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Airlines Race to Recruit Pilots Amid Shortage

By Alec Luhn

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A pilot waving at Domodedovo Airport. A lack of pilots could impact safety. **Andrei Makhonin**

Russia has been widely touted as the world's most deadly place to fly after a series of air crashes. The Russian aviation industry faces another pressing issue that may eventually compound safety problems – a shortage of personnel, especially pilots.

As passenger flights continue to increase, the number of students graduating from Russian aviation academies won't be able to meet airlines' staffing demands, an industry expert said. The burgeoning deficit is prompting airlines to cover their staffing needs by poaching pilots from other airlines and starting special recruitment programs, among other means. If this deficit is not successfully addressed, it could exacerbate the safety concerns about air travel in Russia, experts said.

"The most problematic segment, the deficit which could directly affect the level of flight safety in the future, is the shortage of graduates from educational institutions specializing

in flight operations," said Oleg Panteleyev, an analyst at the industry information agency Aviaport.

According to Panteleyev, about 330 new pilots graduated from Russian flight schools in 2011. Although the state flight schools plan to graduate 480 pilots in 2012 and to increase that number in future years, the number of graduates will be less than the number required by airlines. The industry's staffing needs will include an estimated 800 to 1,000 pilots annually over the next few years, he said.

Meanwhile, passenger travel continues to grow in Russia. Sixty-four million people flew on Russian airlines in 2011, and the number of passenger flights increased 12.6 percent compared with 2010, RIA-Novosti reported in March. The number of passengers grew 18 percent in the first two months of 2012 as compared with the same period last year, according to the news service.

Wage Wars

Pilot positions comprise 5 percent of the aviation vacancies on recruiting website SuperJob.ru, said spokesman Vladislav Gladenkov by e-mail. Meanwhile, 14 percent of the site's aviation vacancies are for flight attendants and 16 percent are for ticket agents, he said.

Aviator positions, however, remain foremost on airlines' minds. Russia's second-

largest airline, Transaero, concerns itself mainly with hiring pilots, spokesman Sergei Bykhal said by e-mail.

"Because the company's fleet is constantly expanding, we carry out constant, planned recruitment of personnel, primarily pilots," Bykhal said.

Russian airline VIM Avia is most in need of pilots and flight attendants, said spokeswoman Yelena Fyodorova by e-mail.

Whereas during the Soviet period flight schools put out as many as 2,500 graduates a year, in post-Soviet Russia that number decreased to less than 200, Novaya Gazeta reported in 2011. This was because a decrease in the number of passenger flights in Russia during the 1990s was accompanied by a sharp drop in government financing for the country's flight schools, Panteleyev said.

Moreover, the lack of ground personnel is only slightly less acute than the pilot shortage, Panteleyev said.

Most large airlines can currently meet their staffing needs by attracting personnel from smaller airlines, Panteleyev said.

"Airlines poach pilots from each other, and the only method of attracting pilots is higher wages," Panteleyev said, noting that large spending on aviators makes Russian airlines uncompetitive with foreign companies.

VIM Avia declined to name the average salary of its pilots, and Transaero said only that its wages correspond to those at leading airlines worldwide. Nezavisimaya Gazeta reported

in 2011 that the salary of an experienced pilot in Russia exceeds $10,000 per month.

Transaero hires pilots both from flight schools and other airlines, Bykhal said. Few other sources for aviators exist. Military flyers sometimes go into civil aviation, but the "number of these pilots is tens of people when the need is for thousands," Panteleyev said.

Personnel from former Soviet republics could help address the problem, but by law Russian airlines can only hire Russian or Belarussian citizens, he added.

Bring a Friend

The personnel deficit has prompted airlines to try various recruiting tools. Russian airlines and flight schools have visited secondary schools on joint recruiting tours, Panteleyev said, but these trips can't alleviate the current problem, as the number of students wanting to enroll already exceeds the number that flight schools can accept.

To try to establish a steadier supply of pilots, the country's largest airline, Aeroflot, opened its own flight school in partnership with the Ulyanovsk Higher Civil Aviation School in March 2011, the company said on its website. Students first study for a year and a half at the Ulyanovsk school, then for half a year at Aeroflot's school on the outskirts of Moscow, where they learn to operate a specific plane. The company requires 250 new pilots every year, General Director Vitaly Savelyev told news agency Prime.

VIM Avia runs its own training center to provide flight school graduates with additional instruction, Fyodorova said, and Bykhal said Transaero also has a training center.

Aeroflot recently garnered publicity for its recruiting program "Bring a Friend to Be a Pilot." For every new pilot hired on the recommendation of an Aeroflot employee, that employee receives a 200,000 ruble ($6,800) bonus. Over the course of 2011, the airline hired 35 pilots in this fashion, flight director Igor Chalik told Vedomosti in April. Panteleyev said he doesn't know of any similar programs at other Russian airlines.

Aeroflot started the program after first appealing to recruiting agencies to help it hire pilots, Chalik said. Although Russian airlines, including VIM Avia, don't often tap headhunters, the skills of recruiting agencies may eventually find demand in this segment, Panteleyev said. One task for recruiters in such a market is to find the most qualified candidates, since almost any applicant starts to look good to personnel-starved airlines, he explained.

"A good recruiting agency should sift out the candidates that have problems," Panteleyev said. "The second part is the search for specialists ready to work for an adequate wage, so that you don't have to overpay."

Fatigued Flight Crews

The lack of both flight and ground personnel can exacerbate safety concerns due to overworking, according to Igor Obodkov, spokesman for the Sheremetyevo Air Staff Union, who said encouragement by airlines to fly more hours wearies pilots. The problem looks like it will only get worse: Aeroflot is planning to double its fleet even though "there's nowhere to get pilots from," he said.

''Pilots' fatigue builds up, and it's not clear what it will lead to,'' Obodkov said.

Although the set maximum flight time for commercial pilots is 800 hours a year, regulations allow them to fly 900 with the approval of their airline union, often for overtime pay. Some fly up to 1000 hours unofficially, Obodkov said.

Furthermore, down time between flights is often insufficient due to poor flight schedule planning, he noted. Russian aviators only have about six days off each month, compared with the 12 days off mandated by U.S. airline Delta, Obodkov said.

An investigation by the Interstate Aviation Committee of an Aeroflot-Nord crash in Perm on Sept. 14, 2008, which killed 88 people, found that the daily rest period between the crew's flights on Sept. 11 had been less than half the 12-hour minimum (the crew flew on Sept. 11, 12 and 13), one of many regulatory violations in the crew's work-rest schedule, according to the investigation report. The captain also had alcohol in his blood, the report said.

Errors made by personnel cause about 80 percent of air crashes in Russia, including allowing pilots without the necessary experience to fly, said Yelena Glebova, head of transport and customs oversight at the Prosecutor General's Office, RIA-Novosti reported.

If the shortage of personnel is not addressed, it could constrict the development of the air industry, Panteleyev said.

''By the middle of this decade, the lack of pilots and ground staff will already hamper the growth of passenger traffic,'' he predicted.

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