] us find superior candidates," Stebler said. "The personality of the pilot has to match [the client]."

A combination of answers to interview questions and information provided by the behavioral assessment helps FlightWorks determine "how people are hardwired," Hatfield said.

Schedule a tryout. "Use [prospective pilots] as contract pilots for a couple of flights," Stebler suggested. But he added

that it's important to make sure insurance will cover any flights conducted with a prospective pilot. A pilot, for example, might not have been able to afford simulator training while looking for work. Jet Professionals will ensure that any pilot flying a contract or temporary assignment has had the recent training needed to meet insurance and FAA requirements.

Clearly, the processes employed by FlightWorks and Jet Professionals deliver well-qualified flight crew. "We've never had accidents or issues with our pilots," Stebler said. "We know what's at stake, so we take it very seriously. We're making sure [clients] have a safe operation."

Added Hatfield, "The number-one key to success of employees is the hiring process. Pilots are the face of the company." □

Web Resources

FAA accident/incident data system:
www.nasdac.faa.gov (Click on *Data & Statistics*, then on *Accident & Incident Reports*)

FAA PRIA information:
www.faa.gov/pilots/lic_cert/pria

National Air Transportation Association PRIA information:
www.nata.aero (Click on *Publications* and order *Understanding the Pilot Records Improvement Act*)

PI Worldwide:
www.piworldwide.com

Profiles International:
www.profilesinternational.com

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