
Women in Aviation

Why so few? - And why we need more

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ABOUT HUMAN FACTORS

“Wow - you’re a pilot?!? That’s not very common!”

“Is it difficult?”

“So, no family, then?”

“How is it working in a man’s world?”

The questions are many, the comments are plentiful. There are at the moment approximately 5% female pilots in commercial aviation, and that number has not increased by a lot over the past decades. In comparison, the number of female police officers, doctors and surgeons, boat captains and - engineers, is much higher, and has risen over the years - even though these jobs also have been (and still are, to some extent) considered typical male industries.

So why do such a low number of young girls and women dream of becoming a pilot? One reason might be due to the fact that most women want a family with children, and the working hours for pilots do not go well with that.

The working hours for pilots, however, are no different than for cabin crew - which has been dominated by women since the beginning of commercial aviation, but which is now more equally divided between the sexes. The same goes for doctors, nurses, police officers, and many other industries. Working hours may vary, but they do not make it impossible to start a family. In fact, many with "abnormal" work schedules enjoy the perks of being able to drop the kids off late and pick them up early on weekdays, hereby spending some quality time with the family on these days instead of during the weekend.

Then could it be due to the fact that a pilot must understand the laws of physics, and enjoy everything with engines, hydraulic - and electrical systems, and that these subjects are seldom of great interest to most women?

Even though a pilot must understand some fundamental physics, the need to be very technically wired and interested, is definitely not a necessity. Pilots are neither mechanics nor flight engineers. Knowing the aircraft systems is important, but not down to every little bolt or screw. If you know how to find information in your cockpit library, you are well ahead.



The Perception

Several studies¹ have shown that female pilots are being judged as being less competent than male pilots, that they are being judged more negatively when making errors, and that they are ridiculed for not handling criticism from instructors or superiors well. Unfortunately, I have heard this song before. I often hear “Yeah, figures”, when a female pilot is involved in an accident or incident. Being a bit naive, I tend to believe that this is just meant as a joke. But the fact that in these above mentioned studies, we got the same answers from males, females, pilots and non-pilots, shows us that it is in fact more of a general opinion, and not just a comment from a trying-to-be-a-funny-sexist-guy.

Often, there seems to be an opinion on the few female pilots in a company. It is kind of a locker-room-thing. “Yeah, she’s very insecure”, “She has a bad temper”, “She’s so emotional”, “She always makes hard landings”, while no-one knows anything about 90% of the male pilots. They just do not stand out the same way, therefore they are not subject to gossip.

I have experienced the following quite a few times: After a flight when the passengers see me either in the cockpit or just outside, they are stunned, and say to me that I was not all bad at this flying-thing. They seem relieved that they even survived with a woman in the cockpit! Their surprise is obviously much greater if I happen to have a female colleague with me on the flight deck (replacing cockpit as the correct term in these times of correctness!). So why is the general public’s perception like that? I must add that most of these comments come from middle-aged, white women. (Generations Y (1981-1995) and Z (1996-2012) are born into a world where they can become anything they want, regardless of their sex, religion or upbringing, therefore they are way more openminded than the previous generations, and they do not have the same biases as the previous generations). I do know that this does not come from a bad place, though - it is merely their way of saying that they were content with the flight, and that they thought I did a good job. But I must admit that I felt a bit weird the first time I heard this. It actually made me sad - why is it that the perception of me, a female pilot, overshadows my skills?

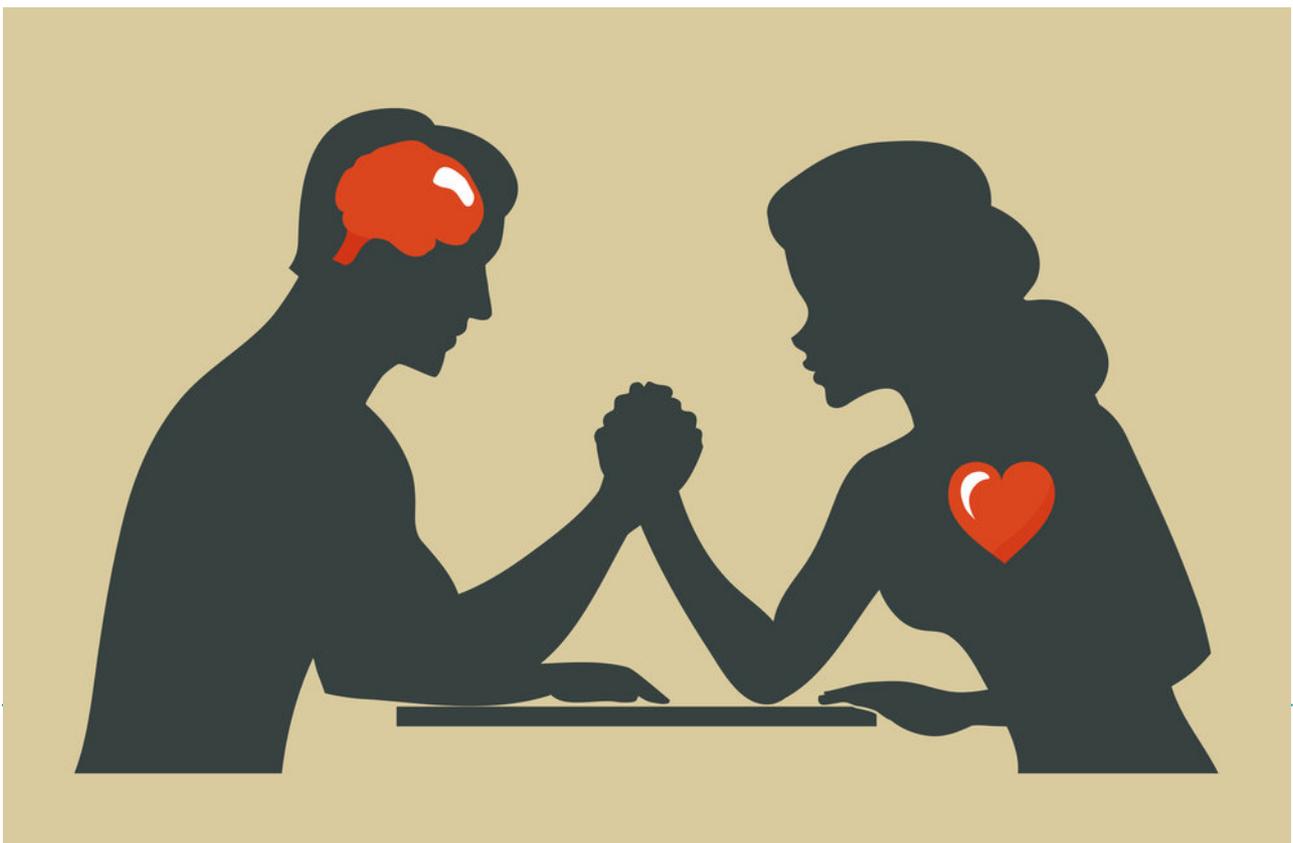
During a decade of flying in Africa, I met a different kind of attention: Everyone was so overly excited to see a female pilot, and I was always treated way better than my male colleagues by our passengers, clients, ground staff etc. (except from a random group of cargo loaders in Lagos, Nigeria, who had just learned the “skill” of cat-calling).

¹ According to pilotinstitute.com

The Emotional Pilots

Throughout the years, I have had many male colleagues coming to me with issues, problems, concerns or confusions. They felt that talking to a woman would really help them, because women are known as the emotionally sex, the maternal and friendly sex. The aviation industry has from the beginning been for the toughest of the toughest, “The right stuff-guys”, the emotionally stable men, who never talk about feelings. It has indeed been a long, hard battle for the women in the industry to feel accepted. But it has also been extremely hard for the men - because here in 2020, we know that no-one is able to put a lid on their feelings without it back-firing at some stage. We know the importance of talking about - and dealing with - our problems and issues, we know that mental health is our number one concern in so many aspects of life, and we know that nothing beats a day in the cockpit with a colleague, who actually really cares about how we feel on that particular day!

The reason why so many of my male colleagues have approached me, and not a more superior, male colleague, is - I believe - because it can be easier to speak to a woman. The macho-feel in this industry has not exactly been inviting the “tough guys” to go to their colleagues with problems at home - yet, we have all had these problems. Privately, professionally, economically. We feel excluded from a group, we feel sad or lonely. We



should not be ashamed of that! It is part of life. We should instead start opening up, difficult as it may seem.

Not long ago I heard about an episode, where a much older (we are talking Boomer generation, here) female captain told her first officer to stop showing emotions when there were any men present, because the male pilots couldn't handle it (she was recently, at a company gathering, put in a group pressure situation, where she ended up being so angry that she started crying). She should instead "toughen up, or get lost". I could not disagree more! Showing emotions is NOT a sign of weakness. On the contrary. It is a sign of strength. It is a sign of knowing yourself, your boundaries, and your short-comings. And just for your information: Tough Maverick-types cry as well. As should they.

So, fellow pilots. Let us be very happy that we are so different. But let us also acknowledge that we share the same problems and concerns in life, and let us help each other the best we can. Let your colleagues know if you are hurting or struggling. Because we all go through tough times. Especially in the crazy world we live in today. My recipe for a really great flight deck is a male and a female pilot. A bit of both worlds. According to years of research, several studies and McKinsey reports², diversity creates better solutions and outcomes. Think about a decision making process. Two different takes from two different brains might just be the perfect way to deal with a problem. We have so much to teach each other, and so much to learn from different personalities. There is no doubt that there is a need for the softer skills in the flight deck now - and in the future!



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² Harvard Business Review, November 04 2016