



AVIATION

International Departures.

Disillusioned U.S. airline pilots are heading overseas, leaving domestic carriers scrambling

BY COCO MASTERS

FOR CAPTAIN BRIAN MURRAY, THE MEMORY of the way pilots and crew were treated during the airline bankruptcies of the 1980s still stings. "Planes were parked. Crews were out and had to find their own way home," says the former Piedmont Airlines pilot. "We were bringing people home in the cockpit and in the back of the cabin." After 23 years of flying mainline American carriers, Murray, 54, says he became "tired of watching senior management march through the airline and leave with huge golden parachutes."

So in July 2004 he jumped too, from U.S. Airways to Dubai-based Emirates. His new company provides him with a freshly pressed uniform and a chauffeur-driven car to each flight. Murray has twice the vacation time (42 days), guaranteed annual raises and a benefits package that has lured more than 100 U.S. pilots to Emirates over the past four years. One-third of the 23 former U.S. Airways pilots at Emirates had the option to return when the airline recalled them from furlough after the cuts in 2004. Only one did. "It's just not worth it," Murray says. "Employees have been beaten down to the lowest common denominator, where the salary, benefits and career path are so miserable—so uncertain." And maybe it's also because the guys who once ruled the U.S. skies now have a different status at the legacy carriers: mere employees.

That sentiment—a common one among the more than 10,000 U.S. airline pilots put on furlough between late 2001 and 2006—has led to what many airline experts call a major shortage of pilots

willing to work for U.S. carriers. Bankruptcies, pay cuts, frozen pensions, eroded job security and increases in monthly flight hours have pushed some pilots out of the industry. Others have simply picked up and followed the best jobs overseas. Emirates, for example, expects to hire 540 pilots this year. Half the applicants are Americans, compared with just 7% of its current pilots. The result is a massive shift of talent and experience from U.S. carriers into the international market.

Pilots flying for airlines in foreign markets say they are treated like upper-level managers, with something they feel they no longer get in the U.S.: respect. China and India are signing up pilots with two-to-five-year contracts and giving them the chance to move around the world without having to start at the bottom and advance—something stifled by the seniority system in the U.S. "It's an amazing opportunity," says Murray.

And the word is quickly getting out to pilots in training. An aviation major and recent graduate of Georgia State University, Adnan Pochi, 22, has been flying since age 15 and has already racked up 300 flying hours. Although he will probably start off at a U.S. regional carrier, Pochi is attracted

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to the energy at airlines overseas. He hopes someday to go to India to work for Kingfisher Airlines. "They're hiring like crazy," says Pochi. "It's a big market."

The U.S. is still the world's pilot training ground, but the pool of young talent is drying up. The number of military pilots, once a reliable source of commercial recruits, has been declining. Flight instructors, whom the industry needs to keep the pipeline of new pilots flowing, are hopping abroad rather than spending years racking up hours to qualify for bottom-rung U.S. pilot posts. And only about 20% of furloughed pilots are coming back to work, compared with 80% to 90% historically, says Jerry Glass, a Washington-based consultant and president of F&H Solutions Group.

So who will fill the estimated 12,000 new airline pilot jobs created this year in the U.S.? Major airlines can still skim off the top to fill plum jobs with eager regional pilots, but then those regional positions will need to be filled. That is forcing some smaller carriers, such as Pinnacle Airlines and Comair, to reduce flight-hour requirements for experienced pilots or offer training-completion bonuses to new flight-school graduates.

Captain John Prater, president of the Air Lines Pilots Association, says a shortage of qualified pilots is severely affecting some regionals' ability to fly, tempting them to push pilots to fly beyond Federal Aviation Administration maximum flight times. Chronic pilot fatigue jeopardizes safety—and the pipeline's flow. "You destroy the benefit and the value of being an airline pilot, and people will take their skills elsewhere," he says. And they are. ■