



AgileOne

2026

THE GREAT RECALIBRATION

Competing for Talent in a
Shifting Aviation Landscape

AIRLINE INDUSTRY

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About This Report

The global labor market is entering a new phase of recalibration, and nowhere is this shift more visible, or more consequential, than in the airline industry. After several years of turbulence marked by rapid recovery, historic hiring surges, inflationary pressures, and supply chain constraints, aviation is now stabilizing while grappling with some of the most complex workforce challenges of any major sector.

Passenger demand continues to climb sharply, with global air travel expected to reach 9.8 billion passengers by 2026.¹ Yet workforce growth has not kept pace. Airlines worldwide are navigating a structural talent shortfall, one that spans pilots, maintenance technicians, ground operations, digital roles, and cabin crew. At the same time, aging aircraft fleets, delivery delays, and rising operating costs are pushing carriers to rethink their workforce strategies at every level. Layered on top of this are broader global labor market pressures, as regional economic conditions, demographic shifts, and policy dynamics increasingly shape talent availability and hiring conditions across aviation.

These global and regional dynamics reveal an airline industry in the midst of a great recalibration, balancing rising passenger demand with uneven access to skilled labor, escalating wage competition, and rapidly evolving operational and technological requirements.

In this special edition of AgileOne's Work Solutions Market Overview, we examine the trends reshaping aviation talent pipelines, the forces driving global shortages, and the workforce strategies airlines must deploy to turn volatility into long-term competitive advantage.

ABOUT AGILEONE

When you're facing the pressure of managing your workforce, AgileOne is at your side. As a single, trusted partner, we deliver comprehensive work solutions leveraging the best of the best, combined with our technology expertise, consulting services, and exceptional delivery teams to meet all your talent attraction and management needs.

We help companies manage the unexpected through a comprehensive suite of work solutions:

- ① **Recruitment Process Outsourcing (RPO):** Our RPO services provide scalable hiring support, ensuring businesses attract top talent while improving efficiency and reducing costs.
- ① **Managed Service Provider (MSP):** For organizations managing external labor, our MSP programs optimize contingent workforce strategies, leveraging technology and supplier management to drive cost savings and compliance.
- ① **Statement of Work (SOW) Management:** We help businesses gain visibility and control over project-based labor, ensuring better budget alignment and workforce performance.
- ① **Contingent Work Solutions:** Our expertise ensures businesses have access to flexible talent pools, helping them scale their workforce based on demand.
- ① **Direct Sourcing:** We enable clients to build and manage their own curated talent communities, leveraging employer brand and technology to attract and redeploy high-quality contingent talent efficiently.
- ① **Services Procurement:** We streamline the procurement of service-based engagements, such as consulting, creative, or IT projects, ensuring compliance, cost transparency, and alignment between deliverables and business objectives.

¹Global Air Passenger Numbers to Reach 9.8 Billion by 2026, Airport Industry News, October 1, 2025

²U.S. Cargo and Passenger Airlines Gained 8,803 Jobs in September 2025, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, November 10, 2025

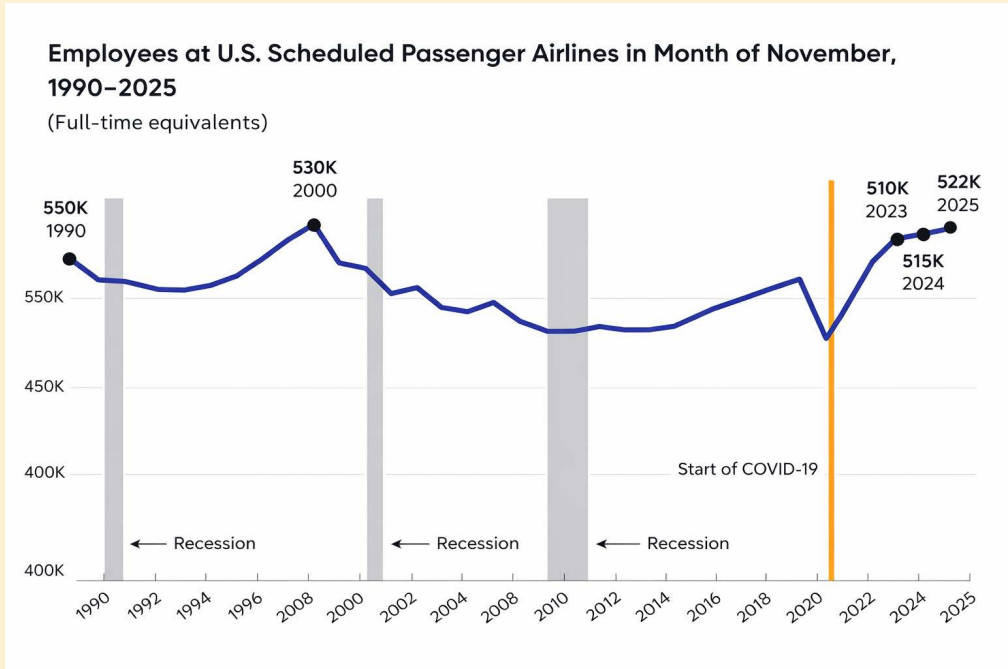
Competing for Talent in the Airline Industry

Global air travel is expected to reach 9.8 billion passengers in 2026, representing 3.7 percent year-over-year growth in demand.

The global airline industry is on the move. Passenger volumes are climbing rapidly, with global air travel expected to reach 9.8 billion passengers by 2026, representing 3.7 percent year-over-year growth in demand.² Yet workforce growth has not kept pace. In the United States alone, the industry employs more than 1.03 million workers, and scheduled passenger airlines are operating at their highest headcount in at least 35 years, reaching 519,000 workers.³ This sharp rise in activity, combined with a tight labor market, has placed intense hiring pressure on carriers worldwide.



Employees at U.S. scheduled passenger airlines in month of September, 1990-2025 (Full-time equivalents)⁴



Across global markets, airlines face a structural shortage of skilled labor. The industry is projected to face a deficit of more than 600,000 pilots, technicians, and cabin crew members by 2032. Longer term, airlines will need to hire more than 2 million personnel over the next 20 years, including 649,000 new pilots, 690,000 maintenance technicians, and 938,000 cabin crew members. These numbers reflect not only growing demand but also the impact of aging workforces and training bottlenecks that slow the entry of new talent.

³U.S. Cargo and Passenger Airlines Gained 8,803 Jobs in September 2025, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, November 10, 2025

⁴Pilot and Technician Outlook 2025–2044, Boeing, July 22, 2025

⁵Pilot and Technician Outlook 2025–2044, Boeing, July 22, 2025

⁶(No) turbulence ahead? The aviation industry in 2026, ING, October 27, 2025

⁷Want to be a pilot? Middle East airlines will need 10,000 more by 2030, Gulf News, November 4, 2025

Globally, airlines will need to hire more than 2 million personnel over the next 20 years, including 649,000 new pilots, 690,000 maintenance technicians, and 938,000 cabin crew members⁶

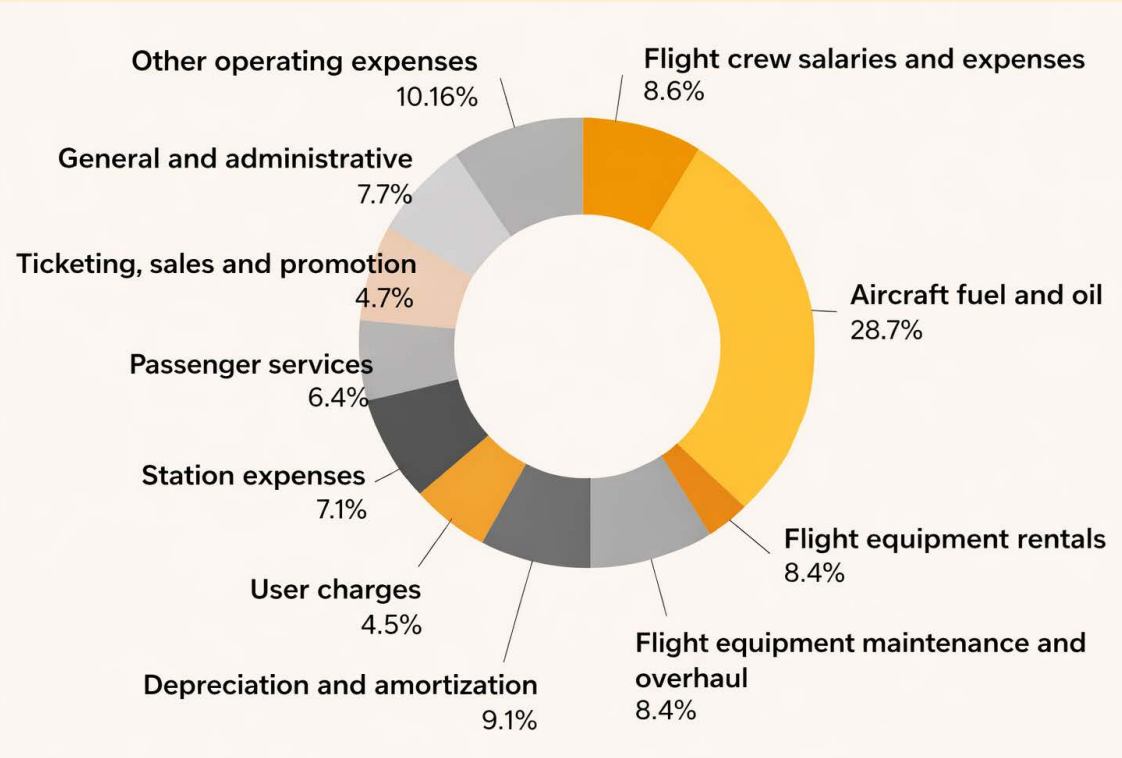
Maintenance and technical roles are under particularly acute strain. As aircraft production lags and delivery backlogs exceed 14,000 aircraft worldwide, airlines are extending leases and keeping older planes in service. This is driving a surge in demand for maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) expertise, with mechanics remaining in severe shortage even as pilot hiring has normalized.⁷ The widening gap in technical labor is now one of aviation’s biggest operational risks.

Regional dynamics are also reshaping global talent flows. Asia-Pacific and the Middle East are emerging as the strongest talent hubs, with both regions positioned to lead the world in pilot hiring, fleet growth, and new aviation jobs over the next decade.⁸ Europe, meanwhile, maintains a workforce of 2.9 million aviation workers but is seeing vacancy rates drift back toward pre-pandemic levels, indicating steadier, but still competitive, hiring conditions.

Beyond these core markets, India’s aviation market is one of the fastest-growing in the world. The industry employs approximately 369,700 people and supports an expanding fleet, with projections suggesting that up to 30,000 pilots may be required over the next decade to meet growth and backlog deliveries.¹⁰ Latin America, led by Brazil, continues to face record-low unemployment but also high levels of workforce informality—often exceeding regional averages—which remains a structural challenge for airlines seeking to scale stable, skilled aviation workforces even as demand grows. Meanwhile, the Middle East stands out as one of the fastest-growing aviation employment markets globally, with fleet growth and workforce demand propelled by ambitious carrier strategies and substantial investment in training, sustainability, and future-skills development, positioning the region to lead global demand for pilots, cabin crew, and technical specialists.¹¹

Breakdown of average costs for global airline companies¹²

At the same time, labor costs are rising sharply. In the U.S., airline unit costs per seat mile have increased 22 percent compared to 2019, while revenue per seat mile has risen only 11 percent.¹³ Labor expenses are expected to grow an additional 4-6 percent year-over-year across major carriers, and flight crew wages now account for 8.6 percent of all airline expenses.^{14 15} Workers are negotiating aggressively for higher pay: flight attendants at Alaska Airlines rejected a contract offering 32 percent raises over three years, while Southwest crews secured a 22 percent pay increase with additional raises locked in through 2027.¹⁶



To adapt, airlines are expanding hiring pipelines and diversifying the roles they recruit. Beyond pilots and mechanics, carriers are increasingly adding software developers, analysts, procurement specialists, schedulers, and quality-assurance professionals. Taken together, these trends reveal an industry that must compete more aggressively and creatively for talent than ever before. With global demand rising, labor shortages deepening, and wage pressures accelerating, airlines will need to rethink workforce strategies, from training pipelines to compensation models, to keep pace with the next era of aviation growth.

At Your Side

Thriving in today’s evolving labor market demands agility, foresight, and balance. As the airline industry recalibrates and global hiring dynamics shift, AgileOne partners with companies to build adaptable, future-ready workforces. Through our MSP, RPO, and SOW solutions, we help companies navigate labor shortages, new technologies, and demographic change, ensuring access to the right talent at the right time.

From the United States to Europe, India, Latin America, and the Middle East, our data-driven approach empowers businesses to respond confidently to regional complexities and global opportunities alike. Whether optimizing supplier networks, enhancing direct sourcing, or supporting workforce planning through AI-driven insights, AgileOne delivers the clarity and flexibility organizations need to turn uncertainty into advantage.

⁸ Aviation: Benefits Beyond Borders, Europe, Air Transport Action Group
⁹ The Value of Air Transport to India, IATA, 2024
¹⁰ Boeing Forecasts 20-Year Global Demand for Nearly 2.4 Million New Commercial Pilots, Technicians, Cabin Crew, Boeing, July 22, 2025
¹¹ Unveiling the biggest airline costs, International Air Transport Association, June 4, 2024
¹² Airline labor costs on the rise, Aviation’s Week in Charts, September 05, 2024
¹³ Travel Market Report, BCD Travel, March 2025
¹⁴ Unveiling the biggest airline costs, International Air Transport Association, June 4, 2024

Top Solutions

As the world of work continues its great recalibration, we stand ready to help our partners lead. Here are some of the leading solutions we recommend:

1. Build agile workforce capacity to manage cooling demand

As hiring slows across the U.S. and Europe, companies must find flexible ways to scale without overcommitting. Leveraging contingent staffing for variable demand and SOW (statement of work) solutions for defined projects can help organizations adapt quickly while controlling costs. Redeployment programs can also reduce onboarding expenses by reusing existing talent. Labor market intelligence tools, such as wage benchmarking and time-to-fill data, can set realistic expectations and ease client concerns.

2. Stand up tariff-mitigation talent strategies

With U.S. tariffs at their highest effective rate since the 1930s, manufacturing, logistics, and retail firms face new cost pressures.¹⁷ Companies should build specialized talent pipelines in procurement, supply chain, and financial planning to mitigate disruption. SOW contracting for supplier shifts and nearshoring analyses can provide targeted expertise, while flexible rate cards and shorter contract terms allow businesses to adapt as trade conditions change.

3. Counter tighter skill supply through mobility and reskilling

Immigration policy reforms reduced the foreign-born workforce by more than 750,000 people in the U.S. in 2025, straining sectors like healthcare, construction, and agriculture.¹⁸ To adapt, businesses should invest in cross-training programs, expand interstate and rural-to-urban mobility initiatives, and use VMS/MSP analytics to reallocate requisitions to deeper local labor pools. These measures broaden access to talent while helping fill roles that would otherwise remain vacant.

4. Harness AI to boost productivity without displacement

Generative AI adoption is accelerating, but disruption is unfolding gradually. Rather than widespread job loss, the near-term effect is task redesign, with up to 26 percent of postings showing high AI transformation potential.¹⁹ Employers worldwide should prioritize “AI-adjacent” upskilling (e.g., prompting, QA, and workflow optimization) for administrative and professional roles. Offering productivity-linked pricing models and establishing AI governance SMEs (in policy, privacy, and change management) can ensure that adoption drives efficiency responsibly.

5. Target pocketed growth sectors with tailored workforce programs

While overall job openings have cooled, sectors such as healthcare, social assistance, and tech-driven industries like data centers are expanding rapidly. In the U.S. alone, financing for data-center build-outs alone surpassed \$9 billion in 2025 securitizations.²⁰ To capture growth, firms should double down on building talent pools in these fast-rising industries and train workers in adaptability, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills. Regional hubs and travel contracts can further help employers chase these pockets of demand.

¹⁵ Focus: US airline flight crews confident and angry as unions seek richer contracts, Reuters, November 21, 2024

¹⁶ Short-Run Effects of 2025 Tariffs So Far, The Budget Lab at Yale, September 2, 2025

¹⁷ What the data says about immigrants in the U.S., Pew Research Center, August 21, 2025

¹⁸ AI at Work Report 2025: How GenAI is Rewiring the DNA of Jobs, Indeed Hiring Lab, September 23, 2025

¹⁹ Data centers: Managing risk amid a market boom, Moody's, May 15, 2025



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