



# The effects of high-performance work practices and job embeddedness on flight attendants' performance outcomes



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## A B S T R A C T

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This paper proposes and tests a conceptual model that investigates job embeddedness (JE) as a mediator of the effects of high-performance work practices (HPWPs), as manifested by selective staffing, job security, training, empowerment, rewards, teamwork, and career opportunities, on creative performance (CP) and extra-role customer service (ERCS). Data obtained from flight attendants with a time lag of two weeks in Iran were used to test the aforementioned relationships through structural equation modeling. The results suggest that JE functions as a full mediator of the joint effects of HPWPs on performance outcomes. Specifically, HPWPs jointly enhance JE. JE in turn leads to elevated levels of CP and ERCS. Implications of the results are discussed and future research directions are offered.

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## 1. Introduction

In today's intense competitive air transport market environment where there are increased price pressures from low-cost carriers and continuously evolving demands of discerning passengers, delivery of service quality and service recovery as well as retention of loyal passengers are keys to success and survival. Flight attendants play a critical role in this process (Fu, 2013; Hvass and Torfadóttir, 2014; Ng et al., 2011). Such employees are expected to contribute to their organization by making constructive suggestions for service improvements and offering creative solutions to passenger problems. Taking advantage of new service ideas provided by flight attendants is important among airline companies such as Singapore Airlines and JetBlue (Lages and Piercy, 2012; Wirtz et al., 2008). With this stated, it appears that creative performance (CP) becomes a requirement for in-flight service jobs. CP refers to the amount of new ideas generated and novel behavior displayed by employees in carrying out job-related tasks (Wang and Netemeyer, 2004).

Despite this realization, flight attendants are confronted with stressful and demanding situations associated with long hours, role overload, jetlag, emotional dissonance, aggressive and unruly passengers, and burnout (e.g., Chen and Kao, 2011; Hsu and Liu, 2012;

Ng et al., 2011). Under these circumstances, airline companies should find ways to establish and maintain a work environment where flight attendants are motivated to perform their jobs successfully and significantly contribute to an effective management of passenger services. This means that expecting flight attendants to display positive performance outcomes requires a work environment where there are high-performance work practices (HPWPs). Human resource activities which are performance-enhancing are regarded as HPWPs. The availability of HPWPs such as training, selective staffing, empowerment and rewards increases the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the potential and current employees and motivates them to enhance their performance in the service delivery process and remain in the organization (Combs et al., 2006; Rhoden et al., 2008; Wirtz et al., 2008). Employees with HPWPs that are relevant and significant for in-flight service jobs are likely to be embedded in their jobs. Such employees in turn display CP and extra-role customer service (ERCS) which refers to “discretionary behaviors of contact employees in serving customers that extend beyond formal role requirements” (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997, p. 41).

Job embeddedness (JE) is a relatively emerging concept in the current literature that centers on the combined forces keeping employees embedded in their jobs. Links, fit and sacrifice are the dimensions of JE. Links are defined as “formal or informal connections between a person and institutions or other people”, while fit refers to “an employee's perceived compatibility or comfort with an organization and with his or her environment” (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1105). Finally, sacrifice refers to “the perceived cost of

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material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving a job" (Mitchell et al., 2001, p. 1105). JE is distinct from the Allen and Meyer's (1990) affective organizational commitment construct in various ways. For instance, the fit dimension of JE may reflect an affective or a nonaffective judgment and includes factors outside of the organization (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Using Bagozzi's (1992) reformulation of attitude theory as the theoretical underpinning, our study develops and tests a conceptual model that investigates JE as a mediator of the impacts of HPWPs on CP and ERCS. Specifically, we examine: (a) the joint effects of HPWPs on JE; (b) the impact of JE on CP and ERCS; and (c) the mediating role of JE in the relationship between HPWPs and these performance outcomes.

Our study contributes to existing knowledge by addressing three relatively neglected issues. First, CP that is related to the generation of new ideas to be used in the service delivery process and novel behavior to be displayed in challenging service encounters has received little empirical attention (Hon et al., 2013; Lages and Piercy, 2012). Such void is also observed with respect to airlines. With this realization, there is a need for empirical research concerning factors that trigger flight attendants' CP.

Second, there are empirical studies that report factors influencing flight attendants' turnover intentions (e.g., Chen, 2006; Chen and Kao, 2011; Moon et al., 2013). An inspection of recent studies with respect to airlines in the current literature reveals that little is known about factors boosting JE. This is also valid for the service management literature in general (e.g., Karatepe, 2013a; Wheeler et al., 2010). As a result of an analysis of the current literature, seven indicators of HPWPs that are likely to enhance JE have been selected due to their relevance and significance for in-flight service jobs. Selective staffing, job security, training, empowerment, rewards, teamwork and career opportunities are the indicators representing HPWPs (e.g., Fu, 2013; Holtbrugge et al., 2006; Moon et al., 2013; Ng et al., 2011; Solnet et al., 2010; Wirtz et al., 2008).

Third, there is a dearth of empirical research concerning the mediating mechanism(s) through which HPWPs influence performance outcomes (Messersmith et al., 2011). Our study uses JE as a mediator in this process, because Wheeler et al. (2010) argue that researchers have to learn much about JE, which is a significant anti-withdrawal construct. In his recent study, Fu (2013) also convincingly discusses that empirical research in the field of internal marketing concerning organizational factors motivating flight attendants as internal customers to display quality job performance is still scarce. Using reformulation of attitude theory as the theoretical framework, our study tests the joint effects of HPWPs on performance outcomes through JE to address the aforementioned research gap. Besides adding to the existing knowledge base, the results of this study will provide useful implications for managers pertaining to the acquisition and retention of quality flight attendants who are likely to be creative and display extra-role performance.

## 2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

### 2.1. Reformulation of attitude theory and conceptual model

Bagozzi's (1992) reformulation of attitude theory proposes that individuals appraise past, present and future outcomes. These outcomes produce particular emotions that will result in behavioral outcomes. Specifically, individuals' cognitive evaluations of their work environment produce particular emotions. These emotions in turn lead to behavioral or coping responses. Accordingly, we surmise that flight attendants' cognitive evaluations of HPWPs in terms of selective staffing, job security, training, empowerment,

rewards, teamwork, and career opportunities will lead to an emotional response such as JE. Flight attendants who evaluate such HPWPs as important signals that focus on delivery of service quality and retention of employees in the organization are embedded in their jobs. Feelings of JE will in turn result in behavioral responses such as CP and ERCS.

In short, our study tests the appraisal → affective response → behavior theoretical framework by examining the full mediating role of JE in the relationship between HPWPs and performance outcomes. The relevance and viability of this theoretical framework is also reported in other studies (e.g., Karatepe and Agbaim, 2012; Rod and Ashill, 2010). Fig. 1 presents the conceptual model and study relationships. Our model proposes that HPWPs (Time I), as manifested by selective staffing, job security, training, empowerment, rewards, teamwork and career opportunities, enhance JE (Time I). JE in turn leads to CP (Time II) and ERCS (Time II). Simply put, JE acts as a full mediator of the joint impacts of HPWPs on CP and ERCS.

Age, gender, education, organizational tenure and marital status are included as control variables in our model. This is important, because these variables may significantly influence HPWPs, JE, CP, or ERCS and result in confounding effects. Treating them as control variables is also congruent with other studies in the current literature (e.g., Harris et al., 2011; Karatepe, 2013b; Karatepe and Agbaim, 2012).

### 2.2. Hypotheses

Management of airline companies should invest in HPWPs to motivate their flight attendants for delivery of service quality and passenger satisfaction. Having a stringent selective staffing process means that managers try to hire the right individuals for in-flight service jobs (Wirtz et al., 2008). This is highlighted in recent research which showed that flight attendants at Thai Airways should meet criteria for linguistic and social skills during the selection process (Tungtakanpoung and Wyatt, 2013). This process focuses on the fit between the employee and the work environment (Zacharatos et al., 2005). Such a practice will also send powerful messages to the current flight attendants that the organization utilizes this process due to its intention to deliver service quality and retain employees. Job security which is one of the HPWPs represents a stable employment for individuals in an organization (Zacharatos et al., 2005). It has been shown that job security is positively associated with flight attendants' intentions to remain in the organization (Zeytinoglu et al., 2012). Without offering job security, it does not appear that flight attendants will develop trust in the management of airline companies. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to retain talented individuals in the organization.

It is argued that training frontline employees in functional and behavioral skills improve their capability to deal with dissatisfied and disgruntled customers (Boshoff and Allen, 2000). Otherwise, such passengers show their frustration when flight attendants fail in managing their complaints effectively (Gursoy et al., 2005). Empowerment that refers to "the freedom and ability to make decisions and commitments" (Forrester, 2000, p. 67) is inevitable in frontline service jobs due to the fact that it is not possible to specify the exact tasks beforehand needed to improve customer satisfaction (Babakus et al., 2003). Milliman et al. (1999) discuss that empowerment which is considered a source of creativity is highly encouraged among flight attendants at Southwest Airlines. This is also valid among flight attendants who work at Singapore Airlines (Wirtz et al., 2008). As stated by Lages and Piercy (2012), the JetBlue executive team expects employees to be involved in all aspects of the business. Expecting frontline employees to use their authority to respond to passengers' problems effectively should be

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