

# **White Paper on the Growth of the Airline Industry and its impact on Cabin Crew Employee Attrition - Why a Flight Attendant Pre-Qualification Program is Needed**

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## **Abstract**

The airline industry is developing at an accelerated rate and demand for cabin crew is growing. At the same time airlines are experiencing high attrition rates and losing return on investment. Finding qualified applicants who have the particular knowledge, skills, and attitudes beyond customer service needed in today's flight attendant position is a challenge.

The airline industry is exploring emerging technologies, such as Virtual Reality, as a cost savings measurement and to assist in training. Methodologies used in research include survey, interview, trial with control group, data collection, and evaluation.

The need for a Flight Attendant Pre-Qualification Program is recognized by both industry and institution. Airline pathway partnerships with institutions providing Pre-Qualification Programs are desired and solutions explored.

## **Problem Statement**

In the past 10 years, the aviation market has been expanding at an extreme pace. Even though some airlines fail to withstand the competition, they are quickly replaced with new or bigger airlines. With such high development in the market, we are witnessing growing cabin crew demand. Naturally, trying to keep up with such demand airlines escalate cabin crew career possibilities while the cabin crew career starts to gain a new face.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Airlines are having difficulty finding qualified applicants and experiencing new challenges in developing cabin crew professionalism, resulting in high attrition rates & professionalism issues within the flight attendant workforce.

## **Background**

Over the past two years we have seen aviation become more active as our economy continues to do well. “Most airlines are busier than ever and new airlines have opened. For cabin crew members and flight attendants new opportunities are becoming available.”<sup>5</sup>

“These are good times for flight crews, as there is a heavy competition among employers chasing for professionals.... Equally important is the quality of cabin crew training, in fact airlines are looking for exclusive training solutions.”<sup>1</sup>

Although initial cabin crew training programs are regulated, differences in the equipment and quality of facilities, instructors' professionalism and the complexity of training is coming. As airlines work to survive and thrive by continually cutting costs, this gives the opportunity of very convenient, time-saving training that also saves money for the airlines.

Airlines are more interested in cutting costs than they might have been previously. Training providers understand that training costs are a focus and must be regulatory compliant but also cost effective. Some aspects of required training can be accomplished online, thereby reducing crew downtime as well as logistics expenses, and others can utilize expanding technologies that also provide cost effective measures.

### **Rising Attrition Rates**

Research over the last few years reveals airlines suffer from low flight attendant employee retention particularly among flight attendants employed under one year.



*\*average cost to train 1 Flight Attendant = ~\$25,000*

- Airline A: lost 9/400 new hire applicants in their last hiring = ~\$225,000 losses

- Airline B: lost 6/54 new hires in their last initial training class = ~\$150,000 in losses
- Airline C: lost 48/60 new hire flight attendants within their first year of employment = 80% attrition, ~\$1.2 M in losses.

Surveys given to eight airlines were completed by both inflight management and flight attendants and revealed a trend in employee attrition due to the following top three reasons<sup>2</sup>:

1. Didn't know what I was getting into/job not what I thought it would be
2. Lack of Professionalism
3. Performance Failure



*Lack of Professionalism* included things like: being late or no showing a trip assignment, abuse of sick leave, not cooperative with crew members, avoiding supervisors or management, refusal to comply with work rules, and/or failure to follow company policy.

*Performance Failures* included things like: FAA and airline required competencies not met, exam failures, and/or failure to graduate training.

*Didn't Know What I was Getting into* seemed to be an overarching theme that encompasses reasons surrounding the lack of professionalism and performance failure.

Common denominators are found to surround these trends in current professionalism issues and contribute to high attrition rates experienced in the cabin crew segment of the industry.

Both inflight management and flight attendant employees were surveyed from 8 different airlines in the United States.

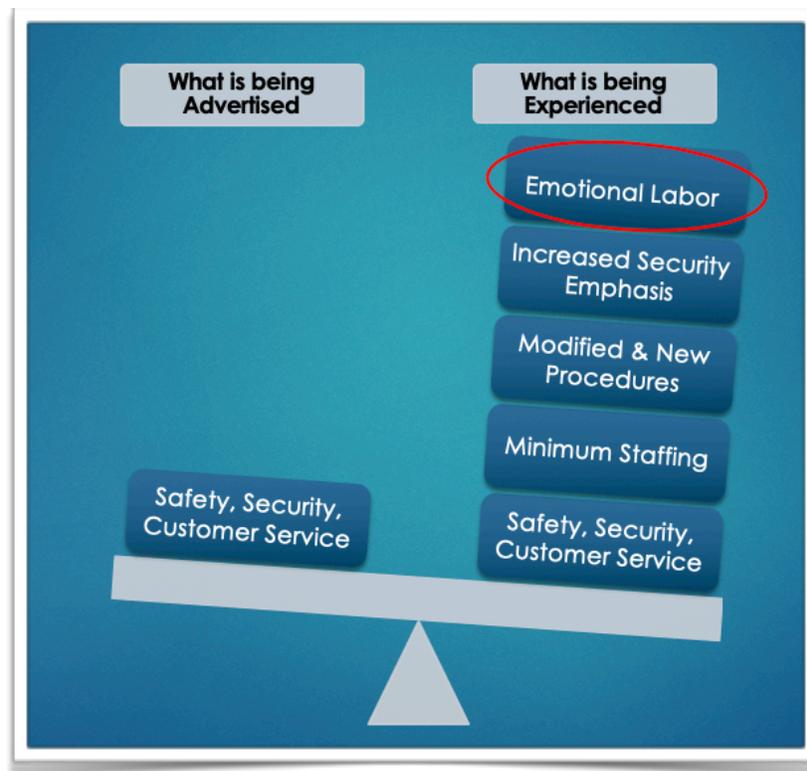
The results of the surveys found:

Reported by Inflight Managers	Reported by Flight Attendants
Lifestyle issue is common (how to pack, eat, must-haves vs luxuries in suitcase, scheduling, work rules)	Previous work experience is not enough preparation
Consistency is a problem across departments: leadership, operation, service, catering	Feel a disconnect with management
Reliability is a problem	CRM, Crew Resource Management relationships are good
Too much learning is on the job	Too much learning is on the job

### Task Saturation is a problem<sup>2</sup>

What is being advertised is not congruent with what is being experienced. Safety, Security, and Customer Service are advertised in general terms, and not specific to the industry. Some new hires are unable to translate these skills to their new job environment.

On top that, we are adding minimum staffing, modified & new procedures, increased emphasis in security – i.e. Flight Attendants are now having to watch for signs of human trafficking, profiling pax, gathering intelligence... their situational awareness is off the charts.



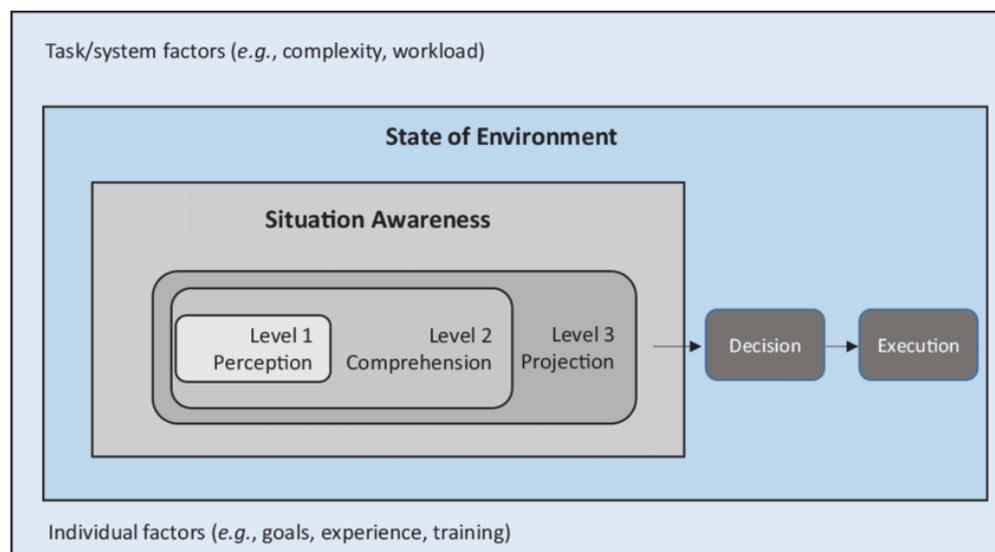
All of this adds to the Emotional Labor burden – where they are having to generate additional energy to suppress their own emotions in order to remain poised, calm, diplomatic, and be brand ambassadors for their airline.

An applicant's expectation is gathered mostly from stereotypes that support the "Dream Job" concept – get paid to travel – idea. Once they move into the workforce, they experience something quite different than what they imagined/expected.

"A Day in the Life" videos that many airlines are putting out are meant to be effective in combating the stereotypes & bring a level of transparency to the realities of today's flight attendant job, however, applicants seem to be unable to translate this awareness into something more meaningful.

Using Endsley's Model of Situation Awareness we recognize where the gap in awareness is happening. He describes 3 levels of awareness:

- *Level 1: Perception*, where one observes but may not comprehend.
- *Level 2: Comprehension*, where one observes and can comprehend what they are observing, yet are unable to internalize the information.
- *Level 3: Projection*, where one can both observe and comprehend, and can predict how this information may affect their future and them personally.



The gap in professionalism issues seems to be happening where one moves from Level 2-3, where the applicant is comprehending but unable to internalize the information to predict how it may affect them personally. And, in some cases, level 1-2 where the applicant is not entirely comprehending what they are observing.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Airline-Applicant Conundrum**

The Flight Attendant career is very unique, in part due to the lifestyle required and the “many hats” roles and job duties that must be performed. Despite the assorted qualifications needed to perform these various roles and job duties successfully, airlines continue to post job advertisements for general customer service experience as the primary qualifier, as has been done traditionally for this career over the past several decades. This lack of transparency in what is today a very different looking career from decades past creates an unrealistic expectation for the applicant.

This isn't necessarily the airlines' fault as the job duties and details of the day-to-day operation do not match marketing initiatives, of which a certain element of positive-attraction marketing has to happen in the job advertisement in order to attract the right type of person for the job (i.e. “people person”). And, although the “Day in the Life” flight attendant videos marketed by airlines show examples of what a typical work day would look like, they are however, biased to the airline's positive attraction marketing agenda and do not shine the light on what is realistically and regularly experienced. This unfortunately fuels the disparity between the Airline and the Applicant expectations.

The Airline-Applicant Conundrum exists where the Airline, unknown to the Applicant, hopes to protect from hiring applicants who might develop professionalism issues by preferentially hiring those with prior flight attendant job experience and who “know what they are getting into”. This forces the Applicant into a hiring paradox as they work to fit the advertised qualifications (focused heavily on customer service), and are unaware of the preference for prior job experience. Those that are advised on this preference are finding the only available opportunities to receive job experience is on the job itself, in which case they would have to first be hired by an airline, yet are finding themselves unhireable due to lack of job experience.

The gap in this practice sits where there are not enough qualified “prior airline experience” applicants and airlines must look to “hire off the street,” hiring applicants with no prior job experience but with strong customer service skills and who essentially meet the advertised general customer service experience requirement. Both Airline and Applicant expect this experience will translate to their new Flight Attendant job duties and experience upset when the experience does not translate directly and the Applicant underperforms in their new job. Neither will be able to fulfill the needed requirements for the job until transparency in the job description is agreed upon and appropriate training opportunities are provided.

## **Pre-Qualification Training as an Eligibility Measurement**

Due to the heavy concentration on competency-based training in the aviation industry, too much focus is correcting behaviors and not enough is encouraging accomplishments. Accomplishments are contributions of value and come first from acquirement of skills. To help students be successful in achieving correct skills acquirement, we must look at how they are learning, how they are acquiring these skills, and whether their learning is promoting the mastery of skills correctly.

The process of skill achievement focuses on behaviors. The differences among behaviors are typically quite small. When teaching, one is more likely to see the *effects* of these differences than the *causes* of them, hence why behavior correction is a popular measurement tool.<sup>8</sup>

*\*Think of a golf club grip — even a tiny adjustment in how one grips the golf club (small change in skill acquirement) may produce an enormous change (trajectory of the ball) in one's accomplishment! (value of contribution).<sup>2</sup>*

If we control the learning, we control the behavior. Students who are not competent at lower level skills or fundamental stages of understanding are severely handicapped when higher levels are assigned or required<sup>8</sup>, as we see with unqualified new hire flight attendants trying to manage the professionalism requirements of a job they are not properly prepared to do.

Trial and error, and learning to avoid previous mistakes (approaches currently used by most airlines) are not the most effective and efficient learning processes. We must make room for a technology that will add a greater degree of control to the learning process in order for the process to become more effective.

## **Comprehensive Experiential Training<sup>2</sup>**

Combining Virtual Reality (VR) with Experiential Learning creates a Comprehensive Experiential Training environment. Research on VR training and its implications in information retention and performance is already proven and indicates people remember what they learn longer and provides a realistic environment in which to learn. Results show improvements in education and high-proficiency training, & improvement in recall accuracy.<sup>3,6</sup>

In a recent study at American Airlines, Virtual Reality (VR) was proven to improve performance in Flight Attendant students and led to a decrease in repeat qualifying events from 25% to 2%, and increased the number of error-free performances from 20% to 78% improving self-efficacy successes. In training readiness for departure/arming doors, VR significantly improved performance on these safety competencies, reducing repeat trainings from 12% to 1% and increasing error-free performances from 47% to 85%.<sup>3</sup>

This type of learning provides a platform for both skills acquirement and accomplishment. Why this works so well is because the way humans create and recall mental constructs is influenced by the way they perceive and move. Ultimately, VR creates an individualized learning experience. Students have a chance to master skills correctly and work within their individual learning style.

VR enhances learning and recall by leveraging a person's overall sense of body position, movement and acceleration and are exciting indicators of the power and potential of this technology and is especially encouraging for flight attendant training where much of the skills acquisition specific to the job is learned in this way. VR acts as a learning accelerator, also reducing the time and costs involved in training employees.

### **Industry Education Contributes to Exemplary Performance**

Another factor contributing to professionalism issues among the Flight Attendant workforce is the lack in industry education. The majority of Flight Attendants have very little foundational industry knowledge (i.e. airline management, aviation history, aviation security, aviation safety, and more) outside of regulations that are covered in their airline's initial and recurrent trainings each year.

Without a foundational knowledge of industry, one cannot comprehend the bigger picture & how they fit into it, employees cannot understand basic principles involved in their airline's management and do not understand decisions that affect them.

Education on industry topics provides background and understanding, bigger picture thinking, creates an ability to comprehend & predict information that may affect them personally. It contributes to their comprehensive learning and ultimately their value of contribution in the job, and toward the airline's vision.

As industry education is not currently mandated by the airlines to meet application requirements, Flight Attendants arrive at their new Flight Attendant job with a variety in backgrounds, education disciplines, and even levels of education. This diversity in the Flight Attendant workforce can serve as a market advantage as these frontline customer service employees are able to connect and relate with their airline's own diverse flying public, but it can also be a disadvantage as it produces a lack of continuity among the Flight Attendant group as varying abilities in the management of inflight events and job intricacies are met with disparity in skills sets and capability, and ultimately results with issues in professionalism.

Industry-mandated aviation education, enforced through pre-qualification certification programs, would allow for a greater ability for comprehension and prediction in situational awareness necessary to manage inflight events and job intricacies as well as

produce a greater capability in professionalism. Flight Attendants who receive this industry-mandated aviation education, regardless of background, education disciplines, and levels of education, can come together on a common platform of knowledge and understanding, creating continuity among the workforce and contribute better value in their positions.

Currently there are no aviation schools or institutions partnered with the industry to provide foundational aviation education to Flight Attendant applicants. Private Flight Attendant training companies are few and focus primarily on teaching safety competencies, rather than industry background and professionalism. Additionally, of the many higher education institutions with aviation programs that exist around the world, most are focused on teaching pilots, not flight attendants. So pilots are getting this information, but not Flight Attendants, which can also account for disparity in levels of professionalism between these two workforce groups.

A study conducted by GoJet Airlines inflight management revealed pre-qualification training was needed to overcome morale/frustration and reduce new hire wash-out rates currently being experienced at 50%. After instituting “Go see” and “Prepare to Fly” programs, both intended to pre-qualify the individual with industry knowledge and experience, the results showed a 25% increase in the success rate of new hire initial training students and a 25% decrease in training time.

It also showed the greatest percent of student loss came at the beginning of training rather than then end, saving over \$620,000 per year. For students who did not complete the pre-qualification trainings, the failure rate reverted back to the previous figures before the pre-qualification trainings were instituted.<sup>4</sup>

## **Solution**

A Flight Attendant Pre-Qualification Training Program in collaboration with and mandated by the Airline Industry can provide comprehensive experiential training necessary for acquisition of correct skills and realistic job experience as well as include an industry-topics education foundation. Additionally, students who complete such pre-qualification training will enable cost-savings for the airline industry as less time and resources are spent in training.

The use of Virtual Reality technology training is both cost-effective for industry and institution alike, and can expand current Scenario-based training from safety-based competencies to passenger behavior, service, and event management scenarios, thus providing regulatory compliance training as well as customer service-focused training needed to improve professionalism behaviors and job intricacies. This in turn, shifts the

learning focus from avoidance learning to accomplishment achievement, creating a higher competency retention and student qualification.

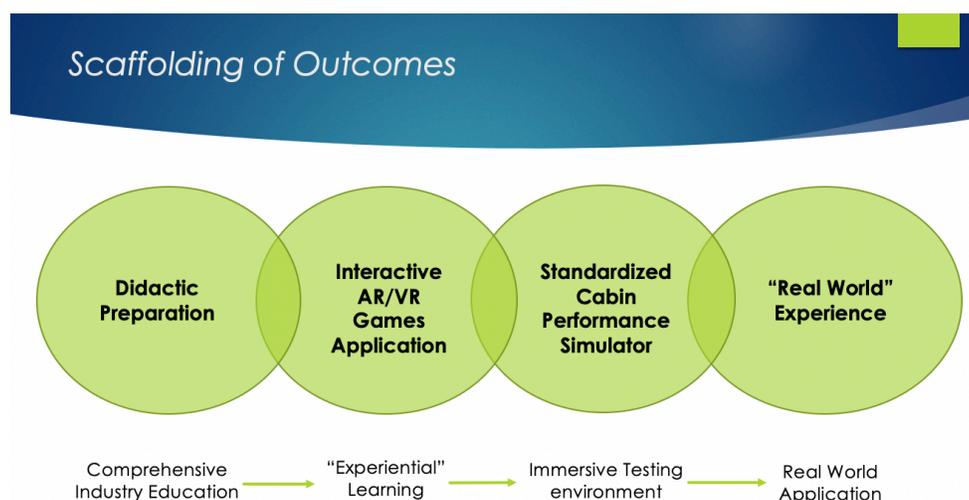
Industry collaboration is a necessary element in creating a viable pre-qualification training program to ensure that not only regulatory proficiencies are met, but that current trends, such as professionalism issues, can be addressed. In this way, collaboration between institution and industry will create a comprehensive pre-qualification training program and partnership that will feed qualified applicants to participating airlines and provide career progression for flight attendants.

### Why Pre-qualification Certification?

1. Formal and comprehensive way to weed out applicants who fail to meet industry standards
2. Sends a very strong message that airlines' take the flight attendant position seriously, and so should the applicant
3. Establishes a clear criteria and expectations
4. Ensures only those who meet industry standards are cleared for application review and allowed to set foot on worksites
5. Protects airlines' public reputations
6. Allows for the verification that the applicant has successfully gleaned basic and advanced concepts
7. When you raise the bar on qualifications, it improves performance as applicants change their practices to meet industry standards

### Expected Outcomes of Pre-Qualification Certification Programs (PCP)

- Through didactic preparation, learning objectives are established early on as a preparation to Simulator (VR) type Training and provide a foundational, comprehensive industry education which allows for value of contribution, and bigger picture thinking.



- Interactive VR Applications provide interactive, immersive, & comprehensive “experiential” learning necessary to increase the level of situational awareness from observation & comprehension to internalization & prediction.
- VR would be used not just for education/experience but as an immersive testing environment. This Performance Simulator would provide standardized tasks and competencies as a measurement tool of skills mastery accomplishment.
- Upon Successfully completing Simulator Tasks – the learned experiences in the VR Cabin Trainer are more easily translated to real world situations; confidence and capability is increased.

Knowledge empowers confidence & capability – the more one “understands”, the broader the view points that can be entertained and the more ability and value in contribution. With the technology available today, there is no longer a need to “hire off the street” as it were, and airlines can hire with confidence from students who have completed a pre-qualification training/education.

### **Creating Pathway Agreements with Pre-Qualification Certification Programs, PCPs**

An industry-institution led Pre-qualification Certification Program, PCP, can solve the Airline-Applicant Conundrum when Pathway Agreements are established. Institutions offering PCPs would become resource pools for airline recruiters as students graduating from PCPs apply to airlines with fully approved industry qualifications.

Industry-Institution PCP agreements would significantly decrease recruiting costs involved in Airlines’ hiring each season as third-party companies, tasked with recruiting, expenses are reduced, if not removed altogether.

The PCP, recognized by participating Airlines, will meet Airline requirements for “prior flight attendant experience”. Airlines need only to look to PCP institutions for qualified candidates when hiring.

This requires raising the industry standard for the Flight Attendant workforce by implementing a certifiable pre-requisite “proof of proficiency” before being able to apply to the job.

### **Comparison**

As a comparison, Pilots are not hireable until they have attained specific levels of proficiency in their skills, as proven in their acquisition of licenses and ratings. As qualified Crew Members it makes sense that Flight Attendants should be held to a

similar standard, requiring specific levels of proficiency in their applied skills before they are hireable.

The conundrum of the Flight Attendant applicant unable to attain “airline experience” no longer needs to be a problem, as institutional Pre-qualification Certification Programs provide comprehensive experiential training and industry-approved certification of proficiencies. The applicants that are recruited from PCPs are assured through their certification to be fully prepared to enter the Flight Attendant workforce, ready to contribute value to their airline and armed with established skills in professionalism.

### **Creating a new Industry Standard**

Pre-qualifying applicants in this way, is not the same as screening them for employment. To be successful, this requires establishing a new, higher standard, a certified qualification, that will render them qualified to apply for a job both from the industry perspective as well as the institution perspective.

With this certification, an applicant comes to the job already prepared in all areas. They will have received industry education and understand how the airline is managed and how their role fits into the company vision. They will have acquired previous job experience, lifestyle comprehension, an ability to perform with reliability, and contribute to the consistency of the operation.

With the demand involved in each season’s hiring and considering the 1% of applicants winning the job lottery at the major carriers, the risk of losing qualified applicants by instituting a pre-qualification certification will work to serve airline goals to find the most qualified, best fitting applicant, only now the applicant will come highly recommended, certified, and ready to contribute, rather than as a work in progress.

### **Pre-qualification Program Breakdown**

- I. Virtual Reality Training
  - A. Cost-effective for industry and institution
    1. Realistic practice and experience needed for entry to industry jobs
    2. Allows for multiple-player = efficiency in working with smaller groups in shorter sessions
    3. Unlimited scenarios = addressing both regulatory safety and service standards
    4. Requires only a small space for training and storage of equipment
    5. Maintenance as software updates = limited equipment downtime
- II. Scenario-based Trainings

1. With industry input we can design any possible scenario and include variables = training never encounters the same scenario exactly the same way twice, yet addresses fundamental competencies
  2. Students receive exposure and practice with emergency and passenger event scenarios, teaching how to manage inflight events and build confidence = student enters industry job prepared for any possibility.
- III. Distance-learning and Computer-based Trainings
- A. Cost effective and logistically sound
  - B. Familiarizes the student with regulatory competencies before donning VR equipment and participating in VR scenarios = less cost, less time, higher performance and exam scores
  - C. Provides comprehensive industry education on aviation topics and = students understand airline management practices and can contribute value in their position according to this fundamental knowledge creating a more cohesive work environment and reduced frustration in the workforce.
  - D. Creates “bigger picture” thinking and motivates the learner to reflect on their contribution to the big picture.
- IV. Traditional Classroom Training
- A. Less distraction
  - B. Engaged learning
  - C. Human elements - plays a role in how learning material is absorbed
  - D. Group interaction - leads to discovery and improves supervisory skills as well as interpersonal skills

## Conclusion

Airlines need better qualified applicants, preferably with previous airline experience, and are looking to institutions to provide Pre-qualification Training. Unable to find enough qualified applicants, airlines look to those with education, and second-career seekers expecting qualifications to be met through prior public or customer service experience.

Applicants are unable to get previous flight attendant experience without first being hired in the flight attendant career. Airlines are having to accept unprepared and unqualified applicants into their new hire training classes. These new hires are unprepared for the realistic requirements of the career and ~80% are lost to attrition within the first year of employment.

Airlines' talent development teams are habitually looking for customer service experience as the main qualifying skill among applicants they “hire off the street.” The Flight Attendant career is not what it used to be and the intricacies of the job where knowledge, skills, and attitudes are needed are being overlooked and going untrained. A

comprehensive experiential learning model is needed to address all aspects of professionalism and proficiencies required in the Flight Attendant job.

Virtual Reality (VR) provides a comprehensive learning experience as it can be programmed with a variety of scenario-based trainings applicable to training competencies and proficiencies and can be used for both training, measurement and testing. Airlines are already reaching to this new technology as a cost/time-saving measure with their Flight Attendant workforce. The desire for pre-qualified applicants with experience in VR applications is expressed by airlines looking to use this technology in their initial and recurrent trainings.<sup>2</sup>

Airlines are continually looking for ways to cut training costs. VR equipment is much cheaper than traditional cabin trainer equipment and requires less maintenance. Students can be responsible for their own training through pre-qualification certification, thereby reducing training costs and time spent at airlines in initial and recurrent trainings.

Airlines are looking to institutions to pre-qualify applicants and are looking to institutions to collaborate with and provide industry-institution led Pre-qualification Certification Programs, from where they can select qualified applicants to join their Flight Attendant workforce.

Airlines have expressed a desire for Pathway Partnership Agreements with institutions offering industry-approved Pre-qualification Certification Programs, enabling qualified graduates Career Pathway Progression.

Pathway partnerships among institutions offering flight attendant pre-qualification certification programs and airlines who recruit from these programs are desirable for both airlines and institutions alike and are the start of creating a new industry standard for the flight attendant career.

It is agreed that the time is right for airlines to raise the industry standard for tomorrow's flight attendant professionals by instituting a mandated qualification for Flight Attendant proficiency as Pre-qualification Certification. By doing so, the lack of professionalism currently being experienced among new hire employees will be reduced, thereby raising the retention rates of new hire employees in their first year of employment. An on-going resource pool of qualified applicants graduating from industry-approved Pre-qualification Certification Programs will be established and help to create consistency and continuity in proficiencies and job intricacies among the Flight Attendant workforce.

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