

## Airline pilot

### Job Description

Airline pilots fly passengers and cargo on a national and international basis for business, commercial and leisure purposes. The aircraft is usually operated by two, three or four pilots, depending on the type of aircraft and length of the journey. The captain is the pilot-in-command, and has the overall responsibility for the safe and efficient operation of the aircraft, including its crew.

Prior to the flight, pilots study flight plans and ensure that the aircraft's controls are operating efficiently. They are also responsible for checking the weather conditions and liaising with air traffic control.

Pilots are employed in a number of different areas: passenger scheduled services, passenger charter services, freight services and business aviation (general aviation).

### Typical Work Activities

Being a pilot can be a rewarding profession, both financially and in terms of the personal satisfaction it provides. Many consider it to be a dream job but perhaps have an unrealistic idea about what it is really like; in practice, the job demands a great deal of responsibility, personal commitment and self-sacrifice. A pilot has to pass stringent training courses and will then be tested in recurrent training twice yearly in order to maintain the relevant licence.

A pilot's primary task is to operate the aircraft safely and economically. To achieve this, pilots carry out a range of tasks, with many shared between the captain and first officer. The tasks may vary, depending on the company, but will generally include:

- ensuring information about the route, weather, passengers and aircraft are correct;
- analysing the flight plan, including the route and flying altitude, to ensure it accurately reflects the expected circumstances of the flight;
- calculating how much fuel to take, and supervising the loading and fuelling of the aircraft;
- ensuring all safety systems are working properly;
- briefing the cabin crew before the flight, and maintaining regular contact throughout the flight;
- carrying out pre-flight checks on the navigation and operating systems;
- communicating with air traffic control prior to take-off and during flight and landing;
- ensuring noise regulations are followed during take off and landing;
- understanding and interpreting data from instruments and controls;
- making regular checks on the aircraft's technical performance and position, on weather conditions and air traffic during flight;
- communicating with passengers using the public address system;
- reacting quickly and appropriately to environmental changes and emergencies;
- updating the aircraft logbook and/or writing a report at the end of the flight noting any incidents or problems with the aircraft.

### Work Conditions

- Salaries vary according to the airline that you are employed with, the type of aircraft you are flying and your experience. A pilot employed with a small regional airline may earn an annual income of as little as £18,000. A first officer working with one of the larger airlines can earn between £38,000 and £48,000. An experienced captain flying long-haul can earn up to £140,000 (salary data collected Jan 09).
- A pilot's salary tends to increase with each year of service with a company.
- Benefits usually include uniform, pension scheme, various allowances and discounted travel.
- Pilots are expected to work shift patterns, meaning that they may have to work unusual hours. It is definitely not a nine to five job. The working day can vary in length, with some days being up to 12 hours, while other days are only three to four hours.
- As pilots can often be on standby duty, they generally need to live near the airport where they are based.
- Pilots working for short-haul airlines often have their working shifts for a month or two ahead. This results in a more stable working/home life balance.
- Long-haul airline pilots are expected to spend much greater periods of time away from home as they will fly further distances. This means that they often have to adjust to different time zones.
- Pilots are restricted to 900 flying hours per year. On scheduled airlines, the workload is spread evenly throughout the year; on charter airlines, the summer months are busier than the winter months.
- The overwhelming majority of commercial airline pilots are men, but a few women are now entering what is a very competitive profession.
- Pilots are expected to wear their uniforms to work.
- Usually, on all but the smallest aircraft, pilots work in pairs: a captain with a first officer, who is usually a less experienced pilot. On some long-haul flights - some are over 12 hours' duration - there might be four pilots.
- Most of a pilot's working time is spent sitting in the cockpit of the aircraft, and the majority of cockpits are designed with comfort in mind. Long-haul pilots may suffer tiredness, particularly if they are flying either eastwards or westwards through different time zones. On long-haul flights, there are often bunks on the aircraft where you can take a short nap.

### Entry Requirements

Gaining a position as an airline pilot is very competitive and a degree or HND holder may be preferred. However, airlines are keen to take people from a wide range of backgrounds so not having a degree/HND should not be seen as a barrier.

In most cases, potential pilots need to have a minimum of five GCSEs Grade A-C in English, maths and a science, such as physics. At least two A-levels or Scottish Highers are required, preferably in maths and physics. Candidates with a scientific or aeronautical engineering background may have a particular advantage. Airlines such as British Airways ([www.britishairwaysjobs.com/baweb1/](http://www.britishairwaysjobs.com/baweb1/)) may insist on higher qualifications.

Pre-entry experience in aviation, e.g. through a local Air Training Corps (ATC) of the Air Cadet Organisation ([www.aircadets.org](http://www.aircadets.org)), is useful as evidence of your interest in this field. Candidates need to show evidence of the following:

- good educational qualifications;
- good communication skills;
- level-headedness, calmness and the ability to think and respond appropriately in difficult situations;
- the ability to do rapid mental calculations;
- logical problem-solving;
- self-confidence and a clear speaking voice;
- a disciplined outlook and responsible attitude;
- good coordination and physical fitness;
- a sound understanding of scientific subjects such as physics and maths is an advantage;
- the ability to speak English fluently;
- the ability to motivate and the capacity for teamwork.

There are several routes to become a pilot:

- learn to fly with the Armed Forces in the Royal Air Force (RAF) ([www.raf.mod.uk](http://www.raf.mod.uk)), the Fleet Air Arm branch of the Royal Navy ([www.royal-navy.mod.uk](http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk)), or the Air Corps in the Army ([www.army.mod.uk](http://www.army.mod.uk)) and undertake a conversion course at a later stage. This is open to those aged 17-24. However, you must be prepared to take on the additional armed forces responsibilities that this will include;
- become a trainee commercial pilot by either obtaining full or partial scholarship with an airline, or through self-sponsorship with an approved training school. Currently, very few airlines sponsor and self-sponsorship will cost around £50,000;
- obtain a Private Pilot's Licence (PPL) and then take further training modules to gain a Commercial Pilot's Licence (CPL).

A PPL requires a class 2 Medical Examination, 45 hours of flying and seven written examinations and skills tests. In order to obtain a CPL, you must pass a Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) class 1 Medical Examination which takes place at the UK CAA Aeromedical Centre (AMC) at Gatwick and lasts half a day. It is ideal to carry this out before you embark on any further training.

### Training

To become a first officer at an airline you will need to obtain:

- the Frozen Airline Transport Pilot's Licence (fATPL), which involves up to 750 hours of study and instruction, as well as 150 hours of flying in light piston (propeller) aircraft. Once you have passed the tests, you will receive a Commercial Pilot's Licence (CPL) and Instrument Rating (IR). This process usually takes around one year;
- a Multi-Crew Operation Certificate which includes study on teamwork and familiarises pilots with modern crews and aircraft;
- Type-Rating training. This is a conversion course which takes around two months to complete and focuses on a specific type of plane. The cost of training escalates dramatically and so this stage is usually completed only after having successfully secured a job with an airline. The airline will usually pay for the training and you will then be bonded to them for a specific period of time.

Some Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) approved training schools, include CABAIR College of Air Training ([www.cabair.com/](http://www.cabair.com/)); Flight Training Europe ([www.ftejerez.com/](http://www.ftejerez.com/)) and Oxford Aviation Training School ([www.oxfordaviation.net/](http://www.oxfordaviation.net/))

Training is expensive with fees ranging from £35,000 to £70,000 for the course leading to a CPL. A few organisations, such as The Air League ([www.airleague.co.uk/](http://www.airleague.co.uk/)), offer scholarships to cover part of this cost. A number of airlines also offer partial sponsorship for training but places are very limited. Check via The British Air Line Pilots Association (BALPA) ([www.balpa.org/](http://www.balpa.org/)) and the Royal Aeronautical Society (RAES) ([www.raes.org.uk](http://www.raes.org.uk)) for vacancies, sponsorship, and conferences which give direct contact with potential employers.

## Career Development

Newly qualified pilots generally start their careers as a first officer. The first officer is the second in command on the aircraft. They will fly the aircraft, and generally do the same role as the captain. However, the captain will have the overall authority.

A newly qualified first officer's flying may be limited due to the weather conditions that they will be allowed to fly in and the types of airports they will be allowed to operate to. As the pilot's experience grows, these limitations are relaxed and they will progress to senior first officer.

A newly hired pilot may expect to spend three to 15 years as a first officer before promotion to captain, depending on the airline. Following a certain level of experience, senior officers may be able to apply to become a captain if vacancies are available. However they also have to undertake and pass a rigorous training programme and demonstrate that they can take on the role of captain. Promotion to captaincy might occur more quickly in a fast-growing budget airline than in a larger, more static organisation.

A captain may eventually take on the role of training new pilots within the company. This role will involve a lot of time spent in a simulator, with less time actually flying passengers. Alternatively, they may take on an examining role.

Some pilots may opt to progress their career by flying a larger aircraft instead of becoming a captain. This will involve operating long-haul routes.

The airline business, and therefore recruitment, tends to be highly cyclical in the piloting profession; many pilots will move several times during their career, either for better pay, or to make the step to captain, or a move may even be forced by airline closure. However, it is common to lose seniority when changing employers.

Aviation regulations are mostly harmonised across the European Union, and now allow airline pilots to work until the age of 65.

Pilots also move into management roles. A small number move into senior positions within the wider industry as flight operations inspectors for the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ([www.caa.co.uk](http://www.caa.co.uk)), or become specialised air accident investigators. Opportunities to rise to the very highest levels within the aviation industry depend largely on the determination and personality of the individuals who pursue them.

## Typical Employers

There are many airline companies employing pilots in the UK, the biggest of which is British Airways ([www.britishairwaysjobs.com/baweb1/](http://www.britishairwaysjobs.com/baweb1/)). Others include:

- scheduled airlines (e.g. Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com/](http://www.ryanair.com/)), Flybe ([www.flybe.com/vacancies/](http://www.flybe.com/vacancies/)));
- chartered airlines (e.g. First Choice ([www.firstchoice4jobs.co.uk/](http://www.firstchoice4jobs.co.uk/)));
- freight airlines (e.g. TNT ([www.tnt.com/](http://www.tnt.com/)), DHL ([www.dhl.com/](http://www.dhl.com/))).

For a list of airlines, you can refer to the membership section of the International Air Transportation Association (IATA) ([www.iata.org](http://www.iata.org)). Please note that this is a global list.

General aviation is the largest sector and includes flying schools, companies operating their own aircraft and air taxi operators.

Many airlines would expect to recruit fully fledged pilots with an Airline Transport Pilot's Licence (ATPL).

Please note that there are many pilot training schools that rely on a regular stream of trainee pilots. However there may not be a constant supply of jobs in the airline industry, especially during economically troubled times.

## Sources of Vacancies

- Pilot Magazine ([www.pilotweb.co.uk/](http://www.pilotweb.co.uk/));
- Professional Pilots' Job Network ([www.ppin.com/](http://www.ppin.com/));
- websites of individual airlines.

There are virtually no recruitment agencies dealing specifically with airline pilot vacancies, but advertisements sometimes appear in trade magazines, notably Flight International ([www.flightglobal.com](http://www.flightglobal.com)). Air training schools are often notified of vacancies.

## Related Occupations

- Aeronautical engineer
- Air cabin crew
- Air traffic controller, civil
- Armed Forces operational officer
- Control and instrumentation engineer
- Health and safety inspector

### Information Sources

#### Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

#### AGCAS Publications

[Transport and Logistics Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

#### Other Publications

[Flight International](#), Reed Business Information, Weekly

[Flyer](#), Seager Publishing, Monthly

[How to Become a Commercial Pilot](#), The British Air Line Pilots Association (BALPA), 2005

[Pilot Magazine](#), Archant, Monthly

[Today's Pilot](#), Key Publishing Ltd, Monthly

#### Websites

The Air League, [www.airleague.co.uk/](http://www.airleague.co.uk/)

Air Cadet Organisation, [www.aircadets.org](http://www.aircadets.org)

Army, [www.army.mod.uk](http://www.army.mod.uk)

The British Air Line Pilots Association (BALPA), [www.balpa.org/](http://www.balpa.org/)

British Airways, [www.britishairwaysjobs.com/baweb1/](http://www.britishairwaysjobs.com/baweb1/)

British Women Pilots' Association (BWPA), [www.bwpa.co.uk](http://www.bwpa.co.uk)

CABAIR College of Air Training, [www.cabair.com/](http://www.cabair.com/)

Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), [www.caa.co.uk](http://www.caa.co.uk)

DHL, [www.dhl.com](http://www.dhl.com)

EasyJet, [www.easyjetcareers.com](http://www.easyjetcareers.com)

First Choice, [www.firstchoice4jobs.co.uk](http://www.firstchoice4jobs.co.uk)

Flight Training Europe, [www.ftejerez.com/](http://www.ftejerez.com/)

Flybe, [www.flybe.com/vacancies](http://www.flybe.com/vacancies)

Go Skills: The Sector Skills Council for Passenger Transport, [www.goskills.org](http://www.goskills.org)

Guild of Air Pilots and Navigators (GAPAN), [www.gapan.org/](http://www.gapan.org/)

Independent Pilots Association, [www.ipapilot.com](http://www.ipapilot.com)

International Air Transportation Association (IATA), [www.iata.org](http://www.iata.org)

Oxford Aviation Training School, [www.oxfordaviation.net/](http://www.oxfordaviation.net/)

Professional Pilots' Job Network, [www.ppjn.com](http://www.ppjn.com)

Professional Pilots' Rumour Network (PPRuNe), [www.pprune.org](http://www.pprune.org)

Royal Aeronautical Society (RAES), [www.raes.org.uk](http://www.raes.org.uk)

Royal Air Force (RAF), [www.raf.mod.uk](http://www.raf.mod.uk)

Royal Navy, [www.royal-navy.mod.uk](http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk)

Ryanair, [www.ryanair.com/](http://www.ryanair.com/)

TNT, [www.tnt.com](http://www.tnt.com)

Today's Pilot Learn to Fly Guide, [www.todayspilot.co.uk/index.html?http://www.todayspilot.co.uk/ltfg/default.asp](http://www.todayspilot.co.uk/index.html?http://www.todayspilot.co.uk/ltfg/default.asp)