

The Relationship between Perceived Organizational Support and Employee Performance: The Mediating Role of Work Engagement in the Aviation Industry during the Disruption of the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the importance of work engagement as a mediator in the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee performance in the aviation industry during the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis. Data were collected from 440 airline employees in six aviation organizations in Thailand. Hierarchical regression was used to analyze and test the hypotheses. The results reveal that although the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee performance was strongly linked, it was partially mediated by work engagement which plays a critical and essential role in increasing employee performance. Work engagement is, therefore, an important matter for organizations to consider when creating HR strategies that should not only create a supportive working environment but should also engage their employees with their work, thereby leading to high employee performance in return. This was especially important in times of crisis.

Keywords : Perceived organizational support, Employee performance, Work engagement, Human resource development, COVID-19

Introduction

The long duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, with its significant disruptions to the social life and work life of almost everybody, the economic situation of many industries has been affected, particularly the aviation industry which was the focus of this research. Airlines have

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needed to keep tight control over their cash burn to survive until air travel demand recovers. This has resulted in the almost full grounding of the passenger fleet, even as strong cargo revenues continued. Airlines turned their focus on cutting expenses during this period (International Air Transport Association (IATA), 2020). Many airlines closed down their operations completely, while other airlines could only survive by closing down most of their passenger flight operations. Airlines had to adapt themselves in any possible way to keep their business running and gain revenues (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020).

A survey revealed that company executives understood that COVID-19 had a great impact on the performance efficiency of organizations: 46% of respondents expected a reduction in performance targets in 2020 (Caligiuri, et al., 2020). This meant that, importantly, organizations needed to be concerned about the status and morale of the remaining employees during this period of disruption of the COVID-19 crisis as it has been noted that organizations that take care of their employees enjoy better employee work engagement (Guan & Frenkel, 2018) and higher levels of organizational commitment (Rhoades et al., 2001). To maintain high levels of productivity and functional effectiveness, organizations must ensure that their employees are focused and invest their full energy into accomplishing their work tasks (Lai et al., 2020). If employees fail to fully engage themselves in their work in the response to mismanagement and managerial indifference, this failure, or the inappropriate working manner and attitudes likely to be demonstrated, leads to poor work performance. Researchers into work engagement have found a positive impact on employee performance (Kim et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2020; Owoeye et al., 2020; Sopia et al., 2020).

Ryba (2021) mentioned that when employees engage positively with their work, they can be 17% more productive, work wisely, and put more effort into their work than unengaged colleagues. A substantial majority, 92%, of business executives believe that engaged employees perform better, boosting the success of their teams and the outcomes of their organizations. If employees actively disengage in their work and perform poor performance, organizations will experience damaging losses in employee productivity. It was, therefore, important to ascertain work engagement related to perceived organizational support and employee performance. Even though other studies supported the mediation effect of employee engagement in this context (Alshaabani et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2020; Guan & Frenkel, 2018), it was important to understand its

effect during the COVID-19 pandemic. As little was known about this mediating mechanism in crises such as the COVID-19 context, the purpose of this study was to fill this information gap about work engagement, particularly in the aviation industry in Thailand, during the COVID-19 crisis.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the relationship between perceived organizational support, work engagement and employee performance in aviation industry during the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis.

2. To examine the factors that aviation industry should pay attention to in order to enhance employee performance during the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis.

Literature Review

Relationship between Perceived Organizational Support (POS) and Employee Performance (EP)

Organizational support theory proposes that positivity from employees will increase when they recognize that they are valued and cared for by the organization (Eisenberger et al., 2020). Without organizational support, it was rarely possible for the employees to accomplish their assigned targets effectively (Shabbir et al., 2020). Kurtessis et al. (2015) referred to the effect of perceived organizational support as “employees develop a general perception concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being” (p.2). Thus, employees with high perceived organizational support have a greater feeling of obligation to help their organization to reach its objectives, with a stronger affective commitment to the organization, together with increased expectancy of reward for high performance. All of these outcomes have consistently been found to be associated with increased in-role and extra-role performance (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Therefore, organizational support plays an important role for employees, especially during the COVID-19 crisis (Shabbir et al., 2020). When fewer employees are working for an organization after the resizing, the remaining employees need to work beyond their job descriptions which may reflect in their performance and thereby maintaining their employment.

As employees are an organization's most valuable resource, employee performance is very important to every organization. Employee performance is everything about the ability, motivation, and environmental factors of the employees in an organization (Sopiah et al., 2020). It involves all aspects which directly or indirectly affect and relate to the work of the employees. Therefore, organizations use different approaches to stay competitive and improve employee performance (Kim & Koo, 2017; Mensah et al., 2016; Tash et al., 2016). According to Elnaga and Imran (2013), performance can be classified into five elements: planning, monitoring, developing, rating, and rewarding. These elements are interrelated and contribute to employee performance which enables and enhances the individual employee's ability to achieve employee performance.

When the organization acknowledges the importance of having higher standards of employee performance and therefore implements the five elements stated above to improve the performance of their employees, the employees also perceive that the organization supports them, especially by providing them with rewards (Markos & Sridevi, 2010). This will encourage the employees to perform their work tasks more efficiently and effectively. Moreover, when the organizations involve their employees in all the performance elements (from planning to rewarding), employees will feel that they are valuable and have a positive attitude towards the organization. Thus, employees will have higher work performance (Elnaga & Imran, 2013).

That the link between employee performance and the organization is essential can be explained by social exchange theory. Social exchange theory claims that social relationships are based on the trust that gestures of goodwill will be reciprocated (Blau, 1964). In other words, employees who perceive positive support from their organization feel a sense of obligation to help the organization reach its objectives and increase performance in return. Hochwarter et al. (2006) emphasized that without perceived organizational support providing resources that empower employees to achieve their work objectives, accomplishing expectations in quality and quantity of their performance was difficult. In return, when employees perceive high positive support from their organization, this is reflected in a high level of appreciation for the contributions and caring towards the employees and, consequently, employees feel motivated to reciprocate through their work behavior, including enhanced job performance and their attitudes reflected as greater work engagement (Nasurdin et al., 2018).

Therefore, it is beneficial for organizations to help employees maintain required levels of employee performance by developing a sense of available support. This was especially so during the COVID-19 crisis which strongly impacted the performance efficiency of employees in organizations (Caligiuri et al., 2020). On the other hand, employees who have weak or no feelings of organizational support may adopt work avoidant and deviant behavior (Omar et al., 2011) which may harm their performance. As a result, the diminishing performance of the employees will impact the success and failure of an organization (Englert & Helmig, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2019).

Mediating Role of Work Engagement (WE)

Kahn (1990) proposed that work engagement was the simultaneous employment and expression of a person in task behavior that promote connections to work and to others; personal presence (physical, cognitive, and emotional), and active and full performances. Bakker and Demerouti (2008) explained work engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that was characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p.209). Sopiah et al. (2020) described work engagement as an important role to help each organization gain a characterized by increased employee commitment and excellent organizational performance.

Bakker and Demerouti (2017) emphasized that work engagement was most often explained by Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory. This theory suggests that an association of job characteristics and personal resources predicts work performance through employee work engagement (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018). Work engagement was most likely when employees are confronted with high challenges and have sufficient job and personal resources available to deal with these challenges (Bakker & Sanz-Vergel, 2013; Tadic et al., 2015). Employees can also proactively seek job resources and challenges by asking for feedback, support, and development opportunities to increase their performance. Thus, work engagement provides employees with an opportunity to invest themselves in their work and also creates a sense of self-efficacy (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018).

When organizations institute policies that involve their employees with their work, in-role and extra-role, and provide positive perceived organizational support, this will create higher standards of work performance which finally benefits both the organization and employees (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011). Employees perceive that organizations support them so organizations should engage employees more in their work to keep up their morale and increase

employee performance, particularly while they are working for the organization in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 crisis. Dai and Qin (2016) mentioned when employees perceive support from the organizations, they will give positive organizational commitment and contribution and make active attitudes or behavior changes to make effort to achieve organizational goals.

Related research is supportive of the theory that perceived organizational support has a direct positive effect on work engagement (Jangsiriwattana, 2021). Several studies have observed that work engagement initially results in greater employee performance (Kim et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2020; Owoeye et al., 2020; Sopiah et al., 2020). Therefore, there is some consensus that work engagement was positively related to performance and plays an important role between organizations and employees.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Perceived organizational support is positively associated with employee performance.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived organizational support is positively associated with work engagement.

Hypothesis 3: Work engagement is positively associated with employee performance.

Hypothesis 4: Work engagement mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee performance.

Conceptual Framework

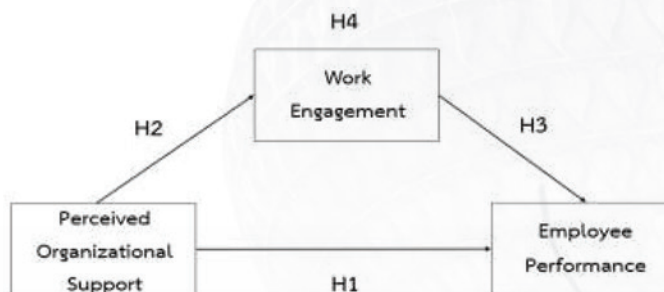


Figure 1 Research Model

Research Methodology

Participants

Data were collected using a 36-item self-administered questionnaire completed by airline employees in six aviation organizations in Thailand. Through non-probabilistic convenience

Table 1 Details of participants (sample size, n = 440)

	n	Percentage		n	Percentage
Gender			Education		
Male	207	47.0	Lower than	28	6.4
Female	233	53.0	Bachelor's degree		
Age			Bachelor's degree	363	82.5
20 - 29	38	8.6	Master's degree	44	10.0
30 - 40	86	19.5	Doctor's degree	5	1.1
41 - 50	178	40.5	Tenure		
> 50	138	31.4	< 5	30	6.8
Department			5 - 15	93	21.1
Administration	161	36.6	16 - 25	141	32.0
Operation	279	63.4	> 25	176	40.0
Total	440	100	Total	440	100

sampling, the gatekeepers of each airline were contacted and asked for their permission to distribute questionnaires to their employees. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed equally among the airlines via two channels; Google Forms through various applications and paper forms; 440 questionnaires were returned (73% response rate). Participants were strictly anonymous and voluntary. As the questionnaire was conducted in Thai, translation of this questionnaire by competent bilinguals from the original English language used the back-translation method (Brislin, 1970)

Measurement

An index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) was developed by three professors who specialize in human resources and organizational development. The reliability of the results was

measured to meet the requirements of Cronbach's alpha. (Cronbach, 1951). Each statement on the questionnaire was rated according to a 5-point Likert scale. Hierarchical regression was used to analyze and test the hypotheses (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The Sobel test was implemented to prove the significance of the indirect effect (Sobel, 1982).

Perceived organizational support (POS) was measured with an 8-item questionnaire developed from Surveys of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002). Sample statements were *My organization cares about my opinions, Help was available from my organization when I have a problem.*

Employee performance (EP) was measured with a 19-item questionnaire developed from The Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) version 1.0 by Koopmans et. al (2014). Sample statements were *I managed to plan my work so that it was done on time, Collaboration with others was very productive, I started new tasks myself when my old ones were finished.*

Work engagement (WE) was measured with a 9-item questionnaire developed from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) by Schaufeli, Bakker and Salanova (2006). Sample statements were *I get carried away when I am working, At my work, I feel bursting with energy, My job inspires me.*

Control variables were selected similarly to those in previous studies on employee performance. For example, Lai et al. (2020) and Sopiah et al. (2020). Participants were asked about their demographic information which were gender, age, education, tenure, and department.

As recommended by Hair et al. (2010), factor loadings equal to or greater than 0.50 are considered significant which shows the internal item validity. Therefore, factor analysis was performed and the factor loadings of all items are above 0.50. The average variance extracted (AVE) higher than 0.50 was defined so that each item by itself was a good measure for the latent construct. Composite reliability (CR) higher than 0.70 indicated that the scale items tend to result in higher reliability levels. Data normality was tested with skewness and kurtosis. All variables were found to have no multicollinearity problem after testing with the tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF). Cronbach's alpha higher than 0.80 was considered excellent, meaning that the items in the questionnaire are highly correlated (Cronbach, 1951). According to Hair et al. (2010), these results show that all values pass the threshold which explains the item reliability and validity as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach's alpha value of constructs

Items	Item Loadings	AVE	CR	α
Perceived organizational support				
My organization cares about my opinions.	0.77			
My organization really cares about my well-being.	0.80			
My organization strongly considers my goals and values.	0.78			
Help was available from my organization when I have a problem.	0.81			
My organization would forgive an honest mistake on my part.	0.66	0.56	0.92	0.82
My organization was willing to help me if I need a special favor.	0.71			
If given the opportunity, my organization would take advantage of me.	0.83			
My organization shows very little concern for me.	0.71			
Employee performance				
I managed to plan my work so that it was done on time	0.65			
My planning was optimal.	0.60			
I kept in mind the results that I had to achieve in my work	0.73			
I was able to separate main issues from side issues at work.	0.74			
I was able to perform my work well with minimal time and effort.	0.55			
Collaboration with others was very productive.	0.69			
I took on extra responsibilities.	0.50			
I started new tasks myself when my old ones were finished.	0.65			
I took on challenging work tasks, when available.	0.67			

Table 2 Factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), composite reliability (CR), and Cronbach's alpha value of constructs (continued)

Items	Item Loadings	AVE	CR	α
I worked at keeping my job knowledge up-to-date	0.76	0.51	0.91	0.86
I worked at keeping my job skills up-to-date	0.73			
I came up with creative solutions to new problems.	0.63			
I kept looking for new challenges in my job.	0.61			
I actively participated in work meetings.	0.59			
I complained about unimportant matters at work.	0.54			
I made problems greater than they were at work.	0.64			
I focused on the negative aspects of a work situation, instead of on the positive aspects.	0.61			
I spoke with colleagues about the negative aspects of my work.	0.77			
I spoke with people from outside the organization about the negative aspects of my work.	0.76			
Work engagement				
At my work, I feel bursting with energy.	0.71			
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	0.80			
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.	0.74			
I am enthusiastic about my job.	0.75			
My job inspires me.	0.75	0.54	0.91	0.89
I am proud of the work that I do.	0.78			
I feel happy when I am working intensely.	0.74			
I am immersed in my work.	0.75			
I get carried away when I am working.	0.57			

The results showed a significant relationship between perceived organizational support, employee performance, and work engagement. Table 3 displays the mean, standard deviation, and correlations among the variables. A correlation was conducted to confirm the relationship and direction among variables. Perceived organizational support was positively correlated to work engagement ($r = .44, p < .01$) and employee performance ($r = .40, p < .01$). The work engagement variable was positively correlated to employee performance ($r = .69, p < .01$). This approach indicates the accuracy of the components that were used for the research.

Table 3 Mean, standard deviation, and correlations among variables

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.53	0.50	-							
2. Age	2.95	0.92	-.04	-						
3. Education	2.06	0.45	.11*	.11*	-					
4. Tenure	3.05	0.94	-.05	.81**	.12*	-				
5. Department	0.63	0.48	-.14**	-.08	-.06	-.12**	-			
6. POS	2.86	0.83	-.01	.17**	.01	-.28**	.04	-		
7. WE	3.65	0.79	-.08	-.01	.67	-.09	.12**	.44**	-	
8. EP	3.32	0.80	.00	.02	.10*	-.03	.06	.40**	.69**	-

Note. $n = 440$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Hypothesis Testing

A four-step approach was used to test mediating effects of work engagement on the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee performance in the aviation industry during the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Table 4 displays the results of the hypotheses testing. To verify the research hypotheses, Step 1, perceived organizational support demonstrated a significant and positive association with employee performance ($\beta = .42, p < .01$) and perceived organizational support explained 17% of the variance of employee performance. Hypothesis 1 was therefore supported. Step 2, perceived organizational support exerted a significant and positive association on work engagement ($\beta = .44, p < .01$) and 20% of the variance of work engagement were explained by perceived organizational

support. Hypothesis 2 was therefore supported. Step 3 illustrated a significant and positive association between work engagement and employee performance ($\beta = .69, p < .01$), and 47% of the variance in employee performance were explained by work engagement. Hypothesis 3 was therefore supported.

Table 4 Analyzing the mediating effects of work engagement

Independent Variable	WE	EP	
	Standard β	Standard β	Standard β
POS	.44**	.42**	-
WE	-	-	.69**
Adj. R^2	.20	.17	.47
SEE	.52	.38	.31
F value (sig. level)	19.68**	15.83**	65.80**

Note. $n = 440$; ** $p < .01$

results for the positive associations show the t-values are above 1.96 for all relationships which also support Hypotheses 1-3 ($t = 9.16, 9.75$, and $19.43, p = .00$) as shown in Table 5. Therefore, Hypotheses 1-3 are all accepted.

Finally, to test Hypothesis 4, the indirect effect of perceived organizational support on employee performance via the mediator, work engagement, was significant ($t = 16.30, p = .00$). The results reveal a significant relationship that explains the mediating effect of work engagement. Since the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee performance was significant, this demonstrates that work engagement was a partial mediator in this relationship. Hypothesis 4 of this research was supported. Table 5 shows the p -values are significant meaning that work engagement was the mediator of this relationship (Sobel, 1982).

Table 5 Mediating effect of work engagement

	B	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
POS to EP	.32	.04	9.16	.00
POS to WE	.47	.05	9.75	.00
WE to EP	.49	.03	19.43	.00
POS to WE to EP	.45	.03	16.30	.00

Research Results

The result of the hypothesis revealed perceived organizational support had significant and positive association with employee performance ($\beta = .42, p < .01$) and work engagement ($\beta = .44, p < .01$). The work engagement had a significant and positive association with employee performance ($\beta = .69, p < .01$). The indirect effect of perceived organizational support on employee performance via the mediator, work engagement, was significant ($t = 16.30, p = .00$). Therefore, the results revealed that work engagement was a partial mediator in this relationship.

Research Conclusions

The results indicate that the performance of employees in the aviation industry was categorized as good while perceived organizational support and work engagement are also categorized as high. The findings of the study confirmed the partial mediating mechanism of work engagement on perceived organizational support and employee performance in the COVID-19 context. This study also revealed that perceived organizational support was an important influencer for both employee performance and work engagement; the more employees perceive organizational support, the more they engage and perform efficiently at work.

Discussion of the results and recommendations

The study findings indicate that perceived organizational support was an important antecedent of employee performance and work engagement. This implies that the more organizational support was perceived by employees, the more likely they will highly engage and perform at work. This is explicitly in line with social exchange theory which highlights a social relationship between employees and the organization (Blau, 1964). Therefore, to maintain the

required levels of employee performance, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 crisis, organizations should develop a sense of having support available, which has a strong influence on employee performance (Caligiuri, et al., 2020).

The findings also addressed a mediating effect of work engagement on perceived organizational support and employee performance as one possible underlying mechanism which was consistent with earlier research that examined work engagement as the process affecting perceived organizational support on employee performance (Alshaabani et al., 2021; Dai & Qin, 2016; Guan & Frenkel, 2018; Lai et al., 2020).

However, unlike prior research, this current study examined these relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. After controlling several relevant variables, work engagement still mediates the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee performance in the aviation industry during the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, the results show that the more perceived organizational support at the time of disruption, the more work engagement of employees. This result was in agreement with previous research that supported a direct positive relationship between perceived organizational support and work engagement (Jangsiriwattana, 2021). Furthermore, the results also indicated that work engagement positively affects employee performance which was also in agreement with previous research (Kim et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2020; Owoeye et al., 2020; Sopia et al., 2020).

In conclusion, work engagement, via the findings of this study, provided a route through which recognition practices enhance employee performance. Therefore, the results indirectly interfere with these results assuring the important role of perceived organizational support in enhancing work engagement of the employees at work, which in turn will enhance employee performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the positive and significant partial mediating effect of work engagement on the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee performance, therefore, suggests that work engagement can act as an outcome of perceived organizational support and also function as an antecedent of employee performance during the disruption of the COVID-19 crisis. This result was also supported by another study (Alshaabani et al., 2021).

Implication

There are several useful implications for an organization based on the results of this empirical study. First, as the finding indicated the partial mediating effect of work engagement on the relationship between perceived organizational support and employee performance, organizations need to understand the positive effect and meaning of work engagement to their employees. Organizations need to comprehend how to develop work engagement policies and apply them to their organizations, given the critical and essential role that work engagement plays in increasing employee performance. Second, organizations should include work engagement when creating strategies, not only ensuring that employees have everything they need to do their jobs but also giving employees satisfactory opportunities for development and advancement. There needs to be positive recognition of the benefits of providing their employees with appropriate training to support them in enhancing their work engagement which will lead to higher performance standards. Finally, based on the results of this study, the indirect effects of perceived organizational support on employee performance and work engagement were also statistically significant. Therefore, to improve employee performance, organizations should create a supportive working environment to engage their employees with their work which will lead to high employee performance in return.

Limitations and Future Research

The strength of this study was that, unlike prior research on the mediating role of work engagement on perceived organizational support and employee performance (Alshaabani et al., 2021; Dai & Qin, 2016; Guan & Frenkel, 2018; Lai et al., 2020), this study provides some valuable information that identifies the mediating mechanisms, especially in the COVID-19 context, but which can be extended to other crisis situations as well.

However, there are still some limitations of the study. First, the data collection was limited to only one sector, the aviation industry, which, while being a large and important industry sector, is nonetheless only one the industries that were severely disrupted during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, future studies should extend this research to other industries to gain a wider perspective, and to compare similarities and differences across a wider range of industry sectors. Second, this study was a cross-sectional study which makes it difficult to generalize the results. Future research could use a longitudinal study designed to increase the certainty of causal

relationships. Finally, a single level of individual employees was used to analyze the data in this study. Future research should extend the model to the connection between individual and organizational levels to avoid the common source bias, especially on employee performance.

Ethics Declarations

This research complies with ethical standards of research involving human participants. The project has been approved by the Board of Ethics Committee, Kasem Bundit University number R012/64X. Approved on 26 August 2021.

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