Work-Stress, Coping and the Needs of Airline Customer Service Agents during Covid-19 Pandemic Spread

Nutchirathorn Naulsom[1]

Krit Witthawassamrankul[2]

Abstract

This research aimed to study the work-stress, coping and the needs of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic spread. This researcher applied mixed method using both questionnaire instrument and interview method. The researcher distributed the questionnaires instrument to 400 airline customer service agents and interviewed 10 customer service agents during 15 October to 15 September, 2020 at Suvarnabhumi Airport. The statistical analysis for the questionnaire was frequency, percentage, mean, S.D., t-test and One-way ANOVA and the content analysis for the interview method. The results founded that the highest job stress during covid-19 came from role ambiguities (mean = 4.41), then interpersonal problems (mean = 4.35) and economic problems and role conflicts (mean = 4.27), respectively. The hypothesis testing results showed that only different ages affected different stress of airline customer service agents. The interview results showed that the airline customer service agents coped with the stress by compromising. They were flexible and adjusted themselves with the situation during covid-19 pandemic. Their work-stress did not come from the work-stress itself; however, it stemmed from the uncertainty of the environment and policy. They needed more clarity and clarification of the updated policy. Therefore, information was the most useful they needed. In addition, the unstable compensation caused their work-stresses.

Keywords: Stress, Airline, Customer Service Agent

[1] Lecturer at Aviation Personnel Development Institute, Kasem Bundit University, 60 Romklao Road, Meenburi, Bangkok, Thailand
E-mail: varapattra.nau@kbu.ac.th
[2] Lecturer at Aviation Personnel Development Institute, Kasem Bundit University, 60 Romklao Road, Meenburi, Bangkok, Thailand
Corresponding author: krit.wit@kbu.ac.th

Introduction

Airline is one of the major parts in tourism and hospitality business bringing a large portion of incomes to Thailand. The airline business includes both passenger and delivery service. Based on the report in the last decade, the Thai airline business rapidly grows in numbers and qualities. Many low-cost airlines opened its businesses to serve the demand of regional flying and neighbor and closed countries, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Korea, Japan, etc. Therefore, it expands the market and jobs as airline customer service agents, who are working with process and people with time constraints (Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand, 2019).

Airline customer service agents are persons who assist the customers with itinerary changes, flight reservations and questions about customer loyalty programs. They provide flight information, issuing tickets, check-in service, checking boarding passes, solving ticket problems and checking baggage for passengers. The airline customer service agent can upgrade the seats and reissue seats for the passengers when no seats are available in the flight. They can work in many places based on their functions, as call center for information and assistance, front desk of an airport, etc. Four types of airline customer service agents are 1) Customer Service Representative: the one who is responsible for solving the complaints and questions of the customer. 2) Airport Manager: the one who is responsible for the smooth functioning of all the activities at the airport. 3) Retail Sales Associate: the one who is responsible for assisting consumers in the collection and purchasing of products. 4) Flight Attendant: the one who is responsible for ensuring the safety and security of the passengers during the flight. Since each type has different functions and works, the stress is different. In general, work-stresses of airline customer service agents were from people and process constraints. The more problems came when they face the covid-19 pandemic in their work (Law, 2018; Burapharat, 2018).

Covid-19 pandemic has spread to Thailand since March, 2021. The pandemic caused changes in service industry, particularly airline business due to the spread of virus from saliva. For the acceptable case, the airline is allowed to operate. However, the airline customer service agents have to follow the rules and regulation from the health unit and aviation organization. When the problem is not easy to control, the airline customer service agents have to stop their works from flight cancellation, reduction of workers in shift. This caused the problems of not enough compensation for the airline customer service agents. Moreover, the operational process during covid-19 pandemic was longer (Maneenop & Kotcharin, 2020). The passengers may be unsatisfied and affected by the stresses of the airline customer service agents. Therefore, this research was conducted in order to study the work-stress, coping and the needs of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic spread (International Civil Aviation Organization, 2021).

Research Objectives

      1. To study work stresses of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic.

      2. To discover coping and managing work stress of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic.

      3. To explore the needs of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic.

Review of Literature

      Work-stress can be defined as a work related psychological pressure and a worker's ability to respond and grip the specific situation at workplace skillfully (Chen & Silverthorne, 2008), as the experience of unpleasant negative emotions such as tension, anxiety, frustration, anger and depression resulting from aspects of work (Salami, 2010) and as a series of physiological, psychological and behavioral responses due to the continuing effects of one or more stressor on individuals in an organization (Yan & Xie, 2016). Therefore, the work-stress included both mental and physical reaction from the works and related to the work to the stressors who work in the organization. The stressors may experience stresses from the works itself and showing their mentally and physically unpleasant reacts such as anxiety, fear, anger, depression, etc. Working in airline business caused numbers of work-stresses due to the job characteristics such as pressure from passengers, uncertainty of atmosphere and environments, or expectation of the persons (Boonkao, 2015; Soo & Liew, 2020; Pi, Chiu & Lin, 2016). Factors affecting work stresses could be from the work-related stressors such as task demand, role ambiguities, role conflicts, ethical dilemmas, interpersonal problems, career development, and physical setting and personal stressors such as family problems, economic problems and behavior symptoms. Since the work as airline customer service agents is in service industry, the stressors face the stressors from service characteristics.

Research Methodology

      The researcher used mixed methods in this study. The researcher distributed 400 questionnaires as research instruments and interview 10 key informants as the research method. The questionnaire consisted of 2 parts as 1) personal factors or demographic profiles and 2) factors affecting job stress which includes work-related stressors and personal stressors. the obtained data from the questionnaires were analyzed by using descriptive statistics as frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation and inferential statistics as t-test, One-Way ANOVA. The Likert's Scale was used to measure the level of stresses (10 factors of stresses). It indicated 5 ranges as 1 as lowest and 5 as highest. The interval in each range was 0.80. The meaning was:

            4.21 - 5.00   =   Highest

            3.41 - 4.20   =   High

            2.61 - 3.40   =   Moderate

            1.81 - 2.60   =   Low

            1.00 - 1.80   =   Lowest

The questionnaire has been approved its content validity by IOC of more than 0.72 and the reliability by 10% tryout was 0.89. The researcher interviewed 10 key informants, who are the airline customer service agents. The questions for interview were:

  1. What are the stresses of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic?

  2. What are the coping and managing stresses of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic?

  3. What are the needs of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic?

Research Results

  The questionnaire results of the factors affecting work stresses were divided into personal factors or the respondents, factors affecting work-stress and the hypothesis testing for genders as:

Table 1 Respondents (n = 200)

Profile Factors	Variables	F	%
Gender	Male	200	50.00
	Female	200	50.00
Age	18-25 years	40	10.00
	26-30 years	171	42.75
	31-35 years	149	37.25
	36 and Above	40	10.00
Marital Status	Single	199	49.75
	Married	128	32.00
	Separated	17	4.25
	Others	56	14.00
Position	Flight Service	95	23.75
	Ground Service	87	21.75
	Others	182	45.50
Work Experience	1-5 years	42	10.50
	6-10 years	90	22.50
	11-15 years	164	41.00
	More than 15 years	146	36.50
Income per Month (Average)	Less than 10,000	27	6.75
	10,001-20,000	155	38.75
	20,001-30,000	40	10.00
	More than 30,000	178	44.50

According to the Table 1, the results showed that male (200 respondents at 50%) and female (200 respondents at 50%) equally responded the questionnaires. In terms of age, the highest age range was 26-30 years (171 respondents at 42.75%) and followed by age between 31-35 years (149 respondents at 37.25%). The highest marital status was single (199 respondents at 49.75%) and the second one was married status (128 respondents at 32%). In the meantime, the highest numbers of position was others (182 respondents at 45.50%) and second number of position was flight service (95 respondents at 23.75%). The highest work experience was 11-15 years (164 respondents at 41%) and the second rank of work experience was more than 15 years (146 respondents at 36.50%). The highest income per month was more than 30,000 (178 respondents at 44.50%) and the second one was 10,000-20,000 (155 respondents at 38.75%).

Table 2 Factors affecting work stress

Personal Factors	Mean	S.D	Meaning
1. Family problems	4.26	0.540	Highest
2. Economic problems	4.27	0.525	Highest
3. Behavior symptoms	4.21	0.519	Highest
4. Task demand	4.17	0.516	High
5. Role ambiguities	4.41	0.540	Highest
6. Role conflicts	4.27	0.546	Highest
7. Ethical dilemmas	4.21	0.546	Highest
8. Interpersonal problems	4.35	0.540	Highest
9. Career Development	4.26	0.525	Highest
10. Physical setting	4.26	0.545	Highest

According to Table 2, all factors affecting work stress were rated at a highest level, except task demand (mean = 4.17). Out of 10 factors, role ambiguity was rated the first highest rank (mean = 4.41); meanwhile, the second highest position was interpersonal problems (mean = 4.35).

Table 3 Hypothesis testing of different genders affected factors affecting work stresses

Factors affecting work stresses.	Male		Female		T	p-value
	$\bar{x}$	S.D	$\bar{x}$	S.D		
1. Family problems	3.45	0.76	3.56	0.77	1.081	0.281
2. Economic problems	3.45	1.14	3.55	0.74	0.981	0.328
3. Behavior symptoms	3.85	0.86	3.77	0.83	-0.764	0.446
4. Task demand	3.34	0.71	3.46	0.94	0.975	0.330
5. Role ambiguities	3.37	0.76	3.52	0.82	1.492	0.137
6. Role conflicts	3.42	0.76	3.53	0.75	1.157	0.249

Table 3 Hypothesis testing of different genders affected factors affecting work stresses (Cont.)

Factors affecting work stresses.	Male		Female		T	p-value
	$\bar{x}$	S.D	$\bar{x}$	S.D		
7. Ethical dilemmas	3.20	0.94	3.34	0.75	1.489	0.138
8. Interpersonal problems	3.35	0.82	3.56	0.86	1.841	0.067
9. Career Development	3.30	0.74	3.28	0.91	-0.133	0.895
10. Physical setting	3.26	0.76	3.41	0.89	1.323	0.187

According to Table 3, hypothesis testing revealed that different genders have no difference in each factor (for 10 factors) at a statistical significance level of 0.05 because every p-value was more than 0.05. In addition, the other personal variables such as age, and marital status were not explored here in this paper like genders since they had no difference in the beginning at 0.12, 0.41 and 0.27 respectively.

The interview results showed that:

1. What are the stresses of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic?

The flight attendants informed that the causes of stress were from 1) work-related stressors and 2) personal factors. The work-related stressors of the flight attendants were from role ambiguities, long-hour flying, and working with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds and attitudes. The problems were from miscommunication. In addition, the flight attendants mentioned their stresses from evaluation and promotion. They have to continue their working contract after monthly flight monitoring. The expectation causes them stressful. The customer service agents informed that their stress was from time pressure and flight schedule. The delay incurred cost and being rush caused mistakes. Their problem was from not enough compensation, particularly in covid-19 spread, they had to reduce their work hours and therefore, the compensation was less. Some customer service agents informed the unclear job description problem caused confusion with work and job sharing. They wasted time discussing their jobs with colleagues.

2. What is the coping and management of stresses of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic?

The airline customer service agents tended to compromise and manage themselves in the situation. They check the situation more often and adapt themselves, instead. The flight attendants tended to ask their colleagues, rather than purser for helps them when having problems. To customer service representatives, they faced the problems by themselves and may ask helps from their supervisors and colleagues. However, from the study, it showed that the flight attendants were less stressful when coping with the situation since their works were based on flights. Once they finished their in-flight service, they reported the cases and then they could move on the new flight and new experiences. In opposite to the customer service representatives, they could not change their work atmosphere and their

supervisor. They had to solve their continuous problems. During covid-19 pandemic, the coping and managing stress for the two positions were different. The flight attendants had more standard and measures to cope with the problems. For minor re-spread covid-19 problems, they were asked to follow the rules of regulations of the aviation organization and for the big re-spread covid-19, the flights attendants were not allowed to fly and may have to be quarantined for 14 days after flying with risks. However, the customer service representatives had less standard and measures for coping and managing stresses with covid-19, based on the different service provision and contact. They have to be aware and update the information and judge by themselves for some cases, which is complicate and new.

3. What are the needs of airline customer service agents during covid-19 pandemic?

The customer service representatives needed more updated information to manage their work. They found it was difficult to manage the problem when getting the information immediately before their work, particularly some positions which requires the time for preparation and guidance such as supervisor. The Thai airline personnel also informed their needs regarding their compensation and stability of their work. They have to prepare for their family. For the flight attendants, they are riskier than the customer service agents due to their nature of work. Most of income was from per diem, which is variable cost. In case of no flight, it means the flight attendants had very low compensation, in opposite to the customer service agents, who have large proportion of permanent income. However, both need welfares and benefits.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the demographic factors, it showed that there were equally 200 customer service agents (= 50%) and 200 flight attendants (= 50%). Most respondents were females (= 53.50%) and males (= 46.50%). The highest age range was around 26-29 years old (= 42.75%) and then the age range around 31-35 years old (37.25%). The highest marital status was single (= 49.75%) and then married (= 32%). The bachelor degree level were highest (= 45%) and they work with flight service (= 23.75%) and ground service (= 21.75). The highest work experience was around 11-15 years (= 41%) and then around 6-10 years (22.50%), the average income per month was more than 30,000 baht (44.50%) and then 10,000-20,000 baht per month (= 38.75%), respectively.

Overall factors affecting the stress of airline customer service agents was at a highest level (mean = 4.46). Based on the 10 factors of stresses of airline service agents, role ambiguities was highest (mean = 4.41), then interpersonal problems (mean = 4.35) and economic problems and role conflicts (mean = 4.27), respectively.

The research found that airline customer service agents have almost highest stresses for every factor during covid-19 pandemic. To work-related stress, they stressed much on their role ambiguity. To this, it was possible that at the time there is unclear role. The airline customer service agents may found lack of clarity, certainty and/or predictability. Role ambiguity may be from unclear job description and/or uncertain organizational objectives. This can create burnout from the airline

customer service agents (McCormack & Cotter, 2013). Some airline customer service agents stressed much on economic and work environment due to changed compensation from the work and instability of work. However, the stresses of airline customer service agents were different from the positions and works. The study also showed that job characteristics, role of employee participation, progression of careers, relationship in the workplace, organization structure and climate were related with the level of stress among ground service agent (Amornpipat, 2020). The research also showed that flight attendants expected more on their career advancement and therefore, they may face stress easier if they could not balance their satisfaction and self-fulfillment, particularly younger flight attendants (Majali and Shana, 2019). For the managerial recommendation, the management persons should identify clear job description and roles since role ambiguity and unclear job description was at a highest level. Regarding issues of covid-19 impact, the management persons should reduce the economic and work environment impact from covid-19. The plan for compensation in each step should be announced in order that the airline customer service agents could prepare and adjust in each step. The future research should be focusing on role ambiguity because this is the highest stress found in the study. The study should be exploring on job description, responsibility and assignment.

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