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SCIENCE

Astronauts4Hire: Opening Up Space For Fleet Of Commercial Astronauts

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[Len Ly](#) | January 19, 2011
Senior Staff Reporter

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Things could be looking up if you want to be an astronaut.

Astronauts4Hire, a Florida-based nonprofit organization of prospective commercial astronauts, is seeking new members. Also known as A4H, it is the first company attempting to supply a private astronaut workforce, said president and cofounder Brian Shiro.

“Virgin Galactic, XCOR, SpaceX, and other companies are developing vehicles to take humans into space; Bigelow Aerospace is developing private space stations,” Shiro said. “But who are the crews going to be? Who’s going to look after the tourists, and who will carry out experiments? That’s where we come in.” Here’s how it works:

- 1) Aspiring (or veteran) astronauts apply to be flight members-- the “astronauts for hire”;
- 2) Companies and university researchers that need astronauts contact A4H;
- 3) Funds from contracts, sponsors and other sources largely generate training scholarships for flight members;
- 4) Flight members receive training, currently provided by third parties, and then certification from A4H.

[Applications](#) to become a flight member are being accepted until Feb. 5.

The company has grown to 17 flight members since it launched last April. Many of them were NASA, Canadian or European space agency astronaut applicants in 2008.

“[But] A4H’s training program is much more attainable than, say, NASA’s,” Shiro said. “The model we’re going with is, ‘What’s the minimum amount of training we need to become competitive candidates for missions that suborbital or even orbital providers will have?’”

In aggregate, the total training time amounts to six weeks and costs at least \$14,000 but will vary according to flight members’ goals and A4H’s scholarship fundraising efforts, he said.

A4H has acquired one contract so far. In February, the company will conduct a parabolic trajectory flight to test the world’s first beer produced for drinking in space. The Vostok Space Beer, a joint venture between Saber Astronautics Australia and the 4-Pines Brewing Company, will be sampled by an A4H flight member during periods of weightlessness.

Asked whether A4H also plans to compete with NASA, Shiro laughed.

“No, we’re not trying to take over NASA, that would be crazy,” Shiro said. “Thousands of people out there would love to be astronauts but there’s not enough market to do that so we’re trying to enter the fray and create basically a new kind of astronaut-- a commercial astronaut.”

NASA, in contrast, seeks candidates for its astronaut corps only on an as-needed basis. Candidates undergo basic training and evaluation for roughly two years before final selections are made, at which point mission-specific training follows. The most recent astronaut candidate class was selected in 2009: Out of more than 3,500 applicants, nine were chosen.

But with two or possibly three space shuttle missions to the International Space Station remaining before the orbiters retire this year, critics question whether NASA still needs its own astronaut corps. A law signed by President Obama last October already tasks NASA to rely on commercially provided transportation services to the space station after the shuttle era while the agency focuses on developing spacecraft that would be capable of missions beyond low-Earth orbit.

NASA told Neon Tommy there are currently no plans to outsource astronauts to the commercial sector after the shuttle program winds down.

“We will still be continuing to support the International Space Station with [our] crews,” said Nicole Cloutier-Lemasters, a spokesperson at NASA’s Johnson Space Center in Houston. “The estimates are that there will be about 30 more U.S. astronauts needed for those mission assignments.”



Astronauts4Hire (A4H) member Laura Stiles performs an experiment in microgravity with NASA’s Reduced Gravity Student Flight Program in July 2008. Photo courtesy of A4H

Some industry observers aren't worried A4H would dent NASA's astronaut corps though.

"NASA has very specialized training," said Ken Trujillo, an aerospace consultant in Colorado and former NASA astronaut trainer. For the same reasons the Air Force does not contract out its pilots, NASA will likely continue to use its own astronauts in the long run, he said.

Phil Hylands, a space analyst at consultant group Ascend Worldwide in London, said one of the positives about A4H is that it "can prove the potential of commercial astronauts," possibly creating a larger pool of prospective astronauts for NASA and the international community.

The response has been positive, Shiro said. Since the announcement in late December calling for new flight members, the company has received scores of inquiries and several applications. Finalists will be announced by March 2.

"We're going to grow little by little in response to what the market can handle," Shiro said. "But our goal is to have around 20 to 25 people by the end of [the] year who are well on their way to being trained and at least a subset of those people who are ready to be hired."

Reach reporter Len Ly [here](#). Follow her on Twitter [here](#).

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Vladislav (not verified) on January 19, 2011 12:48 PM

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There will never be a real space economy until commercial does overtake NASA, their budget will never be enough to open up the space frontier. NASA is not about making space cheap, or open. It is about protecting congressional districts/contractors/contributors.

NASA just burned through 10 billion for Constellation and what did the taxpayer get out of it? One silly launch of the Ares I-X that had no actual flight hardware for the new system.

10 billion spent in the commercial sector could have given America FOUR commercial crew carriers and could have funded two space station start ups. NASA is just flushing good money after bad at this point, time to get them out of the launch business altogether. They should have be forced to by, at fixed prices, launch services ... Launch payload X to point Y in space.

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