

QUESTIONS?

Am I too old/young?

Probably not, but maybe. By regulation, and with few exceptions, airline pilots must be between the ages of 23 and 65. We're going to bet that if you're reading this guide, you're in that range, but if you're too young, don't worry. Continue to build hours and experience until you can earn an airline transport pilot certificate. If you're older than 65, consider flight instructing, charter flying, flying privately for an owner, or other non-airline jobs without age limits. Air traffic controllers must be a maximum of 30 years old when they're hired, but most other aviation careers don't have age requirements.

BETWEEN AGES
23-65



Laura Azara,
Chick-fil-A Corporate Pilot

Do I need perfect vision?

We get this one at AOPA all the time, for reasons none of us understand. No, you don't need perfect vision. Professional pilots must have 20/20 distance vision, with or without glasses, and 20/40 near and intermediate vision, with or without glasses.



Should I go to an aviation college or technical program?

Part of the confusion around flight training for a career is that there are so many different avenues. College aviation programs are one, mom and pop independent flight schools and aviation academies are others. There's no right answer here. Colleges and academies can offer hiring agreements with airlines and many contacts within the industry, but independent schools might better fit your goals and needs. In this strong hiring market, it doesn't much matter where you learn to fly.

Do I need a college degree?

This depends on the job and the hiring market. Right now, even major airlines are hiring pilots without a four-year degree, but that hasn't always been the case. Mechanics don't need a degree, although formal airframe and powerplant school can be beneficial. Air traffic controllers need a degree or some job experience, and most other aviation professionals need a degree.



AVIATION PIONEERS

DOUGLAS BADER

"Don't listen to anyone who tells you that you can't do this or that. That's nonsense...never let them persuade you that things are too difficult or impossible."

—After losing both legs in an airplane crash in 1931, Bader went on to command a squadron flying Hurricanes and Spitfires in the Royal Air Force during World War II.

How is the job market?

Incredible. Airline hiring has never been better, and that draws pilots up from all other jobs, including instructing, charter, corporate, and more. Mechanics are desperately needed. Controllers are aging out. Engineers, people with a trade, and nearly all other professions are in desperate need right now.

If you want to work in aviation, chances are you will find an opportunity.



How much will I earn?

Obviously, this all depends on the job. Airline pilot pay can max out at more than \$300,000 a year, and even new pilots at regional airlines now make a livable wage. In 2014, the Air Line Pilots Association published the list of worst-paying airlines, and Silver Airways, the worst still operating, paid new first officers \$18,693. According to Airline Pilot Central it's now about \$46,800, not including bonuses, per diem, and other extras. Instructing continues to be a difficult way to make a living, unless you specialize in a type.



What is seniority?

At an airline, seniority is everything. Unlike most workplaces where each promotion, layoff, and bonus is based on your performance, the needs of the company, and your relationship with your boss, at an airline the pilot is a number. He or she is given that number when hired, and it becomes the basis for every major personnel decision. Seniority impacts where pilots are based (certain bases are more "junior" or "senior," meaning more or less popular), what airplane they can fly, how long it will be until they can upgrade to captain, and whether or not they are furloughed during a downturn. It's no mystery why the advice is often to earn the hours and be hired as soon as possible, even if it means short-term financial pain or other life sacrifices.



Piedmont Aviation

What airline should I fly for?

This depends on a lot of factors, and it's a question only you can answer. It helps to establish your goals and values early in the process. Are you OK with moving? Do you want to get to a major airline as soon as possible? Do you care where or what you fly? Many applicants turn to online forums for answers to this question because airline hiring is so good that some candidates have multiple offers and need help choosing. The prevailing wisdom seems to be that quality of life is more important than pay. Although regional airlines extensively advertise their now-impressive pay structures, most experienced airline pilots seem to advise that living close to your base is the best thing you can do for quality of life and to avoid burning out.

What is the lifestyle like?

This all depends on the job. Some corporate pilots work for one week, then have one week home with no responsibilities. Charter pilots can be called any time of the day or night on short notice, or have days scheduled to fly and other scheduled days off. Airline pilots tend to work three- to four-day trips, with a few days off in between. That trip starts at the base, so if you live somewhere else, it's your free time you're losing. Finally, there are hundreds of thousands of nonflying jobs that have normal office hours that provide the opportunity to do something you love and pair it with your passion for aviation. If you can think of a career path, aviation most likely offers it.

1,500
FLIGHT HOURS



How can I make myself competitive?

In this market, even pilots with 500 flight hours and no degree can find decent jobs, but expect to have 1,500 flight hours and a degree to be a competitive applicant to the airlines. For other careers, a degree remains a great way to make yourself more competitive, even if it's not in aviation. But most of all, have a passion for aviation. Pilots love to help and support those coming into the field, so whatever career you're going for, having a passion for aviation will help.

ian.twombly@aopa.org