

Feminine Leadership in Commercial Aviation: Success Stories of Women Pilots and Captains

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Abstract

This research project concerns gender-related issues in the aviation industry, as there is a significantly smaller amount of female pilots than male. It has been proven that there are no significant differences in skill level between male and female pilots, yet there is no explanation for the extreme difference in the number of pilots for each gender. Five women who are members of the International Society for Women Airline Pilots (ISWAP) were interviewed to discover their accomplishments, experiences, hardships, sacrifices, and tribulations faced upon earning a leadership position in the aviation industry.

Introduction

As of 2009, only 4,000 of the 92,000 U.S. aircraft pilots and flight engineers were women (Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009).

This research project concerns women in leadership positions in the aviation industry. Women are in the minority in aviation, except as Flight Attendants and ground-based support personnel (ChecklistComplete, 2008). The significantly smaller amount of female pilots and captains in commercial aviation led the researchers to investigate the personal stories of women who broke the barrier to become leaders in their industry. We focused on learning about the hardships, sacrifice, and tribulations these women encountered when pursuing advancement, and how these barriers were overcome.

Literature Review

There have been very few scientific studies about gender issues in aviation, especially in the United States. Most of these articles concerning this topic were published in the 1990's and early 2000's. Articles about this topic point to definite gender-related issues in the aviation industry. However, it is still an extremely under-developed category of research.

“Development and Validation of a Measure to Assess Perceptions Regarding Gender-Related Pilot Behavior” describes a study conducted in South Africa concerning the Aviation Gender Attitude Questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to determine aviators' perceptions about gender-related pilot behavior (Vermeulen and Mitchell, 2007, p. 197). The study focused on four factors that related to perceptions about gender-related pilot behavior: flying proficiency, safety orientation, flight confidence, and flight standards (Vermeulen and Mitchell, 2007, p. 197). The primary purpose of this study was to develop a questionnaire that was valid and also a reliable instrument to assess female and male aviators' perceptions regarding gender-related pilot

behavior. This survey was used in later studies concerning the topic of gender-related pilot behavior.

“Gender Issues in Aviation: Pilot Perceptions and Employment Relation” describes a study conducted in Australia, the purpose of which was to explain why the number of female pilots was significantly smaller than the number of male pilots. In order to determine their perception of female pilots, 1,114 Australian pilots were surveyed. The survey included questions from the Aviation Gender Attitude Questionnaire previously mentioned. The results showed that females scored higher in flying proficiency and safety orientation than males did. The survey also revealed that the opportunity to fly with female pilots improved male perceptions of them in the category of safety orientation. The results revealed that “many aviation industry pilots had negative perceptions towards female pilots, including some female pilots themselves” (Mitchell, Kristovics, and Vermeulen, 2006, p. 48). These negative perceptions may lead to gender bias, prejudice, harassment, and discrimination ((Mitchell, Kristovics, and Vermeulen, 2006, p. 48).

The author of “Flight Instructors’ Perceptions of Pilot Behaviour Related to Gender” used the Aviation Gender Attitude Questionnaire to investigate flight instructors’ perceptions in reference to gender-related pilot behavior (Vermeulen, 2009, p. 1). The study focused on flight instructors’ and commercial pilots’ feelings in regards to female pilots’ flying proficiency and safety orientation. The results revealed that the two groups differed significantly in their perceptions of female pilots’ flying proficiency, but did not differ in perceptions of female pilots’ safety orientation (Vermeulen, 2009, p. 1). This shows that instructors have a more positive perception than commercial pilots do of female pilots’ performance (Vermeulen, 2009, p. 6).

“The Right of Passage? The Experiences of Female Pilots in Commercial Aviation” (Davey and Davidson, 2000) describes a study conducted in Europe designed to examine the difficulties faced by female pilots. Interviews were conducted to determine the experience of the first female pilots who joined the airline and the experiences of women who joined later. Interviews with the first women to join determined that they were not automatically accepted by the male flight crew. The interviews also revealed that these women were made aware of being visibly different from male pilots. They also experienced sexual harassment at their workplace. Davey and Davidson (2000) discovered that men found it difficult to adapt to female pilots and showed aggressive behavior towards female pilots. For women who joined the aviation industry later, they still reported many difficulties but seemed to have an easier time entering the industry than the women who entered earlier. Women also claimed they felt forced to laugh at sexist jokes, pranks, and teasing. These women felt socializing and drinking with men was very important in order to be “well liked” by the flight crew. Even though they felt more accepted, women in the aviation industry still represented a very small percentage and were still considered “different.” Women who entered the aviation industry later were considered inferior and were reluctant to admit problems. This study gave more insight into the problems women pilots faced upon working in the aviation industry.

“Air Force Female Pilots Program: Initial Performance and Attitudes” focused on male and female pilots in the Air Force. This study found that “few significant differences were found between men and women entering pilot training. Comparable performance on most pre-training measures, combined with equivalent graduation rates, factors associated with flight training performance, and student impressions of the flight training experience, all lend strong support to the conclusion that men and women behave similarly in flight training” (Kantor, Noble, Leisey, and McFarlane,

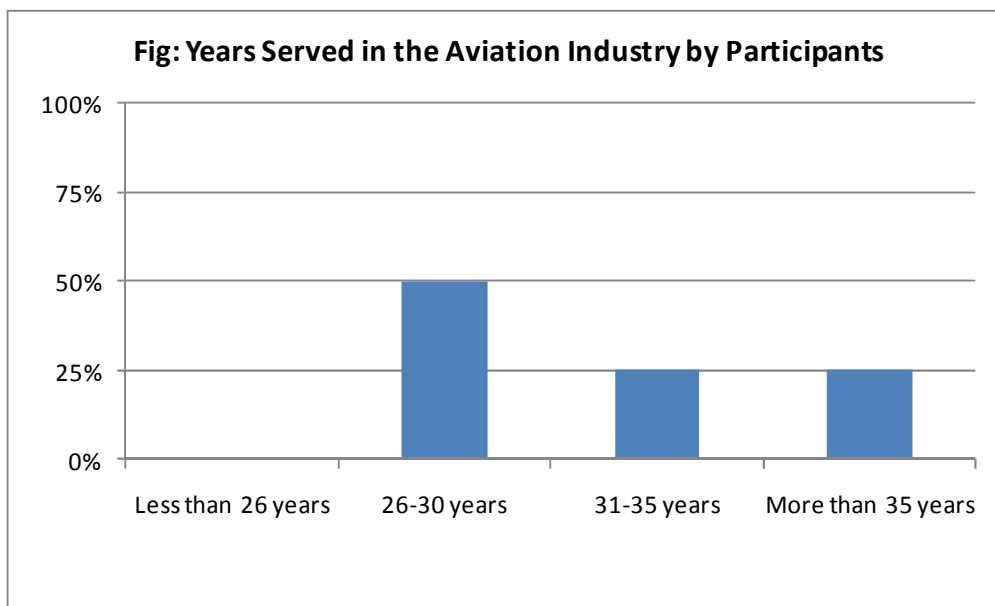
1979, p. 5). Interestingly enough, this article was written in 1979, and military aviation was almost totally male dominated until the mid-1970's.

Research Methods

Online interviews were conducted with five women who are members of the International Society for Women Airline Pilots (ISWAP), formerly called the ISA+21. ISWAP is a non-profit organization of “career women airline pilots whose purpose is to: celebrate camaraderie; support informational exchange and social interaction among its members in a healthy environment; provide aviation scholarship opportunities for career-seeking women; and inspire future generations of women aviators via educational outreach” (ISWAP, 2010). The participants volunteered for the research project during an ISWAP conference in 2010.

Each participant of the study has reached a career milestone in aviation, such as being the first woman to pilot a B-747. All participants have served at least 26 years in the aviation industry (see Figure below). All participants are in a leadership position – pilot, co-pilot, or captain – and fly for commercial airline companies such as FedEx and Continental Airlines.

Interview questions were administered online because of the impracticality of face-to-face interviews. Several of the women who volunteered to participate in the study fly overseas routes every week. The interview protocol consisted of forced choice as well as open-ended formats.



Results

The majority of the interview participants felt that it was difficult to break the barrier and become a female leader. Specifically, 75 percent of respondents found it “difficult.” None of the participants described this process as “easy.”

Workplace's Influence and Attitude toward Female Leaders

A related question focused on the extent to which participants' workplace promoted a particular attitude toward female leaders. Overall, 80 percent of respondents felt that the aviation industry encourages female leaders and has a positive effect on their leadership skills. One participant wrote that "as a Captain, these skills are taught, reinforced, and expected. If they aren't, you fail or lose respect of your peers." Another respondent said, "It is in the aviation industry's best interest to train female captains to develop the skills of women in leadership positions." However, 20 percent felt that their workplace does not influence their leadership skills and does not strive to develop female leaders. Some participants also explained that their employers sometimes incur problems when women with poor leadership skills are promoted.

Personal Influences

In light of the apparent disparity between a perceived encouraging environment and great difficulty in reaching advancement, the participants were asked about the chief resources they had used to achieve success. All of the participants reported several people that personally mentored them. Influential people in the respondents' lives included authors, coworkers, teachers, public figures, parents, and military leaders. The participants' activities as leaders in non-aviation areas seemed to have transferred to the workplace. Of the respondents, 80 percent have held leadership positions in other organizations such as on a church board, conflict resolutions committee, and as a member of the US armed services. The participants said they believe these positions influenced their career path and aided their acquisition of leadership abilities.

Hardships Endured

The respondents agreed that breaking into leadership positions in the aviation industry was met with male resistance. One respondent stated that the hardships were faced early on in her career when it was "unheard of" to have women in aviation. Participants explained that they were forced to deal with men who did not want them in "their" profession and were sometimes required to perform tasks that men were not required to do. Other hardships they faced included ridicule, harassment, alienation, malicious comments from co-workers and passengers, having to "prove that they were capable of doing the job," having to change airlines up to seven times in order to reach career goals, balancing personal and career decisions, and "breaking the glass ceiling."

Ideal Characteristics of a Female Leader

When asked what the important traits are for a successful leader in aviation, the participants reported the following key traits: excellent communication skills, integrity, compassion, competence and patience.

Career Satisfaction and Fulfillment

The participants in this study felt that they had achieved their career goals. Eighty percent felt that they had reached their full potential and could happily retire. One participant said, "I went further than I ever dreamed possible." Some of the most rewarding parts of their careers include being able to give back to their employers by mentoring and training other pilots and helping people who are afraid to fly.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study indicate that female pilots and captains in the aviation industry faced real roadblocks to their career paths. They achieved success and became leaders not because of their workplace environments, whether welcoming or threatening. Instead, they said they owed their success to experiences, people, and events outside of the aviation industry. These outside influences helped them to acquire the skills and confidence that they needed for leadership positions in aviation. The implications of these findings are that we should encourage our students and entry-level business professionals to seek developmental opportunities in their communities that will help them prepare for leadership in their careers.

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