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Gender balance in piloting world is finally showing signs of improving

Nine out of ten airline pilots are men. Yet, Anne Kirwan has never felt at a disadvantage being a female pilot. She tells us why, if you're good enough, being a woman will not hold you back.

Some people know exactly what they want to do from a young age; I wasn't one of them. I was well in to my late teens before I discovered that I loved flying. Once I'd learned a bit about what a job as a pilot offered, I was hooked.

A family friend used to be a long-haul pilot. He would fly to glamorous locations all over the world and I just loved everything about it. Even now, hundreds of flights into my career, I still love the thrill of flying.

Girls just aren't shown examples of women flying planes

I think there's a lack of exposure to female pilots, so girls might not even consider it as a career option. I'd like to help change that. The outdated attitudes of 'men do this, and women do that' are dissipating, but that doesn't happen overnight.

We proactively encourage female applicants for all levels of pilot roles. Hopefully it'll encourage more young women and girls to realise that being a pilot isn't out of reach for them. We have a strong heritage of supporting female pilots and were the first airline in Europe to employ a female pilot, Gráinne Cronin. Currently, we employ twice as many female pilots when compared with the international airline industry average.

Financially, it's a gender-neutral playing field

The financial challenge of training to be a pilot is the same for everyone, regardless of your gender. Taking the plunge to go through your commercial flight training isn't a risk everyone is comfortable with. In that respect, I've never felt at a disadvantage as a woman.

It's a level playing field financially. One option that aspiring pilots

should consider is the Aer Lingus Future Pilot Programme - which is one of very few fully-sponsored, fully-mentored training platforms for aspiring pilots run by commercial airlines globally.

How did your school subjects help you pursue this career?

I chose my subjects based on what I enjoyed and what I was good at, rather than what might help me for the future; I wasn't sure what I wanted to be! Application of knowledge, no matter what that knowledge is, is a statement of intent that employers will take note of, so that was my focus.

I then went onto a science degree, which was quite open-ended in terms of what I could go into at the end of it. That was perfect for me. It possibly wasn't the most logical of next steps in terms of then becoming a pilot, but I loved it. It proved my ability to apply myself to an end goal and demonstrate

discipline, which I could transfer to any future role.

What's your advice to young girls considering career options?

My advice would be that self-belief will carry you a long way. You've only got one life; you've got to live it exactly as you want to. Don't feel boxed into doing one thing or the other. You have so many options. I always say, if you really want to do something, give it everything. You may look back and say, 'Well, that didn't work out', but at least you can say you tried. ■

James Alder

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