

JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN THE ALASKA AIR TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRY

—, Neal Fried and Greg Huff

When Roy Jones flew his Curtis MF Flying Boat into Ketchikan in 1922, the Alaska commercial airline industry was born. The aviation industry quickly found a niche in vast, remote Alaska. This article discusses the structure of the Alaska air transportation industry, related job opportunities, and education/training programs.

INDUSTRY STRUCTURE

Alaska is the "flyingest" state in the nation. There are 10,250 pilots, or one of every 45 Alaskans. This is approximately nine times higher than the national average. There are 3,769 commercial-rated pilots in the state, although not all fly as a profession.

Wage and salary employment in the air transportation industry is 5,650, representing 3% of Alaska employment as compared to 0.4% nationally. Over the past decade Alaska employment in this industry has grown by 88%, slightly more than overall employment.

Sixty percent of Alaska air transportation employment is in Anchorage. Though employment is concentrated in Anchorage, the remaining jobs are distributed throughout the state.

Industry firms can be classified as scheduled airlines, air taxi operators, or "fixed-base" operations, which are firms which provide aviation service, but do not actually operate planes. The scheduled airlines account for 72% industry employment.

Air transportation occupations can initially be divided into airborne and ground categories. The airborne category consists of pilots, flight engineers and flight attendants. While flight crew member occupations have a glamorous, high-profile image, a 1979 Alaska Department of Labor Survey found that they constitute only 20% of Alaska air transportation employment.

The remaining 80% is comprised primarily of maintenance personnel, reservation and passenger service agents, air traffic controllers, dispatchers, and management personnel.

JOB OPPORTUNITIES

As in any field, job opportunities in the air transportation industry are determined by supply and demand for labor. Industry labor demand is

influenced by Alaska and U.S. economic conditions, technological changes, and union agreements. Supply is influenced by pay levels, working conditions, and the number of trained and/or experienced people in the field. For a variety of reasons, there is keen competition for employment in the air transportation industry. This situation is unlikely to change through the 1980's.

Alaska air transportation employment is expected to increase moderately through the 1980's in response to growth in population, personal income and tourism. Nationally, 52,000 air transportation employees have been laid off during the past three years.^{2/} While the current economic recovery is expected to result in increased air travel, it will take some time before a significant rebound in employment occurs. Most airlines are operating far below capacity, meaning that large increases in passenger-miles traveled can be accommodated with only small employment expansion. Additionally, several major airlines, including one operating in Alaska, are generally considered candidates to follow Braniff International into bankruptcy.

Though salaries are on par with the rest of the private sector, the industry offers desirable travel benefits, and includes several occupations frequently seen as glamorous or prestigious.

Air transportation demand is both highly seasonal and highly cyclical. This produces periodic fluctuations in employment, resulting in a large pool of experienced workers competing for openings.

Employment opportunities vary among the different types and sizes of the air transportation-related businesses. Large airlines have more specialized

**Estimated Employment by Selected Occupations
and Growth and Replacement Needs***
Alaska

	1981	1982	1986	Average Annual Job Openings	
				Growth	Separations
Air traffic controller	552	555	565	3	9
Flight engineer	74	75	91	3	7
Airplane pilot	1056	1078	1297	48	9
Flight attendant	112	114	139	5	9
Aircraft mechanics	868	885	1052	37	17
Line service attendants	689	705	859	34	11
Reservation agents	193	197	239	9	6
Passenger service agents	1223	1247	1515	58	32

* Does not include turnover.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor, *Forecast for Selected Occupations, 1981*

job classes, with more training and experience usually required. In smaller general aviation firms and fixed base operations a person may have many responsibilities. Training and experience requirements are often lower. The smaller firms frequently provide a training ground for employment with a large airline.

SPECIFIC OCCUPATIONS

Reservation and Passenger Service Agents

Employment opportunities for reservation and passenger service agents during the 1980's will be fairly good. However, applicants will find considerable competition for openings because of the large number of qualified persons attracted to airline jobs.

Proper training and education make it possible to become a reservation or passenger service agent. High school education is required and some college is preferred. Small commuter airlines and travel agencies are often a good way to gain experience. Reservation agents may be promoted to passenger service agents. Reservation agents work in a central office answering customer telephone inquiries and booking reservations. Like the reservation agent, the passenger service agent books reservations but works at airport terminals or ticket offices. Added duties include the preparation of tickets, helping passengers board and gathering tickets. For more detailed job descriptions see the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1982-1983 edition. (The *Handbook* also contains detailed descriptions on the following occupations).

Mechanics

The employment outlook for A & P (airframe and power plant) mechanics and avionics (electronic equipment) mechanics is fair due to expected growth in the aviation industry. However, applicants will find keen competition for most openings. Mechanics employed by an airline may be more specialized and work on only a few types of aircraft; at a small, independent repair shop mechanics usually work on all kinds of aircraft.

Employment opportunities in Alaska are better with the relatively smaller general carrier and fixed-base operations than with large airlines, because most major airlines serving Alaska have mechanical work done outside. Opportunities are best in the bush areas of the state where the supply of qualified workers is very low.

Line Service Attendants

Competition for line service attendants (freight loaders, fuelers and

"other" ramp personnel) jobs is particularly keen, primarily because entry level positions require no previous training or experience. More often than not the "seniority" positions are filled internally. Small airlines are a good way to gain experience for major airline positions.

Flight Attendants

Job applicants can expect heavy competition for the relatively small number of job openings. Most opportunities lie outside Alaska where most airlines that serve Alaska are based. Wien and Reeve-Aleutian Airlines are the only major Alaska carriers with most flight attendants stationed in the state. Airlines serving Alaska report hundreds of applicants annually. One airline has even started charging a \$10 application processing fee because it was flooded with applicants.

Most airlines give newly hired flight attendants several weeks of training. New attendants are placed on reserve status and either fill in on extra flights or replace attendants who are sick or on vacation. It may take several years to become a full-status attendant. The cyclical and seasonal nature of the industry causes many flight attendants to be furloughed, in some cases for extended periods.

Pilots

More pilots will be needed during the 1980's, but competition for jobs will be intense, with the number of qualified pilots exceeding the number of openings. Pilots work at many different kinds of businesses and fly a variety of aircraft. To many pilots the ultimate flying job is with a major airline commanding a large jet aircraft. Very few Alaska pilots will reach this level. Most pilots flying for major airlines serving Alaska are stationed Outside. The majority of Alaska pilots fly charter or get jobs with small carriers such as air taxis, commuter airlines and air freight carriers.

There are several ways to become a professional pilot. Many obtain the training through the military, while others start as flight instructors, building up their flying hours to obtain a commercial pilot's license. As a pilot's flight hours increase and ratings advance, new opportunities open up.

Air Traffic Controllers

Job opportunities as air traffic controllers are fairly good with the proper training, education and passage of pre-entry exams. After the 1981 strike-related firing of air traffic controllers, many openings occurred instantly and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) could not fill the positions fast enough. Two years later the FAA has become saturated with air traffic controller trainees. Hiring has slowed, although there are still more

openings than before the strike. The backlog of applications is so large that applicants may wait more than a year before knowing if they have been accepted into the training program at the FAA Academy. College graduates and individuals with civilian or military experience will have the best opportunities.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMS

The education and training necessary to open the door to employment varies from a high school diploma to a four-year college degree, and on-the-job training to 2,500 hours of flying time. In Alaska, there are a variety of educational programs that are tailor-made for this industry. With stiff competition for jobs, any education or training beyond the minimum requirements will help an applicant stand out from the crowd of competitors.

One of the major training grounds for the industry is the military. This is particularly true for pilots and mechanics. Because pilot training—particularly jet training—is prohibitively expensive, military training is almost the only route to acquire the skills and hours needed to qualify as a jet pilot.

There are 13 FAA approved flight training schools in Anchorage, Juneau, Sitka and Fairbanks. Countless other non-certified schools and teachers can provide pilot training, also. The Anchorage Community College (ACC) and the Tanana Valley Community College (TVCC) have two year professional piloting programs. Other community colleges throughout the state offer piloting programs. Civilian jet training would have to be acquired at schools outside Alaska. To become a commercial pilot, applicants must be 18 years old and have a minimum of 250 hours of flight experience. Further training and flying time with different aircraft are necessary before most persons will find employment as pilots. For example, an airline pilot has to be at least 23 years old and have a minimum of 1,500 hours of flying experience. Many airlines also require a four-year college degree, in addition to flight time.

The requirements needed to become a commercial helicopter pilot are slightly different. The best training available is through the military, as helicopter training is extremely expensive, costing approximately \$150-\$180 an hour. The cheapest civilian route is to first acquire an airplane license and then train for 50 hours on a helicopter.

Numerous educational institutions in Alaska provide programs and courses to meet the educational needs relevant to the aviation industry. The Anchorage Community College has the most extensive aviation program. ACC offers four areas of study—aviation administration, aviation maintenance technology, air traffic control and professional piloting. Aviation

administration is a general, two year program for persons interested in working for the FAA or in administration of a private aviation firm. The air traffic control program, also two years, helps a person to fill the requirements and pass the entrance exam to become an air traffic controller. For this, the individual must have a high school degree, at least three years of responsible work experience (including some supervisory duties), or four years of college or a combination of both college and work experience. If a person is accepted as a candidate, they then receive 15-17 weeks of training at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City. After successful completion of this training, on-the-job training continues at an FAA facility.

The third program, aviation maintenance technology, provides the necessary training to acquire an A & P certificate and an Associate of Applied Science degree. The Tanana Valley Community College in Fairbanks, through the Hutchison Career Center, also has an A & P program. TVCC's one year program prepares the individual to take the appropriate written, practical and oral examinations for certifications.

The Anchorage School District's Career Center and Alaska Pacific University provide classes that train students in travel agent ticketing and computer operation. This will help a person find employment as a passenger service agent, reservation agent or flight attendant. Most airlines provide additional in-house training.

Prior experience as a travel agent or work with the public makes the job search easier in these occupations.

Management staff often moves up the ranks internally or are recruited from other airlines and industries. The University of Alaska Fairbanks offers associate and bachelor degrees in travel industry management. Business and accounting training at any of Alaska's higher education schools will help the job seeker.

The skills needed to become an avionics technician for the repair of electronic equipment in the aviation industry can be acquired in a number of ways. Some of the A & P programs provide a good deal of avionics training. A person can also hire on as a helper in a repair shop and learn the trade through experience, generally over a two-year period. There are special avionics programs in the lower 48. The needed skills are in constant flux due to technological advances.

To become an airline dispatcher a person has to either choose from two schools in the lower 48 which provide the appropriate training or work as a dispatcher-clerk under the tutelage of a certified dispatcher for two years. Practical and written exams must be taken to be certified. The on-the-job training route is more popular in Alaska.

Load masters, cargo handlers, fuelers and fleet service personnel need only on-the-job training. Ability to drive a truck, operate a forklift, or closely related skills will help the job seeker.

One of the themes throughout this article has been the over-supply of job applicants in the aviation industry. One air taxi operator compared the pursuit of a commercial jet pilot position to the chances of becoming a Hollywood star. Though not all jobs in the aviation industry fall in this category, the right education, training and experience are necessary to stand out in this crowded job market.

1/ This does not include the 1300 FAA personnel in Alaska. If they are included, the employment share would rise to 3.6%.

2/ *U.S. News & World Report*, Dec. 20, 1982, p. 74.

