

WATS CONFERENCE, Orlando, Florida, United States

Day 2, Wednesday 17 April

In Wednesday's first RATS breakout session, Regional Training Challenges Moderator Captain Steve Briner, Director of Operations for GoJet Airlines, challenged the audience to consider going from the traditional three days in the classroom and two in the simulator for pilot Continuing Qualification (CQ) training to two in the simulator through online computer-based training. Regardless of any forecast pilot shortage, he proposed this approach to be considered as a way for airlines to better utilize the pilots they already have.

In the regular panel session, Captain Scot McBride, Manager of Training Development for ExpressJet Airlines, outlined the airline's AQP training. The outcome for such a program is to make a better pilot when that person gets to the airline's operating environment, he pointed out. Captain Perry Solmonson, Director of Flight Standards and Training for Horizon Air, covered how that airline trained for and implemented its Required Navigation Performance-Authorization Required (RNP-AR) procedures as a part of the move towards embracing the FAA's NextGen program. The RNP-AR procedures have provided unprecedented safety benefits and lower approach minimums for the airline in terrain and obstacle- rich environments, he summed up.

Mike McCaskey, Director of Flight Training for United Airlines, described the training challenges that were faced and accomplished when that airline merged with Continental Airlines. He also said that distance learning will be the focus for United Airlines in the future. David Cropper, Manager of Instructional System Design for Delta Airlines, provided an overview of how that airline has developed and adopted its CQ e-learning program.

At session 5, Professor Kent Lovelace, Chair of the University of North Dakota's Department of Aviation, presented the results of the fourth version of the United States Airline Pilot Labor Supply Forecast developed by UND. The study polled 1,700 Certified Flight Instructors as a means to determine whether there are truly current and future trends that will lead to a pilot shortage.

According to the study's predictions, there will be a potential pilot shortage of 35,000 pilots in the United States by the year 2031 unless there are mitigation efforts made to reduce this trend, Lovelace said. One of the more telling trends from the CFI survey was that only 53.67 percent of these current flight instructors surveyed reported that they intend to fly as a long-term goal. Other study results revealed that 58 percent of the CFIs said that they are willing to go to other countries with low flight hour requirements and more that 32 percent are rethinking their plans based on the pending 1,500- hour rule. Jim Winkley, Vice President of Flight Operations for American Eagle Airlines, reported that his airline plans to hire from between 300 to 400 new pilots in 2013. He also cited significant factors that could prevent the airline from reaching this goal in the future. One is that in 2011, American Eagle had a pool of 500 qualified applicants, but that in 2013 there are less than 100 pilots in that pool. The major airlines are beginning to recognize the potential for a pilot shortage, Winkley added. "We are seeing no relief in the future," Winkley summed up.

Paul Preidecker, Chief Flight Instructor for Air Wisconsin Airlines, said that the airline industry needs to do a better job of marketing an airline career, to be the “Ambassador of Aviation”, to help overcome the decline of interest in pursuing an airline career. He also said that airline human resources and flight department personnel need to establish meaningful metrics together to increase training success. He also recommended that regional airlines move to Advanced Qualification Programs requirements to assure new pilot qualifications. Jason Griswold, Managing Director of Brown Aviation Lease, pointed out that airlines should adopt more modern marketing strategies to appeal to younger people.

Captain Darrin Gruebel, Manager of Line Operations for ExpressJet Airlines, stated regardless of the debate, he feels that the predicted pilot shortage is already here today. He based his opinion on the facts that airlines job fair attendance is down by 50 percent, his pool of pilot applicants is “nil,” and that of every new 100 pilots interviewed by ExpressJet, only 30 are qualified enough to be offered a position. He also pointed out that his airline’s pilots attrition to major airlines is 32 percent.

Captain Mark Sawyer, President and CEO of Aerosim Academy, echoed Gruebel’s comments by saying that the combination of the pending 1,500-hour First Officer Training requirement, pilot retirements and the student pilot funding crisis is leading to “the perfect storm” of a pilot shortage.

“The real numbers are irrefutable,” Sawyer emphasized. “There are 21,000 pilots who will be retiring in the next 11 years, and there are only 21,000 regional pilots. If some studies show that there will be no pilot shortage, just ask them, where are the pilots today?”

John Duncan, FAA Deputy Director of Flight Standards, said that the old Flight Duty and Rest rule is 30 years old and needed to be modernized. He stated that the new rule when enacted will increase aviation safety, as well as increasing the demand for qualified flight crew members. He also expressed the opinion that the new First Officer Qualification rule will be enacted before August and that it will also produce better qualified and more experienced flight crew members.

Paul Craig, PhD, Professor of Aerospace at Middle Tennessee State University, described a study at MTSU that showed that students taught with a scenario-based training curriculum had to redo training lessons at a much lower rate than those who had gone through a more traditional curriculum. The results of employing scenario-based training results in reduced training time and the reduction of training costs, he summed up.