

Business Standard

Airlines turn to expats in pilot hunt

Arav Joshi, 26, completed his flying course from New Zealand-based training academy in 2012. After that did not translate into a job, he topped it with a type rating course from a Pune-based facility in 2014. The total expenditure came to around Rs 50 lakhs. He is still without a job.

He is part of the 7,000 odd who despite holding a commercial pilots license (CPL) is awaiting a job. Despite available manpower, Indian carriers are finding it difficult to find suitable people as they are hesitant to recruit fresher to man their cockpit.

National carrier Air India in July advertised to recruit 415 pilots for manning its Airbus A320 aircraft. The airline has a requirement of more than 500 pilots as it plans to expand its fleet rapidly. But the hiring plan has gone awry with the airline now struggling to find suitable candidates.

Only 251 candidates—less than half of shortlisted, have cleared the psychometric test—an integral part of the recruitment process following the Germanwings crash in 2015. The airline now is looking to lure back pilots who had left as it plans to cut costs.

Other private airlines are looking to expat pilots even though the cost of hiring an expat is significantly higher for an airline.

Air Asia India- the joint venture between the Tata Sons and Tony Fernandes-owned Air Asia Bhd is looking to hire at least 30 expat pilots as it looks at fleet expansion following fund infusion from the promoters. Sources, say that despite multiple rounds of roadshows conducted across cities, the airline failed to find enough local pilots. An AirAsia spokesperson declined to comment.

Jet Airways, sources say is looking to hire around 30 type-rated foreigners to fly its Boeing 737 planes.

Having an expat on board is a financial burden for an airline. “The salaries of the expats are higher, the airline has to provide them accommodation and also bear expense for his journey to his home country,” a pilot with a domestic carrier said.

In addition to that there are several safety approvals required which takes around six months. "Effectively during that period, you have to pay them without flying," the pilot said.

"While there are thousands of CPL holders in the country, getting type rated Indian pilots becomes difficult, you have to give them additional training, no airlines want to recruit simple CPL holders and bear that cost," an executive of a private airline said.

A type rating certification is important credentials a pilot should have for flying a commercial jet. Type rating provides the pilot with necessary competency to operate an aircraft with necessary skills required on a specific kind of jet. At present rate, the cost of training a pilot for an Airbus A320 family of planes comes to around Rs 23 lakh.

Such is the crunch for trained hands, that the airlines have now approached the regulator to increase the notice period of a pilot from six months to one year. Low cost carrier SpiceJet recently gave a hike of Rs 1 lakh per month to captains of Boeing 737 aircrafts.

Experts though indicate, it is bad planning by the airlines which is now forcing them to look for expat pilots. "An airline typically has its fleet planning done more than 2 years before the aircraft joins, it can easily recruit Indian pilots and give them suitable training," a trainer for a private airline said.

IndiGo, the country's most profitable airline had its recruitment plan ready beforehand. The airline hired aggressively, as it placed its aircraft orders, though it resulted in a 24 percent higher employee cost in the April-June quarter. In the past 18 months it produced 400 Captains, from 155 of its own First Officers who have been Upgraded as Captains.

"In the last 10 years, we have inducted 941 fresh CPL holders, who just had the basic flying license and have trained them to become Captains and Trainers on the A-320 airplane. Quite a few of these young CPL holders are now flying as Pilots and Trainers in IndiGo and abroad," IndiGo President Aditya Ghosh said.

As Indian aviation enters its fastest pace of growth, it remains to be seen if it will translate to more jobs in the sector.