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Frontline Human Capital Trends in Airlines

Introduction

The airline industry is navigating a rapidly evolving technological landscape, shifting workforce demographics, and intensifying competition for talent. Deloitte's [2025 Global Airline CEO Survey](#) highlights the mounting pressures facing the sector—from economic uncertainty and regulatory changes to rising customer expectations. These forces are driving a renewed urgency to leverage technology, redefine managerial roles to meet new challenges, and address the widening experience gap in the workforce.¹

Deloitte's [2025 Global Human Capital Trends](#) report finds that airlines embracing new technology can empower workers and better attract and retain top talent. New technologies are also enabling airlines to improve operations, enhance the passenger experience, and gain a competitive advantage. This paper explores three Human Capital trends shaping the airline industry and outlines the imperatives for equipping frontline workers to drive improved business and passenger outcomes. Throughout, “frontline” refers primarily to airport operations and customer service roles, but also encompasses all operational functions, including operations centers, tech ops, cargo, and others.



Trend 1: New technology capabilities require new workforce skills

Airlines remain dependent on legacy technology, with core systems—such as passenger service platforms—often running on decades-old mainframes. However, a significant shift is underway. As the travel industry evolves with innovations like offer-order, cloud migration, and artificial intelligence (AI) adoption, airlines have a unique opportunity to transform how work is accomplished. Our 2025 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends report finds the top two business case drivers for investing in new technologies are: 1) enabling the workforce to do more, faster, and 2) reducing costs.

This transition requires employees to move beyond maintaining stable, familiar systems and instead innovate within cloud-based environments—demanding new technical competencies and a shift in mindset. As technology moves from monolithic mainframes to off-the-shelf software-as-a-service (SaaS) products, the available talent pool expands. Additionally, the drive to improve costs through modernization is prompting many airlines to leverage global capability centers, unlocking further efficiencies and access to broader talent pools.

Historically, the airline industry has been highly cyclical. Yet, the latest post-COVID-19 investment wave signals a departure from incremental improvements toward strategic, enterprise-scale, long-term transformations. In 2024 and 2025, airlines have prioritized technologies that directly enhance the frontline employee and customer experience—such as AI-powered predictive maintenance, wearables, and customer-facing automation.²

What can airline leaders do to drive more value from their technology modernization?

- **Recognize passenger demands:** While constrained by existing technology and airport infrastructure, airlines must meet growing passenger expectations. The SITA 2023 Passenger IT Insights report notes that 67% of passengers used self-service check-in options and increasingly expect seamless digital experiences like real-time notifications and automated baggage tracking.³ Airlines should consider investing in technologies that both enable self-service and empower frontline workers to engage more effectively with passengers.
- **Drive change from the frontline:** The commercial aviation workforce is deeply experienced with established systems, and employees often tie their expertise and job security to these legacy platforms. Successful technology adoption requires more than training or the encouragement to change; it demands building trust and addressing apprehension.⁴ Leaders can foster adoption by highlighting “super users,” engaging them in Q&A sessions, and empowering trusted team members to champion new technologies among their peers.
- **Emphasize trust in new technology:** Building trust is essential for successful technology adoption among both employees and customers. Given the longevity of airline technology solutions and the tenure of frontline workforces, skepticism is common. Leaders can build confidence by engaging early adopters, hosting prompt-a-thons, and facilitating enterprise-wide forums that encourage active communication and hands-on learning. These activities focus on play, active communication across the company, and opportunities to learn—all of which work to increase trust in both leadership and the technology introduced.
- **Build global capabilities at the enterprise level:** Upgrading technology and systems globally is increasingly critical.⁵ While technology modernization is often the catalyst for leveraging global talent models, studies show that companies get significantly more value out of a global capability center if they approach it with an enterprise view, focusing on future-forward strategies rather than reactive cost-saving measures.⁶ Establishing an enterprise capability center enables comprehensive IT service delivery, development of strategic cross-functional skills, and scalable global support across functions like HR and finance.

Trend 2: The expanding role of managers

Frontline managers in airlines are facing expanded responsibilities, flatter hierarchies, and a proliferation of tools and tasks. The traditional management model—rooted in rigid chains of command—is being challenged by the need for agility and empowerment. As technology enables more self-service and the frontline role evolves, operational leaders are transitioning from compliance-focused tasks to roles centered on escalation, resolution, and enablement. This shift requires new capabilities and expectations.⁷

Airlines must balance empowering frontline employees with maintaining oversight to help ensure efficiency, safety, and regulatory compliance. The pandemic accelerated automation and self-service, reducing transactional interactions (e.g., seat reassignment) and shifting frontline focus toward crisis management and customer advocacy (e.g., managing customer experience in irregular operations, or IROPs).⁸ Consequently, frontline workers now require skills such as empathy, problem-solving, and adaptability, along with clear decision-making pathways to navigate high-stakes situations.

What are some considerations for airlines to make frontline managers more effective?

- **Adopt vertical structures with clear leadership:** Maintain organizational structures that provide clear leadership and decision-making authority, especially during crises and for regulatory compliance. Streamlining hierarchies and clearly defining roles can improve efficiency and often result in cost savings.
- **Focus on problem-solving skills:** As automation and self-service reshape the customer journey, frontline employees must be empowered to resolve complex issues and provide personalized support during disruptions. Investing in soft skills enables airlines to build customer loyalty and differentiate themselves in a competitive market.
- **Provide support for evolving roles:** Invest in training and support for managers as their roles evolve from transaction-based activities toward disruption resolution, ensuring they are equipped with new technological support to lead empowered teams while upholding safety and operational standards. Intentionally develop training and build learning in the flow of work to prepare them with the new skills, behaviors, and actions needed in the future.⁹
- **Set clear expectations:** Empowering the frontline requires clarity around roles and expectations. Clearly defined customer service standards, escalation protocols, and dispute resolution processes help managers make confident decisions. Organizational design should include explicit role and expectation mapping to empower employees to fully own their responsibilities.

Trend 3: Addressing the experience gap

The airline industry faces a pronounced experience gap, particularly in technical roles such as mechanics and flight dispatchers. The workforce is aging, with a significant proportion nearing retirement, and the pipeline of new talent is insufficient to meet future needs.¹⁰ The decline in vocational training and apprenticeships has further complicated efforts to recruit and develop entry-level talent with the necessary skills.¹¹

Airlines are not only competing with each other, but also with companies in other sectors, such as logistics, for frontline talent.¹² Compensation and employer brand perception should be competitive with alternatives such as logistics warehouses, which may offer similar pay but promise a different employee experience.

While outsourcing has traditionally addressed talent shortages, airlines are now focusing on building strategic partnerships—both domestically and internationally—to secure critical skills. Some carriers have established partnerships abroad to address shortages of mechanics, while others have positioned themselves as outsourcers to build market share and brand reputation. However, developing proficiency in key technical roles takes years, and the supply of qualified candidates is not keeping pace with demand.

The highly tenured nature of airline workforces adds further complexity. Many organizations have unionized roles filled by highly proficient employees, but as these employees retire, airlines must rapidly backfill with less experienced staff—potentially increasing task duration and operational drag.¹³ Airlines should work collaboratively with unions and regulators to develop training pathways and address the looming talent shortfall.

How can airlines bridge the experience gap?

- **Partner with education providers:** Collaborate with vocational schools, community colleges, and international partners to create new pathways into critical roles. For example, regional or executive airports are often an excellent source of Airframe and Powerplant certified mechanics. Airlines can create pipeline programs (especially in focus/hub cities) to grow their talent pools by building intentional alliances and partnerships.
- **Enhance the employee experience:** Improve retention by focusing on career development, workplace flexibility, and competitive benefits. Organizations should clarify and enhance both the nature of the work and the work environment, emphasizing meaning, tools, culture, leadership, and well-being.¹⁴ Investing in culture and frontline experience will reduce turnover and improve productivity.
- **Treat trust as a strategic asset:** Trust—among both employees and customers—is emerging as a central theme in airline Human Capital strategy. Deloitte's [2025 Global Airline CEO Survey](#) shows that employee engagement/culture, both drive-by and drivers of trust, is one of the top three items critical for success.¹⁵ Employees measure their trust in their organization through “their sense of an organization's or technology's reliability, capability, transparency, and humanity,” as discussed in an *Harvard Business Review* article about Deloitte's TrustID™ tool.¹⁶ Building trust requires fostering a culture of reliability, transparency, and humanity and can be strengthened by encouraging innovation, supporting play, and leading by example.
- **Invest in ways to enhance productivity:** With cost pressures and increased challenges in sourcing talent, airlines must find ways to do more with less. Investing in tools that simplify the employee experience and improve productivity will help airlines build resiliency in the face of these challenges. Better workforce management solutions¹⁷ and task allocation, coupled with AI optimization, will drive significant long term value.

Conclusion

The future of the airline industry will be defined by its ability to adapt—both technologically and culturally—to a rapidly shifting landscape. Airlines that prioritize their frontline workforce, invest in both soft skills and technological aptitude, and foster a culture of trust and empowerment will be better positioned to navigate ongoing disruption and seize new opportunities. By embracing these Human Capital trends as intentional strategic imperatives, airline leaders not only can overcome today's challenges but also can build a more resilient, agile, and customer-centric future that helps them compete in an ever-changing industry. The time to act is now, so as to enable frontline employees to remain at the heart of sustainable growth and operational excellence.



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Endnotes

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