Case Study: Airline Pilot - Peter

What do you do?

As a passenger airline captain, I have overall command and responsibility for my crew. I'm the final decision-maker, and all complaints and problems come to me. For instance, before we leave on a flight, I look at maintenance and weather reports, judging how each may affect our progress. If I decide everything looks safe, we take off for our destination.

What is your background?

I studied aviation maintenance as part of my degree at university. And at the same time, I was taking private flying lessons. For a while, after I had accumulated the proper number of hours, I was a flight instructor, and that helped me to get the number of hours I needed to become a commercial pilot.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?

Piloting is a competitive field, so it helps to be assertive. It takes confidence to effectively lead other crew members, and you have to demonstrate leadership abilities to get promoted. Some of your crew members may also be people you've never met before. You want those people to respect you, as well as get along with you.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?

In the process of learning how to fly a plane, you learn a lot about the planes themselves. You could use that knowledge as a technical sales rep for an aeroplane manufacturing company. You might also become an air traffic controller. That job has a similarly stressful environment.

What changes will there be in the future?

The demand for pilots is increasing. Air travel is growing at a rapid pace, and most of the current pilots are reaching the mandatory retirement age of 60. In the next five to seven years, this mass retirement will leave a huge hole in the piloting work force. Young people will be needed to fill that hole.

In the future, economic factors will dictate which routes we fly. For example, an Asian financial crisis will decrease the demand for flights from that area. Airlines will be forced to cancel those routes, or at least fly smaller planes. They might even have to cut jobs.

I expect that technology won't change much. Planes already have the capability to land and stop automatically. What more can they do?

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

The captain assumes all the final responsibility for the crew, passengers and aircraft. That can be stressful. Plus, you work really long hours.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?

There are likely to be opportunities in this field if you start your flying lessons as soon as possible. Also, go to university and get a degree in something. Technical degrees might be more helpful, but they're certainly not required. You only need a basic command of maths and science.

What do you like about your job?

Airlines pay pilots pretty well. You also get a lot of time off that's free and clear of any airline duties. You have new challenges and rewards every day. You're working with new people, encountering different weather and different flights, and the reward is the safe outcome of the flight.
What do you dislike about your job?

I'd have to say I dislike the long days most of all. I work a long day and spend a lot of time in an aeroplane.

Secondly, I'd say flying at odd hours. A lot of times we have 5:00 a.m. departures, which means you have to get up at 2:00 in the morning. Often, we have red-eye flights that you land at 5:00 a.m., which disturbs your body clock.

And, lastly, I'd have to say being away from home for long periods is fairly difficult.

What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

Don't be intimidated by the high cost of flying lessons. There are scholarships available. There are low-interest loans available. Once you've decided to be a pilot, go for it. Spend time at the airport, take flying lessons, build as much flight time as you can as rapidly as you can.

A day in the life

6:00 am - 7:00 am

• Arrive at the airport.
• Check mail.
• Meet my co-pilot in operations.
• Discuss weather, fuel, aeroplane status, etc.
• Sign the flight plan for the aeroplane.
• Meet flight attendants.
• Brief them on the status of the aeroplane and flight details.
• Do cockpit duties in the aeroplane.
• Go through the checklist for aeroplane systems.

7:00 am - 9:15 am

Short haul flight to Europe:

• Talk to the air traffic controller.
• Go through before and after take-off checklists.
• Maintain safe flight in air.
• Talk to aeroplane passengers and flight attendants.
• Go through the approach, then final descent checklists.
• Land the plane.
• Go through parking checklist.
• Set up the plane for the next flight after landing.
• Go through shutdown checklist.
• Say goodbye to the passengers.

9:15 am - 9:30 am

Break.

9:30 am - 11:15 am

Return flight to London:

Repeat of earlier process.

11:15 am - 2:30 pm

Wait around for a few hours for the next flight.

2:30 pm - 4:15 pm

Short haul flight to Europe:

Repeat process.

4:15 pm - 5:30 pm
Wait for the next flight.
5:30 pm - 7:00 pm
Return flight to London:
Repeat process.