

Testing times

Becoming a pilot is no longer regarded as the glamorous career option it once was. Capt **STEVE BILLET**, head of training at CTC Aviation Group, looks at the problems facing training providers trying to recruit new pilots.



The commercial aviation and training industries have a problem. How to train enough pilots to a sufficiently high standard at a time when airlines are unable to invest, when the training industry is in difficulty and when the career itself is less appealing than it was.

For those who dream of a career as a commercial airline pilot, how do they get trained unless they have considerable private means and how can they be sure they have a reasonable chance of employment at the end of the training process?

For the airlines, how can they secure access to high quality pilots, trained to their operating procedures, without having to invest heavily and commit up-front?

And for the training industry, how can they continue to operate when demand is flat, costs are rising and the future is uncertain?

Diminishing appeal

Today, a commercial pilot career has lost much of its appeal. Reductions in benefits, higher productivity and the effect on lifestyles have taken their toll and the job itself has changed to incorporate more management tasks, more paperwork and a greater focus on systems management at

the expense of traditional handling skills. Added to this, increased security concerns have closed our flight decks to enthusiastic young visitors, excluding them from the early, firsthand experiences that helped to shape the aspirations of many of today's pilots.

For those who do seek a pilot career, the high cost of learning to fly is a major barrier. With the closure of most airline sponsorship schemes, many of our best and brightest young people simply cannot find a route into airline flying. At the same time, while self-funded training opportunities still abound, there remains a worrying absence of independent advice and honest counselling on suitability. Many young people today are spending scarce resources in training for a career for which they ultimately may be unsuitable and at which a significant number are unlikely to succeed.

Impending shortage

A fall in demand for training is particularly disturbing when set against current predictions of pilot supply. In the UK, for example, and assuming retirement at 60 years of age, some 17% of the 10,500 professional pilots currently licensed will retire before March 2008. These are our most senior pilots and instructors, the people

most closely involved in training and mentoring our future pilots. The numbers leaving increase significantly if we make an assumption of retirement at 55 years. They also highlight a different problem caused by the lack of even European harmony over age restrictions on flying airline standard aircraft over the age of 60.

In the UK, the demographics indicate that new licence issues are barely keeping pace with the number of retirements, assuming zero industry growth. Yet the concept of zero growth, while currently valid in some parts of the world, in the traditional airline sector, clearly doesn't apply to the low cost operators. Additionally UK government forecasts anticipate that annual passenger numbers will double over the next 20 years — raising the question of who will be flying these passengers to their holiday and business travel destinations?

Declining investment

While they need to secure a supply of well trained pilots, the airlines themselves are not well-placed to invest. The impact of 9/11, SARS and the Gulf War has severely tested the economic viability of airlines around the globe and very few companies today are in a position to provide financial



with high cost bases, high fuel charges and government derived overhead increases already having a major impact on its health and sustainability.

Today, two major issues affect the training and supply of pilots — capacity and the quality of provision. Post 9/11, training capacity is down 30% and all the indications suggest that, without significant new commitment from the airlines, it has further to fall. In a highly cyclical industry, many training organisations will not survive to take advantage of the next upturn.

Perhaps the more complex problem, however, is the nature of training provision itself. There is growing evidence that current provision is not delivering what the airline industry needs. Airlines increas-

aircraft environment without there being an obvious contradiction between the name of the licence and the training associated with it.

At the same time, the vast majority of professional flight training is self-funded. These aspiring pilots are self-selected, the majority of training providers requiring evidence only of financial suitability. (You have only to explore the advertisement section of pilot-oriented magazines to witness the focus on professional pilot training in terms of lowest costs rather than highest quality). While the determination and self-belief of these pilots is important and may take them a long way, airlines too often complain of deficiencies in performance, restricted competencies and the need for a significant level of additional



CTC's crew training centre in Dibden.

CTC's training simulator at Marchwood, Southampton.

or significant management support for basic pilot training. Hard economic realities are likely to render this the status quo unless and until there are not enough pilots to fly the aircraft.

Training in trouble

This is bad news for a training industry in real difficulty. An industry, indeed, that was already in serious trouble before 9/11,

ingly express concerns about the quality and competency of pilots emerging from a minimum-time-based, over regulated training programme. As the volume of training required by the regulator falls, so airlines see a growing disparity between licence requirements and their own needs. It is difficult to see how acquiring an airline transport pilot's licence can be achieved in a single-crew, largely single-engine light

training to bring new pilots up to commercial airline standards.

Combine the effects of regulatory influences and restrictions on syllabus, an uncertain future bereft of significant airline investment and a fall in demand for training from self-funding young people and you have a training industry with serious problems that need urgently to be addressed.

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Getting it right

The answer to these problems (and to concerns about a potential future shortage of professional pilots) requires action on several fronts — specifically, greater innovation and flexibility in training provision, a more appropriate regulatory environment and an airline and training industry partnership to actively promote a pilot career.

In the longer term, part of the solution lies in accelerating initiatives to re-write ab initio training for professional pilots who are focusing on an airline career. Such training needs to involve a competency-based system, where multi-crew skills, advanced flight simulators and aircraft competencies are the focus of training from day one. There is some encouraging evidence that more far-sighted regulators are already looking at a move away from licence-based training to a system where the competencies demanded by airlines frame the training requirement.

Modular approach

In the short term, training providers need to show greater imagination and flexibility in using the available regulatory framework to maximise content and move closer to airline requirements. The training industry has not always paid close enough attention to airline needs but the few bright spots that exist in the industry today shine precisely because they are making innovative use of existing regulations to achieve the right result.

In this context, it is interesting to observe that the modular (as opposed to integrated) training route provides more scope for innovation and the effective use of additional flying and training time to achieve airline standards of performance. While the airline industry is understandably uncomfortable with the idea of training modules being taken from a variety of different



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providers, we are now seeing the development of methods of linking modules under the management and mentoring of one organisation to provide a seamless and very well focused training system, albeit not in a traditional integrated format. Compare, for example, a JAA approved integrated course providing 12-13 months of training with perhaps a total of 165 flight hours, including 25 hours of multi-engine training, with the CTC McAlpine linked modular course which offers 13-14 months training and includes 250 flight hours, with 50 hours of multi-engine flying and a further 50 hours of multi-crew, multi-engine simulator time to develop crew skills.

Standard selection

In addition to addressing the training syllabus, we need, also, to resolve issues relating to selection — or, rather, the absence of effective selection before training starts. The industry cannot afford to be complicit in allowing young people to spend significant sums of money pursuing training for a career to which they are ill-suited. This harms the training industry's reputation in the long term, undermines the efficiency with which pilots are brought into the profession and discourages new entrants. In this context, I believe there is a clear need for a single, industry standard selection process to be introduced across all training organisations. This would give candidates greater confidence in their long-

term prospects and enable the industry more effectively to deliver the high standards and range of competencies required by today's airlines. I don't pretend that reaching agreement on a standard assessment of aptitude and suitability will be easy — rather, that it is necessary for our credibility and, ultimately, our survival.

If not easy, this sounds straightforward. However, we need to recognise that effective selection and quality- (rather than time-) based training syllabi, focused on training to provide true airline proficiency, may well conflict with the volume-based business model of most training providers and could simply add to their growing financial pressures. Without airline investment, it is hard to see where the impetus will come from to make changes on a sufficiently large scale to affect the majority of new entrants to the profession.

Finally, both the airlines and training providers need to work together more actively to promote the commercial pilot career. Severe economic pressures have led to well-publicised failures throughout the commercial aviation industry, making a pilot career less attractive to all but the most enthusiastic. The closure of airline sponsorship schemes has put the career out of reach for many. Yet, all our futures depend on our ability to secure cadets and train high quality pilots. Airlines and training providers have not always supported one another effectively — they need to do so now. ♦