

Airline Employee's Health and Stress in Malaysia

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Abstract: The robust demand for international air travel has made the airline industry a dynamic, complex and stressful environment to work in. This study investigates health problems related to stress and stress level among airline employees. Structured questionnaire was used to collect data. The findings showed that almost one-third of airline employees suffered from a high level of stress and complained about several health problems. This study urged airline authorities to be aware of and to manage employee's stress by training the employees to be more resilient so as to contribute to better performance.

Keywords: Airline, Aviation Safety, Health, Stress, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Serving both local and global markets, Malaysia's airports are getting busier. The rapid pace of growth was further boosted by the growing tourism industry, improvement of connectivity to international destinations and affordability of air ticket prices. According to the Malaysian Aviation Commission (2017), the passenger traffic growth in Malaysian airports is the third biggest in South-East Asia. As the result of globalization (Aslam & Azhar, 2013). the robust demand for local and international air travel has made the airline employees to work in a dynamic, aggressive and rapidly changing environment yet learn to handle complexity and remain focused under pressure.

Airline employees are in a special occupation that experience stress on the ground and in the sky (Leo & Chandramohan, 2008; Widyahening, 2007). They have to constantly display required emotions during work (Lee, 2017), even when they face fussy and demanding customers, as they need to maintain a high standard of performance and positive public image (Hu, Hu, & King, 2017). For instance, on the flight from Bangkok to Nanjing, a female passenger who wanted to sit next to her boyfriend splashed hot water on a flight attendant; in another incident, an overweight Caucasian man forced the cabin crew to undress and clean him in the lavatory on the flight from Los Angeles to Taipei.

Several aircraft accidents have also caused devastating impact on airline employee's morale and emotions, such as the missing flight of Malaysia Airlines MH370, the crash of Malaysia Airlines MH17 in Ukraine, and the crash of Indonesia Air Asia QZ8501 into the Java Sea. The disappearance of flight MH370 which took away 239 lives still remains a mystery and has left an unforgettable pain to family and friends of all those on-board the plane. Besides that, the downing of flight MH17 by a missile killed 15 crew members and 283 passengers, while the crashed QZ8501 killed seven crew members and 155 passengers in the disaster.

All these incidents not only caused negative impacts to airlines' reputation but also to airline employees, especially cabin crew who experienced stress, and in extreme cases, physical and psychological harm. Many airline employees arrived at work with tears in their eyes during the period of the aircraft accidents. Some of the cabin crew could not fly because they suffered mental and emotional trauma, while some reacted with horror and anger at the fate of flights MH370 and MH17. Such hostile environment creates feelings of unsafety, insecurity and anxiety which will eventually cause airline employees stress, and worse, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Lating, Sherman, & Peraquine, 2006; Rosen, 2014).

Stress is an inevitable factor in the airline industry which affects employee's performance (Sexton, Thomas & Helmreich, 2000). Kelleher and McGilloway (2005) indicated that about 75% of the flight attendants are not satisfied with their jobs due to conflict of expectation. In addition, the irregular working hours, lack of autonomy at work, lack of social support, poor organizational climate, heavy workload, performance pressure, unbalanced work-life activities, lack of workplace safety and job insecurity are among factors causing stress among airline employees (Coetzee, & Villiers, 2010; Widyahening, 2007).

This research aims to investigate health complaints and to analyze the stress level among all airline employees working in various occupational groups. The results are expected to benefit the management of airline companies through their awareness and better management of employee's stress by establishing stress-prevention programs, particularly since employees are the human capital in the organization and a major source of competitive advantage to ensure company sustainability.

2. Methodology

A structured questionnaire comprising general demographic information and four types of stress (i.e. physiological stress, psychological stress, emotional stress and behavioural stress) were used for this study. The questionnaire items were adapted from Pejtersen, Kristensen, and Bjorner (2010) and UCU model stress questionnaire (2010) with some adjustments.

Cross-sectional design was used to collect the data at a specific point in time, i.e. at the

end and beginning of the following year. This period of time is the busiest time for airline employees as it is the high season for travelling with an increasing number of passengers. The data was collected through an online survey form which was emailed to employees of a commercial airline in Malaysia. All items in the questionnaire were rated by individual employees.

3. Findings

The respondents were made up of 159 males and 125 females. It is quite an equal distribution between male and female airline employees. Half of the respondents were young adults, aged 21 to 30 years old. Most of the respondents were married and had completed tertiary education.

Overall, the airline employees experienced medium to high levels of stress in the form of physiological, psychological, emotional, and behavioural stress. 60% to 70% of airline employees felt the physical ailment, psychological depression, emotional instability and behavioural changes due to stress, while 20% to 30% experienced chronic stress which may exacerbate many serious health problems especially mental health concerns.

Table 1 Overall Stress Level among Airline Employees

Types of Stress	Stress Level		
	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)
Physiological Stress	7	62	31
Psychological Stress	3	61	36
Emotional Stress	11	69	20
Behavioural Stress	14	69	17

The airline employees who are in different professions have a different level of stress. As indicated by Table 2, most of the employees, i.e. aircraft maintenance engineers, guest service staff, office executives and pilots have moderate levels of physiological stress, and sometimes they suffer from muscle pain, backache, lack of energy and insomnia. Meanwhile cabin crew who are front-liners of the airline complained of insomnia, pain and lack of energy.

Table 2 Physiological Stress among Different Job Categories

Job Categories	Low Stress	Moderate Stress	High Stress
Aircraft Maintenance	3	34	13
Cabin Crew	1	19	33
Guest Service	1	13	10
Office Executive	6	30	9

Pilot	3	23	10
Others	6	56	14

For the psychological stress, many airline employees complain they have problems concentrating, remembering, are unable to overcome difficulties and are exhausted after work. Cabin crew is the category that has a high level of psychological stress compared to aircraft maintenance staff, guest service staff, office executives, pilots and others as shown in Table 3 as below.

Table 3 Psychological Stress among Different Job Categories

Job Categories	Low Stress	Moderate Stress	High Stress
Aircraft Maintenance	1	33	16
Cabin Crew	2	24	27
Guest Service	0	16	8
Office Executive	2	25	18
Pilot	2	28	8
Others	2	46	26

Table 4 indicates that regardless of which job categories they are working in, the airline employees have agreed that they experience a moderate level of emotional stress. Based on the response, the employees sometimes felt depressed, sad, anxious, and get frustrated easily.

Table 4 Emotional Stress among Different Job Categories

Job Categories	Low Stress	Moderate Stress	High Stress
Aircraft Maintenance	6	35	9
Cabin Crew	4	36	13
Guest Service	0	18	6
Office Executive	7	24	14
Pilot	7	27	2
Others	6	56	14

Despite suffering from stress, most of the employees showed little behavioural change, e.g. complain about little things, lost interest in things, difficult to calm down after something upsetting and unable to be enthusiastic about anything. Table 5 below presented different levels of behavioural stress among the airline workers with majority of them experiencing a moderate level of behavioural stress.

Table 5 Behavioural Stress among Different Job Categories

Job Categories	Low Stress	Moderate Stress	High Stress
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Aircraft Maintenance	5	39	6
Cabin Crew	8	34	11
Guest Service	2	16	6
Office Executive	7	24	14
Pilot	7	28	1
Others	12	54	10

4. Discussion

This study found a similar finding where Omholt, Tveito and Ihlebæk (2017) reported that Norwegian aircrew also faced high stress levels. The findings showed that tiredness, sleep problems, back pain, headaches, problem concentrating, exhaustion and depression are the common complaints of airline employees. Stress is inevitable for airline employees due to trigger factors of excessive workload, responsibility, and time availability (Coetzee, & Villiers, 2010; Susanty & Helmiatin, 2017; Widyahening, 2007).

In fact, having some stress is good to push airline employees to work productively. However, when stress is overwhelming, it will become counterproductive and have deleterious effects on employees as well as to the airline, especially in terms of medical costs, turnover, productivity decline, and workplace accidents (Gibson et al., 2009). Furthermore, stressed employees may feel exhausted and drained of their emotional resources, unable to invest extra effort and time in their work; this will impede extra-role behaviors and also affect job performance (Soo & Ali, 2016; Susanty & Helmiatin, 2017).

The results are expected to benefit the management of airline companies to be aware and manage employee's stress at the initial stage before stress is overwhelming. Employee's stress is not only affecting their performance but is also a threat to aviation safety. The aviation industry is one of the most regulated industries and airline authorities need to control and manage employee's stress by promoting work-life balance policy to ensure the work efficiency, well-being, commitment and subsequently improve organizational performance (Edwards, 2013; Zain & Setiawati, 2019).

Further, airline authorities should establish several programmes, i.e. stress-prevention, stress-awareness, stress management, self-improvement, and counselling, with the intention to provide support and educate airline employees to be more resilient in handling stress especially in the highly volatile airline setting (Soo & Liew, 2017). Airline companies should appreciate their employees as the employees are the human capital that are the major source of competitive advantage (Achi & Sleilati, 2016) which can lead the company to success. Enhancing the employee's adaptability to environmental changes through stress management initiatives is crucial to ensure the profitability of the company and stimulate economic growth (Qaisi, 2019; Zain & Setiawati, 2019).

5. Conclusion

Results of this study showed alarming alert to airline management as almost one-third of the airline employees are experiencing a high level of stress. If it is not effectively managed at the initial stage, it will become intensive and prolonged stress which is dangerous and unhealthy to the airline employees. Thus, it is vital for the airline management to provide the employees with greater support such as stress management training and employee hotline or counselling services with the intention of training them to be more resilient in facing difficult situations so as to be able to handle stress and contribute to better performance.

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