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# Flight Attendants

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## Significant Points

- Competition for positions is expected to remain keen because the opportunity for travel attracts more applicants than there are jobs.
- Job duties are learned through formal on-the-job training at a flight training center.
- A high school diploma is the minimum educational requirement, but airlines prefer applicants with a college degree and with experience in dealing with the public.

## Nature of the Work

Major airlines are required by law to provide *flight attendants* for the safety and security of the traveling public. Although the primary job of the flight attendants is to ensure that security and safety regulations are followed, attendants also try to make flights comfortable and enjoyable for passengers.

At least 1 hour before takeoff, attendants are briefed by the captain—the pilot in command—on such things as emergency evacuation procedures, coordination of the crew, the length of the flight, expected weather conditions, and any special issues having to do with passengers. Flight attendants make sure that first-aid kits and other emergency equipment are aboard and in working order and that the passenger cabin is in order, with adequate supplies of food, beverages, and any other amenities. As passengers board the plane, flight attendants greet them, check their tickets, and tell them where to store carry-on items.

Before the plane takes off, flight attendants instruct all passengers in the use of emergency equipment and check to see that seatbelts are fastened, seat backs are in upright positions, and all carry-on items are properly stowed. In the air, helping passengers in the event of an emergency is the most important responsibility of a flight attendant. Safety-related actions range from reassuring passengers during rough weather to directing passengers who must evacuate a plane following an emergency landing. Flight attendants also answer questions about the flight, and help small children, elderly or disabled persons, and any others needing assistance. Flight attendants may administer first aid to passengers who become ill. Flight attendants generally serve beverages and on many flights sell precooked meals or snacks. Prior to landing, flight attendants take inventory of headsets, alcoholic beverages, and moneys collected. They also report any medical problems passengers may have had, the condition of cabin equipment, and any lost-and-found articles.

Lead, or first, flight attendants, sometimes known as *pursers*, oversee the work of the other attendants aboard the aircraft, while performing most of the same duties.

**Work environment.** Because airlines operate around the clock and year round, flight attendants can work nights, holidays, and weekends. In most cases, agreements between the airline and the employees' union determine the total daily and monthly working time. Scheduled on-duty time usually is limited to 12 hours per day, however flight attendants can be scheduled up to 14 hours per day, with somewhat greater maximums

for international flying. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requires that flight attendants receive 9 consecutive hours of rest following any duty period.

Attendants usually fly 65 to 90 hours a month and generally spend another 50 hours a month on the ground preparing planes for flights, writing reports following completed flights, and waiting for planes to arrive. Most airlines guarantee a minimum of 65 to 85 flight hours per month, with the option to work additional hours. Flight attendants receive extra compensation for additional hours.

Flight attendants may be away from their home base at least one-third of the time. During this period, the airlines provide hotel accommodations and an allowance for meal expenses.

Flight attendants must be flexible and willing to relocate. However, many flight attendants elect to live in one place and commute to their assigned home base. Home bases and routes worked are bid for and awarded on a seniority basis, so the longer the flight attendant has been employed, the more likely he or she is to work on their preferred flights. Almost all flight attendants start out working on reserve status, or on call. Flight attendants on reserve status usually live near their home base, because they are required to be able to report to their home base on short notice. On small corporate airlines, flight attendants often work on an as-needed basis and must adapt to varying environments and passengers.

The combination of free time and free or discounted airfares provides flight attendants the opportunity to travel. However, the work can be strenuous and trying. Flight attendants stand during much of the flight and must remain pleasant and efficient, regardless of how tired they are or how demanding passengers may be. Occasionally, flight attendants must deal with turbulent flights which can cause difficulties regarding service and cause anxiety among passengers that flight attendants must address.

Working in a moving aircraft leaves flight attendants susceptible to injuries. According to BLS data, full-time flight attendants experienced a much higher than average work-related injury and illness rate. Various physical injuries can occur when opening overhead compartments or while pushing heavy service carts. In addition, medical problems can arise from irregular sleeping and eating patterns, dealing with stressful passengers, working in a pressurized environment, and breathing recycled air.

## Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Flight attendants must be certified by the FAA. A high school diploma or its equivalent is the minimum educational requirement, but airlines increasingly prefer applicants who have a college degree. Experience in dealing with the public is important, because flight attendants must be able to interact comfortably with strangers and remain calm under duress.

**Education and training.** A high school diploma or its equivalent is the minimum educational requirement. However, airlines increasingly prefer applicants with a college degree. Applicants who attend schools or colleges that offer flight attendant training may have an advantage over other applicants. Highly desirable areas of concentration include people-oriented disciplines, such as communications, psychology, nursing, travel and tourism, hospitality, and education. Flight attendants

for international airlines generally must speak a foreign language fluently. For their international flights, some of the major airlines prefer candidates who can speak two major foreign languages.

Once hired, all candidates must undergo a period of formal training. The length of training, ranging from 3 to 6 weeks, depends on the size and type of carrier and takes place at the airline's flight training center. Airlines that do not operate training centers generally send new employees to the center of another airline. Some airlines may provide transportation to the training centers and an allowance for room, board, and school supplies, while other airlines charge individuals for training. New trainees are not considered employees of the airline until they successfully complete the training program. Trainees learn emergency procedures, such as evacuating an airplane, operating emergency systems and equipment, administering first aid, and surviving in the water. In addition, trainees are taught how to deal with disruptive passengers and with hijacking and terrorist situations. New hires learn flight regulations and duties, gain knowledge of company operations and policies, and receive instruction on personal grooming and weight control. Trainees for international routes get additional instruction in passport and customs regulations. Trainees must perform many drills and duties unaided, in front of the training staff. Throughout training, they also take tests designed to eliminate unsuccessful trainees. Toward the end of their training, students go on practice flights. Upon successful completion of training, flight attendants receive the FAA Certificate of Demonstrated Proficiency. Flight attendants also are required to go through periodic retraining and pass an FAA safety examination to continue flying.

**Licensure and certification.** All flight attendants must be certified by the FAA. To be certified, flight attendants are required to successfully complete training requirements, such as evacuation, fire fighting, medical emergency, and security procedures established by the FAA and the Transportation Security Administration. They also must perform the assigned duties of a cabin crew member and complete an approved proficiency check. Flight attendants are certified for specific types of aircraft, regardless of the carrier. Therefore, only 1-day or 2-day recurrent training, with the new carrier, is needed for those flight attendants who change airlines, as long as the type of aircraft remains the same.

**Other qualifications.** Airlines prefer to hire poised, tactful, and resourceful people who can speak clearly and interact comfortably with strangers and remain calm under duress. Applicants with previous experience in dealing with the public are preferred by airlines. Additionally, airlines usually have age, physical, and appearance requirements. Applicants usually must be at least 18 to 21 years old, although some carriers may have higher minimum-age requirements. Applicants must meet height requirements for reaching overhead bins, which often contain emergency equipment, and most airlines want candidates with weight proportionate to height. Flight attendants must be in excellent health, and a medical evaluation is required. Vision is required to be correctable to 20/30 or better with glasses or contact lenses (uncorrected no worse than 20/200). Men must have their hair cut above the collar and be

clean shaven. Airlines prefer applicants with no visible tattoos, body piercing, or unusual hairstyles or makeup.

In addition to education and training, airlines conduct a thorough background check, which goes back as many as 10 years, as required by the FAA. Everything about an applicant is investigated, including date of birth, employment history, criminal record, school records, and any gaps in employment. Employment is contingent on a successful background check. An applicant will not be offered a job or will be immediately dismissed if his or her background check shows any discrepancies. All U.S. airlines require that applicants be citizens of the United States or registered aliens with legal rights to obtain employment in the United States.

**Advancement.** After completing initial training, flight attendants are assigned to one of their airline's bases. New flight attendants are placed on reserve status and are called either to staff extra flights or to fill in for crewmembers that are sick, on vacation, or rerouted. When they are not on duty, reserve flight attendants must be available to report for flights on short notice. They usually remain on reserve for at least 1 year but, in some cities, it may take 5 to 10 years—or longer—to advance from reserve status. Flight attendants who no longer are on reserve bid monthly for regular assignments. Because assignments are based on seniority, usually only the most experienced attendants get their choice of assignments. Advancement takes longer today than in the past, because experienced flight attendants are remaining in this career longer than in the past.

Some flight attendants become supervisors, moving from senior or lead flight attendant, to check flight attendant, to flight attendant supervisor, then on to base manager, and finally to manager or vice president of in-flight operations. They may take on additional duties, such as recruiting, instructing, or developing in-flight products. Their experience also may qualify them for numerous airline-related jobs involving contact with



*Flight attendants spend a great deal of time away from home.*

## Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2008	Projected Employment, 2018	Change, 2008-2018	
				Number	Percent
Flight attendants.....	39-6031	98,700	106,700	8,000	8

(NOTE) Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

the public, such as reservation ticket agent or public relations specialist. Flight attendants who do not want to travel often for various reasons may move to a position as an administrative assistant. With additional education, some flight attendants may decide to transfer to other areas of the airline for which they work, such as risk management or human resources.

### Employment

Flight attendants held about 98,700 jobs in 2008. Commercial airlines employed the vast majority of flight attendants, and most attendants lived near major metropolitan airports or airports operating as hubs for the major airlines. A small number of flight attendants worked for companies that offered chartered flights.

### Job Outlook

Employment of flight attendants is projected to grow about as fast as average. Competition for jobs is expected to remain keen because the opportunity for travel attracts more applicants than there are jobs.

**Employment change.** Employment of flight attendants is expected to grow by 8 percent, which is about as fast as the average for all occupations over the 2008–18 period. Population growth and an improving economy are expected to boost the number of airline passengers. As airlines expand their capacity to meet rising demand by increasing the number and size of planes in operation and the number of flights offered, more flight attendants will be needed.

**Job prospects.** Despite growing demand for flight attendants, competition is expected to be keen because this job usually attracts more applicants than there are jobs, with only the most qualified eventually being hired. College graduates who have experience dealing with the public should have the best chance of being hired. Job opportunities may be better with the faster growing regional and commuter, low-cost, and charter airlines. There also are job opportunities for professionally trained flight attendants to work for companies operating private aircraft for their executives.

The majority of job opportunities through the year 2018 will arise from the need to replace flight attendants who leave the labor force or transfer to other occupations, often for higher earnings or a more stable lifestyle. With the job now viewed increasingly as a profession, however, fewer flight attendants leave their jobs, and job turnover is not as high as in the past. According to the Association of Flight Attendants, the average job tenure of attendants is currently 16 years and is increasing.

In the long run, opportunities for persons seeking flight attendant jobs should improve as the airline industry expands. Over the next decade, however, demand for flight attendants will fluctuate with the demand for air travel, which is highly sensi-

tive to swings in the economy. During downturns, as air traffic declines, the hiring of flight attendants declines, and some experienced attendants may be laid off until traffic recovers.

### Earnings

Median annual wages of flight attendants were \$35,930 in May 2008. The middle 50 percent earned between \$28,420 and \$49,910. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$20,580, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$65,350.

According to data from the Association of Flight Attendants, beginning attendants had median earnings of \$16,191 a year in 2009. Beginning pay scales for flight attendants vary by carrier, however. New hires usually begin at the same pay scale, regardless of experience; all flight attendants receive the same future pay increases based on an established pay scale.

Some airlines offer incentive pay for working holidays, night and international flights, or taking positions that require additional responsibility or paperwork.

Flight attendants and their immediate families are entitled to free or discounted fares on their own airline and reduced fares on most other airlines. Some airlines require that the flight attendant be with an airline for 3 to 6 months before taking advantage of this benefit. Other benefits may include medical, dental, and life insurance; 401K or other retirement plan; sick leave; paid holidays; stock options; paid vacations; and tuition reimbursement. Flight attendants also receive a “per diem” allowance for meal expenses while on duty away from home. Flight attendants are required to purchase uniforms and wear them while on duty. The airlines usually pay for uniform replacement items, and may provide a small allowance to cover cleaning and upkeep of the uniforms.

The majority of flight attendants hold union membership, primarily with the Association of Flight Attendants. Other unions that represent flight attendants include the Transport Workers Union of America and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters.

### Related Occupations

Other jobs that involve helping people as a safety professional, while requiring the ability to be calm even under trying circumstances, include:

- Emergency medical technicians and paramedics
- Fire fighters

- Other workers who provide customer service include:
  - Food and beverage serving and related workers
  - Reservation and transportation ticket agents and travel clerks

### **Sources of Additional Information**

Information about job opportunities and qualifications required for work at a particular airline may be obtained by writing to the airline's human resources office.

For further information on flight attendants, contact:

► Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, 501 Third St. NW., Washington, DC 20001. Internet: **<http://www.afanet.org>**

The Occupational Information Network (O\*NET) provides information on a wide range of occupational characteristics. Links to O\*NET appear at the end of the Internet version of this occupational statement, accessible at **<http://www.bls.gov/ooh/ocos171.htm>**