



# CEOs as Pilots

Weary of airline delays and traffic jams, more executives are learning to fly their own planes

By **DODY TSIANTAR** FARMINGDALE

**For years, pet-supply executive Andrew King** spent about a third of his workweek trapped on the Long Island Expressway, famed for its snail-paced traffic. He felt he had no choice. As president of **Kings Cages**, a birdcage manufacturer based in Farmingdale, N.Y., about 40 miles east of Manhattan, King has to visit customers scattered all around New

York, New Jersey and Connecticut. But one day last spring, as he was spending all morning driving to Oxford, Conn., it suddenly occurred to him that if he had flown from a municipal airport near his business, he would have reached his destination in half an hour.

Inspired, King took a leave from his job and signed up for intensive pilot training at a school in Pompano Beach, Fla. Training and studying all day for 20 days straight, King, 30, learned to operate a single-engine Cessna 172 under visual flight rules. "I was scared at the beginning, but now I love to fly," says King, a licensed pilot who is working toward a second certification that will allow him to fly in bad weather and at night by using the plane's instruments. "It's very relaxing being up there," he says. "Hey, it's cheaper than therapy."

Weary of airport hassles and delays—not to mention time-wasting traffic jams—many executives like King are taking the throttle in their hands and learning to fly themselves from appointment to appointment. Student

starts are at their highest level since 1993, says Phil Boyer, 61, president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA). The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reports that the number of new student pilots flying single-engine planes rose 6% this year through Nov. 2, compared with the same period last year, to a total of 58,747. While no one tracks the number of executives among those students, the National Business Aviation Association, a nonprofit group, says that since February, 6% more businessmen are flying themselves in their own planes or ones they rent. Says AOPA's Boyer: "More and more executives are treating planes like a personal car used for business."

Rob Basso, 30, plans to join their ranks. The owner of **Advantage Payroll Services** in Hicksville, N.Y., Basso has dreamed of piloting a plane ever since he was a kid. At a trade show last spring, he picked up an **Air East Airways** brochure advertising pilot lessons out of its hangar at Republic Airport in Farmingdale, just 15 minutes from his home. Since April, he's been taking flight lessons once or twice a

◀ **Basso, who dreams of owning a plane, prepares to fly in a rented Piper Warrior**

week—early in the morning or in the late afternoon. He attends a 2½-hour session on the ground and puts in about 10 hours a week at home studying manuals. "I figured flying a small plane would be a more cost-effective way to meet with clients than taking commercial flights," he says. "For a business owner, time is money."

If you've had the itch to soar above the freeways like Basso, you might find it's easier than you think. Be a Pilot, a nonprofit aviation organization, offers \$49 introductory lessons at more than 1,800 schools. (For one near you, check [beapilot.com](http://beapilot.com) or [www.aopa.org/learntofly/school](http://www.aopa.org/learntofly/school).) To obtain a pilot's license to fly a single-engine aircraft with fixed landing gear under visual flight rules, you must meet FAA requirements: 40 hours of training and a flight exam. But instructors say most people need 50 to 70 hours in the air before they can pass the test. The cost: about \$90 to \$120 an hour for the plane, the instructor and the fuel. Certification to fly a plane with greater range—one with multiple engines and retractable landing gear—requires about 250 more hours of flight training. If you fantasize about zipping coast to coast at the controls of a private jet, brace yourself: that license requires 3,000 to 4,000 hours of training and costs as much as \$40,000.



MARC ASHIN—CORBIS SYGMA FOR TIME 121

**King, a business owner and private pilot, checks out a Cessna 172 before takeoff**

On an unseasonably warm October afternoon, Basso climbed into the sky above Long Island at the controls of a Piper Warrior, with his instructor Matt Grimaldi, 24, at his side. The cockpit, a little larger than a sports car's interior, was stuffy and the landing a bit bumpy. But Basso—who figures his flying endeavor will have cost him about \$6,000 to \$7,000 by the time he gets his private pilot's license—was smiling at the thought of flying solo on business trips. Says he: "I can't put a price tag on the time I'm going to save." ■