
Flight Attendants

(0*NET 39-6031.00)

Significant Points

- Job duties are learned through intensive formal training after workers are hired.
- Competition for positions will remain strong because the opportunity for travel attracts more applicants than there are jobs, with only the most qualified being hired.
- Although applicants must be high school graduates or hold a GED, many airlines today prefer a college degree.

Nature of the Work

Major airlines are required by law to provide flight attendants for the safety of the traveling public. Although the primary job of the flight attendants is to ensure that safety regulations are followed, they also try to make flights comfortable and enjoyable for passengers.

At least 1 hour before each flight, attendants are briefed by the captain—the pilot in command—on such things as emergency evacuation procedures, coordination of the crew, the length of the flight, expected weather conditions, and special issues having to do with passengers. Flight attendants make sure that first-aid kits and other emergency equipment are aboard and in working order and that the passenger cabin is in order, with adequate supplies of food, beverages, and blankets. As passengers board the plane, flight attendants greet them, check their tickets, and tell them where to store coats and carry-on items.

Before the plane takes off, flight attendants instruct all passengers in the use of emergency equipment and check to see that seat belts are fastened, seat backs are in upright positions, and all carry-on items are properly stowed. In the air, helping passengers in the event of an emergency is the most important responsibility of a flight attendant. Safety-related actions may range from reassuring passengers during occasional encounters with strong turbulence to directing passengers who must evacuate a plane following an emergency landing. Flight attendants also answer questions about the flight; distribute reading material, pillows, and blankets; and help small children, elderly or disabled persons, and any others needing assistance. They may administer first aid to passengers who become ill. Flight attendants generally serve beverages and other refreshments and, on many flights, heat and distribute precooked meals or snacks. Prior to landing, flight attendants take inventory of headsets, alcoholic beverages, and moneys collected. They also report any medical problems passengers may have had, the condition of cabin equipment, and lost and found articles.

Lead, or first, flight attendants, sometimes known as pursers, oversee the work of the other attendants aboard the aircraft, while performing most of the same duties.

Working Conditions

Because airlines operate around-the-clock, year-round, flight attendants may work nights, holidays, and weekends. In most cases, agreements between the airline and the employees' union determine the total daily and monthly working time. On-duty

time is usually limited to 12 hours per day, with a daily maximum of 14 hours. Attendants usually fly 65 to 85 hours a month and, in addition, generally spend about 50 hours a month on the ground preparing planes for flights, writing reports following completed flights, and waiting for planes to arrive. They may be away from their home base at least one-third of the time. During this period, the airlines provide hotel accommodations and an allowance for meal expenses.

Flight attendants must be flexible, reliable, and willing to relocate. Home bases and routes worked are bid for on a seniority basis. The longer the flight attendant has been employed, the more likely he or she is to work on chosen flights. Almost all flight attendants start out working on reserve status or on call. On small corporate airlines, flight attendants often work on an as-needed basis and must adapt to varying environments and passengers.

The combination of free time and discount airfares provides flight attendants the opportunity to travel and see new places. However, the work can be strenuous and trying. Short flights require speedy service if meals are served, and turbulent flights can make serving drinks and meals difficult. Flight attendants stand during much of the flight and must remain pleasant and efficient, regardless of how tired they are or how demanding passengers may be. Occasionally, flight attendants must deal with disruptive passengers.

Flight attendants are susceptible to injuries because of the job demands in a moving aircraft. Back injuries and mishaps incurred by opening overhead compartments are common. In addition, medical problems can arise from irregular sleeping and eating patterns, dealing with stressful passengers, working in a pressurized environment, and breathing recycled air.

Employment

Flight attendants held about 104,000 jobs in 2002. Commercial airlines employed the vast majority of flight attendants, most of who lived in their employer's home base city. A small number of flight attendants worked for large companies that operated company aircraft for business purposes.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Airlines prefer to hire poised, tactful, and resourceful people who can interact comfortably with strangers and remain calm



Although safety is their primary concern, flight attendants also try to make flights comfortable and enjoyable for airline passengers.

under duress. Applicants usually must be at least 18 to 21 years old. Some carriers may have higher minimum-age requirements. Flight attendants must have excellent health and the ability to speak clearly. All U.S. airlines require that applicants be citizens of the United States or registered aliens with legal rights to obtain employment in the United States.

In addition, airlines usually have physical and appearance requirements. There are height requirements for the purposes of reaching overhead bins, and most airlines want candidates with weight proportionate to height. Vision is required to be correctable to 20/30 or better with glasses or contact lenses (uncorrected no worse than 20/200). Men must have their hair cut above the collar and be clean shaven. Airlines prefer applicants with no visible tattoos, body piercing, or unusual hairstyles or makeup.

Applicants must be high school graduates. Those with several years of college and experience in dealing with the public are preferred. More and more flight attendants being hired are college graduates. Applicants who attend schools and colleges that offer flight attendant training may have an advantage over other applicants. Highly desirable areas of concentration include people-oriented disciplines such as psychology and education. Flight attendants for international airlines generally must speak a foreign language fluently. For their international flights, some of the major airlines prefer candidates who can speak two major foreign languages.

Once hired, all candidates must undergo a period of formal training. The length of training, ranging from 3 to 8 weeks, depends on the size and type of carrier and takes place at the airline's flight training center. Airlines that do not operate training centers generally send new employees to the center of another airline. Airlines may provide transportation to the training centers and an allowance for board, room, and school supplies. However, new trainees are not considered employees of the airline until they successfully complete the training program. Some airlines charge individuals for training. Trainees learn emergency procedures such as evacuating an airplane, operating emergency systems and equipment, administering first aid, and water-survival tactics. In addition, trainees are taught how to deal with disruptive passengers and with hijacking and terrorist situations. New hires learn flight regulations and duties, company operations and policies, and receive instruction on personal grooming and weight control. Trainees for the international routes get additional instruction in passport and customs regulations. Many drills and duties must be performed alone, in front of the training staff. Tests are given throughout training to eliminate unsuccessful trainees. Toward the end of their training, students go on practice flights. Flight attendants also are required to go through periodic retraining and pass an FAA safety examination in order to continue flying.

After completing initial training, flight attendants are assigned to one of their airline's bases. New flight attendants are placed on "reserve status" and are called on either to staff extra flights or to fill in for crewmembers who are sick, on vacation, or rerouted. When they are not on duty, reserve flight attendants must be available to report for flights on short notice. They usually remain on reserve for at least 1 year, but, in some cities, it may take 5 to 10 years or longer to advance from reserve status. Flight attendants who no longer are on reserve bid monthly for regular assignments. Because assignments are based on seniority, usually only the most experienced attendants get their choice of assignments. Advancement takes longer today

than in the past, because experienced flight attendants are remaining in this career longer than they used to.

Some flight attendants become supervisors or take on additional duties such as recruiting and instructing. Their experience also may qualify them for numerous airline-related jobs involving contact with the public, such as reservation ticket agent or public-relations specialist.

Job Outlook

In the long run, opportunities for persons seeking flight attendant jobs should improve as the airline industry recovers from the aftereffects of September 11 and the downturn in the economy. Employment of flight attendants is expected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through the year 2012. Population growth and an improving economy are expected to boost the number of airline passengers. As airlines enlarge their capacity to meet rising demand by increasing the number and size of planes in operation, more flight attendants will be needed. However, over the next decade, one can expect that demand for flight attendants will fluctuate with the demand for air travel, which is highly sensitive to swings in the economy. During downturns, as air traffic declines, the hiring of flight attendants declines, and some experienced attendants may be laid off until traffic recovers.

Despite the improving outlook, competition is expected to be keen because this job usually attracts more applicants than there are jobs, with only the most qualified eventually being hired. Those applicants with at least 2 years of college and who have experience in dealing with the public should have the best chance of being hired. Also, job opportunities may be better with the faster growing regional and low-fare airlines.

The majority of job openings through the year 2012 will arise from the need to replace flight attendants who leave the labor force or transfer to other occupations, often for higher earnings or a more stable lifestyle. However, with the job now viewed increasingly as a profession, fewer flight attendants are leaving their jobs and job turnover is not as high as in the past. The average job tenure of attendants is currently more than 7 years and is increasing.

Earnings

Median annual earnings of flight attendants were \$43,140 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$31,660 and \$66,260. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$20,890, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$91,050.

According to data from the Association of Flight Attendants, beginning flight attendants had median earnings of about \$15,338 a year in 2002. However, beginning pay scales for flight attendants vary by carrier. New hires usually begin at the same pay scale regardless of experience, and all flight attendants receive the same future pay increases. Flight attendants receive extra compensation for night and international flights and for increased hours. Further, some airlines offer incentive pay for working holidays or taking positions that require additional responsibility or paperwork. Most airlines guarantee a minimum of 65 to 85 flight hours per month, with the option to work additional hours. Flight attendants also receive a "per diem" allowance for meal expenses while on duty away from home. In addition, flight attendants and their immediate families are entitled to free fares on their own airline and reduced fares on most other airlines.

Flight attendants are required to purchase uniforms and wear them while on duty. The airlines usually pay for uniform replacement items, and may provide a small allowance to cover cleaning and upkeep of the uniforms.

The majority of flight attendants hold union membership, primarily with the Association of Flight Attendants. Others may be members of the Transport Workers Union of America, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, or other unions.

Related Occupations

Other jobs that involve helping people as a safety professional, while requiring the ability to be calm even under trying circumstances, include emergency medical technicians and paramedics and firefighting occupations.

Sources of Additional Information

Information about job opportunities and qualifications required for work at a particular airline may be obtained by writing to the airline's human resources office.