

# Fight or Flight? Coping with Stress in the Airline Sector

During the COVID-19 pandemic, airline employees experienced unprecedented levels of work-related stress and job uncertainty. However, their coping strategies and cultural differences in their responses to work-related stress remain understudied. In a timely recent study, the SHTM's Seongseop (Sam) Kim and co-authors explored the relationships between job stressors, psychological stress and coping strategies amongst airline employees in Hong Kong and South Korea during the pandemic. Their work provides fruitful insights that could help airlines minimise employees' psychological stress and provide resources to support coping strategies. Crucially, their results also show that national culture should be considered when adopting such measures.

## **Airline Job Stressors**

COVID-19 crippled business operations in a multitude of sectors, and air travel was amongst the hardest hit. Airlines are no stranger to economic or health and safety challenges, but the international travel restrictions imposed in 2020 dealt the sector an unprecedented blow. With mass lay-offs, rescheduling and furloughs, airline employees faced severe job insecurity and ambiguity. "Consequently", say the researchers, "it makes sense to predict that work-related conditions caused by the pandemic may increase stress and anxiety among airline employees in a way that is different from work-induced stress prior to the pandemic".

To date, however, studies have done little to elucidate the specific psychological and behavioural repercussions of industry-level events like COVID-19 for workers in this sector. "How airline employees perceive work-related stress is not fully understood", say the authors.

Furthermore, scant attention has been paid to their coping strategies in response to such stress.

Context is another important factor. As employees' reactions to work-related stress may differ between countries and cultures, the findings of Western studies of job stress may not be generalisable to other contexts, such as Asia. Although the pandemic affected airline employees worldwide, East Asian settings such as South Korea and Hong Kong may differ in their job stress predictors and outcomes relative to Western countries, and even relative to each other. "Airline employees from these two nationalities may experience and manage work-related stress differently", say the authors.

With these considerations in mind, the researchers set out to provide "a systematic understanding of coping strategies in relation to work-related stress for airline employees during the tourism crisis".

## **Theoretical Model of Stress and Coping**

Generally, we experience psychological stress when we feel that too much is being demanded of us. Common job stressors include excessive work demands, role conflict and job insecurity. According to "conservation of resources" theory, stress poses a threat to our resources, and we respond by seeking to conserve our existing resources and obtain new ones. "Exemplifying this point", say the researchers, "studies have shown that service-oriented employees adopt appropriate coping strategies to conserve their resources (e.g. well-being, self-esteem) and alleviate stress".

Accordingly, the authors note, "coping styles play a crucial role in understanding how employees

adapt to stressful work events". This raises the question of what airline employees can do to counteract resource loss during an industry-wide crisis like COVID-19. However, we still know little about which coping strategies airline employees use to deal with work-related stress. The researchers' first step in tackling this question was to establish a theoretical model linking job stressors to psychological stress and coping strategies. "In the model", the authors say, "multiple job stressors are anticipated to increase the psychological stress levels of airline employees. Psychological stress, in turn, determines their coping strategies".

Various possible coping strategies are available to employees. Task-oriented coping attempts to find a solution to the root cause of stress, such as devising a plan to solve the problem. Emotion-oriented coping aims to regulate the emotional distress caused by the stressor, such as through self-revelation or self-blame. Avoidance-oriented coping involves a deliberate attempt to disengage from the stressful situation. If we feel that we have control over a stressful situation and possess the resources to deal with it, we are likely to adopt task-oriented coping. "Emotion-oriented coping and avoidance-oriented coping are more dominant when both control and coping resources are perceived to be low", say the researchers.

During COVID-19, airline employees had no control over the stressors they faced, such as international travel restrictions, the slow progress of virus containment and economic slowdown. Therefore, the authors hypothesised that airline employees experiencing job-related stress during the pandemic engaged primarily in emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented coping. They also hypothesised that as national culture affects people's responses to stress, airline employees

from different cultural settings experienced and managed work-related stress differently during the pandemic.

### **Cross-Cultural Empirical Data**

To test their theoretical model, the authors empirically examined the relationships between job stressors, job strain and coping strategies amongst airline employees in two Asian cultural contexts during the global tourism crisis caused by COVID-19. A cross-sectional survey was completed online by 366 airline employees in South Korea and Hong Kong in summer 2020.

Psychological stress was measured by the participants' self-reports of difficulty relaxing, nervous arousal and being easily upset, irritable and impatient. The survey also measured the airline employees' perceptions of job stressors such as "forced labour policies", "concern about layoffs", "forced unpaid leave" and "lack of appropriate training and knowledge about the prevention of virus transmission". Coping strategies were assessed using a battery of scales measuring task-oriented, emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented coping.

### **Impact of Culture on Stress and Coping**

Rigorous statistical analysis of the questionnaire responses identified three major work-related stressors associated with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the airline industry. First, psychological stress was related to work schedules and demands – reflecting the major operational changes that airlines had to impose during the pandemic. Companies can mitigate this source of stress through timely and transparent communication with employees, say the researchers.

Second, job insecurity and financial concerns were found to be a major source of stress. Although cost-saving measures are unavoidable during crises like COVID-19, airline companies should be transparent about their decisions concerning lay-offs, salary cuts and forced unpaid leave. "It is important for the airline industry to emphasize its efforts to ride out the hardship together with its employees", argue the researchers.

Third, stress was caused by role conflict. "Employees may suffer job strain when performing multiple roles and responsibilities other than those normally anticipated", note the researchers. "Therefore, airline management should consider the willingness of airline employees and provide alternatives instead of implementing forced policies".

For both the Hong Kong airline employees and the South Korean airline employees, psychological stress was linked to heightened emotion-oriented coping. However, job stressors and coping strategies differed between the two cultures. Hong Kong airline employees – whose perceived stressors related to work schedules and demands, job security and financial concerns, and role conflict – were more drawn to emotion- and avoidance-oriented coping strategies. South Korean airline employees reported only work schedules and demands as contributing significantly to their psychological stress, and this elicited primarily emotion-oriented coping strategies.

"This delivers an important message to the global airline industry", say the authors. As employees from different countries/cultural settings may respond differently to the same work-related stressors, airline management should implement culturally appropriate measures to regulate employees' work-related stress during industry-wide crises. Based on this study's findings, for example, airlines in Hong Kong should promote both emotion-oriented and avoidance-oriented coping strategies, whilst South Korean airlines should focus on the former.

### **Supporting Airline Employees**

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique setting for examination of job-related stress in the airline sector. Airlines can learn from this crisis and better protect their invaluable human resources by communicating more transparently with employees, mitigating sources of job-related stress, and equipping employees with culturally specific coping skills. Emotion-oriented coping strategies could be reinforced by organising workshops or employing on-site psychological therapists, and avoidance-oriented strategies could be fostered by subsidising recreational activities and hosting social gatherings.

### **POINTS TO NOTE**

- During COVID-19, South Korean and Hong Kong airline workers faced various job stressors.
- Job insecurity and financial concerns were the biggest causes of psychological stress, along with work schedules/demands and role conflict.
- Stress led to emotion-based coping strategies in South Korea and both emotion-based and avoidance-based strategies in Hong Kong.
- As national culture affects responses to stress, airlines should promote culturally specific coping strategies amongst employees.

Chua, Bee-Lia, Al-Ansi, Amr, Kim, Seongseop (Sam), Wong, Antony King Fung, and Han, Heesup (2022). Examining Airline Employees' Work-Related Stress and Coping Strategies During the Global Tourism Crisis. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 34, Issue 10, 3715-3742.