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Creating of customer loyalty by cabin crew

A study of the relation between emotional labor and job performance

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether a high level of hospitality skill among airline cabin crews could affect customers' "true satisfaction" in a way that other methods, such as the use of information technology systems, do not.

To develop a model, a questionnaire survey was administered to 413 personnel of an Asian airline. The collected data were then quantitatively analyzed. Active cabin crew members reported having a low level of role ambiguity and a high level of overall job performance, but also reported high emotional exhaustion. As results, if the cabin crew understand the emotional mechanisms with intentionality, then the eventual negative effects can be converted to superior job performance and hospitality offering.

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1. Introduction

The speed of change in the airline market is increasing. Today, many airlines use information technology (IT) systems and automated machinery for reservations, airport check-ins, and other operations. Adaptability to the external competitive environment is certainly a prerequisite for organizations to achieve long-term survival. Environmental adaptation is one of the most important managerial issues for modern airlines facing intense market competition and seeking to meet financial efficiency obligations. However, and IT system are performing work previously done by human contact employees. As airlines have become more complex and routine tasks have been increasingly distributed among human contact service team members, the roles expected of those members are gradually changing from what they were in past decades. Because of this, the potential for role ambiguity and role conflict has increased. These conditions affect employee satisfaction as well as the nature and performance of the organization (Kahn et al., 1964).

Role ambiguity relates to the expectations surrounding a role and occurs when the set of behaviors required for a role are not clearly defined. Role conflict occurs when there is an incompatibility between the expected set of behavioral demands on an individual and their actual performance (Tubre and Collins, 2000)

Many airlines have created, since foundation, a company culture with specific characteristics regarding customer service. The images of airlines, including hospitality offering and tacit knowledge in the form of human contact service personnel (such as cabin crew) have been accumulated over their entire histories, and should be considered as intangible assets of the airlines. It would be regrettable if these were lost because of managerial changes; furthermore, even the most loyal customers may be moving away from companies. Polanyi (1967) said that tacit knowledge is central to human knowledge. The relation between “skills” and “tacit knowledge” may be explained by Polanyi’s words, that “We know more than we can tell.” In other words, “tacitness of a skill or the knowledge” is a core factor that underlies skills, in combination with degree (Nelson et al., 2009).

Human contact service personnel are also known as providers of “emotional” labor. The concept of emotional labor has resonated with sociologists of work and with researchers in the fields of management, psychology, communications, nursing and health, leisure and hospitality, and many others (Briner, 2004). Understanding the consequences of emotional labor is important because both theory and empirical evidence suggest that emotional labor is integral to the daily work experience of many frontline service employees, and is closely linked with indicators of employee well-being (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), customer outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty (Grandey et al., 2005, 2008; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006), and, ultimately, organizational performance (Goodwin, 2011; Grandey, 2000).

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between emotional labor, job performance, and organizational stress from the perspective of the cabin crew of an Asian airline. Despite the important role obligation of the cabin crew, the degree to which working consciousness affects job performance, together with the structural relationships between organizational stress and emotional labor, have not been fully investigated. The aim of this study was therefore to investigate how the emotions of cabin crew of an Asian airline are regulated in the context of airline competitiveness, and how this affects performance.

2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses of emotional labor

2.1. Emotional labor theory

Emotional labor refers to the process by which workers are expected to manage their feelings in accordance with organizationally defined rules and guidelines (Wharton, 2009). Hochschild’s (1983) *The Managed Heart* introduced the concept of emotional labor, focusing particularly on airline cabin crew, and inspired research on the topic.

Cabin crew responsibilities are based on not only physical tasks but also emotional tasks of dealing with passengers. Thus, addressing the importance of the emotions of frontline employees such as cabin crew has become a part of organizational behavior. Emotions are sometimes transferred from personal behaviors to commodities, and so organizations have begun to consider using managerial measures to encourage employees to employ emotional labor as a way to maximize efficiency while working (Morris et al., 1996).

2.2. Display rules of emotional labor

Hochschild (1983) argued that common expectations exist about appropriate emotional reactions by individuals involved in service transactions. These expectations give rise to “feeling rules” or norms that specify the range, intensity, duration, and object of emotions that should be experienced (Ashforth et al., 1993).

Emotional labor can involve enhancing or suppressing emotions to modify emotional expression. Generally, emotions are managed in response to rules about emotional display for the job or organization (Hochschild, 1983; Ekman and Friesen, 1975; Goffman, 1959). Frontline service employees are typically expected to express positive emotions (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). For example, human-contact service employees, such as cabin crew, are always encouraged to smile and show good humor, but not fear or anger.

Although emotional expression (or suppression) generally results in more effective human interactions in the

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