PLENTY OF PASSENGERS, BUT WHERE ARE THE PILOTS?

News / Airlines

DELAYS or cancellations because of bad weather or mechanical problems are exasperating but common occurrences in air travel, but increasingly, passengers aren't making it to their destinations for yet another reason: not enough pilots. The gate agent may not tell you that's why you're grounded, but a dearth of qualified pilots is disrupting, reducing and even eliminating flights.

"After 35 years analyzing and following this industry, I've never seen anything like it — and it's only going to get worse," said Dan Akins, an aviation economist and consultant who conducts quarterly surveys of both pilots and airlines to identify staffing trends. "Everyone knows the house is on fire and no one can find the hose."

In addition to widespread delays and cancellations, at least 29 communities, from Modesto, Calif., to Macon, Ga., have lost air service since 2013, and hundreds more had their number of flights reduced. Meanwhile, airports that haven't lost service complain they can't get additional flights to keep up with local economic development. "We've had $5 billion of new industry come to our area,

and the airlines say they can't grow us because there aren't enough pilots," said Mike Hainsey, executive director of the Golden Triangle Regional Airport, which serves Columbus, Starkville and West Point, Miss.

So what's causing the shortage? To start, there are just a lot more passengers. According to the Department of Transportation, airlines carried a record 895.5 million passengers in the United States in 2015, up 5 percent from the previous year. To meet global growth over the next 18 years, Boeing forecasts that the industry will need more than a half million new pilots.

Next, you can point to the roughly 18,000 pilots in the United States who will age out by 2022. This is a can Congress kicked down the road in 2007 when it raised the mandatory retirement age to 65 from 60 to delay the exit of all the military pilots who moved to airlines after the Vietnam War.

There is also a bottleneck in the supply of new pilots because of federal legislation passed after the 2009 Colgan Air crash in Buffalo, which was attributed in part to errors by the flight crew. Among other changes, the law mandated that, as of 2013, all entry-level first officers (that is, co-pilots) on commercial carriers have at least 1,500 hours of flight time instead of the previous minimum of 250 hours.

This change translates to years of flight instructing or flying on the often hair-raising fringes of aviation (aerial pipeline inspecting, banner towing, corpse transport and the like) for meager wages and often in poorly maintained equipment, before flying for a regional airline like Republic Airways, ExpressJet and Endeavor Air.

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Then you're looking at several more years of low pay (about $26,000 per year), unpredictable schedules and undesirable routes, giving up nights, weekends and holidays before you have a shot at advancing to a major airline like Delta, United, Southwest or American, where only after many more years can you hope to start making the kind of benefits and money (about $135,000 a year) that might make it all seem vaguely worth it.

So while being a professional pilot once seemed a glamorous profession — all mirrored sunglasses and swagger — now, not so much. Even those pilots living the dream of flying for a mainline carrier say that in reality it's a highly automated, button-pushing kind of job with advancement based on seniority rather than merit. And then there is the toll on pilots' families from long absences and the constant threat of furloughs resulting from economic downturns, or terrorist attacks.

"The real problem the industry is facing is young people aren't making the decision to become an airline pilot," said Capt. Tim Canoll, a Delta pilot and president of the Air Line Pilots Association. "It takes a very motivated person to meet the physical, emotional and intellectual challenge of becoming a pilot, and that same motivated person does the math looking at what it takes and the return on investment, and it just doesn't add up," particularly when training costs alone can reach $150,000.

Thus far, the shortfall is most acute at regional airlines, which are often affiliated with major carriers, using their logos and connecting passengers to mainline hubs. These smaller operators are responsible for around 50 percent of national departures and were able to hire only 50 percent of the pilots they needed last year, according to the Regional Airline Association.

Citing the pilot shortage, two regional operators, Republic Airways and SeaPort Airlines, filed for

Chapter 11 bankruptcy in February. Other regional carriers have been unable to fulfill their obligations to their mainline partners, resulting in shake-ups; United Airlines, for example, recently transferred 40 jets from ExpressJet to CommutAir in the hopes the latter could better meet its needs.

“Hiring is not a huge problem yet for the major carriers because regional carriers serve as their pilot pipeline,” said Faye Malarkey Black, president of the Regional Airline Association. “But the number of pilots the majors are going to need in the coming years will burn through our entire work force unless there’s some sort of intervention.”

AND it’s not just airlines that are feeling the pinch: flight schools, charter and corporate operations, weather trackers and crop-dusting outfits all say they are struggling to find pilots. Even the military can’t seem to recruit or retain talent, with the Air Force alone short 511 fighter pilots.

The Air Line Pilots Association says the solution is simply to raise wages and improve working conditions to attract people to the profession, a difficult proposition given the unfavorable contracts that regional airlines have with their mainline partners, which leave little to devote to salaries and benefits. And even those regional airlines that have recently raised pilots’ pay still can’t fill positions.

Aviation industry experts suggest that airlines need to start subsidizing and overseeing pilot training as in the so-called ab initio programs common in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. Airlines like British Airways, Lufthansa and China Eastern Airlines pay all or part of new cadets’ training, often at flight schools in the United States. Jet Blue recently announced that it would begin a trial ab initio program, but its recruits would have to pay $125,000 for the privilege.

Airlines and airports, among other aviation interests, are lobbying in Washington to reduce the 1,500-hour rule to get aspiring aviators who have met certain training requirements into the cockpit sooner, which is already possible if you’ve flown for the military or attended an accredited aeronautical school.

Researchers at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and the University of North Dakota, using training records from 22 regional airlines, found that newly hired pilots with 1,500 or fewer hours tended to need less training and were less likely to drop out than those with hundreds and even thousands more hours.

“The sweet spot is 700 to 800 hours,” said Elizabeth Bjerke, chairwoman of the aviation department of the University of North Dakota and an author of the study. “At that point they have experience but haven’t developed bad habits. It’s not quantity of hours but quality of hours.”

However, in testimony before the Senate last year, Capt. Chesley B. Sullenberger III said that had he or his co-pilot flown fewer than 1,500 hours (each had more than 20,000 hours), they would not have been able to put down US Airways Flight 1549 on the Hudson River without fatalities after geese were sucked into the plane’s engines on takeoff from La Guardia Airport in 2009.

When a pilot “is in the 14th hour of his or her duty day, flying at night in bad weather into an airport he or she has never seen before, would I want my family on that airplane?” Captain Sullenberger asked. If the pilot had fewer than 1,500 hours, he said, his answer would be an emphatic no.

The aviator and poet John Magee once described commanding an aircraft as “dancing the skies on laughter-silvered wings.” Easing back the yoke and feeling gravity let go is indeed indescribably exquisite. But now, in aeronautical parlance, the drag of the profession threatens to overwhelm its

lift, which could mean a hard landing for the industry.

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