

# Conversations for tomorrow

Quarterly review  
N°2 — 2021

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**THIERRY BARIL**

Chief Human Resources Officer,  
Airbus





# PREPARING THE AVIATION WORKFORCE FOR THE SKILLS OF TOMORROW

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## **AIRBUS**

Thierry Baril joined the group Airbus in 2003 as executive vice president human resources at Eurocopter, now Airbus Helicopters. He then became executive vice president human resources of Airbus Commercial Aircraft in 2007.

Since 2012, he has been the chief human resources officer of Airbus and a member of the Airbus Executive Committee. Since joining Airbus, he has been responsible for defining and implementing a company-wide human resources strategy, enhancing integration and employee engagement.

The Capgemini Research Institute spoke to Thierry about how Airbus coped with unprecedented changes in the market during the pandemic and the lasting changes they see in ways of working.

## THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE AVIATION INDUSTRY

### **The past year saw an unprecedented impact on the aviation sector and on Airbus directly. How did you respond?**

— The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first crisis we have faced in the aviation world, but it was unprecedented in many ways. We had 90% of our aircraft down on the tarmac, 34% fewer deliveries, and saw revenues decline 29% in 2020. We needed to adapt very quickly to this new, volatile situation and endeavored to continue our activities, which involved implementing the right sanitary measures and protocols to keep our employees safe. We also implemented a plan to manage headcount and a cash containment program.

### **What helped Airbus react with agility and speed?**

— First and foremost, it was the flexibility of our people. The pandemic hit at a time when we were in a very dynamic growth environment. Our people showed a lot of resilience and will to adapt, as well as a willingness to be prepared for when things are back to normal. Second, by the time of the first lockdowns in Europe, we had already faced the COVID-19 crisis in China for a few months. That experience was extremely useful to prepare and adapt with speed in Europe. And this agility is starting to pay off in our first quarter 2021 results. They show stable revenue year on year and more aircraft deliveries, with 125 commercial aircraft delivered versus 122 in the same period a year ago.



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**Our experience in China was extremely useful to prepare and adapt with speed in Europe.”**

## NEW WORKING MODELS POST-PANDEMIC

### **What working model did you implement during the crisis? And do you plan to maintain it for the long term?**

— We manufacture very complex products and components in order to make a final product, such as aircraft, satellites, or arms systems. Given our level of manufacturing activities, not much has changed for our production workers during COVID-19 except our health and safety protocols. Our teams have continued to produce quality products at high productivity levels in this environment.

For people who are not directly linked to the production environments, the lockdowns created opportunities to experience the power of our digital landscape and working remotely. Do we want to make Airbus a company that is 100% working from home? No, we do not. The main reason is that we produce goods, and it's critical for our shop-floor employees to be on site. On the other hand, I think it's too harsh for a company to say everyone has to be back in the office permanently. Post-pandemic, we do plan to continue developing agile ways of working and believe one to two days a week or 40% of people's time at home is workable and acceptable. In some specific activities, where there is more administrative or transactional work, the number of days at home could even be higher, as this type of work can be done from everywhere. We want to capitalize on the remote working experience during the crisis and believe hybrid working is a way to do that. It has to be organized at team level with leaders being empowered to allow their team members appropriate flexibility with remote work, in line with business and team priorities.

### **Are you adjusting your office space requirements as a result of more hybrid working?**

— It is an opportunity to reduce our costs including rent, infrastructure, electricity, and water. We have around 1.5 million square meters of office space around the world. Our objective is to reduce it by 20%, or 300,000 square meters. We also decided to stop building rentals and repositioned those teams in buildings that we own ourselves. Ensuring the office space we do maintain is high quality, flexible, agile, and creative – while at the same time allowing our people to benefit from working remotely – is a win-win proposal to my mind.

## **AUTOMATION AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT**

### **How has automation affected jobs at Airbus already and the nature of jobs going forward?**

— Automation is not new to Airbus. We see it as an opportunity for our operators to increase their horizontal skills. They take on more responsibilities that require a multi-skill approach because their activities are evolving with automation. For example, when we automate one job position, that job holder is then able to manage different positions. I recently visited one of our factories in Spain that has been totally digitalized. Each operator is now responsible for their own “mini production floor” and they have gained management experience and skills. Feedback I heard from our operators was very positive on their new roles and responsibilities.



**At a digitalized factory in Spain, each operator is now responsible for their own 'mini production floor' and they have gained management experience and skills."**

Not only can automation improve our productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness, it can also positively impact health and safety. For example, we can automate some of the ways we inspect aircraft paint work with drones. This eliminates the potential for physical and health risks.

### **How are you building the skills of your workforce?**

— We invest a lot in training. Our business is to create complex objects enabled by digitalization and we constantly need to skill our employees to keep them up to date on the latest technologies that will help us be more effective and continue pioneering aerospace products and services. For example, we have been developing products in 3D for many years and needed to ensure our employees were equipped in this area from a skill perspective.

Multi-skilling and up-skilling help to address skill gaps in our organization. For example, we needed to fill hundreds of data analyst roles. When we started to source and recruit talent, we quickly realized demand outstripped supply and we would not be able to meet our goals from external hiring alone. Therefore, we looked at our own people and identified those who possessed the prerequisites to become data analysts. We trained our first batch of 600 employees for six months to develop and prepare them to be data analysts. We undertook the same approach for roles in artificial intelligence and cybersecurity and are using this approach in further domains of technical capabilities.

### **How do your project timelines impact the demand and supply of skills?**

— Our project cycles are very long and, because of that, we undertake rigorous skills planning. For example, we have a multi-billion euro project to develop a joint European fighter jet, the Future Combat Air System (FCAS). This is a program that will be ongoing for the next 20 to 30 years. We will need to hire or develop thousands of people over the course of the project. So, we must plan for these skills now. We will be looking for talent that are passionate about the future of commercial and military aircraft, including technologies to enable zero-emission/green aircrafts and hydrogen propulsion systems.

There are also skills that we need to develop on shorter timeframes that are linked to our everyday business and production. For example, competencies in cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, as well as information technology specialists. We want to attract talent who are in love with aerospace. But, in addition, we also need to attract talent who may not be aerospace specialists, but who have other diverse skills – for example, skills in digital design and digital manufacturing, as these are important areas for the future of our business too.





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