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Chapter 1

What Do Contract Pilots Do?

“Anyone that tells you that having your own private jet isn't great is lying to you.”
Oprah Winfrey

So you want to be a contract pilot. That's great! Now it's time to make sure that you have a good understanding of the type of career you're getting yourself into. So, what exactly is a contract pilot?

Contract pilots fly airplanes for individual owners, groups of owners, or aircraft management companies. Contract pilots are normally paid a daily rate and are responsible for their own training and currency requirements. They also have to pick up the costs for their health insurance, self-employment tax, and retirement. There are numerous advantages and disadvantages to being a contract pilot, so it is important that you weigh both sides of the equation before deciding if this is a career for you.

On the downside, you may find that the airplanes available for contract pilots to fly are older models, or that other pilots think that you're only doing this because you can't find a regular flying job.

On the upside, you may greatly enjoy the freedom that comes from being a contract pilot. The opportunity to decide your own work schedule and have a more flexible career is a big draw for many contract pilots. Perhaps the freedom to schedule time off is why you're interested, or maybe you always wanted to run your own business.

I'll lay out the pros and cons, and the ins and outs of being a contract pilot in this book. Then you'll know how to proceed, and whether or not being a hired gun is something that will truly suit your lifestyle. For now, let's separate the fantasy from the reality of being a contract pilot.

The Fantasy

When pilots daydream about what it would be like to be a contract pilot, their expectations easily exceed the realities of the job. That's especially true starting out, as the good contract gigs will be a lot tougher to come by for you when you're a beginning contract pilot than they will be once you've become more established and have built a clientele.

The fantasy might look something like this:

You strap into the left pilot's seat in a Gulfstream V business jet. Your copilot already has the FMS programmed, and he or she is ready to start the engines for an on-time departure.

The weather is beautiful and clear all the way to your destination of Kona, the beautiful Big Island in Hawaii. Ride reports call for a smooth flight with a slight headwind.

The gorgeous flight attendant pops her head into the cockpit to ask you how would you like your coffee, then glides away to take care of your order. Meanwhile, you flip through your day planner and notice that your flight schedule is jam-packed for the next two months. The funny thing, though, is that your weekends are still open.

All of the flights that you have scheduled are with Fortune 500 companies, so your fee has been prepaid. It's relaxing to know that your financial future looks good.

Just as you're wondering what you'll do tonight in Hawaii, your celebrity passenger taps his assistant on the shoulder. The assistant sends up a business card, along with two backstage passes to a sold-out concert tonight. Suddenly, you have plans.

You taxi out and the tower lets you know that you are number one for takeoff. Away you go into the beautiful blue skies and off toward Hawaii, a free concert, and boatloads of money. What a life!

The Reality

Hopefully, that will be you. But don't count on it. While a few of the most talented, connected, and lucky contract pilots have a lifestyle that is somewhat similar to that fantasy, the reality is not the same for the rest of us.

It might look more like this:

You're standing on a snow swept ramp in Des Moines, Iowa. You can't feel your toes due to the cold, and a sports utility vehicle just rolled in at 6:30 AM. That's a full 90 minutes past your scheduled 5:00 AM departure.

Your soon-to-be passengers struggle and stumble out of their ride, obviously hung over, and then hand you their luggage. Their silence is your only thanks. They don't even say good morning.

That's when you realize that you can't feel your hands, either.

You load the bags into the nose of a Citation 500. Your plane's tired and has seen better days, but it's airworthy.

You feel the bitter winter wind cutting through your blue blazer. You remember the captain telling you that the trip would be a quick out and back to Orlando. That was two days and several clean shirts ago. Somewhere in there, you've gotten a little bit of sleep, but barely enough.

The extra days don't matter, though, because your schedule has been pretty lean this month. As you secure the door, one of your new passengers curtly asks you to get him a cup of coffee. By the time you wiggle into the right seat, the captain is firing up the engines.

You make a quick call for taxi and Ground tells you that your clearance has timed out and you will need to refile. Just another day living the dream!

How Much Money Do Contract Pilots Make?

It is tough to provide an exact figure. Of course everyone wants to know whether or not he or she can make \$100,000 a year as a contract pilot, while possible, the truth is that it depends on a number of factors.

Depending on the length of a trip and the type of aircraft flown, a contract pilot's rates can vary from \$250 a day to \$1,500 a day, according to industry sources. Then the question becomes how many days you are able or willing to work. Also, if you are doing this full time or just to pick up extra income without quitting your "real" job.

Some pilots are able to work as many as 25 days a month, which is \$75,000 to \$450,000 a year, based on the above rates. Other pilots may struggle to find work five days a month. That leaves them with \$15,000 to \$90,000.

The ability to find work is directly related to where you choose to live. Most successful contract pilots live within two hours driving time of three major airports. Think Atlanta, with PDK, FTY, and RYY. These are all busy corporate airports within a few hours driving time of one another. The Dallas, Texas airport is also booming. There you have ADS, DAL, and RBD, all a short drive from one to another. Of course, you could live in BFE, but trying to find contract flying in the middle of nowhere is not going to make you rich.

Keep in mind that you'll have the expenses of maintaining your own training and staying current, so that will affect the amount of money you actually put in your pocket. Since you'll be an independent contractor, you'll have to pay a self-employment tax, and you'll need to account for your own benefits.

So, the money can be great, but it is important to make sure that you account for expenses and factor it all in before making a decision on whether or not to climb into the cockpit as a contract pilot.



Chapter 1 – Practical Pointers & Tips

- A career as a contract pilot has many pros and cons. Only after you are aware of these can you make an informed decision as to whether this is the right career for you.
- Work as a contract pilot will be slow going at first. You will not make much money in the beginning.
- Don't forget to factor in expenses, making \$500 a day is not the same as taking home \$500. Expenses cut into your pay.
- The closer you are to 3 major airports, the more likely you will be successful as a contract pilot.
- The fantasy perpetuated other pilots doesn't always live up to the reality of being a contract pilot. It is hard work.
- The type of plane flown is the main variable that determines your rate of pay. Bigger plane equals more money, but there are many more smaller planes. More opportunities equals more money. Find a niche.
- Don't assume you will always work a full time schedule. There will be times when your schedule will fluctuate greatly.
- Your ability to find work is highly influenced by your ability to network.
- The average rate of pay for a contract pilot is \$250 to \$1500 per day.
- As an independent contractor you will be responsible for your own self-employment tax and benefits.

Chapter 2

How to Get Started as a Contract Pilot

“I had always wanted an adventurous life. It took a long time to realize that I was the only one who was going to make an adventurous life happen to me.”

Richard Bach

Now that you’ve decided that you have a definite interest in being a contract pilot, it’s time to get into the nuts and bolts of your new career. Prepare to deal with some growing pains and learn to be flexible as you begin. As long as you follow a good business plan, you should be on your way to plenty of success. Oh, and plan on working hard.

Where Do Contract Pilots Come From?

Contract pilots come from a relatively wide variety of situations, but most have extensive training and experience as pilots. They may have worked for an airline for a long period of time and decided to retire and pick up some work as a contract pilot on the side, or they may be furloughed or laid-off pilots. They may come from corporate flight departments that have closed or downsized. Some come from the ranks of flight instructors. These pilots are usually specialists in glass cockpit or other type of technically advanced aircraft. Of course, some pilots have an entrepreneurial streak and want to own their own businesses. Others are just looking to pick up a few bucks on the side while keeping their full-time flying job.

Very few pilots start out their careers wanting to be a contract pilot. They are drawn into it because they lost a job, their bosses sold their airplanes, or their airlines went bankrupt. Some find a home, while others can’t wait to land another “real” job. It takes a unique individual to be a contract pilot. It is not for everyone, but if you embrace the challenges, it can be a rewarding career – regardless of if you do it full time or part time.

Low Time Pilots

While it is possible to become a contract pilot directly after completing flight training and without experience, it is highly unlikely. In truth, you are likely to have a great deal of difficulty finding work since few insurance companies will cover you. I cannot encourage low time pilots to pursue a career as a contract pilot.

Former Airline Pilots

Recently retired airline pilots probably have the most difficult time breaking in to contract flying. Two factors are working against you. The first one is a commonly held view by most contract pilots that airline pilots are lazy prima donnas. Because you didn't have to file flight plans or clean the airplane or make hotel reservations, many corporate pilots think ex-airline pilots aren't cut out for contract work. The easiest way to overcome this obstacle is hard work. Always be willing to lend a hand to put the airplane away or restock the supplies. Actually, flying the airplane is only a small part of a contract pilot's job. Just by showing a willingness to do more than fly will go a long way to gaining acceptance by the people in a position to hire you. The second obstacle is your ego.

Former Military Pilots

Like former airline pilots, military pilots have a difficult time breaking into contract work. Of course, former VIP military pilots are a natural for this line of work. For the average military pilot, I'd recommend reviewing civilian FARs and procedures. A good text is the FAR and Airman's Information Manual. That will give you the gouge on civilian rules. Also, keep the yanking and banking to a minimum.

Former Corporate Pilots

It's easy to move from the ranks of corporate pilot to contract pilot. It requires a slightly different mindset since you are now self-employed. The job is basically the same, however.

How to Get Started as a Contract Pilot

Your customer will either be the actual aircraft owner or a middleman. I define a “middleman” as someone who is dealing directly with the aircraft owner. This will be the chief pilot or an aircraft management firm.

Customers are the lifeblood of any business and contract flying is no different. So who will hire you? The key to acquiring customers is to network.

It’s virtually impossible to make a cold call and pitch your contract flying business to the airplane owner or manager without having a prior connection. With the old saying “it’s not what you know, but who you know” still ringing true today, it is important to network and make strong connections in order to secure a contract pilot position.

To be successful as a contract pilot, you have to be a master at networking. Don’t be intimidated because you have not established a large network yet. I can guarantee that you already network in your everyday activities.

Networking isn’t self-promotion, glad-handing, or using people. Networking is getting to know people and building relationships based on those interactions and first impressions. Think of the line guy you chat with as he fuels your plane, the girl behind the FBO counter, or the other pilots in the crew lounge. These people are in your network and you have already begun to build relationships with them. Of course, it doesn’t hurt to let them know that you are a contract pilot. If they hear about a contract pilot opening, they should immediately think of you and recommend you for the job. If they contact you about the job first and foremost, then it is safe to say that you have a strong network connection with them. If they tell another pilot about the job instead, then it is apparent that the connection you have developed with them needs work.

Determining whether you have a weak or strong connection with other aviation enthusiasts depends on several things. The primary one is how you interact with them. Are you rude, bossy, or inconsiderate? Do you ignore them? If you are a prima donna pilot, the jobs will go elsewhere. Another way to build