

Women in Aviation: Why Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Matter

Efforts to increase the number of female pilots in the aviation industry have been ongoing. Encouraging women to join the industry is difficult; but persuading women to remain in the industry is even more of a challenge. Progress has been made and it has been reported that the share of female pilots rose to 5.26 percent worldwide in 2020. Studies show that the main deterrents for young girls and women considering careers in aviation are lack of mentorship, lack of visible role models, associated costs, and exclusionary policies, amongst other factors.

Those who are already airline pilots have indicated that bias and discrimination are two primary discouraging factors to women joining and remaining in the piloting profession. The International Society of Women Airline Pilots (ISA+21) data, current to January 2020, indicates 185,143 total global airline pilots; of these, 9,746 are women (5.26 percent) and 2,630 are captains (1.42 percent).

The airline industry must focus on inclusion while removing existing barriers that preclude women from seeking careers in the aviation industry. An industry where every person is valued, welcomed, respected, and feels safe in their workplace (whether on the ground or on the flight deck) will function at its full capacity. This will enable industry members to do their best work and retain a diverse workforce. When women are valued and respected in an airline, they are encouraged to seek and attain senior leadership positions.

In order to achieve a more inclusive flight deck, a system of trust needs to be built. Safety cultures need to be developed that should include awareness of bias and that reinforce the fact that all pilots are highly trained and certified regardless of background or unique characteristics.

The pilot workplace should foster an inclusive culture, valuing input from all pilots, supporting confident, capable, and safe decision making. Now is the time to encourage and invite women pilots to participate in training, leadership, and committee roles and provide a diverse perspective and voice at the table. We need to create everyday conditions that promote inclusion by considering the language we use in our workplace and ensuring that women are included in all aspects of the operation.

Developing, supporting, and maintaining a diverse and inclusive pilot group is imperative to building a strong foundation for other safety initiatives. To begin this process, women pilots need to be recognised as part of the pilot community. Studies by McKinsey & Company indicate that organizations that prioritize diversity and inclusion typically outperform their competitors and could experience improved recovery aspects.

It is key that airlines develop a culture where every voice matters. Every pilot, no matter their background, needs to be valued and trusted. All pilots have received the same training and have the equivalent skills and therefore should be treated as equals.

Pilots are less likely to engage, bring up safety concerns, or admit mistakes when they perceive any form of prejudice against them. Operating on unchecked bias can lead to a flight deck microculture of low psychological safety, which deteriorates the effectiveness of CRM; allowing errors to be overlooked by the creation of invisible barriers.

With the recent drastic changes in aviation hiring and retention, IFALPA Member Associations must consider a strategy that focuses on maintaining diversity throughout their pilot groups. Here are some suggested practices that could be used to successfully retain a diverse and inclusive pilot contract:

- Pilot pay and training models that increase flexibility and reduce training costs
- Increased number of part-time flying positions
- Extended Parental leave options
- Voluntary leaves of absence
- Voluntary early retirement packages
- Careful consideration of temporary amendments to the Collective Labour Agreements (CLAs) to reduce costs to maximise employee retention

A concerted effort needs to be made to educate the airline industry on the substantial benefits to airline operations through diversity, inclusion, and equity practices that enhance aviation safety.

There needs to be respect for all pilots and diversity, equity, and inclusion elements must be supported through all levels of management, including IFALPA Member Associations, if they are to be adequately implemented to accomplish positive cultural changes within the organization.

Diversity and equity cannot happen without creating an inclusive culture, which requires a courageous commitment from the leadership in Member Associations.

POSITION

IFALPA should ensure that everyone has equal and equitable opportunities in the aviation industry and work towards correcting the current imbalance.

IFALPA should develop and support a diverse and inclusive pilot group through their Member Associations, where women are valued and respected.

IFALPA should encourage a robust and effective diversity and inclusion training programme throughout the industry to ensure all pilots are equipped to perform their duties on the flight deck without fear of bias, discrimination, or retaliation.