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Will the proportion of women in high level corporate roles in the Aviation industry increase?

The proportion of women at the highest level of corporate roles in the aviation industry is 3%, which represents one of the lowest levels of female representation across all industries.¹ As of June 2018, 18 women held the role of CEO, President or Managing Director across all commercial airlines.

Obstacles to corporate roles can involve stereotyping in the recruitment process as to what are seen traditionally as female and male traits. These stereotypes can cause difficulties as incorrect assumptions may be made about a woman's personality and skillset, leading recruiters to deem them a poor fit for the organisation.² The low visibility of women at the highest corporate levels can also make the environment seem unwelcoming to other women. This has led to a phenomenon called "Vertical Segregation," whereby men predominantly work in senior management whilst women generally work in roles below this.

Given the low proportion of women recruited at these levels, some airlines such as Flybe (before being acquired by Virgin Connect), easyJet and TUI have taken steps to encourage women to become pilots. The then CEO of Flybe, Ms Christine Ourmieres won the Inspirational Role Model Award in June 2019 at the IATA Diversity and Inclusion Awards for raising the profile of aviation among young people and inspiring young women to join the aviation industry. She introduced the highly successful FlyShe initiative which received coverage both in the U.K. and abroad.³ As part of the FlyShe initiative, female pilots and engineers spoke with pupils, produced educational materials for schools to host their own sessions and encouraged young women to consider high level roles as their future careers. They also provided two places for women on their engineering apprenticeship scheme.⁴

¹ <https://skift.com/2014/05/14/women-account-for-fewer-than-5-of-airline-ceos-around-the-world/>

² Gaucher, D., Friesen, J., & Kay, A. C. (2011). Evidence that gendered wording in job advertisements exists and sustains gender inequality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101, 109–128

³ <https://www.iata.org/en/pressroom/pr/2019-06-03-01/>

⁴ <https://www.aviationadr.org.uk/flyshe-flybes-new-campaign-to-encourage-more-women/>

Other progressive examples include Air France hiring its first ever female CEO, Ms Anne Rigail in December 2018, and Zoom Air, an Indian regional airline hiring 9 female pilots out of an intake of 30. Another example of promoting the technical abilities of women is the ‘Chix Fix’ group of female technicians from the USA, which was formed in November 2018, to compete as the first all-female commercial airline team in the Aerospace Maintenance Competition. The competition takes place every year in the USA and provides an opportunity for current and future maintenance professionals to demonstrate their technical knowledge in aviation maintenance. The Chix Fix group competed to raise an awareness that aircraft maintenance is a career path for people of all genders.⁵

There are two promising strategies in diversifying high-level roles in the aviation industry in the long-term. The first involves active recruitment of women into executive level positions, providing support and assigning a mentor who can answer their questions regarding company or industry-specific issues. The second strategy involves introducing aviation as an achievable aspiration for young women through providing information at educational events.⁸ Critically, there is a need for a cultural change at the highest corporate level. The board itself needs to be outspoken in advocating the need for diversity.

It is important to break down stereotypes and increase the visibility of women in high level aviation roles, which in turn will result in an increase of female aviation professionals as role models for young women, increasing the number of talented women that thriving in high level corporate roles.

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⁵ <https://www.internationalairportreview.com/news/82492/five-times-the-aviation-industry-championed-gender-equality-in-2018/>