

Buying a Private Jet? Great! – Now How Are You Going to Crew It?

Preemptive Planning Needed to Avoid Being a Casualty of the Industry-Wide Pilot Shortage



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These are boom times for private aviation. Record sales of both new and pre-owned aircraft. Unprecedented levels of flying in fractional, membership, jet card and charter programs. But that doesn't mean that there aren't some storm clouds looming on the horizon.

In the United States, would-be buyers who hope to take advantage of the last year of 100% accelerated depreciation are rushing to complete their acquisitions and get their newly acquired airplanes into active business usage before December 31, 2022 are facing unusual challenges. For one thing, most maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) facilities and other companies having aircraft inspection capabilities already have fully booked their slots for the remainder of the year. Buyers who are insistent on completing a careful and comprehensive pre-purchase inspection as a pre-condition to accepting their airplanes will find it increasingly difficult to find FAA-certificated aircraft and powerplant (A&P) mechanics who can perform the necessary evaluations and then sign off on a return to service. A similar problem faces buyers who may want to hire independent technical experts to oversee those inspections on the buyers' behalf. Many tech reps already are fully committed through the end of the year.

Another problem facing buyers may not prevent them from closing on their purchases, but may have a significant impact on their ability to use their airplanes after they take delivery, both before and after the new year, and that's the ongoing shortage of qualified pilots to fly those corporate and private aircraft.

The pilot shortage is not a new problem, but it is one that has been steadily getting worse for several years and was significantly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. As the worst conditions of the worldwide epidemic began to ebb in 2021 and business and pleasure travelers began flying again, the commercial airlines had to get their

scheduled services back in operation and that meant putting experienced bodies back into the cockpit. The personnel problem was compounded by the fact that many senior pilots had chosen to take advantage of early retirement opportunities when the coronavirus first burst on the scene in early 2020. Furthermore, the number of ex-military pilots available to switch to commercial flying has been dropping for years. As a result, the airlines began aggressively recruiting corporate and business aviation crew members because they're a recognized pool of pilots who already have substantial skills and experience and can more quickly transition from business jets to commercial airliners.

Airlines attempt to lure business aviation pilots with promises of higher salaries, better retirement benefits and job stability. While there is some truth to these inducements, pilots who have flown for both the airlines and in the corporate world also recognize that there are significant tradeoffs. Business aviation pilots often enjoy an enhanced quality of life, with more relaxed duty cycles, less time on the road, nicer layover locations and less commuting away from home. Business jet pilots also often have the opportunity to fly state-of-the-art aircraft that are comfortable, fun to fly, well-equipped, well maintained and often more dependable than airline equipment – and they don't have to deal with 200 crabby strangers in the cabin on every flight.

The pilot shortage is a serious problem and it isn't going to be solved overnight. Business aviation advocacy groups like the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) and the National Air Transportation Association (NATA) are working with private companies around the country in an effort to attract talent into the industry as early as high school, but that solution isn't going to help would-be owners now. If you are considering a private jet purchase, start

thinking about how you are going to crew it just as soon as you start looking at airplanes or hangars or financing. Who is going to manage your aircraft? Will you utilize the services of a management company or create your own in-house flight department? If you're going to use a third-party manager, ask every company you're considering to explain their specific plans for how they're going to crew your plane. And if you're going to bring the operations in house, make your human resources and hiring department aware that they are going to have to commit the resources needed to find and hire at least one and perhaps as many as three or four experienced crew members for full or part-time employment. Be realistic about what it's going to take to hire and retain qualified pilots in the current environment. If necessary, seek out consultants with expertise in the field who can help you find the right people.

After all, it won't be any fun to have the nicest private jet on the ramp if you don't have someone in the cockpit who can fly you wherever you need or want to go. ■

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