

Airline Cadetships – Myths versus Reality

Our company over the years has assisted many many people join the airlines both as direct entry pilots and cadets as well as join the ADF as a pilots. We have also assisted ADF pilots who are leaving their service and joining the airlines, as well as experienced airline pilots changing employers. This places us in unique position to evaluate the pros and cons of the various pilot career pathways – in short we don't have a dog in this race.

This article is Australian centric but the principles are applicable globally.

Airlines get their pilots from three sources:

- GA and regional airlines
- The Australian Defence Force
- and now Airline Cadetships

We don't intend for the this article to compare the ADF in detail with the two other pathways we have written a number of articles detailing training of ADF pilots in the RAAF, RAN and Army which can be viewed by clicking here. Or going to the website page of "ADF Pilot Employment Resources", the articles at the top of page. Suffice to say that ADF Pilots enjoy healthy pay and conditions with second to none training.

The traditional GA/Regional path in Australia involves an individual attending a flying school and self funding a CPL/IR then seeking to build experience. The initial qualifications CPL/IR are sometimes done in conjunction with an Aviation degree or diploma. Typically the new commercial pilot then builds experience via instructing, scenic flights, parachute dropping, station work or single engine charter. Then after gaining experience the pilot moves onto multi- engine, following that turbine multi-crew etc. The typical new joiner at VB and Jetstar who is moving onto their first jet job would have between 3000 to 4000 hours flight time. Typically this would take someone around ten years to achieve.

In contrast the airline cadetship involve a period of intense full time training normally at what are regarded as the nation's best flying schools and then transition directly to a first officer or second officer job at the airline. In the past some airlines such as Qantas have "farmed out" their cadets for two years of turboprop first officer flying prior to them joining the main airline on a jet aircraft.

So now that we have introduced the mechanisms of how the career paths work it might well be useful to discuss the topic further under the following headings.

How many people do they take?

These cadetship programs offered by Jetstar and Cathay Pacific are certainly looking like they will be at least 100 per year, with Cathay Pacific moving towards 200 per year.

All sponsored students at Flight Training Adelaide (FTA) now come from Cathay Pacific ,or the 100% Cathay owned Dragon Air. There are approximately 120 sponsored students at FTA with multiple intakes per year. So you could reasonably assume at least 100 new starts every year.

Oxford is looking for 28 ab-initio cadets to commence at the start of March. This is one entry mechanism from four possible entry mechanisms. When you annualise the numbers it is apparent that at least 100 will graduate from this program every year. This does not include graduates from the recently established Jetstar Asia program.

The Applicant Pool:

It is not secret that to have the best chance of a career as an airline pilot you are always better off starting out young. Pilot training is expensive and it would be reasonable to assume that the expenses of gaining a CPL/IR would be around \$80K at least perhaps more for a program that includes a degree. In effect this limits the applicant pool significantly as the pathway is limited those who come from a family with the ability to fund this training. You might say people can work and fund the training but the ability of a year 12 leaver at 18 years of age without any qualifications, skills or experience to earn this kind of money in any reasonable time period is severely limited. The year 12 leaver who attempts to earn fund flying training on a pay as you go basis also limits their opportunity to access other educational and training opportunities.

So the airline that sets up the cadetship and either fully or partially funds the program broadens significantly the talent pool who now has the financial capacity to become pilots.

GA/Regional Job Prospects

Not good.

Be prepared for periods of unemployment, with your periods of employment being unstable, low paid and often in remote parts of Australia. For the majority of people it is a long hard road to the airlines and remember you have invested \$80K in your licences.

Well there is no point painting a rosy picture that does not reflect reality.

Australia has always been an exporter of pilots with and at present there are thousands of Australians flying for airlines overseas. The same is true at the bottom end of the market that there are not enough "entry level" jobs to satisfy the number of fresh CPLs coming onto the market. So this has created a slave labour system with exploitative employers often taking advantage of junior pilots. It is common place even at some of the large city flying schools for junior instructors to attend work full time but only paid when they fly; the situation is very similar with many charter operators.

The percentage of GA operators who pay minimum wage is small, those that pay award levels even smaller. The reality is that most people who gain a CPL/IR do not make it to an airline and eventually pursue alternative career paths.

So in effect the self-funded applicant is in many ways “gambling” \$80K on licences to work in the GA marketplace for numerous years in the hope of one day making the “big-time”. You can see why many high achieving school or Uni leavers would not consider this “traditional” path.

The Cadetships don’t guarantee Employment!

Well that is true and there is good reason for this. The Qantas cadets of the early 1990s in effect had a “guarantee” of employment with their agreement with Qantas. When economic circumstances changed at this time and employment was not available immediately after course completion, some of the cadets developed “attitude” problems. A few were subsequently terminated by Qantas and all other cadets were placed on the first available second officer courses which commenced shortly afterwards.

So yes there is no guarantee of employment but according to the data we have seen there is about a 95% chance of an someone who commences on a cadetship flying for that airline, this is applicable for Cathay , Qantas , Jetstar etc. We personally know of many circumstances where the airline has arranged many extra training sessions so that the cadet would meet the required standards. The key is your performance, your endeavour and your attitude.

By way of comparison less than 30% of people who self-sponsor a CPL/IR will eventually fly for a major airline.

You will never be a Captain as you won’t get command time

Not true.

There are hundreds of cadets who are now Captains at prestigious airlines such as Cathay Pacific and Qantas who joined the airlines directly from a flying whilst on cadet programs.

Exactly the same thing will happen for those who join Jetstar and Rex via their cadetships. These airlines will establish appropriate training mechanisms to ensure all regularity requirements are met for their cadets to be promoted to captains. Remember these airlines enjoy strong relations and reputations with regulators.

The airlines are not hiring people from these cadetships to be career first officers, that is a proposition that is simply not logical and the precedent for cadets to be promoted to command is well and truly established.

Expect graduates from the Jetstar Cadetship to be promoted to Captain after around five years with the airline. So we are going to see 24 and 25 year old Airbus captains in Australia – it is going to happen.

How can a 250 hour pilot be safe ?

Two words really – BA and Lufthansa

These companies have been running cadetships for decades with the graduates flying in conditions that in many ways make Australian skies look like a boy scout camp. The degree of difficulty in the flying conditions encountered in by the BA and Lufthansa Cadets is simply much higher and the safety record achieved is outstanding.

So as emotive as the question might be it is just a myth that can be quickly dispelled.

What's in it for the Airline ?

Quite a lot when you think about it.

Firstly it gives the airline a consistent product to start with, with known standards and habits banged into them from the leading flying schools. They have been trained from day one to become airline pilots and their training has very much been tailored around that.

It also gives the airline access to a much broader cross section of young people to join these programs. Clearly applicants who join an airline via the ADF have already been through a highly competitive selection process and have been trained to the highest standards with no expense spared. The airlines are no doubt hoping that they will be able to encourage a higher calibre applicant to pursue this career path. In essence the "airline selection" part is happening prior to the candidate commencing training, instead of after 10 years of working the GA/regional sector. Now that there are funding mechanisms in place and requirement to work in GA is removed this should be a more attractive career option.

These programs should make for a more stable workforce for the airlines. Most of these programs come with some kind of bonding or return of service obligation so aircrew numbers should be easier for the airline to manage. The cadet entrant to an airline would not be particularly marketable to other companies until they had spent five or so years with their sponsor airlines..... to be continued

Next Issue:

What's in it for the airlines? (final chapter)

We rank the Cadetships

Working Overseas with Jetstar