



The role of self-efficacy in performing emotion work[☆]

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Abstract

This study used a sample of 154 cabin attendants to examine the role of self-efficacy in the performance of emotion work. On the basis of the literature, we hypothesized that self-efficacy would have a moderating influence on the relationship between emotional job demands (i.e., feeling rules and emotionally charged interactions with passengers) and emotional dissonance, and on the relationship between emotional dissonance and well-being (emotional exhaustion and work engagement). In addition, we predicted that emotional dissonance mediates the relationship between emotional job demands and well-being. The results of a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses generally supported these hypotheses. Results confirmed that emotionally charged interactions with passengers are related to emotional exhaustion and engagement through their influence on emotional dissonance. Furthermore, self-efficacy buffers the relationship between emotional job demands and emotional dissonance, and the relationship between emotional dissonance and work engagement (but not exhaustion).

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1. Introduction

Flight attendants are among the prototypical type of employees to perform emotion work (Hochschild, 1983). Cabin staff has to deal with emotionally demanding interpersonal interactions, including demanding, drunk, and sometimes even aggressive passengers (e.g., Ballard et al., 2004). An internal assessment within the airline company where this study has been conducted revealed that more than half of the cabin staff had been confronted with violence, discrimination or sexual intimidation by passengers (see also, Swanton, 1989).

In addition, cabin attendants have to attend to organizational prescriptions and requirements with regard to emotional display that can be summoned as *feeling rules*. These (unwritten) rules prescribe when and which type of emotional display is appropriate in specific work environments. Friendliness, empathy, and cheerfulness are among the typical feeling rules that apply to the interactions between flight attendants and their passengers. While the expression of these emotions is in most cases a spontaneous process that does not cost any effort (Ashfort & Humphrey, 1993; Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini, & Isic, 1999), some situations call for the stimulation or suppression of emotions that may be in conflict with truly felt emotions. This discrepancy between felt and displayed emotions has been referred to as *emotional dissonance* (Zapf, Seifert, Schmutte, Mertini, & Holz, 2001; Zapf et al., 1999). Emotional demands, feeling rules, and emotional dissonance can be considered as the core components of emotion work (Hochschild, 1983).

The central aim of this study is to gain more insight in the relationship between emotion work and employee well-being. Previous studies have produced mixed findings regarding this relationship, with some studies showing positive relationships between emotion work and well-being (Adelmann, 1995; Ashfort & Humphrey, 1993), and other studies showing negative relationships (Abraham, 1998; Brotheridge & Lee, 1998; Heuven & Bakker, 2003; Zapf et al., 1999, 2001). We will argue that self-efficacy, i.e., the belief that one can successfully perform novel or difficult tasks or cope with adversity (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Schwarzer, 1992), can explain these inconsistent findings.

1.1. Burnout and work engagement

Although previous research has demonstrated that burnout is not restricted to human service professions (e.g., Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001), burnout complaints have been found to be more prevalent among “people-workers” than among employees in non-service professions (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Apparently, there is something specific about human interactions at work that may cause burnout. In the original definition of the syndrome, burnout was even restricted to people-work: “Burnout is a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment that may occur among people who do “people work” of some kind” (Maslach & Jackson, 1986, p. 7). Increasing empirical evidence shows that job demands are the most important predictors of the emotional exhaustion component of burnout, while lacking job resources are the most important predictors of depersonalisation (or disengagement) and reduced personal accomplishment (e.g., Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Bakker, Demerouti, Taris, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2003; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Since the focus of the present study is on emotional *job demands*, we will focus on *emotional exhaustion*. Emotional exhaustion refers to feelings of being emotionally

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