Investigating the moderating effects of service climate on personality, motivation, social support, and performance among flight attendants

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine the moderating effects of service climate on personality and performance.
- Social support and service climate moderate the personality—performance relationship.
- Work motivation is an important moderated mediator for improving service performance.
- Distinguishing different types of work motivation is needed to maintain performance.

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ABSTRACT

As service work becomes more complex and diversified, proactive behaviors become even more critical as determinants of organizational success. This study investigates the moderated mediation and three-way interaction effects that exist in the relationship between the variables 'proactive personality' and 'service performance'. A self-administered questionnaire collected data from 205 flight attendants. Using hierarchical regression analysis, the results show that the relationship between 'proactive personality' and 'service performance' is moderated by other variables, namely 'social support' and 'service climate'. Another variable 'intrinsic motivation' is found to be important when a low 'service climate' would otherwise inhibit service performance. The implications of the research findings are provided and discussed.

1. Introduction

Airlines place a heavy emphasis on service quality, although perhaps less so now, when flying is a common way of traveling, than when it was a more luxurious form of travel in the mid-twentieth century (Chen, Peng, & Hackley, 2008). The increasing size and complexity of the airline industry means that more effective management of passenger services is needed (Kang, Jeon, Lee, & Lee, 2005). Within the airline industry, flight attendants are referred to as the frontline service employees, who play a vital role in shaping key customer outcomes (Chang & Chiu, 2009). However, the increasing complexity of airline service systems requires such employees to be more efficient and flexible workers, thus increasing their work-related pressure. Moreover, flight attendants

who are unable to handle their duties efficiently and effectively could lead to service failures, and thus customer defections (Gabbott, Tsarenko, & Mok, 2011).

The personality traits of flight attendants may have an influence on customer-related outcomes, such as dealing with disruptive airline passengers, and can thus help to alleviate concerns that tourists' may have about their flights (Rhoden, Ralston, & Ineson, 2008). As work becomes more dynamic and decentralized, proactive behavior and initiative become ever more critical determinants of organizational success (Crant, 2000). Proactive people are not passive recipients of environmental pressures, and instead influence their own environments (Buss, 1987). However, relatively little research has investigated proactive behavior in the realm of customer services, although Rank, Carsten, Unger, and Spector (2007) show that a proactive personality is significant predictor of good customer service performance. In addition, the literature still contains few works that consider the mediators and moderators of the personality—performance relationship. Past studies identify work motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, as having a central

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mediating role in the relationship between personality and job performance (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2000), while organizational climate may moderate the relationships among personality, motivation and performance (e.g., Fineman, 1975; Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008). Complex work characteristics or environments may also affect personality-related outcomes (Barrick et al., 2002). For example, a lack of colleague support may result in decreased flight attendant performance (Chen & Kao, 2012), and high quality social exchange relationships have been shown to weaken the positive relationships between personality and performance (Kamdar & Van Dyne, 2007). According to Tett and Burnett (2003), employees are likely to perform better in organizations with climates that match their personality, and there is some evidence that the presence of limited social resources or special organizational climates (e.g., Day & Bedeian, 1991) may affect the expression of personality traits. However, the moderating effects of social support (e.g., Lee & Sukoco, 2008) and organizational climate (e.g., Baba, Tourigny, Wang, & Liu, 2009) on the relationship between proactive personality and performance have received little attention in past studies.

To fill the abovementioned research gap, this study aims to investigate the moderated mediation and three-way interaction effects in the proactive personality–service performance relationship by using a sample of flight attendants. First, proactive personality is specified as the driver that predicts and explains service performance, and then the moderating effects of service climate on the personality–performance relationship are examined via the mediation of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Second, this work explores the multiple moderators of the personality–performance relationship, and examines whether the relationship between proactive personality and service performance is weakened when individuals perceive high levels of social support. Third, this study tests whether individuals are more likely to perform better in organizations with climates that match their personalities.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Personality–performance relationship

An employee's personality is a key contributor to their job performance (Penney, David, & Witt, 2011). Cellar, De Grendel, Klawsky, and Miller (1996) show that the training performance of a sample of trainee flight attendants can be explained by the Big Five personality dimensions. According to Cellar et al. (1996) and Bateman and Crant (1993), a proactive personality is positively correlated with the dimensions of extraversion and conscientiousness in the Big Five personality traits. Specially, the proactive disposition is conceptually related to extraversion, in that they both imply seeking new experiences and activities. It should also be related to conscientiousness, in that both are goal-oriented and imply persistence toward reaching closure on an objective. A proactive personality is one that is relatively unconstrained by situational forces, and that is able to cause environmental changes (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Previous studies have shown that a proactive personality is strongly related to positive job performance (e.g., Bateman & Crant, 1993; Chan, 2006; Rank et al., 2007). Tourism literature also provides support for the tenet that personality enhances an employee's performance, for instance, proactive personality is positively associated with innovative performance among hospitality employees (Chen, 2011). In the context of the airline industry, the most frequent challenge which flight attendants encounter at work is satisfying passengers' varied requests (Chen & Chen, 2014), and service performance thus refers to the effectiveness of in-flight service with regard to service

efficiency and quality. To address the gaps in the literature, this study develops and empirically examines a framework of service performance outcomes in relation to the pursuit of efficiency and quality goals. Consequently, the first hypothesis in this work is as follows:

H1. A proactive personality has a positive impact on service performance.

2.2. The mediating role of work motivation

Work motivation refers to both internal factors that impel action, and to external ones that can act as inducements to action (Locke & Latham, 2004). The key mediating mechanism of work motivation on the relationship between personality and performance has been widely identified in the organizational behavior literature (e.g., Barrick et al., 2002; Kanfer & Ackerman, 2000). For example, Barrick et al. (2002) propose that the personality dimensions are related to sales performance through motivational intentions, while Penney et al. (2011) noted that the primary mechanism through which personality affects job performance is work motivation. Furthermore, work motivation has been recognized as operating in two directions, namely intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to interest in and enjoyment of an activity for its own sake, while extrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome (Deci & Ryan, 1985), such as tangible or verbal rewards (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Since external rewards are easier for organizations to implement and motivate employee behavior, extrinsic motivation is often discussed as desire to engage in a task to obtain an external reward, such as money (Silverstein, 2010), and so in this study extrinsic motivation is regarded as employee perceptions of reward fairness. This distinction can be used to guide research linking proactive personality to service performance dimensions by helping to identify theoretically mediating motivational variables for different sets of behaviors. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a. Intrinsic motivation mediates the proactive personality–service performance relationship.

H2b. Extrinsic motivation mediates the proactive personality–service performance relationship.

2.3. The moderating role of service climate

A proactive personality and the related behaviors are important for the effectiveness of individuals, teams, and organizations (Crant, 2000). The construct of a proactive personality is based on a comprehensive view of the person–situation relationship adopted by the interactionist perspective, which posits that individuals can create their environments (Bateman & Crant, 1993). The dynamic interaction between a proactive personality and situational factors is thus of considerable importance with regard to enhancing service performance.

According to Tett and Burnett (2003), situational moderators interact with personality dimensions at the task, social, and organizational levels. For example, the situational moderators that exist at the task level include autonomy and emotional labor. The effects of personality are likely to be stronger in jobs with high as opposed to low autonomy. The moderating effects of social demands, such as cooperative and interdependent teamwork, have been well explored in the literature. Furthermore, situational factors at the organizational level can affect the personality–performance relationship, such as organizational climate and high-stress or complex work environments.