

What Does the Changed 'Age 60' Rule Mean for Pilots?

As most people in the aviation community know, Congress last December authorized Part 121 pilots to fly until they reach age 65. The Fair Treatment for Experienced Pilots Act ends the decades-old practice of forcing airline pilots out of the cockpit simply because they reached age 60.



Even though most business aviators never had to fear being forced out of a job as long as they continued to hold their medical certificates, the new law is good news for airline pilots.

The mandatory retirement law set a benchmark and fueled a culture that encouraged an entire community to question the competency of older pilots. Some flight schools, for example, in their efforts to recruit students eager to become first officers, wrote ads for those "up to 50" as if 51-year-old applicants somehow had less promise.

But proficiency, not age, is the bottom line for 67-year-old Paul Boone, a contract King Air captain based in North Carolina, who formerly flew a Dash 8 for a regional airline. "There's not one accident in the National Transportation Safety Board registry attributed to old age," he asserted.

Boone said the best benefit of the new law is that it enables pilots to continue their health insurance until age 65, when Medicare kicks in, and avoid a potential five-year gap in coverage. "At 60, if I'm kicked out, I have to pay the COBRA [insurance] at exorbitant rates and wonder if I can find a job."

Practice is what keeps older pilots like Mike Gooden competent. Gooden, a 60-year-old King Air captain based in Goldsboro, NC, who entered professional aviation 10 years ago after retiring from his medical practice, claims the best way to stay proficient is for pilots to manually fly their aircraft. "I try to hand-fly the airplane below 10,000 feet," he explained. While this may be a solution some operators can use to assist in maintaining pilot proficiency, company policy or air traffic control limitations may restrict the amount of hand-flying that can be done. For this reason, companies should evaluate a variety of options for maintaining pilot proficiency.

He also suggests practicing with a computer flight simulator to keep situational and scanning skills sharp.

Practice also trumps age for Bill Griffen, vice president of flight operations for Linear Air, an East Coast charter company specializing in very light jets and Cessna Caravans. But so does the ability to cope with change as new techniques, software and equipment are introduced.

"Many of our senior pilots have arrived at their last platform," and resisting complacency is critical, he said. "I'm all for the [age 65] extension."

While younger pilots may have swifter reaction times, that perceived advantage is negated by older, seasoned pilots. "An experienced person anticipates things sooner than a younger person," he believes.

So what can business pilots expect from the new law? Fewer company buyouts, more dual-captain crews (or at least a captain paired with a type-rated or highly experienced first officer) and more pilots holding first-class medical certificates, claims Don Baldwin, an aviation safety consultant and former company pilot and flight department manager. "These are good operating practices we should all be adopting," he said. ✿

Always Vigilant: NBAA Strategic Focus Team

In a perfect world, security experts would have a lot of free time on their hands. In the post-9/11 environment, however, people like John Sullivan have no such luck.

Sullivan is chairman of NBAA's Security Strategic Focus Team (SFT), a group made up of the nearly two-dozen members of NBAA's Security Council. Those members represent a wide swath of the aviation industry, from fixed base operators (FBOs) to flight departments, airports and consultants. The Security SFT is one of five SFTs that NBAA created in 2005 to consolidate and optimize the workings of its 13 Standing Committees.

Past accomplishments of the Security SFT, under the auspices of the Security Council, include developing best practices related to security for business aviation operators and working with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and other government agencies to protect general aviation's access to airspace. The latter effort was key to bringing general aviation back to Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA) in 2005 after being banned for nearly four years due to government concerns about security in the region, says Doug Carr, NBAA vice president, safety, security & regulation, and staff liaison to the Security SFT.

The SFT meets regularly to share security information and coordinate NBAA responses. The group does not yet hold a dedicated seminar focused on security, so the SFT largely works through existing educational avenues within NBAA to disseminate security information to members, Carr says.