Working onboard – Job perception, organizational commitment and job satisfaction in the cruise sector[☆]

Svein Larsen [a,b,*], Einar Marnburg [b], Torvald Øgaard [b]

[a] University of Bergen, School of Psychology, Dept. of Psychosocial Science, Norway
[b] University of Stavanger, Norwegian School of Hotel Management, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the perceived work environment and its influence on organizational commitment and job satisfaction in the cruise sector. Two focus group interviews were conducted in addition to one survey among the crew in an upmarket cruise line. The focus groups elicited responses concerning crew experiences of working onboard. Based on this information, a questionnaire was constructed to measure job perceptions among crew members. The results indicate that all of the experience domains were related to job commitment and job satisfaction, but that the strongest effects were found to be perceived "Respect", the "Social atmosphere", and "Food and living quarters".

1. Introduction

Although the cruise sector is a fast-growing segment of the international tourism industry (Gibson, 2006; Hung & Petrick, 2010; Murray, 2005), it has received relatively little research attention (Hosany & Whitham, 2009; Lee-Ross, 2006). Loper (2005) highlights a number of important challenges facing the cruise segment. These include: (1) The changing demographics of cruise passengers, (2) the question of how to attract customers, and (3) how to maintain customer loyalty (Dowling & Cowan, 2002; Gibson, 2006; Petrick, Li, & Park, 2007). Another problem is the sustainability issue (Dowling & Cowan, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Klein, 2008), including pollution (Klein, 2005, 2008), safety and hygiene (Klein, 2005, 2008), and various problems of the marginal economic impact of the industry on destinations (Klein, 2005, 2008; Seidl, Guiliano, & Pratt, 2007; Wilkinson, 1999). The sustainability issue also incorporates some economic implications, for example that cruise passengers in the future will be expected to pay more "ecotaxes", at least in some areas. Still, from the point of view of the passenger, more immediate issues such as food poisoning (e.g. Larsen, Brun, Øgaard, & Selstad, 2007; Swaan, Ouwerkerk, & Roest, 2010) and other salient issues of risk and worry (Larsen, Brun, & Øgaard, 2009) may also prove to be important for choice of cruise line and itinerary.

In addition to such *external* challenges linked to the market (environment and economical impact), the cruise sector also faces several *internal* exertions at an operative level. Such problems include the relatively complicated areas of staffing (Gibson, 2006) and handling of management issues in everyday multicultural environments (Tsoukatos & Rand, 2007) of cruise ships (Testa, 2004). This is pivotal in maintaining high service quality, in reducing costs by a decreased demand for recruiting new personnel, and through savings made by decreasing the demand for initial training of newly-recruited crew members.

For any operation in the cruise sector, the staffing question represents at least a two-fold challenge. On the one hand, it concerns recruiting and selecting staff (Larsen & Rapp, 1993), for example chefs, sommeliers, waiters, and other highly qualified frontline personnel, who may get better paying jobs in good restaurants at home. On the other hand, this problem pertains to the issue of keeping such crews happy so that they stay onboard for more than one contract. It is well known in the service literature that happy service staff tend to produce happy guests (e.g. Nebeker et al., 2001; Brown & Lam, 2008; Yee, Yeung, & Cheng, 2008), and in turn happy guests are more willing to return to the same service provider. In fact, Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, and Agrawal (2010) documented a *causal* relationship between employees' work perceptions and the bottom line of organizations Therefore, crew members' perceptions of their work environment and the relationship of these factors to organizational commitment and job satisfaction are areas of fundamental importance for cruise lines (Larsen & Folgerø, 1993; Larsen & Rapp, 1993; Testa, 2001, 2004; Testa & Mueller, 2009).

1.1. Aspects of working onboard

In pinpointing the concept of the "tourist gaze", Urry (1998) brought some of the problems of management in the hospitality and tourism industries to the forefront within the framework of a more general sociological approach. Urry maintained that in the tourism industry, labor itself is part of the service product, which logically makes the service worker part of the service. This implies that various domains of the service workers' individualities, such as the way they speak, their appearances, and their personalities become matters of management interest – management is expected to interfere, intervene and control these aspects of a service worker's personal behavior. This sort of understanding is in line with Hochschild's (1983) analysis. She underlined that service work is emotional labor inasmuch as the customer procures the service workers' personal demeanors. This aspect of service work results in a commercialization of human feelings (Urry, 1998, p. 70; Johansson & Näslund, 2009), which in turn is related to particular experiences of worry (Larsen, Øgaard, & Marnburg, 2005), isolation and other negative affects (Larsen & Folgerø, 1993), as well as a series of positive affects resulting from successful service encounters and manager-employee relations.

Looking at the cruise sector specifically, Larsen (1996) underlined that cruise ships are often staffed by an international crew, which might be one motivator for many to take up work in this sector. He also noted that younger people in particular would work onboard cruise ships because of the opportunity it provides to see the world, a point also highlighted by Gibson (2006). At the same time, Larsen and Rapp (1993) alleged that this sector had traditionally been relatively hierarchically organized, and that this could be problematic in contemporary societies where "today's personnel markets see themselves as socially equals, not only of their supervisors but also of their passengers" (p. 5). They also maintained that one important objective of any cruise line would be to lengthen each employee's tenure for as long as possible. Johansson and Näslund (2009) argued that onboard cruise ships, emotional labor helps to create the cruise experience. Larsen and Folgerø (1993) highlighted that cruise ships are distinguished by a certain level of isolation, inasmuch as the crew is cut off from families and friends and from various recreational possibilities. De Lange, De Witte, and Notelaers (2008) reported that low work engagement, low job autonomy, and low departmental resources predicted low retention. In a recent review, Harter et al. (2010) found that managerial actions and practices impact employees' perceptions of work conditions.

The present research therefore addresses the issue of job perceptions in cruise line crews within this general framework. The basic research problem is two-fold: The first is to describe the parameters of the job perceptions in cruise line crews, and the second is to study how these perceptions are related to outcomes at an individual level in terms of organizational commitment and job satisfaction. The overarching research question may therefore be formulated as: Which job perceptions are related to high commitment and high satisfaction in cruise line crews?

2. Methods and materials

A two-step research process was conducted for an international cruise line. The first step consisted of two focus groups conducted predominantly with non-supervising crew within the current fleet. The most important aims of these sessions were to bring out crew members' experiences of their lives onboard in terms of likes and dislikes, relationships with colleagues and managers, and what crew members considered to be important for organizational commitment and job satisfaction; in short, to get verbal descriptions of aspects of the psychosocial work setting onboard. Such an elicitation approach is well known in the social sciences as an initial part of a research process. This kind of case approach may often be worthwhile in describing a particular domain, in an attempt to get an overview of the verbal contents of peoples' experiences in various settings (Howitt & Cramer, 2005; Stanovich, 2010).

The two focus groups were led by one of the researchers, and each group was attended by 6–8 crew members representing various operative and "close-to-customer functions" onboard the vessels of this particular cruise line. Each focus group interview lasted approximately one hour, and followed standardized recommendations as outlined by Howitt and Cramer (2005). Some of the crew members attending were on their second contract (mostly novices), while some were long-term employees in the organization (more than 15 contracts). The hotel manager appointed people to participate in these groups, and although an instruction of "randomization" was given, we cannot be sure that the people in the focus groups were randomly selected.

In step two of the study, the information that emerged during the focus group interviews was used as a basis to develop a number of items for a questionnaire, which was then distributed among the crew and supervisors for the purpose of measuring the crew's perceptions of their work environment.

2.1. The questionnaire

In addition to standard socio-demographic background questions (such as age, gender, nationality, department, length of tenure (i.e. how many contracts the informant had been on with this company)), the questionnaire also included items measuring various other theoretical constructs such as implicit personality theories (Heslin & Vandewalle, 2008; Heslin, Vandewalle, & Latham, 2006) and cultural values (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1981). For the present study, however, the key outcome variables were standardized measures of organizational commitment (OC) and job satisfaction (JS). Job satisfaction, often understood as an emotional response to the individual's appraisal of his job experiences, was measured using three items adapted from the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1983). Organizational commitment, usually understood as the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979), was measured by the short form of the Organizational Assessment Questionnaire (Cammann et al., 1983), but in order to avoid word confusion, only the nine (of 15) items that are positively worded were used (cf. Mathieu, 1991; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990). The job perception items were developed based on the results from the focus groups. Initially, we used 23 items to capture job perception. We also developed one item for the purpose of validation of the job perception items ("Frankly, I just love to work for this company").

2.2. Respondents

There was a total 216 respondents in the survey, 133 of whom reported that they were "ordinary crew" with no supervisory (leadership) tasks in their job, 58 respondents indicated that they had a certain leadership responsibility, and the remaining 18 respondents did not answer this question. These respondents represented 30 different nationalities and the mean age was 33 years (SD = 9). Some 69% of these respondents were men. The number of people working onboard during the week(s) of data collection was 495, yielding a response rate of approximately 44%. Some 25% of respondents were on their first contract with this cruise line, while 18% of the respondents had been on 10 contracts