



# Perceived organizational support as the mediator of the relationships between high-performance work practices and counter-productive work behavior: Evidence from airline industry



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## ABSTRACT

In light of Signaling theory, this study investigates the mediating role of perceived organizational support (POS) in the relationship between high-performance work practices (HPWPs) and counterproductive work behavior (CWB). Judgmental sample of flight attendants in Iran was used to assess this relationship. The results of multiple regression analysis indicate that empowerment, reward and promotion as indicators of HPWPs are negatively related to CWB. Further, the results support the mediating role of POS in this relationship. Specifically, results indicate that POS acts as the partial mediator in the relationships between empowerment, reward and CWB. Moreover, results support full mediating role of POS in the relationships between promotion and CWB. This study advances our understanding of organizational level antecedents of CWB and mediating role of POS as the social mechanism through which HPWPs predict employees' behavioral outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) as a discretionary behavior which violates the organizational norms has attracted considerable research attention during the recent years (e.g., Bowling and Burns, 2015; Spector and Zhou, 2014; Fida et al., 2014). CWB refers to “voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members, or both” (Robinson and Bennett, 1995, P.556), which usually include behaviors such as theft, sabotaging organization's properties, spreading rumors, absenteeism, and sexual harassment.

Review of the extant literature provides insight into different frameworks or categorization of CWB which clearly distinguish between acts directed at individuals and at organization (Robinson and Bennett, 1995; Bennett and Robinson, 2000). However, such categorization is beyond the scope of this study. According to the definition of CWB, it is obvious that such behavior will cost extreme

amount of financial and non-financial problems to the organization and its members. Regarding the negative impacts of the phenomenon, reports revealed that CWB costs organizations billions of dollars per annum (Bowling and Gruys, 2010). Particularly, CWB is reported to occur in the airline industry (Hsieh et al., 2004), due to flight attendants' specific working environment where dim lights, long night shifts, aggressive and destructive passengers, air pressure and other types of harmful physical elements make it difficult to work in the airplane (Neuman and Baron, 1998; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996). Hsieh et al. (2004), strongly suggest that the antecedents of CWB in the airline and tourism industry deserve more attention in order to avoid losses associated with such behavior. In Iran, few studies focused on counterproductive work behaviors. Particularly, there is no evidence of practical statistics or surveys with respect to the loss incurred by such behavior.

Several studies attempted to reveal the causes of CWB in the organization such as Stressors, Negative emotions and Moral disengagement (Fida et al., 2014); Personality trait (Oh et al., 2014); Fairness, emotion and emotion regulation (Matta et al., 2014); Narcissism (Grijalva and Newman, 2015) and Status judgment and identification (Al-Atwi and Bakir, 2014). In a More relevant approach, Sammani and Power (2014) found a negative association between strong HRM practices and CWB directed to individuals.

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Similar results have been found in the literature regarding negative relationship between HR practices and interpersonal deviance behavior (Arthur, 2011; Shamsudin et al., 2011). However, studies that go beyond the individual factors related to CWB is limited (Barling et al., 2009). Piening et al. (2014) assert that the role of human resource management in explaining CWB is neglected in the relative literature. According to Niehoff and Paul (2000), factors at the systemic or organizational level are associated with CWB. Factors such as internal control, security devices, compensation system, incentives, job redesign and process reengineering are among the factor which predicts to what degree employees engage in theft (Niehoff and Paul, 2000). Hence, presence of high-performance work practices (HPWPs) is assumed to be negatively related to CWB. High performance work practices are a 'bundle' of human resource practices that focus on enhancing employee knowledge, skills and ability to perform better in the organization and lowers their turnover intentions (Huselid, 1995). Rewards, team work, recruitment and selection, empowerment and training program as indicators of HPWPs are among best practices which are applied by the leading airlines (Solnet et al., 2010; Writz, Heracleous and Pangarkar, 2008). Current literature reported positive outcomes due to adaptation of HPWPs in the organization, such as enhanced career satisfaction and service recovery performance (Karatepe and Vatankhah, 2015); increased employee subjective well-being and decreased job burnout (Fan et al., 2014); higher organizational citizenship behavior (Sarikwal and Gupta, 2013) and individual creativity (Chang et al., 2014). According to Karatepe and Vatankhah (2014), presence of number of HPWPs such as training and re-training programs aimed at better use of empowerment, rewarding and recognizing high performing flight attendants and providing them with the promotional opportunities in the organization as functions of HPWPs leads to increased perception of organizational support. Based on signaling theory (Spence, 1973, 1974), it is assumed that, presence of HPWPs send this signal to flight attendants that their contributions to the organization is recognized, valued and rewarded, and the organization is concerned about their well-being which in turn would lead to positive response from flight attendants in terms of higher perceived organizational support (POS), better service quality, lower turnover intentions and lower CWB.

As a result, the purpose of this study is to investigate the mediating role of perceived organizational support in the relation between HPWPs manifested as empowerment, reward and promotion and counter-productive work behavior. In line with previous studies, empowerment, reward and promotion are significant indicators of HPWPs which are well applicable for the flight attending position (e.g., Kim and Back, 2012; Solnet et al., 2010; Wirtz et al., 2008). Therefore, data gathered from flight attendants in Iran is used to test (a) the effects of empowerment, reward and promotion on POS; (b) the effect of POS on CWB and (c) the mediating role of POS in the relation between HPWPs and CWB. Present study contributes to the body of literature by conducting research among flight attendants in Iran, where it seems that the knowledge of CWB is still in its infancy. As suggested by LasisiOlukayod et al. (2014), developing and underdeveloped countries need more research attention in the CWB literature. Moreover, presence of HPWPs as the organizational level antecedent of CWB is a response for the call for more research, investigating causes of CWB beyond its personal or individual factors (Piening et al., 2014; Arthur, 2011; Shamsudin et al., 2011). Finally, POS acts as the mediating mechanism through which the effects of HPWPs indicated by empowerment, reward and promotion on CWB are investigated as a response to the call for more research attention concerning the mediating mechanism(s) through which HPWPs would affect several performance outcomes (Mostafa and

Gould-Williams, 2014; Alfes et al., 2013). Managerial implications provided in the article, would also provide a useful guideline for the airline managers who are concerned about the well-being of their flight attendants and would like to benefit from the strategies by which enables them to reduce the negative impacts of CWB.

## 2. Signaling theory

Signaling theory (Spence, 1973) argues that employees view organization's positive inputs as signals of support from the organization which leads to positive reaction back to the organization. According to Connelly et al. (2011), there has been an increasing interest in using signaling theory as a theoretical framework in the literature. However, this theory has been under researched in management literatures (Connelly et al., 2011). Based on signaling theory, employees' perceptions of HPWPs are positively related to their work-related attitudes (Kooij et al., 2009). That is, HPWPs are positively related to flight attendants' perception of organizational support, and functions as 'signals' of the organization's good intentions toward them. In this line of reasoning, the general assumption is that flight attendants will view HPWPs as a personalized commitment toward them, an investment in them, and as recognition of their contribution, which they will then reciprocate through correspondingly positive attitudes and behavior toward the organization (Hannah and Iverson, 2004; Shore and Wayne, 1993). On the basis of this realization, we propose that flight attendants would interpret the presence of HPWPs in terms of empowerment, reward and promotion as positive signals of support from the organization. Their positive evaluation of organizational cues and the feeling of POS would lead to reciprocate positively by avoiding to involve in dysfunctional or counterproductive work behavior such as absenteeism, theft, sabotage, drug use and sexual harassment at work.

According to above-mentioned realization, our study tests the conceptual model that investigates the mediating effect of POS in the relationship between HPWPs and CWB. Investigation of such relationship in light of Signaling theory is advised in the current literature (Mostafa and Gould-Williams, 2014; Alfes et al., 2013; Connelly et al., 2011). According to Fig. 1, HPWPs in terms of empowerment, reward and promotion is positively related to POS. Moreover, positive perception of organizational support leads to lower levels of CWB. That is, POS acts as the mediator of the effects of empowerment, reward and promotion on CWB.

## 3. Hypothesis

Studies in the service industry, convincingly suggest that the presence of HPWPs are positioned as essential organizational strategies for organizations seeking for enhanced performance outcome and quality service delivery process. Different service settings are benefitting from conducting various configurations of HPWPs. For example, in a study of hotel employees in China, Sun, Aryee, and Law (2007) found that High-performance human resource practices are associated with higher productivity and lower turnover. Moreover, according to Tang and Tang (2012), presence of high-performance HR practices in the hotel industry in



Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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