



Hiring Your Pilot

By Peter v. Agur, Jr.

Hiring your pilot is one of the most important decisions you will make... period. Pick the right one and your business aviation travel experiences will be great. But, if you pick the wrong pilot you can experience disastrous.

The best practice is to crew a business aircraft with two pilots. The critical flight person in your employ is the lead pilot. He or she may have one of a number of titles; director, manager, chief pilot, etc. What is more important than his title is that this person is responsible, on your behalf, for four critical performance arenas:

1. Safety,
2. Service,
3. Economics; and
4. Management.

Pilots usually fly safely. After all, they have the best view of what is coming. Yet, about 70% of aircraft accidents are caused by pilot error. And those errors can have expensive and tragic consequences. A classic example was when the chief pilot for a southeastern-based company was in a hurry to get his passengers home so he took off into modest local weather with the intent of busting through the haze and clouds to get to clear skies on top and an easy 20 minute flight home. Instead, they struck a hillside and all eight people onboard were killed. His failure to adhere to appropriate standards and practices led to tragic results. Your greatest risk of an accident comes from a pilot who is willing to take risks, demonstrates poor judgment on any level, or deviates from standard procedures. Don't tolerate these behaviors, at any level.

The best pilots realize they are in a service business. Tom Davis, co-founder of Triax Partners, says that a good pilot must have a "service heart". Flying an airplane safely is an easy feat compared to anticipating and meeting the comfort and travel service needs of passengers. Many military and airline pilots transitioning into business aviation are stunned by the extra effort that is taken in stride by business pilots. Assuring the accuracy and quality of the catering, schlepping bulky bags in the worst weather conditions, pestering ATC for smoother altitudes, and pre-arranging and double checking that ground transportation is ready to go at the destination airport are all part of a normal day's work. Doing so with pride and grace is essential. Prima donnas make more work for everyone, including you.

Traveling in business aircraft is not cheap. And it is worth it! But the wrong pilot can cost you big money. Most pilots are honest. However, there are exceptions to the rule. During the past few months I have talked with no less than three owners who have each lost hundreds of thousands of dollars when the managers of their flight operations misdirected funds. And another chief pilot cost his owner tens of thousands of dollars by using the airplane to pick up his girl friend for private personal weekends. When his misbehavior was discovered both his employer and his wife were through



with him. Even though these circumstances are rare, it is much more common for a pilot to have a casual approach to cost containment. After all, a few thousand dollars here or there is lost in the rounding when the annual business aviation budget is a million dollars or more. But those thousands add up fast. A pilot who treats your money like it is his is priceless.

Managing people is one of the greatest challenges any leader faces. Managing pilots can take that challenge to a whole new level. Most executives to whom the chief pilot reports say they spend more time on flight department stuff than any of their other responsibilities. This isn't surprising. Most pilots have little or no business or leadership experience. Many entered their profession because they didn't want a desk job (managing people or things). When the Good Fairy waves her magic wand and promotes a pilot to Head Flyer in Charge that pilot may be far less competent than any other manager in your company. As an example, a chief pilot recently said the wrong thing to an employee during a separation interview. You can guess at the amount of executive time and company funds that was diverted to dealing with that one.

So how do you avoid hiring the wrong pilot? Or, more importantly, how do you find and hire the right one? I suggest four easy steps:

Step One – Define your objective.

Your pilot must have the maturity, knowledge, skills, experience, aptitude and attitude you expect. This person is responsible for your safety, your comfort and a lot of your hard earned money. Set the standards high. The best practice is look for

- A four year degree.
- An Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) certificate.
- More than 5,000 hours of flying (that is at least ten years behind the stick).
- More than 500 hours flight experience an aircraft like yours (most accidents happen during the first 100 hours in a new type of aircraft).
- Significant experience on the kinds of trips you intend to take (international trips, Oceanic crossings, mountain flying, etc.).

Set your hiring standards high and compromise wisely.

Step Two – Search and Select

If you are in a major metropolitan area you may be able to find the right pilot locally. Otherwise, be prepared to import the talent you need. The aviation community is small and the communications flows are excellent. Use that to your advantage:

- Talk to your friends and business colleagues who have planes.
- Talk to pilots who have great reputations to see what success looks like.
- Your human resources department may be helpful but remember that this is a position that is outside their normal playground. There may be limitations or hazards to using only your normal hiring system for this unique role.



- It may be necessary to use an industry-specific search agent (see the Hiring Resources sidebar).

In the end, you will want to interview at least three top candidates to find the one who fits your needs and style best.

Step Three – Trust, but Verify

This is a high risk hire. Treat it accordingly.

- Do a full background check (traffic, crime, financial, etc.) on your finalist. For instance, a DUI is not a good sign. More than one is a fatal flaw.
- Vet their references. Make sure they are credible and appropriate. But don't stop there. When was the last time you had someone use a reference that wasn't going to give a rave review?
- Talk with their previous employers and other industry managers in the know. Even in today's legal environment, you may get valuable information by asking questions like, "What should we do to assure Jane Doe's success in the role of chief pilot?"
- Have someone with industry knowledge review their flight history for accuracy. Flight hours are precious and documentation is easily faked. That's euphemistically referred to as "Parker t-ball time". A couple of easy yellow flags to look for are annual flying rates that are dramatically more than 500 hours and instrument flight hours that exceed 25% of total hours flown. It's possible to achieve higher rates, but it would be a unique situation that begs explanation.
- Hire a check pilot to conduct a practical examination of your preferred candidate's practical abilities. This can be done in an airplane but it is much safer to do it in a full motion simulator.

Step Four – Manage, Develop and Retain

Getting the right pilot isn't the end goal of the hiring process. It is the beginning of keeping and growing them to even greater abilities and performance. Be mindful of that throughout the hiring process because the best candidates are thinking that way, too.

- An experienced pilot is going to want to report as high within your organization as possible. If yours is a small organization, then you may be it. But, if you have four or more senior executives, then the flight department manager should report to one of them. This structure provides the accessibility, authority and responsiveness in decision making that you need to keep your flight services safe and effective. Reporting to a middle manager is usually ineffective because the flight department's customers outrank their boss. You can imagine the opportunities that can create.
- Integrate your pilot into your management team. Include him in staff meetings. This not only develops their understanding of each other but lubricates relationships among the managers of the various areas of expertise the flight



department must work with closely (legal, human resources, IT/IS, purchasing, etc.). Remember that most pilots need this exposure because it may be new to them.

- Technical training (simulator refresher training, weather and radar schools, etc.) is the same as changing the oil in your vehicle. It is mere maintenance. Budget the days and dollars for this vital investment. But don't stop there.
- If your company has an executive development program, enroll your pilot. Brand him or her with your company's culture and ways of doing business. If you don't have this kind of capability, encourage your pilot to continue his or her formal education at a local college or through one of the distance learning programs that are now available.
- Networking and growth are invaluable in aviation. In many ways, the greatest knowledge has is not what he knows. It is knowing where to get the answer or help he needs. Your pilot develops that network through industry associations like the NBAA, the Flight Safety Foundation, regional business aviation groups and various industry gatherings like the NBAA's annual meeting and convention held each fall, the Flight Safety Foundation's spring Corporate Aviation Safety Seminar, customer meetings hosted by your airframe manufacturer, etc. Your pilot should propose a wish list of programs he in which he wants to participate.
- Pilot's typically have strong egos. That's a good thing when decisions need to be swift and accurate. Those egos also expect acknowledgement for a job well done. Additionally, a good working environment and effective compensation and rewards will retain most of the best and brightest. Underpaying your pilot will promote turnover with its very high hidden costs of hiring and training the replacement person (at least a \$50,000 expense, when all the bills are in). Again, see the sidebar for compensation information resources.

As you go through the hiring process remember that the best and brightest candidates are looking for a career opportunity with a great company that will cherish their contribution and growth.

If you are like most business jet travelers, the back of your airplane is one of the few places in which you have little control. But you have great influence on the selection, care and feeding of the person who is responsible for the safety and comfort of those for whom you care the most. Hire the right pilot and you will be well rewarded!

Hiring Resource Sidebar

The following is a partial list of pilot hiring resources. The NBAA staff can provide you with an even more inclusive and up to date list. My apologies to anyone that I may have inadvertently omitted in this limited time and space

- National Business Aviation Association (NBAA). They have a "Jobs" web page. Join the NBAA and go to their site; www.NBAA.org 202- 783-9000
- The Stanton Group's "Industrial Flight Compensation Survey", www.stanton-group.com 888-624-1575 ext. 4516
- A few well known business aviation search firms:



- Aviation Personnel International. 504-392-3456
- CAAP. www.CAAP.com 817-421-8200
- Jet Professionals. www.Jet-Professionals.com 201-393-6900
- The VanAllen Group. www.VanAllen.com 770-507-5001

HR Sidebar:

A couple of important human resource comments before we proceed. There are is a growing cadre of fine female aviation professionals out there. Just check the front of your airliner to see for yourself. Even so, for the sake of easier reading this article I have used the pronoun "he" as gender inclusive. And speaking of airlines, they have an age 60 retirement rule. Don't let that limit your thinking. There are a lot of great aviators being forced out of the cockpit by this capricious limit. Keep an open mind on both counts and you may find a true treasure!