



JETBLUE SHAKES UP PILOT HIRING BY TRAINING THEM FROM SCRATCH

News / Airlines



JetBlue Airways Corp., breaking with historical practices at U.S. airlines, plans to recruit potential pilots with no flight experience and provide its own training under a proposal awaiting approval from federal regulators.

The program would be the first of its kind in the U.S. and would be similar to those used by some European and Asian carriers. Candidates still would have to meet U.S. requirements, including 1,500 hours of flight experience, to be certified as commercial airline pilots, JetBlue said.

JetBlue crafted its plan to gain access to a broader group of candidates, oversee their training from the start and expose them earlier to being part of a crew on large aircraft, said Doug McGraw, an airline spokesman. Dubbed Gateway 7, the initiative is being targeted for introduction on a trial basis in 2016 and will initially involve only a small percentage of recruits.

"The program is designed to accommodate prospective trainees with little-to-no aviation experience, but who pass a rigorous selection process," McGraw said.

JetBlue is focused initially only on pilots for its 100-seat Embraer SA E190 jets. McGraw said that after the trial period, the airline will evaluate whether to extend the program, possibly to the larger Airbus Group SE aircraft that make up more than two-thirds of its 211-plane fleet. They carry at least 150 passengers.

Major U.S. carriers have long relied on bringing in pilots with the minimum flight hours, typically amassed in military aircraft or by working as a civilian instructor before snagging a regional-airline job. Either way, pilots would begin in small aircraft and gradually work up to faster, more-sophisticated multi-engine models.

Simulator Time

JetBlue's approach is known as *ab initio* - Latin for "from the beginning." One point of emphasis: More time in simulators for exposure to scenarios involving bad weather and mechanical failures. Recruits also would take academic classes at JetBlue before moving to a partner company to gain the required 1,500 hours of flying time. They then would return to New York-based JetBlue, or could apply at another airline.

"We're opposed to it," said Captain Jim Bigham, chairman of the Air Line Pilots Association union at JetBlue. "We think there are thousands of pilots available that have higher qualifications right now than any pilot coming out of an *ab initio* program."

The program is being reviewed by the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, McGraw said. The FAA didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Gateway 7 is similar to a so-called multicrew pilot license introduced several years ago by the International Civil Aviation Organization and since adopted by airlines including Germany's Deutsche Lufthansa AG and the UK's easyJet Plc. Pilots in that system start training in multiperson cockpits in simulators instead of gaining their first experience in small, single-engine planes.

JetBlue plans to begin accepting applications in the first quarter and to open training in mid-2016. Successful trainees would join the airline as first officers in 2020. Gateway 7 will consider applicants with no prior training as well as those with flight experience, McGraw said. Prospective pilots would pay for their own training.

"We can assess early whether someone would make a great JetBlue pilot and get them on the path," McGraw said.

The program isn't a response to a potential pilot shortage, McGraw said. JetBlue, the fifth-largest U.S. airline, receives thousands of candidates for pilot positions and expects that to continue. Rather, Gateway 7 will supplement six existing recruiting efforts at the airline, he said.

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