ANALYSIS: HOW EASYJET TRANSFORMED ITS PILOT TRAINING

News / Maintenance / Trainings



EasyJet has travelled a long way in its 20-year existence. Since introducing the British public to the low-cost carrier model, and inspiring multiple other operators to follow its lead, the UK-based company is now an established airline of choice for many leisure and business travellers.

More than 69.8 million passengers flew with EasyJet in 2015: a 4.6% increase on its previous year of operations. During the same period, its load factor also climbed, by 0.8%, to reach 91.6%.

This solid rate of growth is reflected in the airline's fleet plans. Flightglobal's Fleets Analyzer database records the carrier as having an in-service inventory of 131 Airbus A319s and 88 A320s, with an average age of 6.9 years. Its EasyJet Switzerland unit has a further 13 and 12 of the types in use, respectively, taking the total fleet size to 244. The carrier receives a new aircraft on average every two weeks.

Significant change is on the way, with the airline scheduled to receive its first A320neo in June 2017. Powered by CFM International Leap-1A engines, the new model is expected to beat the fuel efficiency of its in-service aircraft by 13-15%. Of the 179 A320s which Fleets Analyzer shows as comprising EasyJet's order backlog, 130 are in the new-generation standard. At Airbus's list prices for 2016, the latter are worth just under $14 billion.

Training demands are high with a fleet this size. During the current financial year, EasyJet will complete the training of roughly 1,140 new crew members, including 310 pilots; the latter at a rate of up to 12 per week. It will also promote 140 co-pilots to captains.

The majority of the new recruits will be sourced via partnerships with CTC Aviation and CAE Oxford Aviation Academy, while more will join from other airlines or transfer to a commercial cockpit after completing a career flying for the military.

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While its aircraft are home based at multiple locations around Europe, the airline's training infrastructure is found at two sites in the UK. These include a long-established facility at Luton airport in Bedfordshire, and a new academy which was opened at London Gatwick airport in October.

Opened by EasyJet chief executive Carolyn McCall and transport minister Patrick McLoughlin, the new facility was opened within 14 months of the development being approved, and – at £2.7 million ($3.8 million) – for half the expected budget. In addition to supporting all pilot induction, it also delivers cabin crew instruction and provides fire training. Once fully operational, it will deliver 60% of all company training, with the remainder to stay in Luton.

"This and our Luton academy, which we're about to refurbish, [give] us enough capacity through 2020 – and [then] some," says head of crew training Capt Eddie Sproul, speaking to Flight International at the Gatwicksite in early February.

On average, EasyJet has 58 aircraft at Gatwick and around 14-18 each at Luton and Stansted, plus 10 at Edinburgh. Others are located at bases including Geneva, Milan Malpensa and Paris-Orly.

"We have Gatwick as our biggest base, it's where most of our pilots are, it's where most of our [pilot] training is, so we should reflect that," Sproul says of the new facility. Simulators to support its all-Airbus fleet are located close to the West Sussex airport, in Crawley, and also a 20min drive away, in Burgess Hill. It also has simulator facilities in Manchester and Paris.

For some carriers, the prospect of recruiting and training 300 new pilots in a year would be daunting, but Sproul says EasyJet – with its 2,500 pilots – is well able to handle this volume, and notes every position is hugely over-subscribed.

"The availability of cadets for us is not [an] issue, because we are seen as a pretty good proposition," says Sproul.

"You hear a lot in the industry about 'We're going to be short of pilots' – we're not," he says. "There's still thousands and thousands of them that want to do the job. What's going to happen is there's going to be competition for quality pilots. You're going to see some of the smaller airlines struggling to get quality – but they'll never struggle for numbers."

Over the course of this decade, EasyJet has transformed the way its pilots are trained, from a position where too many cadets were failing to complete their instruction: perhaps "in the 20s to 30s per year". By reviewing its requirements and intake standards, course footprints and training standards, this performance has been transformed.

"Last year we had 320 students – four were not successful," says Sproul. "A lot of that goes back to the selection, which is absolutely key."

Once a cadet has been through flying selection with either CTC or CAE Oxford, they undergo an interview with the carrier. One of the key objectives is to decide whether the recruit will fit culturally at EasyJet. "We're not interested in filling seats – we want 300 captains in five years' time," says Sproul.

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This approach has been a clear success. “We’ve found that we get the best people, the people that fit EasyJet. You’ve got huge quality coming in, the failure rates go right down and you can invest in them,” he says.

“We look at it as a career. You give them great training as a first officer, we then mentor them as they graduate. We then provide one of the best in the industry first officer development exercise, so they have a programme from graduating as a cadet or joining as an experienced pilot right up until command. When they come up to their command training, it’s easy.”

Cadets account for roughly 70% of EasyJet’s incoming first officers per year, while the remainder arrive as experienced direct entrants from other carriers, or the armed forces. The company will bring in around 40-50 direct entry captains this year, with its Gatwick hub especially popular for these.

“It’s all about getting the right person,” says Sproul. “Our criteria [are] clear: the right person, the right quality, the right standard.” However, the carrier has the greatest ability to influence its own cadets. “If we deal with the entire process – literally from the time they [start] ground school – [we] own it,” he notes. “If you build a programme around them and look after them when they are new, then the dividends you reap are huge.”

The company’s newest initiative is an ambitious plan – aired by McCall at the Gatwick academy opening – to double the number of women pilots flying for the carrier within two years. If achieved, this would see its current figure for new entrants; already one percentage point ahead of the industry-average 5%, jump to 12%.

“The airline will encourage female pilots at all ranks and positions by widening the pipeline of young women who enter EasyJet’s pilot community,” it says. An initial intake of six recruits under the Amy Johnson Flying Initiative recently began their training, with the carrier underwriting their instruction with loans worth roughly £100,000 each. It will offer 10 such places per year.

“We recognise we need to have more females in aviation,” says Sproul, who notes the scheme is not just intended to fill seats in the cockpit, or simply to attract employees from other airlines. “How do I increase the number of [female] training captains, as a pull factor?,” he asks. “They’ll then become the role models.”

Sproul says the initiative has not been launched as a one-off headline-grabber. “We’re trying to get the processes, culture and the perception right, so that we make it attractive. If we get that right, then the long-term output will be a more diverse environment.”

This different way of thinking is also being evidenced elsewhere at EasyJet. The company already offered staff who have been with it for more than two years and who hold a commercial pilot’s licence (CPL) the opportunity to apply for sponsorship to undergo type rating onto its fleet. “We’ve run that for three years – successfully, but what we’ve realised is: why should we limit it to people who have a CPL?,” Sproul says. “This year, everyone in the company can apply to be a pilot.”

Should applicants pass the company’s rigorous selection standards, it will sponsor them through their entire wings programme with CTC, and then welcome them back as pilots.

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“We have had nine successful applicants this year, who were working as cabin crew, or in the office in engineering, finance and marketing, and who just thought ‘I’d love to do that’. What we’ve got are people who we know fit EasyJet, and who are hugely motivated.”

Successful cadet training stems from relationships with specialists like CTC and newly-appointed FTEJerez. In February, the latter was selected to provide graduates for assessment by EasyJet from its campus in southern Spain, “with a view to offering opportunities with the airline”.

“The key to ensuring we’ve got the right quality is to plan ahead, so we are already tagging people for FY2016 and 2017,” says Sproul, pointing to the importance of events such as recruitment roadshows. “That’s where one of the great challenges for the industry is going to be – the competition for the quality people, because the CTCs, Oxfords and Jerezs can only produce so many.”

For those keen to enter the pilot community along the cadet path, the former Royal Air Force Panavia Tornado F3 pilot and instructor sums up the opportunity: “It is a big investment, but the rewards are huge.” On graduating, a starting salary of £45,000 rising to £58,000 is available, with the clearly defined potential to become a senior first officer in three years and for their wage to reach £110,000 per annum within a further two years, if a command position is secured.

Such transparent career opportunities differ greatly from the days of the flexible contracts available following the last commercial aviation downturn in 2008. Under a new-entrant contract with the carrier today, incoming pilots will still do around one year working under such “flexi” terms – but with the knowledge that better times lie ahead.

“That’s had a massive impact on retention, but also on their engagement within the company – they know where they’re going,” says Sproul.

One of the challenges facing the company – and every airline – is maintaining manual flying skills in an age when the majority of each flight is conducted using an autopilot.

“Automation complacency is a big issue for the modern airline pilot,” says Sproul, who notes EasyJet’s pilots are encouraged to “take the automatics out and fly the aeroplane, to maintain their skills” if the weather is fit to do so. At least 1h of every simulator session will also be flown manually during recurrent training.

“Every sim session in a first officer development programme is tailored towards the individual,” he says. “If you build it up and they start having problems half-way through then we can help them, rather than say ‘you’re not good enough’.” In 2015, only six of 120 pilots placed through command training failed their course, and all of its former cadets involved in the activity were successful. This is markedly better than the industry average, Sproul notes.

Meanwhile, the company is also working to fill the gap between pilot and cabin crew training, by bringing in a specialist on the latter during command courses. The intention is to make a better captain, able to communicate effectively with his or her crew, but also passengers, for example when a flight is delayed – or just by leaving the cockpit after landing to say goodbye to them.

“These are simple things, but you can have a huge impact on the customer experience,” Sproul notes.

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