



Midlife Career Change: Is Faster Better?

As a pilot career counselor, I am seeing more mature beginning pilots who want to fulfill their life's dream and become a professional pilot. Many have harbored the dream since childhood, while others have read just enough to wonder if this might be the passion they've been looking for—and a way to escape a dreary nine-to-five desk-bound job.

One inevitable topic of discussion during our counseling sessions is the quickie “zero time to pro pilot in six months” option. Such a plan naturally appeals to those in their 30s and 40s who feel this route will allow them to make up for lost time and enter the job market sooner. Is there a distinct advantage to this shortcut or does following the longer, more traditional training scenario make for a better chance of succeeding in this plum profession? The second option is usually better. Although it's certainly possible to complete the necessary training in a short three- to six-month period, the result can often be likened to a beached whale. He knows how to swim, but getting close enough to the environment he's familiar with can be a bit tricky and require a great deal of assistance.

What we're really talking about is short-circuiting the experience requirements for pilots who fly larger multicrew airplanes. Just how does a new hire fare once on the line,

having to perform in other than standard conditions, particularly if his or her total aviation experience is limited to a short three to six months of flying?

Let's start with the admission that once we've passed our youth, our ability to study and learn new skills becomes somewhat diminished, and what we could once have gulped down by the glassful now needs to be sampled and sipped as we reach midlife. In professional aviation, it's crucial that you match your training speed to your learning ability so you don't collect any pink slips along the way.

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crucial that you match your training speed to your learning ability so you don't collect any pink slips along the way. The Pilot Records Improvement Act allows employers to carefully scrutinize your records and a pattern of check ride failures, accidents, or incidents can mean death to that airline career you've been dreaming about—and paying for with your hard-earned life's savings, or worse, with a high-interest-rate loan.

Experience versus book learning

According to my flight operations management mole, experienced pilots—those who've learned through trial and error and by teaching the skills to others—make markedly better regional first officers. Those who've learned their lessons through “speed study” and rote memorization often have insufficient PIC hours to help them when it comes to making decisions and judging wisely the best solution to a particular problem. If I had to assess the value of my book learning versus the “been there, done that” system, I'd certainly pick the latter as offering much more substance and inspiring greater confidence.

Just recently, I told my new-hire first officer that he likely knew the “book work” on our airplane better than I did because he had just finished ground school, and it's been



15-plus years since I attended initial training. However, my 10,000-plus hours on the MD80 has shown me a lot—if I can remember it all! So let's work together to benefit from our respective resources. Using the same logic, I once declined a Part 91 solo flight in a friend's well-equipped F33 Bonanza because I knew that my lack of recent experience in the type, some questionable weather conditions, and the onset of night would make for a set-up I felt ill-equipped and unwilling to handle. My vast flying experience led me to conclude that the conditions were not right for me to make a comfortable, non-stressful flight.

While we're talking about experience, let's look at the fiscal benefits of gaining some longevity in this business. Because your initial training will put a strain on your savings, try to make the transition to full-time flying a gradual one so that you can keep your income from your old job while you ease into the aviation world. Remember, your first pilot job is going to pay you a very small part of what you've probably been earning. Keeping two incomes as long as possible makes good sense and is another key to making a successful midlife career change.

Adaptability and flexibility—two crucial attributes of a good pilot, particularly in the airline world—are much easier to acquire when one has the experience to back up the decision-making process. Trying to succeed in the constantly changing world of aviation is so much more difficult when your frame of reference is very narrow. A year or two of seeing how it's really done can be invaluable and increase your chances for success. The ticking clock will definitely favor the pilot who's seen enough mistakes to anticipate his own and has learned the value of patience and foresight when it comes to carving out a niche in an airliner's cockpit.