

Significance of Psychological Factors on Mental Health of Flight Attendants

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Abstract: The Aviation industry in India is one of the major resources which contributes to the country's GDP. The primary role of any airline industry is to cater to the needs and comfort of their clients and customers and also maintain their safety. Their frontline employees are the flight attendants and their services are crucial as they play the role of creating the first impressions about the airline. The job of the cabin crew although considered very glamorous and attractive is instead very strenuous. They have to interact with individuals from various backgrounds, work in different time zones, stay away from family, go on long haul flights, etc. Their jobs demand them to behave and manage their emotions in a certain standard way irrespective of what the crew goes through, which explains the issue of emotional labour. This can lead to a lot of psychological issues with detrimental effects to the mental health of the crew. The paper here addresses them and also provides a way of combating the negative impacts on their mental health with the help of emotional intelligence.

Keywords: aviation industry, flight attendants, emotional labour, emotional exhaustion, emotional intelligence, mental health.

INTRODUCTION

According to the India Aviation Report of 2016, India intends to achieve the place of the third largest Aviation market by 2020 and the largest by 2030.

An e-report published by Livemint in 2017, marked India as the third largest in domestic aviation market after Japan. These results clearly signify the performance pressure on the civil aviation market and specifically on the main performers within the industry. The foremost aim of any airline is to provide the best service and safe journey to their clients. One of the frontline groups of employees in the aviation industry are the members of the cabin crew also known as the flight attendants. They play a significant role in any airline company's make or break situation, because it is them with whom the clients and the customers of the airline come in contact with. Therefore, it is very imperative for the cabin crew members to set a standard and provide the best possible service to their clients.

However, in this bargain most often than not, the important physical and mental health concerns of the flight attendants go unnoticed and unattended. Some of the leading mental health and physical health concerns among aviation crew are physical exhaustion, fatigue, depression, drug abuse, anxiety, sleep disturbances, dysfunction in emotions, psychological trauma in extreme cases of devastation, repetitive motion injuries, cancer mainly due to exposure to radiation, etc. According to a report by Crump in 2017, one of the leading casual factors of aviation accidents is the mental health conditions of the airline crew. The

airline crew comprises of the pilots, cabin crew, baggage personnel, air traffic controllers, and maintenance personnel. In 2012, Avis, reported that interpersonal and communication errors within the airline crew lead to devastating consequences. This paper primarily looks at the various physical and psychological concerns among flight attendants and also explains its significance with their mental health.

Emotional labour

Flight attendants belong to a niche group who are considered to be appealing and glamorous, but their job is very challenging and taxing. The concern of emotional labour has been long daunting among this group. The job of the flight attendant sometimes goes against their inner feelings and desires. They are expected to portray an expression of please and make themselves appealing to their clients and customers [3]. Emotional labour is a kind of an organisational stressor. The organisation set expectation of expressing emotion may not be in accordance to their genuine feelings, hence they take to 'acting'. Whenever there is a discrepancy with what they actually express at work as against what they genuinely feel, they experience some kind of dissonance which are psychologically straining. There are two primary ways of dealing with emotional labour according to Hochschild (1983) [3]. They are surface acting, which indicates the pretence and

superficial display of emotions without actually feeling them and deep acting, which indicates internalising the emotions and modifying the inner feelings to actually feel the expected emotion. Both the types of emotional labour are internally false. Emotional labour has been directly associated with emotional exhaustion, stress, burnout, lower well-being and degrading general health[4].

Emotional exhaustion

The flight attendants are in regular, direct face to face contact with many people at work. The interactions and experience with all these different passengers on board are not the same for them each day. They are bound to meet people from all the different spectra of life be it age, gender, religion, culture, economic strata, attitudes, complacent client, difficult client, personalities, etc. Each passenger comes with a different story and hence, it becomes very crucial for the flight attendant to be considerate and modify their attitude toward each of them uniquely. This experience of interpersonal interactions results in emotional exhaustion. As cited by Chang and Chiu in 2009, emotional exhaustion signifies lack of energy and excessive emotional demands during interpersonal interactions[5]. Emotional exhaustion effects the mind and the body and also has negative repercussions on self-esteem, physiological state and also shows neurotic symptoms like anxiety, depression irritability, etc.

Emotional intelligence as a way to mental health

The environment within the flight is not predictable at all times; it is emotionally charged. According to an e-report published in 2017, the job of the flight attendant is not just limited to being friendly or professional alone, but in being emotionally intelligent. The ability to manage one's feelings while being aware and being able to comprehend other's feelings and acting accordingly is called emotional intelligence. Therefore, nowadays a higher EQ (emotional quotient) is considered by airline recruiters along with other professional requirements.

The aforementioned concerns pertaining to the flight attendants are indeed critical issues and it can be curbed by being emotionally intelligent. Literature has shown clear signs of positive influence of emotional intelligence with favourable organisational outcomes like job satisfaction, well-being, productivity, less burnout, low employee turnover, etc. and also favourable individual outcomes like overall well-being, general health, good emotional regulations[6-7].

Therefore, flight attendants who can readily perceive one's and other's emotions and are able to modify their expected display of emotions and adapt accordingly will experience less emotional labour and less emotional exhaustion. Individuals with high EQ can comprehend situational factors, thereby contributing to lesser dissonance. Also, literature proves that people who engage in more surface acting have negative consequences as against people who engage

more in deep acting. Literature also shows that people with higher emotional intelligence engage more in deep acting than in surface acting because they are able to adjust and manage their emotions effectively. Emotional intelligence has proved to moderate the influence of emotional labour on emotional exhaustion, however, this finding has been relatively inconsistent.

CONCLUSION

The betterment of mental health and physical health should be of outmost importance to the civil aviation industry. More care the employees experience, the better will be their performance and hence will result in positive consequences.

Following are a few suggestions for the betterment of mental health among the flight attendants. The crew resource management of civil aviation and the aviation psychology departments could come up with ways to help flight attendants deal with the issues of emotional labour and emotional exhaustion which cause a threat to their mental health. Training programs on improving emotional intelligence during pre-recruitment and post-recruitment phase could be introduced and also counselling cells or programs for the aviation employees can be established. These practices by the aviation industry will definitely help them cater to the needs and requirements of their clients, customers and most importantly to their employees. This can also help the aviation industry establish themselves as one of the largest domestic passenger markets with a strong workforce.

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