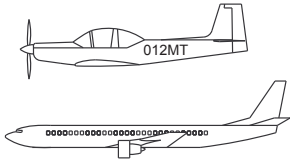




Conversations: Find your Niche



Helicopter Flight Instructor

“When I’m flying around it doesn’t really feel like a job because it’s too much fun. I look down at all of the traffic and everybody in their cars going to and from their office job while I’m flying around above them having a blast and getting paid. It would be hard not to like this.”
- Jason Sohn

Executive Summary: Helicopter Flight Instructor, Jason Sohn

Typical Education Level:

High School Diploma, Associate’s or Bachelor’s Degree in Aviation Science, Private Pilot Certificate, Instrument Pilot Certificate, Commercial Pilot Certificate plus Flight Instructor Certificate, Instrument Flight Instructor Certificate, Ground Instructor Certificate and log book endorsement in the type of helicopter instruction will be given in.

Annual Salary Range* (Hourly Rates):

Note: Earnings for Helicopter Pilots rise rapidly as they gain experience. Also, remote duty sites often have significant pay incentives and overtime premiums.

Entry Level = \$46,000 - \$65,000 annually (\$22.12 - \$31.25 per hour)

Mid-Range = \$65,000 - \$97,000 annually (\$31.25 - \$46.63 per hour)

Upper Range = \$97,000 - \$160,000+ annually (\$46.63 - \$76.92+ per hour)

Job Description:

Helicopter Flight Instructors teach student pilots at all levels of aviation the skills they need to get a new rating or refresh their skills on existing ratings. Helicopter Pilots in industry fly a wide range of missions including passengers and freight transportation, traffic watch, police support, lifting cargo, machinery and construction materials to remote locations and supporting Search and Rescue and MEDEVAC operations. Good health and good hand/eye coordination are required for this profession.

** The Salary Range presented here is derived from U.S. Department of Labor data and other credible sources, but should be considered approximate and used for reference only. Salaries for specific jobs vary widely depending on company size, locale, economic conditions and other factors.*

Professional: Jason Sohn

1. Please tell us about yourself and what people, influences, events, or desires led you to your profession.

Basically, it is kind of something that I have always wanted to do. I’ve always wanted to fly. I grew up outside of Philadelphia and I used to see the helicopters coming in and out of the hospitals downtown. It was always something that really appealed to me, so I started doing research on how I would be able to become a helicopter pilot so I could fly MEDEVAC (medical evacuation). There are two different options: the military or private flight schools. I did not go through the military so I can only share how the private schools work.

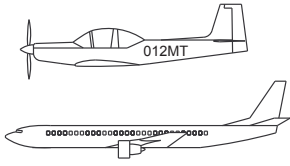
When you start at school there are a number of different things you have to do. First, you have to get a medical and a student pilot license. Then you start going to school to get your private license. Once you get your private license, the next step is the commercial license. A pilot needs to

build a lot of time in between. Private licenses usually take somewhere around fifty to sixty flight hours even though the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) only requires forty hours. For the commercial license you need a minimum of one hundred and fifty hours. We use some of the remaining ninety hours in the meantime to work on getting an instrument rating.

We train our students so they get their instrument rating and all of that time counts towards their commercial license. Then they can complete whatever hours they need in order to get their commercial license. Once you get the commercial license, you work on your Certified Flight Instructor rating. When you have done that you can get your Instrument Instructor rating. When all is said and done you have about two hundred hours of flight time. If you go consistently, four to five days a week through training and studying and if you are really motivated, it will take about a year and a half to get through all of the different ratings. At that point in time



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you usually get picked up as a flight instructor somewhere whether it be at the school you train at or another flight school.

2. How would you *describe the job* of a Helicopter Flight Instructor?

As the assistant chief instructor I help out with some administrative duties at the school such as scheduling and maintenance issues with helicopters. Also, any kind of little side projects that the owners have, such as researching different helicopter contracts or courses that we might be able to put together for students. As far as flying duties, I teach the Certified Flight Instructor course and also conduct stage checks.

I also teach the Instrument Instructor course. We usually do two-hour blocks with a student and it's all one-on-one instruction. We will do either a ground session or a flight session. We have a syllabus that we follow that has all of the course information laid out. We'll basically go along with the syllabus and teach the ground instruction that we need to teach or go out and do the flight maneuvers that we need to cover. So, a typical day consists of usually five or six sessions of either ground or flight depending on what the particular student needs and where they're at in their training.

3. What are the *most enjoyable aspects* of your work? Why?

One of the biggest things for me is that I'm not sitting behind a desk everyday. I've just never been one to sit at a desk or work in an office all day. It's not for me. So, I'm outside and flying around which in and of itself is awesome. We go different places. For example, the other day I flew out to an area just south of Boston. It only took two hours for the trip out and back. That is at least a two-hour drive one way from where we are. I like the ability to go different places and experience different things when I'm flying. One of my most memorable flights was when we were able to fly around the Statue of Liberty at 500 feet. Things like that and being able to fly around New York City at night is amazing. Those kinds of things are memorable because they're unique. Most people never get to do them. When I'm flying around it doesn't really feel like a job because it's too much fun. I look down at all of the traffic and everybody in their cars going to and from their office job while I'm flying around above them having a blast and getting paid. It would be hard not to like this.

4. What are the *least enjoyable aspects* of your work and why?

Weather. We generally have to have good weather. We can fly in marginal weather depending on what we're doing. Sometimes, when we have low ceilings or not so great visibility, we will do a flight just to expose the students to what it is like when it's not the best of conditions out there. If it's too nasty, then we won't go. Whether we get to fly or not on a day like that depends on how long the weather stays bad. I've gone almost a week without flying because of the weather. So, that's one of my least favorite aspects of my job.

5. What is the *most common misconception* that people have about your line of work?

Everybody thinks that flying helicopters would be really, really easy. In all actuality, it is very difficult. Once you get the hang of it, it starts to get easier. Basically, when most people look at a helicopter, especially in a hover, they don't realize that it is still moving. The pilot is constantly making control inputs in order to keep the helicopter still. Everybody thinks it's like driving a car. A car is a stable vehicle. It's really not like a car at all. It usually takes around eight to ten hours just to develop a good hover. Many potential students don't realize that. They think it's one of those things that they should be able to do right away as soon as they get in. To sum it up, my general impression with people I talk to who don't know anything about the field is that they have the impression that it's easy to fly a helicopter.

6. What parts of your formal education, work experience, or personal hobbies were the *most helpful* in preparing you for your profession?

I wear contacts, which kept me out of the military. So I couldn't get flight training through them and I couldn't find a school that offered helicopter training. I went to college and got a degree in criminal justice. I was a police officer for four years prior to getting into flying. It took me a while, but after a couple of years of looking I was able to find Northeast Helicopters. When I found them I said, "Okay, that's what I'm going to do." I came down here and started training.

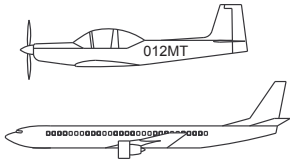
I do think that some of the decision making processes I used as a police officer makes a difference in the way I view situations and decisions when I'm flying. Also, talking on the radio as a police officer made it easy for me when I was flying. That is a hard thing for many students. They don't like talking on the radio.

7. How open is your field? Are there *good opportunities* for determined newcomers?

Absolutely. At this point in time the helicopter industry is just booming. There are more jobs than there are pilots. The demand right now for getting qualified people to fly for the different operators is huge. The pay scale has generally been



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going up a lot for helicopter pilots and the hour requirements for the jobs are dropping drastically. I think people are starting to realize the importance and use of helicopters because they can pretty much go anywhere and land in the middle of a field, highway or rooftop. It really changes how people view being transported. People are starting to realize how useful a helicopter can be. They are starting to acquire them and of course they need the pilots to go along with them.

8. Beyond the obvious work of being a Helicopter Flight Instructor, what *other activities or skills* does your profession require you to do well?

Multitasking. When we're flying, both hands and both feet are doing something all at the same time. Anytime we change one control input the others have to change. So every time you move your left hand, you have to move your right hand and usually your feet. Then if you move your right hand you might have to move your left hand and feet. In addition to that, now you have to pay attention to where you are, what you are doing, who's around you, talking on the radio, making sure you aren't busting somebody's air space, etc. That is just basic flying. If you are doing a lift operation where now you have a line below you with a weight or cargo on the bottom that you are trying to put down in a specific place, you have even more things to keep track of. So, multitasking is a huge part of being able to fly helicopters.

9. How would a young person with aspirations to become a Helicopter Flight Instructor *best prepare* himself or herself?

As far as school subjects go, we do a lot of things that involve math and calculations. Basic math skills would be good. As far as character traits, in the beginning you have to be willing to work. One of the things that comes with the job is that you may not have nights, weekends or holidays off depending on the type of operation you're doing. You have to realize that you are going to be working a lot. Still, it's not really work because it's so much fun.

The training for becoming a pilot is a challenge and you have to be determined to work hard and stick with it. I really believe that if you work hard, good things will happen to you. The helicopter industry is a small community. Your reputation will follow you. If you start out with a really good reputation, that's going to open a lot of doors for you. So, it's about being personable and working hard. It's taking that

extra step to do things the right way and maybe even going above and beyond sometimes. You'll get recognized for that and hopefully rewarded.

10. What do you believe are the *keys to enjoying work*?

Basically, find something you love to do and then find someone who is willing to pay you for it. I think what it really comes down to is if you aren't happy doing what you are doing, then you really should find something else to do. Find something you enjoy that you can do as a career. There's so much out there. It's kind of interesting because when I changed from the police department to flying, which was always a life long dream, it was kind of scary going to a whole new career. I enjoyed being a police officer and going from being established somewhere to moving to a new place where you don't know anybody was tough. Sometimes people are afraid to take that jump. It's basically doing whatever it is that makes you happy. Try to find something you can do that makes you happy and figure out how to make it into a job and go from there.

11. What is the *most important or significant thing* that you have accomplished in your work to date? What do you hope to accomplish?

One of the biggest things for helicopter pilots is the magic number: one thousand hours of flight time. Once you get one thousand hours you are marketable for going to the oil rigs, flying tours around New York City, the Grand Canyon, or even going up to Alaska and flying utility work. I think one of the most important things for me was when I reached my one thousand hours and started looking for other jobs. I was only a flight instructor at that point in time. Being offered the Assistant Chief Flight Instructor position was a really good thing for me, both personally and career wise. One of the reasons I was offered the position was because of how hard I worked as a flight instructor.

In the future I would like to go to Alaska for a season. It would start in the spring. April through October is their season. Then I would like to transfer into EMS, Emergency Medical Service, and fly for a hospital somewhere.

12. Additional thoughts?

Going through high school, you don't realize it at the time, but how well you do and the habits you develop are important. I can tell you that it really does make a difference... because I didn't do so well in high school. I had the attitude that I didn't care if I did well. That caught up with me when I went to college. I turned it around a little and did better in college, but I would definitely say do as well as you can both in high school and in college if you go.

Also, you always have options. There's always a way to get something done. Don't be afraid and don't feel locked in to one course of action. If there's something you really want to do, go out and do it.