Airline recruitment trends and challenges and how recruiters are responding

David Barrett explains the key challenges facing airline recruiters – and how to overcome them
Seven steps to avoid turbulence in airline recruitment

Job seekers are attracted to airlines because of their strong brands, the training they provide and the international career opportunities they offer. However, there are four clear characteristics that make airline recruitment unusually challenging, particularly when you’re recruiting flight professionals.

Four characteristics that make recruiting flight professionals challenging:

- **Airlines compete in a truly global talent market**
  Many airlines are global employers recruiting in over 100 countries – and there is no shortage of candidates. Some companies receive a million applications each year for their cabin crew positions. Identifying the best candidates is therefore a considerable challenge, especially as airlines are keen to include greater diversity in all their roles. The challenge is intensified because the market is so competitive and quick selection decisions need to be made, as candidates will often apply to several airlines and take the first position they’re offered.

- **Candidates are passengers**
  When your candidates are passengers of your airline, it helps with attraction. They may apply to you because they know your brand and they like your values. However, if your candidates are also your customers, the way you reject them matters. One airline recently found that it had sent standard job-rejection emails to cabin crew applicants who in the past twelve months had bought $14m of tickets from them! If someone is unsuited to the job and you reject them in an off-hand way, they might vent their frustration by boycotting your brand. If a large number of people do this, it will quickly impact on your bottom line.

- **Growing and retaining talent**
  Globally mobile employees will use some airlines as a stepping stone to advance their career. Smaller, faster-growing airlines will recruit ready-trained pilots and they’ll offer quick opportunities for progression, whereas larger airlines usually prefer to nurture cadets and trainee pilots using their own in-house programmes. By 2020, it is predicted that there will be a shortfall of 235,000 pilots. Also, 70% of new aircraft are bought in Asia and the Middle East but most of the world’s qualified pilots are based in Europe and America. This – and the fact that cabin crew positions have a high churn (attrition) rate – makes ‘retaining talent’ a key challenge in the industry.

- **Passenger safety and employee well-being**
  In 2015, Andreas Lubitz was the co-pilot who deliberately crashed a plane into a mountain in the French Alps, killing everyone onboard. Airlines are understandably concerned about the safety of their passengers and the well-being not only of their pilots but also of their cabin crew, engineers and airport staff. Recruiting individuals who will be safe and successful in every role is therefore a primary concern.
How recruiters are responding

Innovative airline recruiters are taking seven steps to tackle these challenges:

1. **Using data-informed job analysis**
   The tasks involved in roles at every level can be clearly defined using in-depth job analysis and role profiling studies. This helps recruiters to pinpoint the competencies and qualities required in new recruits, as knowing what good – and bad – looks like in the role helps you to understand what you should be assessing. It also helps you to determine where you should target your training interventions and what ‘in-role experiences’ you need to provide.

2. **Turning to technology**
   All airlines appreciate the benefits that technology brings to recruitment but some of the most innovative approaches have been made by the newer, faster-growing airlines. Realistic job previews, for example, are short, interactive ‘self evaluation’ assessments that sit on a careers website. They can showcase the realities of any role, to help potential applicants decide if the job and the culture of your airline are a good fit for them. The use of these as well as video interviews and paperless assessment centres – in which candidates access video clips and conduct quizzes and exercises on smartphones and tablets – is revolutionising pre-application attraction and selection processes. The ‘paperless’ option is particularly beneficial to centralised selection teams who are conducting and administering local recruitment events.

3. **Introducing quick and efficient assessment**
   Given the international reach of airlines, the ability to screen applicants effectively and conduct assessments in multiple languages is highly important.

   The desired competencies, abilities and motivational attributes can be measured with a personality questionnaire and by assessing the mental ability and specific cognitive abilities of prospective candidates. Situational judgement questionnaires can focus on the decisions a candidate makes, or how they react when faced with specific tasks and challenges they’ll experience in the role. These assessments are helping airlines to filter out unsuitable applicants and predict which candidates will perform best in the role. They can also flag up any areas of concern about the individual’s temperament or attitude to risk, which recruiters can probe more deeply at the interview stage.

   For cabin crew, the attraction and application process is increasingly becoming mobile and tablet-enabled. Assessments for experienced Captains or First Officers – who are already able to fly – will focus more on whether they are a good fit for the airline and the role. Cadets should undergo aptitude testing to identify their trainability and flying potential, because of the expense involved in training and developing them.

4. **Unleashing insights from talent analytics**
   Some airlines are now integrating their data from employee assessments with their existing talent and performance data to create ‘predictive talent analytics’, to drive better recruitment and talent decisions. For example, the behavioural and situational judgement profiles of cabin crew staff can be integrated and correlated with their in-flight sales productivity to provide additional insights which can help recruiters to identify the most suitable candidates. Airlines collect a wealth of employee data, covering all roles, which can be utilised in this way.

5. **Offering application incentives**
   Some airlines are enhancing their candidate experience by offering reward points or loyalty discounts to applicants who take their realistic job preview. The reward could be as simple as a free coffee or a discount off a future flight – and/or it could involve offering career advice to help the individual to find a role that is better suited to them in the future.
6. **Rejecting with empathy**
Leading airlines understand the importance of rejecting unsuccessful candidates politely and respectfully. Individuals will find rejection easier to take if you explain why you’re turning them down. By providing an engaging application process – and a positive rejection process – you can retain unsuccessful candidates as passengers. You may even boost customer loyalty: if an applicant hasn’t already flown with you, they might want to do so in the future and this could lead to them becoming a lifelong ally of your airline.

7. **Providing career advice**
Some airlines are endeavouring to address the high churn rate of cabin crew by providing career guidance or assessment systems to help ‘de-board’ staff into a new career with the airline. Cabin crew personnel are often multi-lingual and they have valuable skills which airlines are keen to retain.

Ultimately, the secrets of successful airline recruitment are to treat each candidate with care and to utilise technology to make your selection process as quick and easy as possible. That way, airlines can enhance their employer brand, provide a personalised and compelling candidate experience and hire high-quality staff with minimum disruption.

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