

Perception and preferences of hiring managers

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the perception and preferences of hiring managers toward employing airline cabin crew for management positions in food and beverage outlets.

Design/methodology/approach – A phenomenological approach is adopted for this study purposefully selecting food and beverage hiring managers and airline cabin crews.

Findings – The study concludes that with customized and effective re-training, food and beverage hiring managers are willing to employ airline cabin crews to assume managerial positions.

Originality/value – This study outlines the practicalities of re-training individuals to improve personal and organizational performance.

Keywords Human resource development, Talent retention, Food and beverage industry, Restaurant managers, Airline cabin crew

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the service industry, the service quality delivered by service personnel is of the utmost importance and the food and beverage scene in Malaysia has seen tremendous growth over the years. This phenomenon created a gap between the supply and demand of qualified service personnel, alongside the long-standing issue of a high employee turnover rate and policy makers developing regulations such as employing local citizen as frontline operators.

Frontline employees when under-trained, under-paid and over-worked tend to quit, as they find little or no satisfaction on the job. Further to that, many managers of food and beverage outlets are promoted due to shortages and not necessarily on merit, as qualified employees are often headhunted by organizations that are able to offer a more attractive salary package.

The purpose of this study is to explore the perception and preferences of hiring managers of food and beverage outlets toward employing airline cabin crew for a management position in the outlet. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- to explore the perception and preferences of hiring managers of food and beverage outlets toward employing airline cabin crew;
- to explore alternatives in career progression for airline cabin crews; and



- to offer recommendations in bridging the gaps in employee turnover and employee competencies in the food and beverage industry.

The phenomenological approach adopted for this study sets out to identify and interpret the perceptions of food and beverage hiring managers with reference to airline cabin crews. A purposeful sampling strategy was adopted, drawing on hiring managers of food and beverage outlets and airline cabin crew. The researchers believe that the samples yield a potential solution to bridging the gap that exists at the food and beverage outlet management level. The rationale for the study is based on the fact that airline cabin crews have a relatively short career span and limited opportunities for career progression. Further, as many cabin crew members join the industry at an early age, they may not have obtained an undergraduate degree which may in turn limit their opportunities for career progression. The researchers believe that due to their experience in providing service, food and beverage outlets are able to assimilate them to assume a managerial role in the outlet after re-training.

Literature review

Airline cabin crew

An airline cabin crew's scope of responsibility is more than most frontline employees in service industry settings, as it includes maintaining cabin safety and providing a myriad of on-board customer services (Chen and Chen, 2012). Airline cabin work is perceived as an attractive job because of its relatively short working hours, high remuneration and the impression that one can travel around the world free (Chen and Chen, 2012; Huang, 2001; Liang and Hsieh, 2005). However, Chen and Chen (2012) and Liang and Hsieh (2005), in their respective research findings, found that the prospects for cabin crew career advancement are limited as are the prospects for career change.

A peculiarity of Asian culture is that female cabin crew members have to deal with role conflict between work and family obligations in a context in which Asian culture considers family to be more important than the individual. Hence, a working mother has to constantly negotiate between job and family obligations (Lo *et al.*, 2003). In addition to the pressures of balancing career and family, cabin crew also have to contend with health risks such as "reduced respiratory health, increased rates of breast and skin cancers, musculoskeletal injuries, health effects from contaminated cabin air and higher rates of mental health conditions" (McNeely *et al.*, 2018). There is little known about the Malaysian context, but these cultural and health-related issues are similar to the broader Asian context. Hence, this study examines the perceptions of Malaysian cabin crew and explores the career options that are open to them.

Restaurant managers

According to Hayes and Weathington (2007), employees in service industries face particularly stressful work situations. Restaurant managers are one group of individuals who can be categorized in this way, as they routinely encounter challenging situations that arise on the job, such as being short of staff and the need to deal with dissatisfied customers. They are also expected to meet monthly and annual sales goals and ensure that the restaurant maintains a good appearance and meets customer expectations. These work pressures can cause them to become tired, frustrated over time and suffer other adverse reactions. Given the many challenges faced by restaurant managers, it is inevitable that turnover rates are high (Malek *et al.*, 2018). There are numerous contributory factors (McFillen *et al.*, 1986; Crandall *et al.*, 1996; Hayes and Weathington, 2007; Adnan *et al.*, 2018), and they are outlined in Table I.

Adnan *et al.* (2018) suggest that the factors that contribute to a restaurant manager’s intention to leave are as follows:

- organizational commitment;
- job stress;
- person–organization fit; and
- compensation and benefit.

Though these findings relate to managers of fast food outlets, they are likely to be indicative of the Malaysian food and beverage industry as a whole.

Accreditation of prior experiential learning

Given the on-going turnover problem, one solution is to bridge the gap by re-training airline cabin crew, drawing on their related, prior experience and work-based action learning. Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) is a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation and assessment of prior experiential learning to determine the extent to which an individual has achieved the desired learning outcomes, for access to a program of study and/or award of credits. Jarvis’s (1987) model of the adult learning process begins with (life) experience where every (social) situation is a potential learning experience.

Historically, learning has tended to focus on the acquisition of academic knowledge, but there has been a shift in emphasis in recent years toward lifelong learning and learner-directed autonomy. Ball (1994) reminds us that in hospitality settings, a broad range of skills is needed, namely,

- technical skills such as table setting;
- inter-personal skills such as how to work effectively in teams; and
- conceptual skills such as problem-solving.

Bauman (2000) argues that learning needs to be rather more fluid and dynamic to develop individual capacity to engage with new and unfamiliar situations, cope with knowledge domain conflicts and keep pace with the rate of technology-driven change. For adult learners, there is no single “best way” to learn, but learning is generally more relevant if it is self-directed and independent and participants are able to draw on a reservoir of prior experience in applying skills and knowledge to real-life problems and tasks (Kennedy, 2002). The Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL) personifies this approach, and its system for learning is well suited to the challenge of this article – equipping airline cabin crew for a career change. GULL is a pioneer in applying action learning and evidence-based learning and provides a structure, system and process that facilitates lifelong learning by knowledge sharing and by equipping participants to become skilled, self-directed learners.

1	Pay
2	Number of working hours
3	Physical demands of the job
4	Job pressure
5	Treatment by superiors
6	Job satisfaction
7	Work environment
8	Person–job fit

Table I.
Factors affecting restaurant managers’ intentions’ to leave

GULL has no formal curriculum – instead, the curriculum is derived from the participants own life and work (whether paid or voluntary) and facilitated for a group of participants in accordance with an overall learning pathway design. The action learning pathway helps the individual to develop their interpersonal, technical and conceptual skills and is best characterized as personal and professional development. As noted earlier, it is self-directed, and the rationale for this is that all participants are uniquely different, with their own motivation for learning and for personal development (Teare, 2011). Given this backdrop, the study reported in the next section explores the deployment of GULL's approach to re-training of airline cabin crew staff. The purpose here is to bridge gaps in employee turnover and enhance the array of expertise available to the food and beverage industry.

Research approach

A phenomenological approach is adopted for this study, as it sets out to identify and interpret the perceptions of food and beverage hiring managers in relation to airline cabin crew staff. The study is conducted in two phases: the first phase comprises:

- recruitment of participants;
- designing of a semi-structured questionnaire; and
- a pilot qualitative study.

The second phase comprises:

- modification of the sequence of questions asked to better address the issues raised that are relevant to this study;
- gathering of data from the remaining interviews; and
- transcription and analysis of the interviews to identify emergent codes and themes.

A purposive sampling strategy is adopted and the samples consist of two groups namely:

- (1) hiring managers, from either independent or chain food and beverage establishments in Kuala Lumpur; and
- (2) airline cabin crew members from various airlines.

Theoretical saturation – no new insight emerging (Creswell, 2014; Denzin and Lincoln, 2013; Jennings, 2010) was reached relatively quickly after interviews with seven participants. Ten questions were formulated, for both groups of participants, and interview notes were made when an interesting comment was made by the participants as they shared their experiences. Qualitative observations consisting of the non-verbal cues and body language of the participants were also observed and recorded.

Data were collected from the notes of the semi-structured interviews, observation of participants during the interviews and audio recordings of the interviews. In this study, the process of analyzing qualitative data began with coding of the interview transcriptions, and this generated specific theme categories (Sandiford and Seymour, 2007). The study applied six steps for data analysis suggested by Creswell (2014) as follows. All data were organized and prepared for analysis. Second, all transcripts were read thoroughly several times, after which general statements were produced. Data coding was carried out alongside the data collection process rather than waiting for the completion of all the interviews and hence the ability to ensure that the questions were reliable. A two-cycle coding method was conducted in data analysis to generate the themes. The In Vivo coding method was used in the first

cycle of data analysis, and *Theming the data* coding method was carried out in the second cycle of data analysis to filter the codes generated and generalize them into themes.

Findings

In this section, the themes generated are categorized according to each of the research objectives. For the purposes of confidentiality, a code name was assigned to every participant, and this reflects the participants' position or occupation and group. Each participant's profile is summarized in [Table II](#) in no particular order.

RQ1: To explore the perception and preferences of hiring managers of food and beverage outlets toward employing airline cabin crew.

Emphasis is on the individual

Participants place more emphasis on the attitude and ability of the individual – this is because participants have varied perceptions of airline cabin crew members:

RR1: Good. I like this idea very much. But they must have good food and beverage knowledge and a good attitude.

RR2: Great. I hope they are dedicated and used to the work environment. As cabin crew like freedom, I wonder if they can adapt to a restaurant?

Participants expressed the view that it is the attitude and ability of an individual that is important, together with relevant work experience. However, participants were slightly skeptical in relation to the willingness of cabin crew to assume managerial responsibility. Given this, the number of years of prior experience plays a role in increasing the potential employment opportunities, but the main contributory factor in hiring cabin crew for a managerial position is the ability to demonstrate the desired ability and attitude.

Managing expectations is the challenge

Participants talked about the challenges in retaining their supervisors and in particular, managing their expectations:

RR1: It is really challenging to keep good people working with you – especially when they are offered a better salary package elsewhere in another restaurant or even in another country.

No.	Codename	Occupation	Years of experience
1	RR1	Restaurant owner	2
2	RR2	Restaurant owner	8
3	RR3	Café owner	4
4	RR4	Restaurant owner	10
5	CC1	Cabin crew	5
6	CC2	Cabin crew	1
7	CC3	Cabin crew, flight director	11 and 9
8	CC4	Cabin crew	5
9	CC5	Hotelier, cabin crew	4 and 4
10	CC6	Senior cabin crew	15

Table II.
Profiles of participants

RR2: This generation of employees now are very different from the last. Nowadays, even when they are supervisors or captains they won't stay long. The maximum is usually one year, then they will leave either because for a better salary or because they cannot take the pressure.

Participants said that the expectations that need to be managed to retain good supervisors are as follows:

- the provision of a compatible salary package that includes wages and benefits (both monetary and non-monetary), which reflect the workload; and
- the work culture, and in this context, the term “strawberry generation” is used to denote current generation employees (millennials) who are less accepting of social pressure and sustained hard work than their parents' generation hence.

These are the main factors affecting the retention of good supervisors in food and beverage outlets and the widening gap between demand and supply of food and beverage outlet supervisors.

RQ2. To explore alternatives in career progression and/or direction for airline cabin crews.

The challenge is real

Participants said that career progression for cabin crew is limited, especially for females.

CC1: I joined Malaysia Airlines after completing form 5 at school as I wanted to experience flying and travelling the world – even if I only have 24 hours in a particular country. I love to explore the culture and people of that country. But it takes a very long time to climb the ladder.

CC2: Regular work during hours when you normally sleep or rest create many health issues! I have very high respect for my peers that have worked as a cabin crew member for 10 years or more.

CC4: I stop flying after 3 years due to health issues. At this point I was experiencing problems sleeping, and frequent back pain among other issues. As I have a Diploma in catering management, I didn't find it difficult to get into a different job.

Participants said that many joined with the dream of flying to places and earning a high salary but came to realize that career progression as a cabin crew member is limited and even more so for females with family priorities. Participants also said that lean career structures limit the opportunities to progress to supervisor and more senior levels.

Love the idea, very similar to flying

Participants said that they liked the idea of restaurants employing experienced cabin crew staff in managerial roles:

CC1: This is an interesting possibility. I spent all of my youth working as a cabin crew member and retired due to marriage and having a family. My 20 years' experience as a cabin crew member is similar to working in food and beverage service. I think that with some training, I'd be able to take on the role.

CC2: I quit as a cabin crew attendant because I got married. I would really like an opportunity to work in restaurant management.

CC4: Yes, restaurant management would work for me as I already have prior experience in the hospitality industry.

Participants said that if the food and beverage industry is willing to employ current or former airline cabin crew staff in a managerial position, it will be welcomed, especially by women, as this provides an alternative path for career progression. As mentioned above, participants said that they began working with an airline because of the dream of flying and earning a good salary without realizing that opportunities for career advancement are limited and that sustained flying can have a health impact.

RQ3. To offer recommendation(s) in bridging the gaps in employee turnover and employee competencies in the food and beverage industry.

A new approach to bridging the gap

Participants said that the food and beverage industry needs to change, especially in relation to managing the current generation of employees:

RR2: I don't think it is going to happen soon but we need to change our mindset and keep finding ways to be better. I also think we should also open up opportunities to a wider group of candidates who could manage our restaurants.

RR3: Nowadays the young people cannot accept the same level of pressure as in the past and so the industry does need to change and perhaps we can create more flexible career paths.

The participants acknowledged that long working hours and a demanding work environment are the main factors contributing to high turnover. They accepted that the industry needs to adapt and be relevant to the workforce currently employed. Some suggestions for increasing retention are as follows:

- career progression, so it is more flexible and achievable;
- encourage suitable candidates – including from other industries – to apply for managerial positions in food and beverage outlets; and
- offer more flexible working hours so that employees can achieve a better balance between work and life.

A potential, practical solution

Participants expressed enthusiasm for, and the practicality of, re-training former airline cabin crew for managerial roles:

RR2: This is a brilliant idea and I don't see why we should not try it – I am willing to give this opportunity to suitable candidates. But the training must be structured carefully with sufficient time to facilitate the transition.

RR3: I really like this idea. My main concern is affordability but I'd like to interview former cabin crew and try this because they have the experience that we need here.

Participants thought that the prospect of employing former airline cabin crew in managerial roles could offer a practical way of improving the caliber of managers. Further, participants agreed that airline cabin crew would have already acquired the experience required in

regard to service excellence such as: body posture, grooming, communicating and serving. That said, participants also thought that structured managerial training would be needed.

Train for management competencies

Participants held similar beliefs on the type of competencies needed by airline cabin crew to assume a managerial position.

RR1: Communication skills especially feedback skills to the frontline staff. They must be also able to format and read profit and loss accounts and follow HR procedures.

RR2: It is important to train new management entrants – the goal should be to ensure that they can function effectively and efficiently in a managerial role.

RR3: Airline staff already have experience in serving and so the goal should be to equip them with train the trainer skills so that they are familiar with and can train for front of house and back of house operations and procedures.

Based on the above responses, participants are willing to employ re-trained airline cabin crew to assume management roles in their food and beverage outlet(s). The specific management competencies mentioned are as follows: accounting and finance, communications and operational procedures in food and beverage. Participants felt that lack of experience (in managing) could, in turn, lead to problems:

- with leadership – especially in dealing with line-level subordinates;
- being comfortable in dealing with confrontational situations with subordinates;
- in dealing with a workforce that is diverse; and
- providing meaningful feedback to superiors and subordinates.

In response, training for these competencies would equip managerial candidates with the necessary industry background and to cope with specific sources of industry pressure.

Yes is the answer

Participants shared their willingness to undergo training for managerial roles in food and beverage outlets:

CC1: Yes. I'm willing to re-train. I would love to build on and use my 20 years of cabin-crew experience in a different service industry context.

CC4: Yes. I would like to utilize my knowledge and skills in a different hospitality industry setting.

Based on the responses, participants said they are willing to undergo re-training to equip them with the managerial competencies needed to assume a managerial role in a food and beverage outlet – a role that also recognizes their prior learning and work experience.

Conclusion

The findings of this study provide an insight on the food and beverage industry in Malaysia where there is currently a gap between the supply and demand of food and beverage outlet managers that could potentially be addressed by current and former Malaysian airline cabin crew staff. One of the findings is that food and beverage outlets are willing and ready to adopt new methods in recruiting managerial talent, though they still have some reservations

about recruiting from outside the industry. It has been possible to identify a number of implications for practitioners as follows:

- There is a need to develop customized career progression plans for employees from entry level to managerial roles so as to ensure succession planning is in place.
- Though monetary compensation (salary) is vital, leveraging other non-monetary benefits is equally important. They include work environment, responsibilities at work and working hours – all of which can influence retention.
- It is necessary to explore different candidate sources for managerial positions as in the example, the potential fit for current and former airline cabin crew members.

Based on the findings of this study, a customized learning pathway could be developed for airline cabin crew staff (and others) so that they are ready to assume a managerial role in a food and beverage outlet that draws on their prior work experience. One way of recognizing their prior work experience is as follows:

- A pre-training workshop is in place to brief candidates on the opportunities of APEL in recognizing their prior learning and work experience as an entry point to a GULL pathway.
- Candidates submit their profile and resume to a GULL facilitator for review.
- The GULL facilitator assesses the candidate's profile and resume to identify specific food and beverage gaps and learning needs.
- Candidates are assigned to food and beverage outlets as management trainees.
- The GULL facilitator serves as a learning coach to assist the candidate to develop the skills and experience needed to assume the role of restaurant manager.
- Candidates who successfully acquire and demonstrate the skills needed to successfully manage a food and beverage outlet are awarded a Professional Diploma in Restaurant Management.
- Diploma recipients are employed full time as a restaurant manager.

There are some study limitations – principally due to the size of the sample – and so the findings of this study are indicative and cannot be generalized to all food and beverage outlets in Malaysia. Second, although the study provided some insights on the possibilities for employing re-trained airline cabin crew to assume a managerial position in a food and beverage outlet, the impact of participants' demographics nor the recruitment-selection process hasn't as yet, been quantified. In view of this, further studies are needed to explore from a different perspective, the implications for other food and beverage categories such as fast food, fine dining, pubs and bistros of employing re-trained airline cabin crew in managerial roles. This study concludes that with customized and effective re-training, food and beverage hiring managers are willing to recruit airline cabin crew staff for managerial roles.

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