

JetBlue - Training in the Air (Apr 06)



Stephen Howell

Despite the rigors of the job, recruiting is no problem for Forest Hills, N.Y.-based JetBlue Airways, says Stephen Howell, director, College of Inflight at JetBlue University. In 2005, the airline, which launched in 2000, had just over 20,000 applicants for in-flight crew (flight attendant) positions, with only 600, or 3 percent, selected for training. The process begins, Howell says, with a recruitment team called the Blue Review sifting through online applications. From there, pre-screening phone interviews are conducted. Those who make the grade are invited to an eight-hour, one-day event conducted by the Blue Review team, which includes the director and manager of in-flight recruitment as well as three or four additional representatives from the company's human resources, or "people" team and several in-flight crew members in leadership positions. Twenty to 40 applicants are screened in one day, Howell says, because the company wants to make sure the people it hires are able to work well with others. "It's a very intense, full day," he explains. "At the end of the day, the team gets together and makes their selections based on all the different activities that went on and their interactions with these applicants, and they're offered a training day if selected."

The importance of applicants' performance in the group activities they participate in during their review day in Forest Hills is essential because the company cares more about how they interact with others than how much experience they have on paper. "You can be a stellar applicant with respect to your experience level and what you're bringing to the table, but what is it that you bring that's unique, and how well do you work with others to deliver the JetBlue experience?" Howell says recruiters ask the newcomers. "A lot of our evaluation is how well do you project yourself, but also how well do you interact with your fellow, potential co-workers because there's four of you on an A320 having to work together as a team."

Having enough applicants to conduct meaningful group activities is essential, but the company also tries to keep pools small enough to evaluate applicants, Howell notes. Recruiters want to make sure applicants reinforce the five values Howell says JetBlue was built on: safety, integrity, passion, caring and fun.

All flight attendant training is provided by JetBlue University, which has two primary learning environments. The Orlando hub includes a 100,000-square-foot facility that provides initial as well as some continuous education for all employees, from pilots to in-flight crew to customer service representatives. The Forest Hills arm of the university is primarily used for recurrent training, Howell says, though it is also used for some of the initial training given for technical operations and customer service. The company currently is conducting training in New York that will enable staff to work on its newest aircraft, the Embraer 190 (E-190), a 100-seat jet. "Because all our in-flight crew members were only trained on the A-320 [Airbus 320] equipment that we launched JetBlue with, and still fly today, we have to go through transition training where we have to now train all existing flight attendants on this new equipment," Howell explains. Readyng in-flight crew for work aboard the new aircraft is accomplished via e-learning and a one-day workshop in Forest Hills.

JetBlue University staff, including those in support, instructor and executive leadership roles, numbers just over 205, and is split evenly between the company's two corporate campuses, and that number is on the rise. By the end of this year, Jet Blue expects its university staff to expand to 250.

Following acceptance of the position, new flight attendants at JetBlue are sent a "Know Before You Go" booklet containing technical information on topics such as the aviation industry, JetBlue's route structure

and the 24-hour military-style clock the airlines operate on. Within the first week of the company's four-week initial in-flight crew training at its Orlando campus, new recruits are tested on the booklet. "It saves a little time because when they come in, and we say something like, 'fuselage,' we know that they know what that is," Howell says. "Plus, it gets them excited, and they look forward to coming in and learning something."

The hydraulic simulators that replicate the experience of serving customers miles in the air are located in Orlando, but "mock-ups" for recurrent training, such as simulations of cabin doors, also are available in New York. These devices are used to meet government regulations that require regular door drills for flight attendants.

Recurrent training sessions are small, Howell says, with 16 to 20 per class. "We keep them very small so we have some really good quality time with those 20 crew members...and having their learning experience be much more beneficial."

While the mock-ups of doors only feature limited areas of the cabin, the hydraulic simulators in Orlando more closely resemble and feel like a real aircraft. "Because we're dealing with much larger groups, we've built much bigger mock-ups," Howell says. "Our A-320 cabin trainer is actually full motion. We were able to run it up—it's on a hydraulic system—so that with sound effects, lighting and motion, you feel like you're really flying." The full-scale mock-ups are able to simulate the entire spectrum of experiences flight attendants might have to deal with, from turbulence to decompressions to on-board fires, in which the "cabin" is filled with imitation smoke, in addition to crash or emergency landing situations.

Not surprisingly, some trainees figure out during simulations that the job just isn't for them. At JetBlue, Howell says, on average, there is about a 10 percent attrition rate for in-flight crew during the four-week training program. Besides successfully making it through the simulated emergencies, trainees must pass a series of written examinations. If they fail more than two, they are automatically expelled, and the two that are failed require an oral re-take in which the trainee must achieve 100 percent to continue.

Door drills can be another source of attrition. JetBlue requires that trainees demonstrate not only that they know how to open the door, but that they know how to shout the appropriate commands and evacuate the aircraft in 90 seconds. Those who are unable to accomplish this after a certain number of tries are also released from the program.

What's next for JetBlue? More training, of course. The physical and classroom-based coursework new flight attendants are expected to complete soon will be complimented by additional e-learning courseware, says Howell, who explains that the company has just launched an e-learning initiative. To teach students about the E-190, a four- to five-hour interactive e-learning module is presented about the cabin's interior layout.

E-learning is also now being used to prepare learners for the two days of recurrent training that's periodically required. Before coming to class, in-flight crewmembers must complete an online refresher of emergency procedures and a test. "That's very popular with our in-flight crewmembers because it prevents them from having to be in a classroom for almost three days," Howell notes.

This year, the training done through e-learning, like that used to qualify in-flight crew to work on the E-190 and to support recurrent training, may be joined by modules that provide instruction on aircraft emergency equipment. The modules would be used as preparation for instructor-led sessions in which trainees would be expected to learn how to physically operate the devices.

In March, the company launched all-online, computer-based testing for the initial training program. Grading's instant, and instructors will save the time it had taken to score manually.

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