

The Effect of Creativity and Learning on Satisfaction of Airline Employees

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Abstract

Human resources are crucial to the success of organizations. Satisfied employees are expected to provide better services to customers. In the context of the airline industry, this study focused on the important roles of employee learning and employee creativity on job satisfaction. In recent research studies, an increasing number of scholars have explored the role of various aspects of employee creativity to improve understanding of organizational contexts. Airline employees represented the sample in this study. The author used a questionnaire study tool, with structural equation modeling to test causal effects. The results of the study revealed significant effects of employee learning and employee creativity on job satisfaction. Practical implications for the airline industry were provided, and directions for further research studies were also discussed.

Keywords: *Employee learning, employee creativity, job satisfaction, airline industry*

Introduction

Unpredictable economic situations around the world, including global economic volatility, political instability, and natural disasters have negatively affected the airline industry. Airline companies in Thailand had to respond to all these problems by creating new business solutions or strategies to be able to compete and survive when competition became increasingly intense. Several airlines improved their pricing strategies, cost efficiency, and operating efficiency (International Air Transport Association, 2011). At the same time, more emphasis has been placed on customer service and fuel management, as well as fuel hedging to enhance competitiveness. Many airlines joined airline networks to strengthen their operational flexibility and improve their route networks, not just in Thailand, but also in the world competitive arena (Thai Airways International Public Company Limited, 2016). In addition, the continuing recovery of Thailand's economy has benefited the local air transport industry despite some challenges such as natural disasters. According to the Bank of Thailand (2016), the number of foreign travelers in 2015 was 29.88 million, increasing from 24.81 million in 2014. The overall number of airlines operating in Thailand in 2016 exceeded 500 international, domestic, and dedicated freighter airlines that provided services, including passenger and air cargo services (Suvarnabhumi Airport, 2016). Increasing competition forces airlines to emphasize the quality of their airline staff because for the hospitality industry, human resources are the most important resource and the main source of service excellence and innovation (Amarakoon, Weerawardena & Verreyne, 2016).

In such an environment, airline companies are currently facing strong domestic and global competition. It is crucial for airlines to survive, adapt, and outperform their competitors. Therefore, airlines need to take advantage of their employees' creativity and learning, and at the same time enhance their employees' job satisfaction. For the hospitality industry, one of the critical problems is high employee turnover. Job satisfaction implies a long-term relationship between employees and their companies. A number of studies have focused on many factors affecting job satisfaction. However, few research studies have explored the role of employee creativity as a determinant of several variables in organizational context (Henker, Sonnentag & Unger, 2015; Gu, Tang & Jiang, 2015). Additionally, employee learning is an important process to improve knowledge and skills in order to perform successful work. Little research has been done in the area of hospitality studies (van Rooij & Merkebu, 2015). Therefore, this study emphasized the relationship among three main factors, which were employee creativity, employee learning, and job satisfaction.

One of the most important factors in research about employees relates to job satisfaction. Therefore, the focus of this research is on the effects of employee creativity and employee learning on job satisfaction. Understanding the roles of learning and creativity on job satisfaction can help organizations find the right approach to support their employees and enjoy their work. Employee job satisfaction can also imply a long-term relationship between firms and their employees. The study's main objective was to test the effects of employee learning and employee creativity on employee job satisfaction in the airline industry.

Literature Review

Based on the concepts of learning-goal orientation (Mun & Hwang, 2003; Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006) and organizational behavior (Miner, 2003; Button, Mathieu, & Zajac, 1996), learning is an integral part of organizations and can help support further development of a firm's competitive advantage. In addition, the concept of creativity in organizations needs to be addressed through additional empirical research studies to measure its effects on job satisfaction, which are discussed in more detail in the next section.

Employee Learning

Employees with a learning goal orientation are those who desire to obtain new skills, new knowledge, and learning from experiences (Amarakoon, Weerawardena & Verreyne, 2016; Lorenz, Lundvall, Kraemer-Mbula, & Rasmussen, 2016; VandeWalle 1997). Billett (2008) pointed out that employees in all settings, including both large and small organizations, can learn through work, and this can be considered an important factor for a successful working life. In addition, employees' learning processes can be shaped by cultural and situational factors in organizations. Employee learning can be classified into formal and informal learning. Firstly, formal learning includes technical knowledge and problem-solving skills. Secondly, informal learning refers to practical expertise acquired from knowledge sharing and on-the-job experiences (Inanc, Zhou, Gallie, Felstead & Green, 2015). Learning-oriented employees exhibit three characteristics, which are open mindedness, commitment for learning, and shared vision (Long, 2013).

From studies in service industries, employees with a high level of learning orientation delivered higher service quality than other groups, such as goal-oriented employees (Yee, Lee, Yeung & Cheng, 2013). The reason is because learning-oriented employees have a greater desire to learn and a higher motivation to complete challenging tasks, leading to higher service performance. In addition, employees with learning orientation influence firm innovativeness through enhancement of their creativity. Learning-oriented employees are committed to acquiring new knowledge and skills regarding customer needs, competitor reactions, new technologies, and market trends to create new products or services (Melton & Hartline, 2012). Employee learning strengthens relationships among groups of people within organizations, improving their organizational commitment and employee advocacy (Yeh, 2014). In order to increase employee learning, organizations should focus on developing necessary skills, knowledge, and capabilities in order to improve employee performance, eventually enhancing job satisfaction (Pormirleanu, Mariadoss & Chennamaneni, 2016; Singh & Sharma, 2011; Dekoulou & Trivellas, 2015).

Employee Creativity

Employee creativity is important for service-oriented businesses, especially in the hospitality industry. The routine work of service employees involves dealing with a variety of customer demands, which are mostly uncertain and unpredictable; in so doing, they must provide novel, creative, and beneficial solutions or ideas to satisfy customer demands (Hur, Moon & Jun, 2016). As a result, employee creativity is essential for tourism and hospitality firms, where customer satisfaction is a priority in order to generate revenue. Zhou & George (2003) posit that there are numerous definitions for creativity in many contexts, such as science. Nonetheless, the definition of creativity in the context of "work" must include two important dimensions, which are novelty and usefulness. In addition, the

levels of creativity may range from generating minor useful changes in work processes to new ideas that change business platforms. To improve employee creativity, it is essential for employees, based on their personal backgrounds, to have more interactions among their cognitive style, personality, motivation and knowledge through many different social contexts (Horng, Tsai, Yang, Liu & Hu, 2016; Hur, Moon & Jun, 2016). Staw (1995) stated that creativity is a naturally complex endeavor that requires firm effort and often leads to frustration. In addition, creative outcomes are heavily anticipated in order to produce new products, services, or processes. Ellsworth (2002) noted that research in the area of employee creativity has become more important for organizational studies. More significantly, employee creativity is an important tool to sustain organization performance, including both financial and non-financial outcomes, and competitive advantage. Creative employees provide better problem solving outcomes and innovative ideas, leading to higher service performance. Additionally, creativity is a fundamental element for innovation and long-term success (Rego, Sousa, Marques & Cunha, 2012).

In practice, employee creativity can be developed through support from organizations, especially through knowledge sharing and employee interactions within organizations. In addition, the level of creativity influences the level of employees' job satisfaction (Tsai, Horng, Liu & Hu, 2015). Moreover, creative employees produce positive psychological benefits for firms and a heightened sense of job satisfaction (Hon, Chan & Lu, 2013; Kim, Hon & Crant, 2009).

Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is considered one of the most researched areas in the organizational behavior literature. Job satisfaction is highly important, especially for the hospitality industry, because employees' job satisfaction may have an influence on customer satisfaction (Snipes, Oswald, LaTour & Armenakis, 2005; Raykov, 2014). In addition, human resources are considered the key determinant of success in service organizations. Satisfied staff are recognized as the key to success for hospitality firms (Pan, 2015) According to Locke (1969), Job satisfaction is defined as "the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one's job values." Karatepe, Uludag, Menevis, Hadzimehmedagic, and Baddar, (2006) found that measures of job satisfaction have several dimensions, including overall job environment, fellow workers, supervisor(s), salary, organizational policies, and opportunities for advancement. While there are various ways to measure job satisfaction, it can basically be stated that employees are satisfied with their jobs when their actual job experiences exceed their expectations (Pan, 2015).

Empirical studies have shown that one of the best ways to increase the level of job satisfaction is through use of implicit correctional factors, such as skills, knowledge, personal growth, and creativity, rather than through use of explicit encouraging factors like wages (Yeh, 2014). This shows that employee learning and creativity may enhance employees' job satisfaction. According to past empirical research, an employee's creativity influences his/her job satisfaction (Rast & Tourani, 2012). Another prior study revealed a positive correlation between job satisfaction and job creativity, as well as a relationship between employees' job satisfaction and a high level of creativity (Banakou, 2015; Spanjol, Tam & Tam, 2015). According to the literature discussed above, the relationship among the main three concepts can be formulated and further tested to shed light on the effects of learning and creativity on job satisfaction in the context of the airline industry.

Research Hypotheses

Derived from learning goal orientation and organizational behavior theory, the model shown below was developed for statistical testing, with two main research hypotheses as follows.

Hypothesis 1: Employee learning has a positive effect on job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2: Employee creativity has a positive effect on job satisfaction.

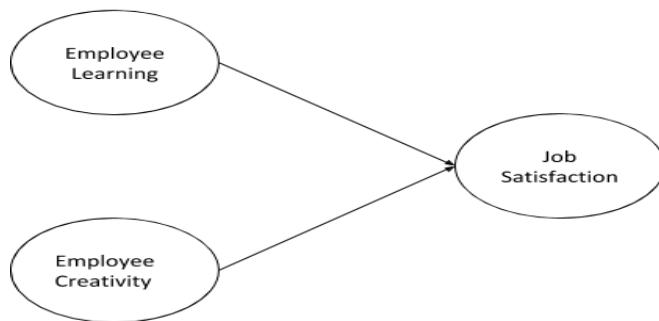


Figure 1. Proposed Model

Figure 1 identifies the causal effects of employee learning and employee creativity on job satisfaction, as discussed in Hypothesis 1 and 2.

Research Methodology

Structural equation model was used to explore the effects among constructs. Convergent validity and discriminant validity were evaluated in order to test whether the data and constructs were suitable for model testing. In addition, causal relationships of employee creativity, employee learning, and job satisfaction were also examined.

Data Collection

The population for the study was employees in Thai airline companies, excluding foreign airliners operating in Thailand. Data was collected from airline employees by distributing questionnaires to the headquarters of Thai airline companies. The sample size was a total of 405 employees. All data collection was completed with no missing values. The period of time for collecting data was three months.

Results

In this part, the author provides the results of the sample's descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and model testing. The demographic details of airline employees are shown in Table 1 below.

Demographic Factors	Percent
Sex	
Male	48
Female	52
Age	
18-30	38
31-40	36
41-50	21
>50	5
Education	
High school	26
Bachelor degree	59
Master degree or higher	15
Positions	
Top management	2
Middle level management	11
Operation staff	87
Years in position	6.28
Years in organization	8.38

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Respondents (N= 405)

The descriptive statistics show that about half of the respondents were male. As for respondents' ages, about 74% of the employees were between 18 to 40 years old. About 60% have earned bachelor degrees, followed by 26% with high school degree. The average number of years working in their organizations was 8.38 years.

Reliability analysis was performed, and it was found that all factors met an acceptable level of reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of greater than 0.80; the results are shown below in Table 2.

Factors	Cronbach's Alpha	Sources of Questionnaire Development
Employee Learning (EL) 1. I am interested in new knowledge. 2. I keep up with new tools to improve my work. 3. I observe how to do things better from others. 4. I attend seminars and training for new knowledge. 5. It is important for me to learn to improve my skills. 6. Learning is an important part of my work.	.866	Inanc, Zhou, Gallie, Felstead & Green (2015); Amarakoon, Weerawardena & Verreyne (2016); Lorenz, Lundvall, Kraemer-Mbula, & Rasmussen (2016)
Employee Creativity (EC) 1. I always think about better ways to solve problems. 2. I usually come up with new ideas. 3. I like to challenge the old way of doing things. 4. I believe that there is always a better approach to doing the same thing. 5. I usually offer new ideas to solve problems. 6. I am willing to take risks when I will try a new way of finishing tasks. 7. I have a suggestion about how to improve our services to our customers.	.869	Horng, Tsai, Yang, Liu & Hu (2016); Hur, Moon & Jun (2016); Tsai, Horng, Liu & Hu (2015).
Job Satisfaction (JS) 1. I am satisfied with my working environment. 2. I have good teamwork. 3. I enjoy providing service to my customers. 4. I have good support from my company. 5. I have a good work/life balance.	.920	Karatepe, Uludag, Menevis, Hadzimehmedagic, and Baddar (2006); Pan (2015)

Table 2. Reliability Analysis (n=405)

Prior to testing the proposed model, the author performed validity tests of the data to ensure that it was suitable for the structural equation modeling technique. Thus, the following fit indices are reported to indicate the model's fit: CFI, NFI, NNFI, and RMSEA.

In Table 3 (following page), the results of testing the data's validity are shown. The structural model's fit indices reveal an acceptable level of quality for the overall model. In addition, standardized factor loadings for all items were higher than .40. The lowest factor loading was .626 and the highest was .896, indicating that all the constructs meet the criteria of good convergent validity. Convergent validity can be defined as the degree to which measures of the same concepts are correlated (Hair et al., 2006). Anderson and Gerbing (1988) proposed that acceptable convergent validity exists when standardized factor loadings of all items exceeds .40 (Lin & Germain, 2003) and t-values are greater than the level of significance (i.e. t-value is higher than 2).

Items	Fit Indices	Criteria
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	.970	>0.90
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	.955	>0.90
Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI)	.966	>0.90
Goodness of Fit (GFI)	.934	>0.90
Chi-Square/Degrees of Freedom	2.05	<3.0
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	.068	<0.08

Table 3. Results of Structural Model (Source of Criteria: Hair et al. [2006]; Hu & Bentler [1999])

Additionally, it is highly important to measure that one construct is clearly distinct from another construct; discriminant validity assessment is used to provide evidence that a construct is unique from the others as shown in Table 4 below.

Average of Variance Extracted		Squared Correlations between Constructs	
Employee Learning	0.525	Employee Learning and Employee Creativity	0.321
Employee Creativity	0.631	Employee Creativity and Job Satisfaction	0.419
Job Satisfaction	0.701	Employee Learning and Job Satisfaction	0.221

Table 4. Discriminant Validity Assessment

All constructs had average variance extracted that was higher than the squared correlation between the constructs, indicating sufficient discriminant validity for all constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Items	Fit Indices	Criteria
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	.949	>0.90
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	.958	>0.90
Non-Normed Fit Index (NNFI)	.964	>0.90
Goodness of Fit (GFI)	.920	>0.90
Chi-Square/Degrees of Freedom	2.20	<3.0
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	.076	<0.08

Table 5. Results of Proposed Model (Source of Criteria: Hair et al. [2006]; Hu & Bentler [1999])

The testing results of the model were acceptable in terms of the criteria, including a CFI of .949, NFI of .958, GFI of .920, and RMSEA of .076, as shown in Table 5. Therefore, this suggests that the results of the model can be further interpreted to explain the causal relationship of the constructs, as shown in Table 6.

Relation of Parameters	Standardized Estimates
Employee Learning → Job Satisfaction	.214* (3.248)
Employee Creativity → Job Satisfaction	.661* (8.606)

Table 6. Relation of Parameters and Parameter Estimates of Proposed Model

* Indicated statistical significance at .05, with t-values shown in parentheses.

The empirical test results show that employee learning exhibited a positive relationship with job satisfaction. In addition, employee creativity had a significant positive relationship with job satisfaction. Furthermore, the comparison of the level of influence of employee learning and employee creativity on job satisfaction showed that employee creativity had a higher influence on job satisfaction.

Discussion

The research findings supported the proposed hypotheses. Several research studies in the past had also revealed similar results. For example, Tsai et al. (2015) also showed that employees' learning commitment was related to job satisfaction. The relationship between employee learning and job satisfaction was also supported by the study of Singh & Sharma (2011). Several other prior empirical studies (e.g. Pormirleanu et al., 2016) supported a strong positive relationship between learning and work satisfaction. Organizations with learning-oriented environments encourage employees to have higher levels of organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Learning-oriented employees became more motivated and energetic, and they achieve positive psychological outcomes (Dekoulou & Trivellas, 2015). In regards to the relationship between employee creativity and job satisfaction, Kim, Hon & Crant (2009) noted that employee creativity was positively associated with career satisfaction. According to Spanjol, Tam & Tam (2015), job satisfaction showed a positive relationship with employee creativity. Employees with creativity demonstrated the effective utilization of knowledge and skills, and experience a decline in work-related stress, leading to higher job satisfaction (Raykov, 2014).

Conclusions, Recommendation and Directions for Further Research

This study has achieved its objectives in testing the relationships between employee creativity, employee learning, and job satisfaction. The results indicate that employee creativity had a significant positive relationship with job satisfaction, and employee learning also had a significant relationship with job satisfaction. Therefore, airline organizations should urge their employees to have a stronger commitment to learning, and also encourage creative thinking activities, because they can improve employee job satisfaction. There are a variety of training courses on organizational learning and creative thinking, which may have a direct impact on employees' learning skills and creativity. Providing more training and encouraging employees to find new knowledge can directly lead to a greater level of job satisfaction. This may imply that the airline companies should adopt more systematic organizational learning systems, including e-learning systems. Furthermore, when employees have higher job satisfaction, this may lead to fewer problems in terms of employee turnover, which is one of the critical problems in the airline industry. Apart from support from airline companies, airline employees should focus on self-learning. Learning a variety of work-related topics can help enhance their job satisfaction, especially keeping up with the new knowledge regarding the airline industry and job-specific knowledge.

A key limitation of this study was that it was a cross-sectional study, and so the results may not be used to generalize in other contexts. Secondly, longitudinal research would be useful in describing the relationships between all these factors in the long run. Regarding directions for further research, researchers may explore possible relationships between employee creativity and other related topics. As the importance of investigating employee creativity has increased over the past decades, the impact or roles of employee creativity should be explored in other dimensions. Further study may explore the effects of employee creativity on employee turnover or organizational commitment.

About the Author

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