

The Direct Entry Captain Prep Pack

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A current A350 line captain

AerologHQ — 2026 edition

An honest framework for the assessment, written by a current A350 line captain.

About this pack

This is not a leaked question bank. There are no proprietary sim profiles, no insider interview questions from any specific airline, no confidential training material. Anyone selling you that is risking their career for your money, and the information would be out of date within months anyway.

What this pack is: an honest, structured framework for approaching a Direct Entry Captain (DEC) assessment built from publicly available information, pilot community knowledge, and the mental approach that works for experienced captains moving between operators.

If you're a qualified captain considering a DEC pathway at a major airline, this is the guide I wish existed when I was preparing for mine. Read it once end-to-end, then use it as a working reference during your prep.

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Section 1 — The DEC Landscape

What “Direct Entry Captain” actually means

Direct Entry Captain (DEC) is a hiring pathway where an airline recruits someone who is already a qualified commercial airline captain — typically on jet aircraft, typically with a substantial command hours requirement — directly into a left-seat position on their fleet, rather than promoting internally from their own first officer ranks.

The pathway exists because airlines periodically need captains faster than internal command upgrades can produce them. Fleet growth, retirements, new route launches, and post-pandemic hiring cycles all create gaps that DEC fills. When an airline has ordered 50 new widebody aircraft arriving over three years, waiting for internal FOs to reach command minimums isn't an option.

From the airline's perspective, DEC is expensive. A DEC captain typically commands a senior pay band from day one, needs a type rating if they don't already hold one, and carries training and relocation costs. Airlines do it because the alternative — aircraft on the ground without crews — is more expensive still.

From your perspective, DEC is a one-shot opportunity to jump fleets, operators, and often countries, in a way that normal seniority-based progression would never allow. It's also the most competitive entry pathway into many major airlines, because the pool applying is by definition experienced and motivated.

Who runs DEC programs

The pattern of who's running DEC changes year by year. As of 2026, the operators that have had active or recently active DEC programs for widebody aircraft include — in no particular order, and not exhaustively:

- Gulf carriers — Emirates, Qatar Airways, Etihad, Saudia, Oman Air, Gulf Air have all run or are running DEC pipelines depending on fleet needs
- Asian carriers — Cathay Pacific, Singapore Airlines, Korean Air, Japan Airlines, and various Chinese carriers run intermittent DEC depending on expansion
- European majors — Lufthansa Group, Air France-KLM, British Airways, Turkish Airlines periodically
- North American — more rarely, typically via specific subsidiary or regional pathways, though this varies
- Cargo operators — FedEx, UPS, Cargolux, and various Asian cargo carriers run command pipelines that sometimes accept DEC
- Charter and premium operators — various

This list changes. Before applying, verify the airline is currently accepting DEC applications on your aircraft type — not every airline runs DEC every year, and fleet needs shift. PPRuNe, pilot career forums, and the airlines' own career pages are the sources of truth. Recruiter agencies sometimes know before the public announcement.

What the airline is actually looking for

Airlines running DEC are filling specific gaps. The ideal DEC candidate from their perspective is:

- Already type-rated on their aircraft, or on something close enough that type training is low-risk
- Current — flying the line, not retired or long-out of flying
- Clean record — no accidents, no significant incidents, no sim failures on record
- Stable employment history — no pattern of short stints that suggest difficulty adapting
- Good English — most airlines accept ICAO Level 4 as the minimum, with Level 5 common at some Gulf and Asian carriers; Level 6 is expert and generally lifetime-valid (a few jurisdictions still require validation). What matters is that you're actually fluent, not just certified
- Healthy — Class 1 medical with minimal limitations, capable of passing the airline's specific medical standards
- Culturally adaptable — willing to relocate, live in the airline's base, adapt to their operational culture
- Unremarkable in interviews — which sounds strange but is important. Airlines are risk-averse on captains. They want competent, professional, mildly unexciting people who will fly their aircraft safely for the next 15 years

The last point is worth sitting with. DEC selection is not like graduate program recruiting. The airline isn't looking for the most dynamic, charismatic, or entrepreneurial candidate. They're looking for someone who will show up on time for fifteen years, not embarrass them on the line, and make consistent commander-level decisions. If you walk into an interview trying to impress them with how exceptional you are, you're playing the wrong game.

What the pathway typically costs you

DEC is expensive before it pays. Honest accounting of what you'll spend in the application and assessment phase:

- Medical preparation — airline-specific medical exam (typically \$300–\$1,500 depending on location), plus fixing anything that comes up
- Travel to assessment — often multiple trips to the airline's base. Not always reimbursed, especially for early-stage interviews
- Time off work — assessments eat 3–7 days per airline you're serious about, sometimes more with recalls
- Document preparation — notarized documents, license conversions, reference letters, background checks
- Opportunity cost — the duty days and currency you're missing while prepping
- Application fees — rare but some airlines charge, and type rating bonds are on the table at offer time

If you apply to three DEC programs in parallel, budget realistically on the order of \$5,000–\$15,000 before you've received a single offer, plus significant time away from home. This is not

a tax on you; it's the cost of competing for jobs that pay \$200k+ per year.

What it actually buys you

Realistic outcomes for a successful DEC transition at a major widebody operator, based on publicly discussed packages (salary ranges vary significantly by airline, base, and year):

- Base salary in the band of roughly \$180k–\$400k depending on operator and fleet
- Tax advantages if relocating to a zero-income-tax jurisdiction
- Housing allowance or provided accommodation at some operators
- Schooling allowance for dependents at some operators
- Rotational or fixed-roster patterns that differ from your current operation
- Type rating covered by the airline (usually with a bond)
- Loss-of-licence and health insurance typically provided
- Jumpseat and staff travel benefits on the airline and partners
- Pension or provident fund varying widely by operator

The numbers above are ballpark and change year to year. Don't take them as commitments. Verify with the specific airline and the specific contract you're offered.

This is the end of the free sample

The full pack continues with nine more sections totalling roughly 40 pages, plus five working companion templates (CV checklist, medical prep checklist, reference briefing, sim drill set, decision worksheet) and three live spreadsheets (90-day timeline, offer comparison, story bank).

Get the full pack at aerologhq.com.