

HIGH ALTITUDE PARTNERS

# 2025/26 AVIATION HIRING & LEADERSHIP TRENDS REPORT

*Airline · Business Aviation · General Aviation · MRO · Emerging Sectors*

Produced by High Altitude Partners · May 2026

## **Who this report is written for**

CHROs, Chief People Officers, CEOs, founders, and hiring leaders across airline, business aviation, MRO, and general aviation. This is an operator-to-operator conversation. We assume you are already living these pressures. We are not here to explain the industry to you — we are here to name what is happening clearly and tell you what it means for the decisions on your desk right now.

## Foreword

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### About High Altitude Partners

High Altitude Partners is a founder-led specialist aviation recruitment firm. Our founder brings 45 years of personal experience inside the aviation industry — not as a career recruiter, but as an operator and senior leader who has held significant roles across commercial aviation, business aviation, and general aviation. That operational background is what makes HAP different. We understand the brief because we have lived it.

Our team combines that depth of industry experience with specialist recruitment expertise, serving clients across airline, business aviation, GA, MRO, aerospace, and the emerging sectors reshaping the industry — including unmanned systems, eVTOL, and commercial space.

This report enters its second edition at a moment of genuine inflection. The 2025 edition named eight structural trends reshaping aviation hiring. Twelve months on, every one of them has intensified.

Global airline revenues are forecast to reach \$1.053 trillion in 2026 — up 4.5% on 2025 and a new record. Passenger numbers will hit 5.2 billion. Load factors are at all-time highs. By the commercial metrics that boards track, aviation is performing exceptionally well.

The workforce picture tells a more complex story. Labour is now the single largest cost component for airlines globally — 28% of total operating expenses — and the structural misalignment between what the industry demands of its people and what the pipeline can deliver is not closing. It is widening.

***"The organisations that win the next decade of aviation talent will not be the ones with the biggest budgets. They will be the ones who treat workforce strategy as a board-level discipline, not an HR function."***

This report names eight findings that define the aviation hiring and leadership landscape in 2025/26 — updated with the most current data available and sharpened by twelve months of additional market observation. Some findings have evolved. The direction of travel has not.

We have written this as operators and advisors. We take positions. We are allergic to vague recommendations. And we write for people making real decisions.

*We hope it earns a place in your planning cycle.*

— The High Altitude Partners Team

## Executive Summary

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<b>\$1.053T</b> Global airline revenue forecast 2026 — IATA	<b>1.47M</b> New aviation professionals needed 2025–34 — CAE / Boeing	<b>24,000</b> Peak US pilot shortfall — arriving in 2026 — Oliver Wyman
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Eight findings define the aviation hiring and leadership landscape in 2025/26. Every one carries a clear implication for how organisations should be operating right now.

**1** The talent pipeline is a decade problem, not a quarter problem. Reactive hiring strategies will underperform structurally — and 2026 is the year that gap becomes undeniable.

**2** The pilot shortage is no longer on the horizon. The peak arrives now. 2026 is projected as the year of maximum shortfall — 24,000 pilots in the US alone.

**3** The maintenance technician gap has deepened. North America alone faces a shortfall of over 24,000 aircraft mechanics. Boeing now projects 710,000 new technicians needed globally by 2045.

**4** Business aviation and GA are fighting a two-front war: competing with commercial aviation for the same talent, and with energy, rail, and technology for the same engineers.

**5** Tariff volatility and supply chain disruption continue to reshape fleet timelines — and hiring timelines shift with them. Average aircraft age has hit a record 15+ years.

**6** The C-suite of aviation is being redesigned. CHRO turnover is up 25% globally in 2025. New roles — Chief Resilience Officer, Chief Learning Officer, Head of AI — are now standard at progressive operators.

**7** Employee value proposition has become the primary competitive weapon for mid-sized operators. 59% of CHROs plan to increase hiring in H1 2026 — the competition for the same pool is intensifying.

**8** Workforce data is now a decisive competitive advantage. The organisations using market intelligence to plan are consistently outperforming those who rely on instinct or precedent.

# 01

## The Market Context

*What the numbers say in 2026 — and what they don't*

### An Industry Growing Faster Than Its Workforce Can Keep Up

Global airline revenues are forecast to reach \$1.053 trillion in 2026 — a 4.5% increase on 2025 and a new industry record. Passenger numbers will reach 5.2 billion. Load factors are forecast at 83.8%, an all-time high. Labour costs are now the single largest expense category for airlines globally at 28% of operating costs, having overtaken fuel. The industry is, by almost every commercial measure, performing exceptionally well.

The structural tensions underneath that performance are equally clear. Average aircraft age has hit a record 15 years as delivery delays continue. Fuel efficiency improvements have slowed to 1% annually — historically they ran at 2%. IATA and Oliver Wyman estimate supply chain bottlenecks cost the airline industry over \$11 billion in 2025, a figure that is not improving materially in 2026.

The workforce problem sits at the heart of all of it. CAE's 2025 Talent Forecast identifies 1,465,000 new aviation professionals needed over the next decade. Boeing's latest Pilot and Technician Outlook puts the 20-year global demand at 660,000 new pilots, 710,000 new maintenance technicians, and 1,000,000 new cabin crew. These are not projections built on optimistic assumptions. They are derived from fleet forecasts, retirement rates, and traffic modelling. The gap between supply and demand is structural and it is not closing.

### **\$41B**

Record net airline profit forecast for 2026 — yet net margin remains just 3.9%. As IATA Director General Willie Walsh noted: 'Apple will earn more selling an iPhone cover than the \$7.90 airlines will make transporting the average passenger.' Source: IATA December 2025

### The Policy and Trade Environment

The US tariff environment established in 2025 continues to exert pressure on aviation in 2026. The dismantling of the Civil Aircraft Agreement's zero-tariff framework — through 25% duties on Canadian and Mexican goods, 50% on steel and aluminium, and reciprocal tariffs on dozens of trading partners — has become a structural feature of the operating environment rather than a passing disruption.

Air cargo has, remarkably, emerged as a beneficiary — IATA's Willie Walsh describing it as the 'hero of global trade' as front-loading ahead of tariff deadlines drove volume surges. But for fleet planning, parts sourcing, and the MRO operators dependent on international component supply, the environment remains materially more expensive and less predictable than pre-2025.

For workforce planners, the indirect effect is the most significant. When fleet timelines shift — and they continue to do so — hiring timelines shift with them. Organisations that have built workforce plans to a single fleet delivery scenario are operating with a fragility they may not yet have fully priced.

# 02

## The Pilot Market

*The peak is here — 2026 is the year of maximum shortfall*

### The Shortage Has Arrived

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Oliver Wyman's modelling identifies 2026 as the year of peak pilot shortfall — a projected gap of 24,000 pilots in the United States alone. The cumulative deficit is forecast to reach 28,000+ by 2030 before pipeline improvements begin to make a meaningful impact. This is no longer a coming wave. It is here.

Major carriers are responding with significant hiring commitments. United Airlines is running classes of approximately 75 new pilots per week. American Airlines is sustaining classes of 60 or more per week. Combined, these two carriers alone are hiring over 500 pilots per month. Both have signalled 10,000 hires over the next five years. This pace is drawing talent from every feeder source — regionals, cargo carriers, business aviation, and the military pipeline — at a rate that is destabilising those markets in turn.

***"The organisations that use this moment to build pipeline — rather than simply compete for the existing pool — will be positioned very differently in 2028. Those who do not will be fighting for the same shrinking group of available, qualified pilots."***

<b>24,000</b> Peak US pilot shortfall in 2026 — Oliver Wyman	<b>660,000</b> New pilots needed globally 2026– 2044 — Boeing	<b>~3,000</b> Mandatory retirements at legacy US carriers forecast in 2026
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### Business Aviation: The Secondary Impact

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The NBAA's research into business aviation pilot retention identifies the primary reason experienced corporate pilots leave for the airlines — not salary, but schedule predictability. The on-demand nature of business aviation flying, while genuinely attractive to some pilots, is a deterrent for others who value roster stability. As major carriers ramp hiring, the pull on business aviation's experienced pilot population intensifies.

The GA and business aviation pilot placement challenge in 2026 is fundamentally different from a commercial airline search. It requires understanding the principal relationship, the confidentiality expectations, the lifestyle implications of the specific operation, and the candidate's motivations at a level that a generalist recruiter cannot replicate. It is a specialist search and must be approached as one.

# 03

## The Maintenance Gap

*710,000 technicians. The most underreported workforce risk in aviation.*

### The Numbers Have Grown

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Boeing's updated Pilot and Technician Outlook now projects 710,000 new maintenance technicians needed globally over the next 20 years — a significant upward revision from earlier forecasts. North America alone faces a shortfall of over 24,000 aircraft mechanics. (Oliver Wyman 2024) CAE's 10-year forecast identifies 416,000 new AMEs needed globally. The BBGA's 2025 AGM heard recruiters describe the market as 'unprecedented' — with demand for engineers up 32% year-on-year.

The problem has compounded in 2026. Ageing fleets — now averaging over 15 years — are generating more heavy maintenance events. Engine reliability challenges and supply chain disruptions have created backlogs at MROs that are being managed with fewer qualified engineers than the workload demands. Brookfield Aviation's 2026 workforce forecast describes licensed engineer shortage as 'acute' with demand sustained across airlines and MROs simultaneously.

Competition from outside aviation has not eased. Energy, defence, rail, and advanced manufacturing continue to recruit aviation-trained engineers with comparable pay and fewer lifestyle demands. The pipeline is losing qualified people at both ends — too few new entrants, too many experienced engineers leaving the sector.

**710,000**

New maintenance technicians needed globally over the next 20 years — Boeing Pilot & Technician Outlook 2026 (revised upward from previous forecast)

### The Apprenticeship Imperative

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The organisations building apprenticeship programmes in 2025 and 2026 are making the only investment that produces guaranteed qualified capacity by 2028-2029. The business case has not changed: an apprentice completing a four-year programme is culturally embedded, operationally familiar with the fleet, and statistically far more likely to stay than an externally recruited mid-career hire.

What has changed is the urgency. The organisations that have not started this investment yet are already behind the curve. The qualified technician they need in 2029 requires a decision in 2025 or 2026 to exist. There is no market solution that arrives faster.

***"The organisations that will have qualified maintenance engineers in 2029 are making the investment decisions in 2026. The open market will not solve this at that point — the pool simply will not be there."***



# 04

## Business Aviation & GA

*A two-front talent war — and the offer that actually wins it*

### The Competitive Landscape in 2026

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General aviation delivered more than 4,000 aircraft in 2024 and order backlogs remain robust across all segments into 2026. GAMA's characterisation of the demand environment as strong is borne out in the data. The challenge is entirely on the supply side.

Demand for pilots and engineers in business aviation is up more than 30% year-on-year. (BBGA AGM 2025) Commercial and sales aviation roles have increased 38%. (Zenon Aviation 2025) The talent pool that GA and business aviation operators are drawing from is the same pool that every commercial carrier, every MRO, and every emerging operator in drones and space is pursuing simultaneously.

The operators winning this competition are not doing so on salary. They are winning on clarity — a specific, honest, compelling articulation of what working for them actually looks like and who it is genuinely right for. The failure mode is leading with 'we are not an airline' rather than 'here is precisely why someone would choose us.'

**38%**

Increase in commercial and sales aviation roles in 2025/26 alongside a 32% rise in pilot and engineer demand.  
Source: BBGA AGM 2025 / Zenon Aviation

### What GA Can Offer That Commercial Aviation Cannot

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Fleet variety. Schedule flexibility. The relationship between pilot and aircraft owner. The experience of managing diverse operations across multiple aircraft types. For the right candidate — and there are more of them than most operators realise — these are genuine advantages, not consolation prizes.

The employer value proposition in GA and business aviation is fundamentally a marketing and communication problem, not a compensation problem. The organisations investing in how they tell their story — through their recruitment process, their offer conversations, and increasingly their LinkedIn and digital presence — are outperforming peers without meaningfully outspending them.

# 05

## Leadership & the C-Suite

*New roles, rising turnover, and the candidate who is vetting you*

### The C-Suite Is Being Redesigned

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The pace of change at the top of aviation organisations has accelerated. Russell Reynolds' Global CHRO Turnover Index recorded 155 CHRO appointments globally in 2025 — a 25% increase on 2024. In the S&P 500 alone, 64 CHROs were appointed, up from 49 the prior year. First-time CHROs now account for 60% of appointments, the highest proportion in seven years.

Across the wider C-suite, new role categories have become standard at progressive operators. Chief Resilience Officers — a direct response to the fragility exposed in 2020. Chief Learning Officers — reflecting that the skills gap cannot be solved by recruitment alone. Heads of AI and Automation. Directors of Sustainability and SAF Strategy carrying genuine regulatory compliance responsibility, not communications briefs.

The CHRO Confidence Index for Q1 2026 shows 59% of HR leaders planning to increase hiring in H1 2026 — up from 54% in Q4 2025. Leadership development investment has accelerated, with 50% of surveyed CHROs citing increased investment in management capability building over the past six months. (Conference Board Q1 2026)

### The Candidate Who Is Vetting You

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Senior aviation executives in 2026 are not passive candidates. The questions asked in final-stage leadership conversations have evolved materially. 'What does the board actually believe about people strategy?' 'What happened to the last person in this seat?' 'What is the realistic support structure for delivering what you say you want?'

***"In 2026, a senior aviation leader accepting a role is not just assessing the job. They are assessing whether the organisation is a serious place to do serious work. They are asking: will what I am being promised actually be true?"***

The organisations losing candidates at the final stage are almost never losing on compensation. They are losing on credibility — an inability to answer the hard questions about succession, support, and organisational culture with the specificity that an experienced executive now expects.

# 06

## Employee Value Proposition & Retention

*The weapon most operators are still underusing in 2026*

### Salary Is Not the Whole Story

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2026 data from the aviation recruitment market is consistent with 2025: salary, while necessary, has ceased to be sufficient as a retention and attraction tool. Aeroprofessional's review of 2025 aviation recruitment confirmed that candidates assessed employers against leadership quality, communication transparency, career development pathways, roster stability, and long-term organisational stability before making decisions.

Deloitte's 2025 Global Human Capital Trends identified that 66% of executives said their most recent hires were not fully prepared. The implication is significant — organisations investing in structured onboarding and early development are building a compounding return that salary competition cannot replicate.

The Conference Board's Q1 2026 CHRO survey found that 56% of organisations that increased workforce investment focused on leadership and management capability. 40% invested in AI and emerging digital capabilities. The organisations treating workforce development as a strategic investment rather than a training cost are separating themselves from the field.

### Year One Remains the Danger Zone

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The pattern has not changed. The candidates who leave in months three to six almost never cite the role as the reason. They cite the welcome, the support structures, and the gap between what the recruitment conversation described and what the organisation actually delivered.

Replacing a technical hire costs 50 to 200% of annual salary. For licenced engineers and type-rated pilots, the replacement timeline including licence validation can stretch to six months or more. The calculus for investing in structured onboarding is not complicated. The organisations that are not doing it are paying a quantifiable cost they have chosen not to address.

***"Retention is not a programme. It is the cumulative effect of every decision your organisation makes about how it treats people who have already said yes to you."***

### Proven EVP Levers for Mid-Sized Operators

<b>Career pathways</b>	Explicitly mapped progression over two, five, and ten years. Not aspiration — documented routes with realistic timelines.
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<b>Fleet variety</b>	For pilots and engineers, access to diverse aircraft types is a genuine attraction for candidates who value breadth.
<b>Schedule quality</b>	Roster stability and predictability are consistently valued more highly than operators assume.
<b>Relocation support</b>	Comprehensive packages addressing partner careers, schooling, housing, and settling-in. This is a competitive differentiator that most operators underinvest in.
<b>Cultural specificity</b>	An honest, specific articulation of what the organisation is actually like to work in — including the hard parts.

# 07

## Workforce Intelligence

*The competitive advantage that is now separating the field*

### Evidence vs Instinct

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The divide between organisations using market intelligence — salary benchmarks, candidate mobility data, regional supply analysis, competitor hiring activity — and those relying on instinct has widened in 2026. AeroProfessional's 2025 aviation workforce review confirmed that evidence-based decision-making produced more predictable hiring outcomes and better alignment between what organisations needed and what candidates expected.

The Conference Board's Q1 2026 CHRO survey found that organisations integrating people analytics into strategic planning reported materially stronger hiring and retention outcomes. The connection between workforce data and business performance is no longer theoretical. It is measurable and it is being measured.

### What Good Looks Like in 2026

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- Running 24–36 month workforce plans with scenario modelling against at least three fleet delivery timelines — not a single annual headcount number.
- Tracking candidate mobility trends by type rating, region, and seniority band — understanding where supply is loosening before it shows up in hiring difficulty.
- Briefing search partners with the full picture: role, organisation, relocation support, career trajectory, and the honest answer to 'what happened to the last person in this seat.'
- Treating succession risk as a board-level metric with quantified exposure — not an HR list that gets reviewed annually.
- Investing in employer brand as a strategic effort to be accurately known by the candidates they most need to attract — not a marketing exercise.

# 08

## The 24-Month Horizon

*What hiring leaders must do in 2026 and 2027*

### The Window Is Narrowing

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The hiring decisions made in 2026 and 2027 will determine which aviation organisations are well-positioned when the next acute labour pressure peaks — which the data consistently places at 2027–2029. The actions that matter most require a lead time of twelve to thirty-six months. For organisations that have not started, the window is not closing — but it is narrowing.

#### PRIORITY 1

##### **Map your 36-month workforce exposure — now**

For every critical role category — pilots, type-rated engineers, licenced AMEs, senior leadership — understand your current position, your succession depth, and your exposure if headcount growth assumptions change by  $\pm 20\%$ . This is the foundation for every other decision on this list.

#### PRIORITY 2

##### **Invest in apprenticeship and pipeline immediately**

Apprentices completing programmes in 2028–29 represent maintenance technical capacity that will not be available in the open market at that point. The cost-benefit case is clear. The barrier is a planning horizon most HR functions have not yet been granted — which means this conversation must happen at board level.

#### PRIORITY 3

##### **Redesign your EVP before the next shortage peak**

Articulate what your organisation genuinely offers that a major carrier cannot. Test it against candidate feedback. Make it specific and honest. Vague employer branding does not compete in a market where candidates have real options and the internet makes claims easy to verify.

#### PRIORITY 4

##### **Build your relocation infrastructure**

International hiring will be essential for most operators over the next five years. The organisations with a standardised, comprehensive relocation offering — including partner career support, school research assistance, and a structured settling-in period — will consistently close candidates that others lose at the final stage.

#### PRIORITY 5

##### **Position HR at the planning table — not downstream of it**

Workforce strategy that is downstream from commercial strategy will always be reactive. The people function needs to be in the room when fleet plans, route expansion, and market entry decisions are being made — presenting workforce data alongside financial and commercial data, not receiving decisions to implement.

PRIORITY 6

### **Engage your recruitment partner as a strategic resource**

A specialist aviation recruitment firm is not a CV pipeline. Used well, it is a source of market intelligence, salary benchmarking, candidate feedback, and early signals about shifts in supply and demand. The organisations getting the most value from external partners are treating those relationships as strategic, not transactional.

## About High Altitude Partners

High Altitude Partners is a founder-led specialist aviation recruitment firm. Our founder brings 45 years of personal experience inside the aviation industry — not as a career recruiter, but as an operator and senior leader who has navigated the industry through its most significant periods of change. That background is what informs everything we do.

Our team combines that depth of industry experience with specialist recruitment expertise across flight crew, licensed engineering, technical operations, and senior leadership — including C-suite and board-level appointments. We are not generalists who have added aviation to a portfolio. Aviation is all we do.

This report is produced annually. It draws on our direct market activity, candidate and client conversations, and publicly available data from IATA, Boeing, CAE, NBAA, GAMA, Allianz, Oliver Wyman, Aeroprofessional, Brookfield Aviation, the Conference Board, Russell Reynolds, and others. We welcome feedback, challenges, and conversations that help us sharpen the picture.

*High Altitude Partners · Founder-Led Aviation Recruitment · 2025/26 Edition*

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