

Challenges and Opportunities after Working as Filipino Flight Attendants in Local Airlines: Input for an Empowerment Sessions for Tourism Management Students

Sharon Candy Manguerra Mahusay

St. Paul University Manila & University of Sto. Tomas, Philippines

Brian Saludes Bantugan

St. Paul University Manila, Philippines

Abstract

This study investigates the different challenges and opportunities encountered by Filipino flight attendants, who used to work with local airlines, to create empowerment sessions for tourism students who intend to be flight attendants but will later find themselves transferred to another field. The notion behind the empowerment sessions was guided by empowerment theories, in general. The researchers interviewed via an emailed list of questions guided by the research questions Filipino flight attendants who worked in a local airline until saturation was reached at five participants. The narratives from the participants were textually and thematically analyzed to surface themes relevant to successful career shifting among flight attendants. Focal areas of development were identified from the narratives and themes and mapped in a matrix aligning them with existing courses in the Tourism Management curriculum of St. Paul University Manila, and the relevance of those courses to flight attendants before, during, and after their career in the airline industry. The study found that there are different challenges awaiting flight attendants after they leave said careers. Some encountered the challenge of looking for other kinds of jobs in a different company, how to adjust to their new, and how to deal with new responsibilities in a different field as a supervisor or entrepreneur. The study identified ten focal areas of development that could be cultivated in empowerment sessions within existing General Education and major courses of the said degree program. The study recommends that the same mapping should be done in all programs to empower students from any discipline at any point during their formation in the university and to optimize the value of academic courses in the lives of students.

Keywords: Flight attendants; Empowerment sessions; Challenges; Airline industry; Tourism students

Introduction

Airline industry giant Boeing predicted that “In the next two decades, the international aviation industry will need to find more than 2 million people to fly commercial airliners, operate as cabin crew, and work as maintenance technicians to keep aircraft safely in the air. The demand comes

from across the globe as airline companies expand their fleets and increase flight schedules to meet market needs” (Prime Industries, 2018, para. 1). The substantial increase in the sales of commercial planes is predicted to increase demand not just for pilots but also for cabin crew members. The greatest demand is expected to happen in the Asia-Pacific region, according to the 2017 Pilot and Technician Outlook Report (Boeing, 2017).

In the Philippines, anyone with a Bachelor’s degree can be hired as a flight attendant (Bureau of Local Employment, n.d.). However, the minimum educational requirement, according to the Department of Labor and Employment, is a high school diploma or its equivalent. With potential salary ranging from Php 18,000.00 (for beginners) to Php 54,000.00 (for the experienced), to be hired as a crew cabin member is an attractive scenario. Tourism graduates are easily the best candidates for the job since, relative to other fields, they have a greater understanding of the travel industry (Cueto, 2016). Nevertheless, the tourism program is not entirely designed for the airline industry; some knowledge and skills taught in the program may still be enhanced, Cueto added, courses that are more specific to the aviation industry and tasks that only flight attendants are concerned with must be incorporated.

Despite this situation, being a flight attendant is considered one of the more glamorous professions all over the world. This glamorous image of the flight attendant originated from the time when flying was limited to the rich and famous (Godfrey, 2018). The image persists until today when flying has become more common and despite realities that point to less than glamorous tasks (McGuire, 2017). Not very many people are aware that while there is no stipulated age limit for flight attendants, the work required of them like lifting heavy baggage, pushing a 200lb service cart, extended shifts, and sleep deprivation, among other services does not get any easier as people age; As such, in the Philippines, it may not be an ideal lifelong career (Ferrerias, 2018).

Higher Education and Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning has become a buzzword in academia because of the recent changes that have been happening in the field of education. The ongoing movement towards an information society, increasing internationalization of education, push and pull of varying specializations, expansion of knowledge and technology, and the microeconomic reforms and the changing workplace, and emergence of new occupations and careers had all but led towards a need to learn throughout one’s lifetime (Candy, 1995). To ensure that access to learning is made real through all sectors, the UNESCO declared that “higher education institutes (HEIs) face a strategic imperative to broaden access to lifelong learning opportunities and ensure that education and learning are available to a diverse student population” (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015, para. 1). Richardson (in Mouzakitis and Tuncay, 2011) defined lifelong learning as “a process in which individuals retain their development of knowledge, skills, and interest in their lives and opportunities for learning” (p. 168).

The aviation industry is not immune to the ongoing revolutionary changes in the field of education. With knowledge changing faster than ever before, pilots and other professions related to the aviation industry, including cabin crews and tourism professionals face the challenges of continuously updating their knowledge and skills to remain relevant and efficient in their respective fields (Barnes, Brown, & Brimrose, 2006). Universities partner with airline industry players to enable aspiring workers not from the same industry to join the latter (Bravenboer and Betts, 2016). Likewise, airlines seeking to maximize their crew productivity present professional challenges to attain ever-increasing expectations (Kirkwood, 2017). Such challenges could only be met if flight attendants have a constant desire to improve themselves which helps “improve (one’s) chances of securing a flight attendant’s job” (para. 13).

In the tourism and hotel industry (THI), lifelong learning is also important in that “(the) changing nature of tourism (moving from mass tourism to niche tourism and new experiences) has a strong influence on educational process and skills which service providers in tourism have to attain” (Trivun, Kenjic, & Mahmutcehajic, 2008, p. 171). To be able to adapt to new trends affecting travel and accommodations, professionals in the tourism and hotel industry must constantly undergo training and updating. Because the top tourism spenders come from highly developed and knowledge-based countries like Germany, USA, UK, and France, the THI must make sure that their professionals can provide tourists from knowledge-based countries opportunities to “get a feel of community, (and) to understand and respect local context” (p. 173). Likewise, they need to be able to cope with an ever-increasing demand to reach ever-elevating standards of quality for products and services that no longer accept excuses based on “local habits” (p. 173). The flight attendant, situated in the intersections of transport, hospitality, and travel industries, is challenged to make lifelong learning one of his/her professional priorities.

Flight Attendant Turnover and Career Shifts

It was found that because of the nature of the job of the flight attendant, married ones are more likely to quit than unmarried ones (Chen, 2006, p. 276) – flight attendants migrating to another career or profession face unique challenges that higher education does not prepare them adequately for, if at all. At a time when flight attendants seeking a new career can opt to take any career, they must be ready to confront any professional challenge in their prospective professions. As such, an ex-flight attendant is likely to experience a struggle between pursuing an “external career” or an “internal career”. An external career refers to a career that is officially documented in organizations while an internal career is that which a person senses while at work (Schien, 2007). Flight attendants will find themselves at odds with both, especially if their job in the travel industry is all they have ever known and experienced firsthand. More experienced persons, or persons who have been in other careers outside of being a flight attendant, are likely to be less stressed during a career shift as they would have already established a “career anchor”. A “career anchor” is likely to keep an ex-flight attendant economically viable and less stressed when they face a career shift. Ex-flight attendants eventually develop career anchors so they can have stability in their personal, family, or career development.

Compared to many staff members in the airline industry, flight attendants have a lower career ladder. They only either get promoted as lead attendants or customer service specialists but only when they stay longer in the company. Lesser retirements, lesser turnovers, and more frequent flight crises pose lesser possibilities for advancement (Colbert, 2004). Their career mobility within the airline industry is, thus, limited, leading to career challenges and shifts. In Taiwan, while many women compete for flight attendants positions, vacancies have been few (Barry, 2008). In a highly feminized profession (Barry, 2008), males will find even lesser opportunities to work as a flight attendant. Being in a highly specialized field, flight attendants who opt to exit are suddenly faced with a much open career field where their previous experience might have very little use. Hence, moving to a career not directly linked to the flight attendant’s work description necessitates that they constantly develop themselves to acquire knowledge and skills that have value beyond the airline industry. To this challenge, a university may opt to contribute by empowering tourism graduates with knowledge and skills that might prove useful should they decide to shift to another career after serving as flight attendants.

Statement of the Problem

To help St. Paul University Manila further capacitate students who become flight attendants, the study sought to surface the competencies that students must have so that they are likely to successfully shift to another career after being a flight attendant. In the context of universities in the Philippines, there is room for students to learn competencies beyond their discipline through empowerment sessions outside of classes. The experiences of flight attendants who successfully moved to another career present inputs for empowerment sessions.

To achieve this, the study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the experiences of the selected flight attendants when they shifted to another career?; (2) What challenges did the selected participants encounter after leaving work as flight attendants?; (3) What opportunities did the selected participants encounter after leaving work as flight attendants?; (4) How did the pieces of training and work experiences as flight attendants help in dealing with challenges and opportunities encountered after working as flight attendants; and (5) Based on the responses of the selected participants, where in the Tourism Management curriculum can empowerment sessions be embedded to enable future flight attendants to transition more effectively to another career?

Study Framework

The study is informed by empowerment theories, that despite their diversity, share a common conception that “workers are an untapped resource with knowledge and experience and an interest in becoming involved which can be released by employers providing opportunities and structures for their involvement” (Wilkinson, 1997, p. 45). In this study, the desired empowerment sessions are conceived as enabling a professional towards greater involvement in his or her chosen field, especially in a new career of choice. To provide empowerment sessions to undergraduate students of tourism means to provide them opportunities and structures to contribute to the expansion of their knowledge and experience relevant to their field of interest after a career as a flight attendant. Empowerment sessions desired by this study are consistent with general empowerment conceptualization in that they underscore “more direct business (or economic) considerations, such as quality, flexibility, and productivity” (of employees) (p. 46). Hence, empowerment sessions are intended to make former flight attendants possess said considerations in their new professions or economic engagements. As such, the desired empowerment sessions involve information sharing (that enriches downward and upward communication in an organization); upward problem-solving (that informs management about needed improvements); task autonomy (that produces self-managing teams); attitudinal shaping (that allows for greater and more confident customer interactions); and self-management characterized by greater employee participation in the larger business operations, consistent with the stipulations of Wilkinson. Thus, empowerment sessions here were identified based on their capacity to facilitate said characteristic processes in tourism graduates, enabling greater external and internal careers.

Methodology

Descriptive research design and qualitative methods of data collection were adopted for the study. In this qualitative research, purposive sampling was used. Flight attendants who were able to work in any local airline and were able to successfully move to another career were considered credible sources of information. Being a qualitative study, there is no required number of participants. However, the study sought to achieve response saturation, which was attained in the 5th interview. The study interviewed former flight attendants who were personally known to the researchers and those referred to them by personal contacts in their networks. In gathering the data, the researchers used six guide questions validated by three experts in St. Paul University Manila. The questions used in the interviews were guided by the specific problem statements of

the study and sent via email to the interviewees. The responses were emailed back to the researchers. Transcribed narratives coming from the answers were thematically analyzed and the themes guided the ideation of empowerment sessions owing to the competencies that the interviewees mentioned within particular contexts.

To arrive at the empowerment sessions specific to a course with the curriculum of Tourism Management students, the competencies that were found in the narratives after textual analysis were plotted by a faculty member of the Tourism Program in a matrix that enabled the researchers to map them in the existing courses of Tourism students in St. Paul University Manila. Competencies that were not covered by existing courses were assumed as competencies that must be deliberately cultivated in the context of those courses.

Results and Discussions

Life after Flight Attendant Career. Four themes surfaced as describing the state of life of former flight attendants: (1) life satisfaction, (2) missing satisfaction as flight attendant, (3) sense of being lost, and (4) room for new experiences. The first theme indicated that the interviewees found satisfaction after having left their lives as flight attendants. The second theme covers all responses that revealed how the interviewees miss living their life as flight attendants. The third theme was drawn from a response that expressed a feeling of loss after leaving the job of a flight attendant. The fourth theme exposed the interviewees' openness to new things, including a more personal relationship with God. Altogether, the responses established that life after a flight attendant's career is not without any struggle and that a stable and satisfying life remains on the horizon after leaving the said career.

Challenges Encountered After Leaving Work as Flight Attendant. The two themes that emerged under this category were (1) employment difficulties and (2) adjustment-related difficulties stemming from not knowing where to go after their flight attendant careers, and (3) struggles related to a change of residence (moving abroad), industry, and salary. While flight attendants are generally used to changes in terms of work time shifts, destinations, and flight schedules, their responses revealed that such adaptations do not render them unaffected by larger changes in their lives later. They remain significantly affected by the change, in general, and never get used to adjustments. Thus, empowerment sessions must enable them to become more prepared for change and more confident in their ability to deal with it regularly.

Opportunities Encountered After Leaving Work as Flight Attendants. The responses of the interviewees revealed two major clusters of opportunities that became available to them when they exited the airline industry. The first was an opportunity to take on supervisory or managerial positions in related and unrelated fields. The second was a chance to take on an entrepreneur's role where they became their bosses. These responses showed that the job of a flight attendant does not alienate one from higher, better, or more challenging work opportunities, particularly those that involve leadership knowledge and skills. On the contrary, their experience in the airline industry as flight attendants seemed to have rendered them suitable for even greater, though more difficult, economic opportunities. Hence, empowerment sessions must include leadership capacity-building and entrepreneurship skills development.

How Flight Attendant-related Trainings and Work Help in Dealing with Challenges and Opportunities. The stint of former flight attendants in the airline industry helped in their development as professionals in the following areas: (1) improved self-presentation and appearance; (2) better personality; and (3) larger network and better people skills. Improved self-presentation and appearance came as a result of their having been trained to do their make-up and oriented towards better presentability to customers. They acquired a better

personality as they had to learn how to deal with different passengers and situations in the aircraft. Because part of their training is to communicate well with passengers, they can attract people's attention, which eventually leads to a larger social network and more competence in the use of their already polished social skills.

After having experienced work in the flight industry and seen new challenges after leaving said job, they realized the need to pursue professional development activities that made them more capable of performing well in their new careers. As a result, they decided to get training that relates to more effective supervision and business management, developing further their creativity that was useful in a more artistic career, and/or getting higher academic degrees to be able to work in a higher education institution. These data suggest that tourism students might be better prepared to deal with life after a flight attendant's career if they are trained early to get used to ongoing development sessions that involve physical, personal, and interpersonal enhancements. They also need to be trained to lead others, manage projects, engage in creative pursuits, and aspire for higher learning achievements.

Empowerment Sessions Preparing Tourism Students for a Life after a Flight Attendant Career. Based on the above findings, the following training areas must be strengthened in the Tourism Program of St. Paul University Manila to help potential flight attendants migrate and participate more optimally in new fields after they leave said jobs: (1) Coping, Adaptability, and Flexibility; (2) Openness to Diverse Learning Opportunities; (3) Leadership Ability; (4) Management Skills; (5) Self-Presentation; (6) Personality Enhancement; (7) Communication; (8) Artistic Pursuits; (9) Higher Academic Goals; and (10) Instructional Capacity. These areas must be addressed either separately in stand-alone academic activities that target one or more of the above, curricular offerings/courses iterated throughout their stay in the university, or in extra-curricular programs with similar learning outcomes. Since the flight attendant career is open to graduates of other programs, it would also be good to consider addressing said areas through the General Education Program (GEP). Below are courses in the new GEP and their corresponding student development areas.

Table 1 below shows how said areas can be incorporated in the GEP and major areas of learning within the base curriculum of the new Tourism Management Program which is to be implemented by St. Paul University Manila. Note the value of the three GEP courses in the three periods relative to the flight attendant's career span, indicating the utmost importance of the social science and humanities courses in the formation of potential flight attendants among tourism students. Note, too, that Tour and Travel Management is considered important before the entry to, during the stay in, and after exit from the flight attendant profession because it informs those intending to pursue it the continuum of service that must be ensured to any traveler within the said continuum. The same goes for Risk Management because this area of learning applies to all service industries that seek to ensure customer satisfaction. Finally, Tour Guiding, Introduction to MICE Management, and Operations Management are courses that are most relevant to a flight attendant in so far as they refer to viable options after one's exit from a flight attendant career or as one is promoted to a higher management position that no longer requires the performance of flight attendant-specific tasks. Extra-curricular programs and activities of Tourism Program students must ensure that outcomes tied to the focal areas of development are also addressed by and are not in conflict with them.

Table 1. *Alignment of Focal Areas of development in Tourism Program Students vis-à-vis Their Curricular Courses*

Areas in the Tourism Management Curriculum of St. Paul University Manila	Specific Courses in the Tourism Management Curriculum of St. Paul University Manila	Focal Areas of Development found in the themes generated that may be incorporated in the specific courses	Relevance of specific course to the Flight Attendant's Career		
			Before entry	During stay	After exit
General Education Courses	Understanding the Self	Coping, Adaptability, and Flexibility	✓	✓	✓
		Self-Presentation	✓	✓	✓
		Personality Enhancement	✓	✓	✓
	Purposive Communication	Communication	✓	✓	✓
	Art Appreciation	Artistic Pursuits	✓	✓	✓
Major Courses	Tour and Travel Management	Coping, Adaptability, and Flexibility	✓	✓	✓
		Openness to Diverse Learning Opportunities	✓	✓	✓
		Management Skills	✓	✓	✓
	Risk Management as Applied to Safety, Security, and Sanitation	Leadership Ability	✓	✓	✓
		Management Skills	✓	✓	✓
		Communication	✓	✓	✓
	Tour Guiding	Coping, Adaptability, and Flexibility	x	x	✓
		Openness to Diverse Learning Opportunities	x	x	✓
		Self-Presentation	x	x	✓
		Personality Enhancement	x	x	✓
		Communication	x	x	✓
		Instructional Capacity	x	x	✓
	Introduction to MICE Management	Leadership Ability	x	x	✓
		Management Skills	x	x	✓
		Communication	x	x	✓
Operations Management	Leadership Ability	x	x	✓	
	Management Skills	x	x	✓	
	Communication	x	x	✓	

Legend: / - Relevant and x - Not Relevant

Discussion

The study revealed the focal areas of development identified in the themes were mostly covered by existing or current General Education courses and major courses in the Tourism Management program of St. Paul University Manila. These focal areas were reiterated within the curriculum. Courses that were given to students as majors were found to be beneficial for them even after their flight attendant careers because of the focal areas of development that can be highlighted by them. A major course like Tour Guiding covers the most number of the focal areas of development than the other major or General Education courses. However, because such a course can only be practiced outside of the flight attendant's career, it was considered valuable only after the flight attendant's exit from the airline industry. Should the courses that are relevant

only to a post-flight attendant career be further enriched with empowerment sessions relating to the identified focal areas of development, such courses will be made more relevant before or during their entry in the industry as flight attendants. That said, intentionally infusing the said courses with empowerment sessions that enhance the focal areas of development identified, will render them valuable to anyone who graduates from the Tourism Management degree program.

The study recommends that the said areas of development be mapped out in other degree programs because they are areas of development that are important for career shifters coming in from any industry to cultivate. Identifying courses in any degree program that can help enhance these areas of development and intentionally cultivating them advance the value of specialized courses in the lives of students who complete them. Without deliberately enhancing these courses with empowerment sessions, students' capacities for career shifts may not be optimized. The opportunity to use these courses as means to develop competencies that are valuable regardless of any career is lost if there is no deliberate attempt to infuse them with empowerment sessions in the identified focal areas of development. Thus, this study must be replicated in other degree programs, and should the proper or appropriate empowerment programs be integrated, the areas of development vis-à-vis their related competencies must be evaluated at the end of every course. By doing so, the likelihood that students could change careers in the future will be further increased. This allows the university to serve students for the long-term.

References

- Barnes, S-A., Brown, A., & Brimrose, J. (2006, September 13-15). Older workers' careers: upskilling, reskilling, and transitions. In Warwick Institute for Employment Research, European Conference on Educational Research. Conference conducted at the meeting of Warwick Institute for Employment Research, European Conference on Educational Research, Geneva.
- Barry, K. M. (2008). Femininity in flight: A history of flight attendants. Retrieved January 14, 2019, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/37720565_Femininity_in_Flight_A_History_of_Flight_Attendants.
- Boeing. (2017, July 24). 2017 Pilot and Technician Outlook Report. Retrieved January 14, 2019, from www.boeing.com/resources/boeingdotcom/commercial/market/pilot-technician-services/assets/downloads/2017-pto-oshkosh-air-show.pdf.
- Bravenboer, D., & Betts, M. (2016). Professional lifelong learning in the aviation sector. Retrieved January 14, 2019, from <https://slideplayer.com/slide/11645021/>
- Bureau of Local Employment. (n.d.). Flight Attendant. Retrieved January 14, 2019, from <http://www.ble.dole.gov.ph/index.php/cg/89-flight-attendant>.
- Candy, P. C. (1995). Developing lifelong learners through undergraduate education. In Summers, L. (Ed), *A Focus on Learning*, p ii-viii. Proceedings of the 4th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, Edith Cowan University, February 1995. Perth: Edith Cowan University. <http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf1995/candy.html>.
- Chen, C. (2006). Job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and flight attendants' turnover intentions: A note. *Journal of Air Transport Management*, 12(2006), 274-276.
- Colbert, J. (2004). *Career Opportunities in the Travel Industry*. NY: Ferguson.
- Cueto, K. (2016). Flight Attendants' Feedback on Tourism Curriculum Program: Inputs to Curriculum Improvement on Industry Needs. *Asia Pacific Journal of Academic Research in Social Sciences*, 1, 45-53.
- Ferreras, J. (2018, March 26). Here's What the Life of a Flight Attendant is Really Like. Retrieved January 14, 2019, from <https://www.tripzilla.ph/filipino-flight-attendant-life/5851>.
- Godfrey, K. (2018, May 31). Flight attendant reveals glamorous 'heyday' of plane travel. Retrieved January 14, 2018, from <https://www.express.co.uk/travel/articles/967643/flight-attendant-secrets-british-airways-history-travel>.
- Kirkwood, T. (2017, July 27). How to become an Airline flight attendant. Retrieved January 14, 2019, from <https://www.avianation.com/pages/4110-how-to-become-an-airline-flight-attendant>.
- Mouzakitis, G. S. & Tuncay, N. (2011). E-Learning and lifelong learning. *Turkish Online Journal and Distance Education*, 12(1), 166-173.

- McGuire, C. (2017, September 20). Mile Low Club: Flight attendants reveal why their job isn't as glamorous as it seems (and you shouldn't ask them to put your luggage in the overhead cabin). Retrieved January 14, 2019, from <https://www.thesun.co.uk/travel/4508948/flight-attendants-reveal-why-their-job-isnt-as-glamorous-as-it-seems-and-you-shouldnt-ask-them-to-put-your-luggage-in-the-overhead-cabin/>.
- Prime Industries. (2018, February 15). Boeing Predicts Boom in Growth of Airline Industry. Retrieved January 14, 2019, from <https://primeindustriesusa.com/boeing-predicts-boom-growth-airline-industry/>.
- Schien, E. (2007). Career anchors revisited: Implications for career development in the 21st century. *NHRD Journal*, 1(4), 27-33.
- Trivun, V., Kenjic, V., & Mahmutcehajic, F. (2008). Life-long Learning Strategies in Tourism and Hotel Industry. *Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 14(1), 171-184.
- Wilkinson, A. (1997). Empowerment: theory and practice. *Personnel Review*, 27(1), 40-56.