

Talkin' 'Bout Your Generation

By Phil Comstock, President, Wilson Center for Public Research

► Since 9/11, managements of many airlines have operated on the assumption that pilots are effectively bound to the industry and will do “whatever it takes” to continue to fly. A generation ago, this was probably true. But management is out of touch with pilots—by at least a generation. Let’s see how this happened.

Among airline pilots 40 and younger, one-third of those whom the Wilson Center polled in 2005 say they plan to leave the piloting profession before age 60. Furthermore, about 15 percent indicate a strong likelihood of leaving the airline industry within just the next 5 years. Their principal reason is that they feel they have made a “mistake” in choosing the piloting profession and are young enough to start a different career.

Pilots in their 40s and early 50s have more of a “wait and see” attitude. These pilots almost unanimously see contract concessions, especially regarding quality-of-life issues, as unacceptable for the long term. For many younger Baby-Boom-aged pilots, the notion of flying for the rest of their careers under current conditions is simply not viable, especially with changes in scheduling and work rules since 9/11 having significantly increased pilot fatigue.

When the Wilson Center first polled pilots 20 years ago, we found that views about management, bargaining expectations, and willingness to strike were fairly uniform. The differences that occurred in the 1980s were mostly a function of past experience at a given carrier. The few pilot groups that had been on strike in the 1970s or 1980s were more militant and more skeptical of management.

But 20 years ago, many ALPA members had a strong identification with management and were not comfortable being referred to as union members. With very few exceptions,

most pilot groups were intrinsically opposed to strikes—feeling that a walkout was “disloyal” or would “hurt the company.”

In the mid-1990s, these views began to change when a surge of hiring rapidly altered the generational make-up of ALPA members. Baby-Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) became the majority. But

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the views of Baby-Boom pilots had distinctions by age segment. Younger Boomers (those now 41 to 55) were notably more skeptical of management, had higher contract expectations, and were more willing to strike, than those currently 56 and older.

These age-related distinctions have remained since 9/11. No pilot wants contract concessions, but poll data show more opposition among younger pilots. At major airlines in bankruptcy, for example, pilots in their 40s have been the age group most vehemently opposed to concessions and most willing to strike if management were to impose terms and conditions via the bankruptcy court. Seniority certainly plays a role, but poll data show a stronger correlation of work-related views with age than with seniority, per se.

An especially cogent example of generational differences within ALPA began with the expansion of small-jet flying in the late 1990s. The number of ALPA members in their 20s and early 30s—the age group demographers now refer to as “Generation-X”—increased dramatically. Very few

had military backgrounds. They tended to come from more affluent families than older pilots. These families often subsidized the initial flight training of Generation-X pilots.

Generation-X pilots were inclined to enter the airline industry because they felt it was well-paid, had the potential for rapid career advancement, and provided attractive schedules. Many appear to have a less intrinsic “love of flying” than do older pilots.

The Wilson Center has polled young workers in many industries and occupations. We have found that Generation-Xers have very different work-related views. These differences are evident among many ALPA members in their 20s and 30s. The work-related attitudes that distinguish Generation X include

- generally less respect for authority,
- greater skepticism regarding management,
- a strong desire for rules applied to them to be justified,
- an expectation that rules should be flexible and negotiable,
- very high expectations,
- a strong sense of entitlement,
- short time horizons,
- an expectation of rapid advancement at work,
- little expectation that the current job is a life-long career,
- limited concerns about job security, and
- a very strong willingness to strike.

These characterizations are neither good nor bad. Instead, they shape how this generation of pilots views the world and the profession they have chosen. Every institution they touch—their companies and their union included—will have to adjust to these realities. 🔗

The Wilson Center for Public Research is a polling firm that polls various labor groups, including ALPA pilots.