Exploring the impacts of employee advocacy on job satisfaction and organizational commitment: Case of Taiwanese airlines

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Ying-Pin Yeh [*],[1]

Department of Business Administration, Yu Da University of Science and Technology, No. 168, Hsueh-fu Rd., Tanwen Village, Chaochiao Township, Miaoli County 361, Taiwan, ROC

ABSTRACT

The accessibility of information through the Internet has enables flight attendants to become more informed, as well as developing more control of their own affairs. Employee advocacy is related to the transparency of airlines' employment offers and the airlines' willingness to do what is best for their employees. After reviewing the relevant literature, this study focuses on how employee advocacy is influenced by the way employees are treated by their airlines. We explored strategies that airline administrations apply to employee advocacy, developed a research setting, analyzed the factors involved, and developed a casual model of the antecedents and consequences of employee advocacy. We formulated 5 hypotheses. Data were collected, using a questionnaire survey of flight attendants in Taiwanese airlines. All hypotheses were verified with data from a sample of the respondents, by using a structural equation model. Our results indicated that employee advocacy is positively related to flight attendants' job satisfaction and commitment to the organization. Organizational innovation, supervisor support, and employee empowerment are positively related to employee advocacy. Finally, this study concludes by discussing managerial implications and providing suggestions for future research.

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1. Introduction

For a service industry employee, job satisfaction is a critical factor, because it is typically assumed that front-line employee attitude and behavior substantially affect customer perceptions of the service. Service firms must find ways to manage their employees effectively, and ensure that their attitudes and behaviors are conducive to the delivery of high quality service (Chan and Wan, 2012; Sarwar and Khalid, 2011). Job satisfaction is defined as the pleasurable emotional state of an employee, regarding his or her job duties, supervisor, working situations, and the organization as a whole (Sarwar and Khalid, 2011). Job satisfaction is defined in terms of all the characteristics of the job itself, and of the work environment in which employees may find rewards, fulfillment, and satisfaction, or conversely, frustration or dissatisfaction (Bussing et al., 1999). Service firms should communicate customer needs to their employees, provide continuous training, assist them to acquire both communication and recovery skills, and ensure that

they feel comfortable and satisfied with their jobs (Pantouvakis, 2012). Employee commitment to the organization is a crucial indicator of the impacts on the firm's performance (Lum et al., 1998; Naumann et al., 2000). The primary reason for this is that employees with greater commitment tend to remain employed in the same organization for a longer period (Johnston et al., 1990). In addition, they are more efficient in their job performance (Mackenzia et al., 1998). Organizational commitment refers to how employees regard their organization's goals, and the value of identification, acceptance, and loyalty toward the organization (Pillai and Williams, 2004). It also assumes that there is a relationship between an employee and the firm, which contributes not only to the firm, but also to wider society. Therefore, job satisfaction and organizational commitment comprise an employee's intentions to contribute their high degree of performance, and demonstrate loyalty to their organization's goals.

The airline industry is a particularly sensitive service industry. Flight attendants are in close contact with customers for long periods. Therefore, the quality of the service they provide has a strong influence on customer satisfaction. Flight attendants must be able to solve customers' problems immediately to promote and maintain the company's overall image of providing high quality service. Flight attendant attitude and behavior substantially affects a customer's perception of service. Therefore, airlines must develop

* Tel.: +886 37 651188; fax: +886 37 651216.
  E-mail addresses: kent88@ydu.edu.tw, kent88@ms1.url.com.tw.
[1] His research subjects include supply chain management, e-commerce, and service management.

methods to manage their employees effectively, and to ensure that their attitudes and behavior are conducive to the delivery of high quality service. The accessibility of information through the Internet has enabled flight attendants to become more informed, acquiring timely and reliable information by connecting and communicating with their employers, and thereby developing greater control of their own affairs (Lings, 2004; Sawhney and Prandelli, 2000; Urban, 2004). Employee advocacy is related to the transparency of an airline company's employment offers, and their willingness to act in the best interests of their employees.

Having reviewed the relevant literature, we focus on how employee advocacy is influenced by airline treatment of employees. We investigate the strategies that airline administrations apply to develop employee advocacy, develop a research program, analyze the factors involved, and develop a causal model of the causes and consequences of employee advocacy. Therefore, we use an advocacy marketing approach, and "the flight attendant viewpoint," as the basis for discussion. In addition, we regard flight attendants of Taiwanese airlines as the subjects of a survey for further verification. Finally, this research discusses the management implications of our results, with the hope of offering guidance for improving the commitment and job satisfaction of employees when compared with service providers in other industries.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Theory

Enterprises have internal customers (in addition to more conventional, external customers), and they should develop and apply marketing programs and tools that focus on this internal market (i.e., employees), parallel to those for the external market (i.e., customers) (Bansal et al., 2001). The operationalization and synthesis of the internal marketing concept is based on the human resource management (HRM) philosophy and the notion of employee advocacy, all within a service context (Pantouvakis, 2012). Social exchange theory describes employment relationships as a form of social exchange that individuals enter into when they expect their rewards to justify the costs of taking part in that exchange (Blau, 1968). The quality of social exchange leads to unspoken obligations between the parties (Blau, 1968; Settoon et al., 1996). One way to support and enhance wellbeing is by implementing human resource (HR) practices that strengthen the employment relationship (Clarke and Hill, 2012). The application of social exchange theory to the employee–organization relationship has focused on the relationship an employee develops with their manager (Liden et al., 1997), the organization (Eisenberger et al., 1986), or both (Masterson et al., 2000; Wayne et al., 1997). Greater social exchange is associated with stronger employee contributions in the form of greater commitment, lower turnover intentions, and better performance (Chen and Kao, 2012; Shore et al., 2009). Other contributors to the social exchange relationship include team and supervisor support (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). These inputs are likely to result in employees feeling valued and supported by their organization, which leads to possible forms of reciprocation, such as employee commitment and loyalty (Snape and Redman, 2010).

Employee advocacy refers to the transparency of the firm's employment policy, and its willingness to act in the best interests of the employee, even if the recommended solution to a problem is provided by the competition (Urban, 2004). Although this may be seen as counterintuitive according to standard principles of market-based competition, by emphasizing a positive partnership and support over traditional selling-based relationship strategies, employees are more likely to trust the firm. For enterprises, the

critical issue is how to strengthen the employment relationship and enhance employee advocacy. Prior research has suggested that job satisfaction (Chen, 2006; Petrescu and Simmons, 2008) and organizational commitment (Park and Rainey, 2007) are directly influenced by the HRM practices an enterprise applies across key areas, including employee learning and development, employee voice and involvement, work-life balance practices, and workplace health and safety. However, employee satisfaction and commitment to the organization, particularly in service enterprises, should be incorporated as simultaneous functions of marketing and HR, both externally and internally. This combined influence of specific HRM actions, and the adoption of external marketing methods and tools within enterprises, is necessary to foster overall employee job satisfaction and commitment to the organization.

2.2. Hypotheses

We consider the characteristics of airline services, and discuss job satisfaction and organizational commitment from the viewpoint of employee advocacy marketing and with latent variables as the focus. We also consider that employee advocacy may affect job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Employee advocacy is regarded as a moderating variable. In turn, supervisor support and employee empowerment may affect employee advocacy.

Employee advocacy concerns an employee's perception of the extent to which an organization values their contributions, and cares about their wellbeing (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Thus, employees tend to seek a balance in their exchange relationships with their organization, by basing their attitude and behavior on their employer's commitment to them. George and Jones (1996) indicated that job satisfaction reflects employee attitudes and structure of understanding towards the organization. Lyons et al. (2003) proposed that it is more effective to improve the job satisfaction of an employee by using implicit correctional factors (such as personal growth, useful skills, etc.), than by using explicit encouraging factors (such as wages). An employee's job expectations affect their emotions with respect to job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Carr, 2000). When an employee's expectations do not correspond with reality, it may lead to dissatisfaction and a lack of organizational commitment (Rousseau, 1998). Employees expect their organization to support them, and, in exchange, they contribute behavior that is beneficial to the organization. Such acts of reciprocation and exchange affect an employee's attitude toward their organization and job (Shore and Tetrick, 1991). Therefore, we argue that, as airlines improve their employee advocacy, employees will experience a higher level of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Based on these analyses, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H_1). The greater the airline company's advocacy on behalf of flight attendants, the greater the flight attendants' job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2 (H_2). The greater the airline company's advocacy on behalf of flight attendants, the greater the flight attendants' organizational commitment.

Organizational innovation is evaluated as a firm's actual ability to regularly adopt and implement technical and administrative innovations, with a greater degree of incorporated novelty, relative to their main competitors (Santos-Vijande et al., 2012). Innovation is a fundamental mechanism in firm competition, because it enables them to appropriately modify their products, processes, and management systems to adjust to the market's rapidly changing needs (Baker and Sinkula, 2002; Darroch and McNaughton, 2002). To remain competitive, firms increasingly rely on the ability of employees to continuously innovate and renew their methods of