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# Post-Pandemic Factors Influencing Job Satisfaction Among Airline Crew: A comparative study of a UK and Portuguese airline

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to explore how Covid-19 has influenced airline cabin crew job satisfaction and motivation to work in the sector. A qualitative approach was adopted with 32 semi-structured interviews among cabin crew employees at two national carriers in EU, namely British Airways and TAP. The purpose is to provide a comparative analysis between the two companies and identify any potential differences and similarities in terms of job satisfaction of cabin crew. The key findings suggest that cabin crew is resilient in dealing with crisis. Flight attendants found ways to turn the crisis into an opportunity to grow and be developed. Job satisfaction after the pandemic is based on health and safety, job security, good working relationships, mentoring and human capital policies. This paper proposes that airlines should adopt the recommended strategies which enhance job satisfaction such as scheduling, knowledge transfer and mentoring.

**Key words:** job satisfaction, motivation, airlines, cabin crew, pandemic, resilience

**Track:** 1. Management & 10. Covid-19

**Focus of Paper:** Theoretical/Academic

**Type of Submission:** Paper

## **Introduction**

The airline industry in the United Kingdom is comprised of a large multitude of both short and long-haul airlines and combined they generate 120 billion dollars each year, in addition to exporting further £26 billion pounds (IATA, 2022). The United Kingdom is amongst one of the most active and desirable airline industries in the world. As an industry, they have enjoyed strong growth for the past two years with cheap oil, keeping fuel bills down, which has allowed them to offer cheaper fares. However, Brexit and the pandemic have cast a shadow on the industry, with concerns over the open skies agreement, airline ownership rules and declining consumer disposable income (CAA, 2022). Airline staff have suffered from the impact of the pandemic, as many were on short-time work, or have been laid off (Keller, 2021). These recent changes to the industry could further affect job satisfaction of cabin crew as airlines continue to drive overheads down in a bid to remain competitive. According to Statista (2022), there were 83,998 people employed as cabin crew, by UK-based airlines in 2019 and this has only grown since with the expansion of low-cost carriers such as easyJet and Ryanair and of course, both short and long-haul carrier, British Airways (BA). Same source reports a drop in numbers in 2020 to 64,725 people due to the pandemic. This drop demonstrates that airlines have made redundant many employees, which has created high stress to existing staff, demotivation and has had an impact to the industry as the demand grew dramatically in 2022 (The Guardian, 2022). Similarly, the airline sector in Portugal faced a decrease in demand leading to a restructuring aid of €2.55 billion and €71.4 million by the European Commission to TAP Portugal (Eurocontrol, 2021). The company had to restructure, cut jobs, reduce salaries in order to qualify for the support from European Commission (Finlay, 2021).

Competition among airlines has increased the past two years, with passengers choosing companies that take Covid related measures and offer quality of service (CAA, 2022). Airlines have acknowledged the need to

provide better service (Gupta, 2018), hence they have started showing more care to their employees with more training and other human resources (HR) policies. Nevertheless, job satisfaction and motivation to work in the sector has reduced after the large number of redundancies in 2020 (Finlay, 2021). Airline employees and more specifically cabin crew (flight attendants) are at high risk of getting infected (Hawkins, 2020).

Most of the studies focus on passengers' satisfaction rather than employees' satisfaction (Messner, 2016) and current research focuses on the impact of covid rather than the post-covid period. The working environment in the airline industry can positively or negatively affect employees' satisfaction (Han, 2013). The purpose of this study is to explore job satisfaction and motivation among flight attendants after the pandemic and provide some information on the airline sector situation in terms of human resources with recommendations on ways to increase satisfaction and motivation to contribute to service recovery. The aim is to contribute to the research on human resources in airline crew, and to provide the factors of job satisfaction.

## Literature Review

The role of cabin crew (flight attendants) has high demands such as long hours, role overload, working at altitude and emotional labour (Williams & Thwaites, 2007). Cabin crew often work at night (sometimes for long hours), travel across time zones and experience jet lag (Ng et al., 2011). Quick aircraft turnaround times, reduction in pay and working conditions and the pressure to carry out as many duties on the ground and whilst flying, in compliance with safety and company procedure, makes the occupation of cabin crew one of the most intensive and potentially stressful jobs in the service sector (Boyd, 2001; Chen & Chen, 2013).

*Job satisfaction* implies doing a job one enjoys, doing it well and being rewarded for one's efforts. Job satisfaction is the "key ingredient that leads to recognition, income, promotion, and the achievement of other goals that lead to a feeling of fulfilment" (Kaliski, 2007, p.446). Shahzad et al. (2013) propose that high experienced and well-trained employees tend to be more satisfied with their jobs and that financial benefits, rewards, promotion all play an important role to satisfy, retain and attract employees. Karatepe and Vatankhah (2014) propose that airline companies should establish and maintain a work environment where cabin crew can take advantage of a number of high-performance work practices. Moreover, research suggests the existence of cultural and demographic differences (such as age, gender) in job satisfaction and motivation to follow a career path (Baum, 2012; Shahzad et al., 2013; Marinakou & Mills, 2019).

There have been various definitions of job satisfaction. For example Aryee (1995) and Wood et al. (2001) included remuneration, promotion as well as the emotional state of the individual. Smircich (1995) added employees' attitudes, Luthar (2000) resilience and Robbins and Judge (2017) the characteristics of the job and employees' feelings. Service employees such as flight attendants play a vital role in the quality of customer service, passenger satisfaction; they represent the company hence they affect passengers' decisions to purchase a product. If they are satisfied with their job, they will perform well and may create good organisation impressions on customers (Ishaque & Shahzad, 2016). Boontharika (2010) and Jangsiriwattana (2016) in their study of Thai Airways proposed work, supervision, payroll, promotion among the factors of job satisfaction. Maythisa (2005) in a study of Japan Airlines excluded income and promotions. Rast and Tourani (2012) in their study in Iran propose supervision, pay, nature of work and opportunities for promotion as positive factors, and they found no differences among male and female employees' job satisfaction. Bergman (2015) provided three key factors that have a negative impact on employees job satisfaction, namely intensification of work, vulnerability and aging.

Similarly, *motivation* is linked to well-being, short breaks, time, money and good working conditions (Chen, 2006; Russell, 2017). Motivation drives behaviour, gives direction and is described as an inner force that drives employees to achieve individual and organizational goals (Ko et al., 2021). With reference to Maslow's hierarchy of needs studies propose various factors for employee motivation, such as adequate wages, facilities (physiological needs), job continuity, insurance and retirement plans (security needs), relationships and friendships at work, open climate (belongingness and social needs), job titles, awards, recognition (esteem needs), and on the top meeting full potential (self-actualization needs) (Hamilton, 2014; Ko et al., 2021). The literature suggests common motivating factors that contribute to the satisfaction of an individual include appreciation, communication, co-workers, fringe benefits, job conditions, nature of the work itself, the organisation, policies and procedures, pay, personal growth, promotion opportunities, recognition, security and supervision (Spector, 1997; Han, 2013). Cabin crew are responsible for safety and security as well as customer service and the welfare of passengers, they should also be familiar with new emerging technologies (Camillieri, 2018). The two main research questions of this study are:

1. What are the factors that contribute to cabin crew job satisfaction after the pandemic?
2. Are there any differences between companies operating in different countries?

## Methodology

For the purpose of this study 32 semi-structured interviews were conducted with cabin crew at two airlines, one in the UK (British Airways, 17) and one in Portugal (TAP Portugal, 15). The interviews were conducted online, and all participants were provided with a list of topics that would be included in the process to minimize the limitations of online interviewing (Hewson et al., 2016). The interviews started with some general demographic data such as age, years of experience, education and then the second part included questions about the factors that contribute to job satisfaction and motivation of cabin crew after the pandemic. The questions were designed to provide information and deeper understanding into the factors that contribute to job satisfaction. Convenience sampling was used, as participants were among the contacts of the researcher and were selected based on their accessibility, and their willingness to participate at the study (Etikan et al., 2016). Participants' consent was acquired, and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Although it is difficult to determine the number of interviews that may provide valid data, the interviews stopped when saturation and repetitiveness were evident (Fontaine et al., 2013). The main consideration was to collect a similar number of responses to ensure that data could be compared between the two companies. Qualitative analysis between the two samples was performed as it can be case-based, but at the same time may generate findings that can be generalized across wider populations with relatively small and simple data sets (Schatz & Welle, 2016). It also helps to identify patterns in the cases to explain a phenomenon (Pattyn et al., 2017). The coding and themes emerged even from the interview process; notes and keywords were identified, which were then used for the coding and the thematic analysis. An example of these codes are shown in table 2.

**Table 2: Coding**

Code	Keywords
Nature of work	Overtime / Culture / Working conditions
Financial implications	Salary

The text was analysed in a comparative way as the purpose was to identify any differences among airline crew members between the two companies. All responses by each group were compared and compiled and quotes have been used to support the data analysis and discussion.

## Findings and Discussion

Participants were asked questions about demographic information, such as gender, age, years of experience, and marital status (as shown in Table 2).

**Table 2. Participants' profile**

	Number (N=32)	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	10	31
Female	22	69
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	10	31
Married	10	31
Divorced	12	37.5
<b>Age</b>		
Under 30 years	12	37.5
31-40	11	34.3
41-50	5	15.6
Over 50 years	4	12.5
<b>Years of Experience</b>		

3-6 years	11	34.3
7-10 years	13	40.6
Over 10 years	8	25

Of 32 participating flight attendants, 31% were male, and 69% were female, with 16.9 average in years of experience, all working full-time (in both companies). 10 are married, 10 single and 12 divorced (with or without children). Participants in the study were asked to evaluate their motivation to work after the pandemic in the sector with a scale 1-10. The results showed that employees were motivated to work in their company. More specifically, 7 participants at BA rated their motivation with 9/10, 4 with 8/10, 4 with 7/10 and only 2 with 6/10. At TAP, 6 participants scored their motivation with 9/10, 5 with 8/10, 3 with 7/10 and only 1 with 6/10. The average motivation for BA cabin crew is 7.94% and for TAP is 8.06%. Considering the circumstances and the impact of covid-19 the scores are high. Interestingly there were no differences in motivation among cabin crew in terms of gender, but there were in terms of age and years of experience. The younger respondents (Under 30 years old and 30-40 years) were more motivated to work at airline companies. This could be an indication that younger employees are more enthusiastic to perform their duties and engage with co-workers.

For the purpose of this conference paper the results and findings are presented in a table in a comparative way. The responses were clustered reflecting different aspects of job satisfaction.

**Table 3. Findings – Factors for job satisfaction**

CLUSTER	BA (N=17)	TAP (N=15)
<b>Nature of work</b>		
Working hours - flexible	12	11
Employee loyalty schemes	14	12
Empowerment	15	11
Variety of work / challenging work	16	15
Job security	17	15
Health and safety	17	15
Work-life balance	17	15
Emotional stability	12	12
<b>Compensation</b>		
Fair payment system	17	15
Pay reflecting the job requirements	13	9
<b>Opportunities for growth</b>		
Opportunities for learning and training	9	8
Promotion and progression opportunities	10	14
<b>Working environment - Relationships</b>		
Organizational culture	6	4
Supervisor's capabilities (emotional and technical support)	5	7
Close relationships quality	13	13
Pride in the company	9	13

In terms of *nature of work*, respondents were satisfied with the working hours, but they placed higher value to job security and health and safety as they were exposed to higher risk being in contact with so many passengers. Interestingly, more cabin crew members at TAP felt proud for working in the company, whereas less people working at BA provided such statements. This study agreed with Boontharika (2010) where Thai airways cabin crew were proud to work for the company. This is linked with the culture at TAP that instils such feelings and attitudes to staff (TAP 2022) and provides evidence of low staff turnover in the company. Work-life balance was important especially for the younger employees in both companies, which confirms other studies (Karani & Purba, 2021). Participants expressed their need to have time to spend with their families and friends. For example, P18 stated “*I love my job, but I would like to have more time for my personal life....especially during holidays*”. Hence, they would like more HR policies on work-life balance to create and maintain a supportive and healthy work environment.

*Compensation* was an area of concern. Cabin crew were satisfied when there was fairness in employees’

compensation. Policies affecting their compensation were important to the participants, including pay structure, incentives, and performance bonuses. Moreover, cover for health reasons was mentioned, as participants were concerned with their absence from work due to Covid-19 and their remuneration during this time. Such findings confirm other studies that propose that cabin crew will have to “find new balance in their incomes and expenses” (Laovoravit et al., 2021, p.3).

*Opportunities for growth* included training and development as well as progression. More specifically participants mentioned information sharing, diversity training, performance management and consistent feedback. The *working environment conditions and relationships* emerged from the participants’ examples. The majority were more concerned about the quality of staff relationships and supervision and mentoring. The results were consistent with other studies where the working environment and relationships contributed to job satisfaction (Maythisa, 2005; Boontharika, 2010; Marinakou & Mills, 2019). P7 from BA stated “*the multi-cultured staff makes going to work fun*” and P22 from TAP stated “*the team you work with day to day, the fact it’s always different people and different passengers to different destinations*”. It is evident that after the pandemic employee relations, good working environment, empowerment and mentoring are still valued among cabin crew.

Some areas of concern that can lead to dissatisfaction and lack of motivation were proposed in the study. More specifically, emotional exhaustion due to excessive organizational demands and work requirements was an area for improvement in both companies. This is linked with the characteristics and the demands of this profession, which were anyway anticipated as part of the job (Opatha & Rathnayake, 2018). Participants stated that they have found ways to deal with exhaustion, as they try to develop and change their attitudes towards the new situation by becoming more enthusiastic and staying mentally healthy with exercise. P27 a female flight attendant said “*I try to exercise at least 3 times a week. My favourite is yoga as it helps me distress*”. Scheduling including un-social hours and long days linked to older crew members was discussed especially from younger flight attendants. They mentioned that sometimes they are “looked down” by more experienced and older colleagues, nevertheless they suggested that they manage to overcome this challenge by creating a more collegiate culture.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore the impact of the pandemic to job satisfaction and motivation of cabin crew to work in the airline sector. The majority of employees interviewed were satisfied with their work and motivated to maintain a career in the airline sector, even after the pandemic. Interestingly, participants in this study were found to be resilient and provided insights on how to deal with the new era in airline industry after the pandemic. Cabin crew at both companies were found to be loyal and committed to their companies, placing value to the nature of work, compensation, opportunities to grow and the relationships among employees. More specifically the findings suggest that health and safety, job security, fair compensation schemes, collegiate organizational culture are the key factors contributing to job satisfaction after the pandemic. Financial satisfaction, creates emotional attachment to the job and eventually to motivation to remain at work. These findings may be based on the nature of the two companies, as they provide more job safety and security in terms of the contracts they have with cabin crew. On the contrary, other studies propose that compensation and other benefits are not positive factors for job satisfaction (i.e. Maythisa, 2005; Boontharika, 2010). Scheduling satisfaction is also a predictor for job satisfaction when it allows flexibility and appropriate rest time.

The factors leading to satisfaction and dissatisfaction were established and a supporting framework is shown in table 3. It is evident that when it comes to cabin crew, fairness and good supporting working conditions and HR policies are mandatory. Job satisfaction among cabin crew depends on the working environment, leadership, career development, job characteristics and well-being in the workplace. The job is demanding and as such airlines should ensure they put the workforce at the centre of their companies. The pandemic helped cabin crew to turn the crisis into opportunity as they became goal-oriented, driven and motivated by purpose.

## **Practical Implications**

The airline sector has been dramatically impacted by the pandemic and COVID-19. Redundancies and decrease in demand for travel has caused stress and demotivation to employees (Laovoravit et al., 2021). One simple measure is to ensure they have sufficient staffing levels, with focus on permanent staff recruitment (Hudson & Shen, 2015). This study proposes that national carriers like BA and TAP invest in their human

capital and can be a good example for other companies to follow in terms of the working conditions and HR practices. Fostering knowledge transfer and opportunities for training and development may take off some of the pressure to cabin crew.

Knowledge transfer is also valuable to develop and maintain good relationships among employees, giving the opportunity to younger and less experienced staff members to learn from the older, particularly at times of pressure. Mentoring and/or training schemes on risk awareness may prepare employees better to become resilient and maintain a healthy working environment. The author suggests that managers should meet regularly with employees, listen to their concerns and proposals and help increase the level of organizational commitment, motivation and job satisfaction. For example, cabin crew may be consulted on their preferred schedule, which will conform to legal guidelines, but at the same time will be flexible enough to provide work-life balance and better staff perception of company support and HR policies. Nowadays, new technologies and software programs are available for scheduling purposes, which give access to staff to choose and design their own timetables based on their needs.

More time off as a reward for acknowledging staff contribution to passenger service could also have a positive impact on job satisfaction. Another idea from the interviewees was to develop practices to allow cabin crew to go through airport control and busy international hubs faster to allow more time for rest and recover from physical and/or emotional stress. Time could also be allowed after their flights to be spent on shopping or other activities such as fitness programs. Alternatively, airlines could offer free fitness club memberships to cabin crew. Employees who are satisfied with their work are inclined to provide better quality of service and be more client-oriented which benefits companies success and revenue (Lee et al., 2020).

Diversity and inclusion are important in engaging with all employees and providing support to all cabin crew members regardless their origin, age etc.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study has a few limitations as it focuses on two national carriers where the majority of employees are permanently employed; they are both full service airlines. The number of interviews conducted in each company may not reflect the views of the majority of employees, hence the factors identified should be tested with a survey with a larger sample, and in different types of airlines i.e. budget. There are also cultural differences as the characteristics of employees from different origin, or different governmental policies may impact differently on job satisfaction. Beyond any cultural differences, the generalizability to other frontline jobs in tourism is debatable, too. The author proposes that further studies should be conducted in different types of companies, i.e. budget, no-frills and different countries. From a theoretical perspective further research may be conducted on investigating the correlation between job demands and job resources.

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