Checklist: What You Need to Qualify for a Drone Pilot Job

Quick Look: Drone Pilot Job Checklist

1. Meet the legal requirements for commercial drone pilot jobs.
2. Choose a career path (9-to-5 job or freelancer).
3. Train to make yourself more marketable.
4. Choose a niche.

Legal Requirements for Commercial Drone Pilots

Before you can begin your career as a drone pilot, you must meet certain legal requirements, as detailed below.

1. Obtain Remote Pilot Certification (Part 107)

In order to earn money from drone pilot employment, you must meet FAA Part 107 license requirements in accordance with its Small UAS Rule. Without [this certification](#), pilots are violating federal law anytime they fly for profit. The pilot and even those hiring them can be subject to fines and jail time if they choose to ignore this rule.

Criteria to earn a remote pilot certification:

- Be at least 16 years old
- Read, write, speak, and understand English
- Be in a physical and mental condition to safely fly a UAS
- Pass a TSA background check and adhere to specific rules regarding felony convictions

If you meet all of the above requirements, you may sit for the initial aeronautical knowledge test, called the Unmanned Aircraft General – Small (UAG) exam. Unmanned Aircraft General – Small (UAG) exam details:

- Costs $175
- Consists of 60 multiple-choice questions, which you are given two hours to complete
- Requires a score of 70 percent or higher (at least 42 questions correct) to pass

If you pass the exam, there are a few administrative tasks you must complete to have the FAA send you your license, but you can start earning money while you wait for the official license to arrive in the mail.

You will need to stay current by taking recurring training and passing a test every 24 months, but the training and test are online and free.

2. Register Your Drone

The second requirement is to register your drone or drones if you have several. Registering your drone is an easy process and is completed using the FAADroneZone website. The cost is only $5 per drone and must be renewed every three years.

Choosing a Path

Before getting into the specifics of training, it is important to note that there are two paths everyone seeking drone pilot employment must choose between: fulltime and freelance.

Full-Time Employment

If you are interested in a steady paycheck, set hours, and benefits like medical, dental, and 401(k), you most likely want to be hired as a full-time pilot. Working for a company that employs commercial drone pilots offers security but may also limit your earning potential.

Freelancing

Freelance pilots operate their own businesses as drone service providers. While some of the security that comes with a 9-to-5 job is sacrificed, you can choose your own hours and have unlimited earning potential. Some pilots choose to combine the two paths and freelance outside their regular working hours, but most choose one path or the other.

Make Yourself Marketable With Commercial Drone Pilot Training

Like any profession, commercial drone pilots can significantly increase their marketability through specialized training and the acquisition of new skills. There are many ways to continuously build your knowledge, but here are some of the best ones.

1. Enroll in Drone Pilot School

Schools for drone pilots come in all shapes and sizes, from brick-and-mortar multiyear universities like Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, to online education platforms such as Altitude University.

While the FAA doesn't require commercial drone pilots to attend any instruction before taking the Part 107 exam, the vast majority of pilots benefit from attending one of these programs. Students learn a wide range of materials, such as airspace rules, understanding weather conditions, and the legal requirements of drone operation.

2) Practice Piloting Skills

Some in-person programs teach piloting skills, but most pilots learn on their own. YouTube is a great resource for learning how to fly drones. While it varies with each individual, I like to recommend pilots fly at least 40 hours in a variety of locations and conditions before considering themselves a skilled drone operator.

3. Learn Your Equipment Thoroughly

Learning your equipment is just as important as learning how to fly. Drones are essentially flying cameras or data collection platforms. If you don't understand how to use the equipment on your drone, you won't be a successful commercial drone pilot.

For example, if you're using thermal imaging, you should invest in thermography classes such as those given by the industry leader Teledyne-FLIR. Search for well-established schools with good reviews when looking to expand your understanding of UAV-related equipment and payloads.

4. Don't Forget Your Recurrent Training

Recurrent training is required by the FAA to keep your remote pilot certification current. You must complete the training and pass an exam every 24 months.

The good news is the FAA provides the training and the test online for free. You must pass the exam with a 100 percent score, but the FAA allows you to go back and correct incorrect responses, so it's essentially impossible not to pass.