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Original Author: Ronnie Afema

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Passing the Torch

Founded in 1992 as a small regional carrier, Airlink began its journey serving select domestic routes within South Africa. It was a modest operation, aiming to connect communities within the country. The airline's transformation into a powerhouse of African regional aviation began with the appointment of Rodger Foster as CEO, who turned Airlink into one of the continent's leading independent airlines over his three decades at the helm. His departure in March 2025 marks the end of an era, yet it opens the door to a promising future for Airlink, built on a solid foundation of innovation, resilience, and growth.

Airlink's early years were marked by steady development within South Africa. As the airline matured, it sought opportunities to serve underserved destinations, focusing on connecting smaller cities and remote regions. By expanding its network, Airlink became a critical enabler of regional connectivity, making travel within Southern Africa more efficient and reliable.

A defining moment came in 2020 when Airlink boldly chose independence, ending its franchise agreement with South African Airways (SAA). This move allowed the airline to operate under its



brand and pursue a path aligned with its growth vision. The shift to independence was transformative. No longer under the shadow of SAA, Airlink emerged as a strong player in the aviation market, demonstrating its ability to chart its own flight path.

The years following independence saw milestones that redefined Airlink's position in African aviation. The airline expanded its fleet to include over 60 Embraer aircraft, renowned for their fuel efficiency and operational reliability. Airlink also grew its route network to serve over 50 destinations across Southern Africa and beyond. A crowning achievement was the launch of its first intercontinental route from Johannesburg to São Paulo, Brazil, establishing Airlink as a connector not only within Africa but also to the world.

In 2024, another groundbreaking moment solidified Airlink's global ambitions: Qatar Airways acquired a 25% stake in the airline. This partnership brought Airlink access to an extensive international network, leveraging Qatar Airways' global reach. It also underscored Airlink's growing reputation as a reliable and forward-thinking airline, poised to compete on a global scale.

Rodger Foster's legacy is one of resilience and vision. His leadership saw the airline navigate turbulent periods, including economic downturns, fluctuating fuel prices, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which crippled the aviation industry worldwide. Foster not only kept Airlink afloat but guided it to thrive during adversity, focusing on strategic partnerships, operational efficiency, and sustainability.

As Foster prepares to step down, he leaves Airlink at a point of strength and stability. The airline has grown from its humble beginnings into a key player in African aviation, with a solid balance sheet, a robust fleet, and a well-defined strategy for sustainable growth. In aviation terms, Foster's leadership has propelled Airlink through a steady climb trajectory, setting it on a level flight path, ready for expansion and greater achievements.

The torch now passes to De Villiers Engelbrecht, Airlink's current Chief Financial Officer, who will step into the CEO role in 2025. Engelbrecht's decade-long tenure at Airlink has been marked by his instrumental role in the airline's transformation to independence and its navigation through the challenges of the pandemic. His background as a financial expert positions him uniquely to steer Airlink into its next phase, ensuring the balance sheet remains strong as the airline continues to invest in fleet expansion, route development, and sustainability.



initiatives.

Engelbrecht' s leadership brings a focus on numbers and strategy, which will be vital as Airlink builds on its solid foundation. With plans for further expansion and a commitment to sustainability, the airline is well-positioned to cement its status as a leader in regional and international aviation.

Rodger Foster leaves behind an airline that has transitioned from crawling to walking—and now to flying at level flight. His legacy is a testament to what visionary leadership can achieve over 30 years of dedication. Airlink' s next chapter, under Engelbrecht' s stewardship, promises to take the airline even higher, ensuring it continues to soar in the ever-changing skies of African aviation.

With a strong foundation, strategic partnerships, and a clear vision for the future, Airlink is poised to expand its horizons and make an even greater impact on the African continent and beyond. Foster' s tenure may be ending, but the legacy he built ensures Airlink' s journey is far from over.

Author : Ronnie Afema



Afema Ronnie is a dedicated aviation sustainability leader and business development strategist with a robust background in sustainable air transport management. Holding both a Master's degree in Sustainable Air



Transport Management and a Bachelor's in Business Analytics, he is also a licensed pilot with extensive experience in the aviation industry. As an award-winning sustainability advocate and recipient of the African Aviation Sustainability Award 2023, Afema has driven transformative climate action within the sector.

His expertise spans strategic business development, project management, and the implementation of pioneering sustainable aviation practices. Through his work as an aviation journalist and AviaDev Ambassador (2022), Afema continues to influence industry advancements and champion innovative solutions for a greener future.