Changing Attitudes of Commercial Airline Pilots Towards Organizations after the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of the changing attitudes and behaviors of commercial airline pilots toward organizations after the COVID-19 pandemic on corporate culture. It examines the factors influencing these attitudes and behaviors, as well as the challenges associated with returning to normalcy in aviation industry post-pandemic. The research is grounded in literature review of 10 key articles related to the commercial airline pilot profession and its impact on organizational culture.

The aviation and tourism sectors were among the first to be severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with airlines worldwide, including those in Thailand – such as Thai Airways, AirAsia, Nok Air, Lion Air and Bangkok Airways – facing unprecedented challenges. In an effort to survive the crisis, these airlines implemented drastic measures, including laying off numerous pilots and personnel and reducing pilot compensation. These actions not only disrupted the operational stability of the airlines but also had significant repercussions on the mental health of pilots, who had previously been well-compensated and regarded as having a stable and prestigious vacation.

The number of commercial airline pilots is relatively small compared to other professions, and they operate under strict rules and regulations. Many individuals invested millions in

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commercial airline pilot courses, viewing the profession as a secure and lucrative career path. Hower, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered perceptions of the pilot career, both among the pilots themselves and the general public. Media reports of widespread layoffs led to a shift in attitudes, with some pilots reconsidering their career choices and other exploring alternative employment opportunities.

The financial pressures and job insecurity brought on by the pandemic have had profound effects on pilot quality of life, attitudes towards their employers, loyalty to their companies and overall pride in their profession. The literature review reveals that these shift in pilot behavior and attitudes are closely linked to the downturn in the aviation business. Factors such as mounting debt and private sectors have further contributed to a negative outlook on future employment as commercial airline pilots and the sustainability of aviation organizations.

Keywords: Attitude, Change, Commercial airline pilot, COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant halt in global travel, with air travel being one of the most severely affected sectors. Airlines around the world were forced to cancel flights and suspend operations due to the unprecedented pandemic situation. The introduction of strict travel regulations by many countries further exacerbated the challenges faced by the aviation industry, leading to a complete standstill in some regions. As a consequence, the impact on airline employees has been profound, particularly for pilots who depend on flying for their primary income. These professionals, referred to as "commercial airline pilots," are responsible for piloting aircraft to transport passengers, cargo, and various commercial goods across the globe. Within this profession, pilots are generally categorized into two main roles: the captain, who commands the aircraft, and the co-pilot, who assists in operating the plane.

The career of a commercial airline pilot is one that demands a wide range of attributes. These include not only academic qualifications but also moral integrity, strong personality traits, dedication to their career, and critical thinking skills (Hongsapraphasorn, 2003). These attributes are essential for ensuring the safety and efficiency of flight operations, as well as for navigating the complex decision-making processes that pilots encounter. The allure of this profession is strong, with many aspiring to become pilots, drawn by the prestige, financial rewards, and the unique challenges that the role presents. Some individuals vie for competitive airline scholarships, while others are willing to invest substantial resources into their own education, driven by the prospect of a high return on investment.

Historically, the aviation industry has witnessed continuous growth, fueled by the increasing demand for air travel for purposes such as tourism, business, and education. This growth has instilled a sense of confidence and pride in many pilots, who view their profession as both stable and esteemed. As pilots undergo rigorous training and adapt to the strict regulations of the industry, many develop enhanced personal qualities that are highly valued in both professional and social settings. However, the demands of the profession can also lead to challenges, such as

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difficulties in socialization and adapting to changing environments, particularly as pilots navigate the pressures of their role and the often transient nature of their work life.

The commercial airline pilot profession has long been regarded as one of the most prestigious careers, offering not only a higher salary compared to many other occupations but also job stability, social recognition, and acceptance by various financial institutions. Over the past decade, the value and allure of this career have only increased, with societal norms reinforcing the idea that aspiring pilots must be well-rounded individuals—excelling academically, maintaining physical fitness, and demonstrating emotional resilience. Additionally, pilots who transition into the aviation field from other professions may bring with them certain behavioral characteristics and work ethics that can influence their interactions within their new work environment, impacting both their performance and their integration with colleagues.

In conclusion, the aviation industry, and particularly the profession of a commercial airline pilot, remains highly coveted despite the challenges it has faced, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The attributes required of pilots, along with the industry's ongoing growth and the societal prestige associated with the role, continue to draw many to this demanding yet rewarding career path.

Research Objective

1. To study the changing attitudes of commercial airline pilots towards organizations after the COVID-19 pandemic that affect the corporate culture.

2. To study the changing behaviors of commercial airline pilots towards the organization after the COVID-19 pandemic that affects the organizational culture.

3. To provide the guidelines to deal with the situations after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concepts used and relevant literature

- commercial airplane pilot

- the spread of COVID-19

- concepts of human resource

- concepts of personal factors

- concepts and theories about attitude

Research Methodology

To gather the necessary background information and ensure comprehensive coverage of the research topic, this study employed a secondary data collection approach. The research was conducted using a variety of sources, including research documents, textbooks, books, independent study articles, theses, and a selection of 10 academic articles specifically focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. These sources provided valuable insights into the changing attitudes and behaviors of commercial airline pilots and the resulting impact on corporate culture within the aviation industry. The chosen academic articles were carefully selected to reflect a range of perspectives and were published during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring relevance to the current context of the study.

Results

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to the aviation industry, particularly for airport businesses, affecting various aspects such as traffic volume, revenue, connectivity, and operational requirements (The Current View, 2015). Airport operators found themselves tasked with a dual responsibility: protecting the health and welfare of travelers, employees, and citizens, while also mitigating the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, they had to contend with passenger losses, transportation disruptions, and financial strains that threatened their ability to secure capital and invest in future infrastructure (International Air Transport Association, 2020).

Flight cancellations during the pandemic further jeopardized airport operations. However, airlines played a crucial role in maintaining essential services, such as transporting medical supplies and facilitating the repatriation of thousands of individuals stranded by global travel

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restrictions. As the pandemic recedes, governments around the world are recognizing the pivotal role airlines must play in supporting economic recovery and revitalizing tourism. Immediate and decisive action is therefore critical (Clifford, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to profound changes across multiple dimensions, including human behavior, consumer preferences, and service delivery. The aviation industry, in particular, was one of the first sectors to experience the devastating effects of the pandemic. These effects rippled through the industry like a domino effect, impacting every facet of operations. The repercussions included widespread flight suspensions, route restrictions, airline cancellations, cost-cutting measures, staff reductions, and stringent passenger travel restrictions. Collectively, these changes represented a significant threat to both individuals and nations. Adapting to the new normal in the post-COVID-19 world is essential for the survival of the aviation industry, which is a critical driver of national economies (Thareeket and Simasathien, 2020).

These observations align with research on the changing attitudes of commercial pilots toward their organizations following the pandemic, highlighting a correlation between shifts in pilot attitudes and behaviors (Kunyingwattanawit, 2019).

Before the pandemic, the commercial airline pilot profession was a highly desirable career path for those entering the aviation industry. This can be explained through the lens of career choice theory, occupational development theory, and unemployment theory:

1. Personal Factors: Individuals tended to choose careers that best aligned with their personal needs and aspirations. Factors influencing career choices included self-awareness, aptitude, intelligence, interests, values, environmental influences, academic achievements, family background, personality, adaptability, and community values.

2. Influence of Others: Career choices were also shaped by the influence of significant individuals in one's life, such as family members, mentors, and peers.

3. Information and Knowledge: Access to information and knowledge about different occupations played a crucial role in career decision-making. Media exposure and societal perceptions influenced how individuals viewed various career options.

4. Labor Market Dynamics: The diversity of the labor market meant that different sectors required workers with varying qualifications, impacting career choices.

Given these factors, it is evident that numerous elements influence pilots' attitudes toward a career as a commercial airline pilot. These factors not only affect the aviation industry but also have long-term implications for airline organizations and corporate culture. The interplay between professional pride, economic downturns, and job instability has significant consequences for pilot training and the overall viability of aviation-related organizations, which depend on pilots as key personnel to drive the industry forward.

Discussion and Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced attitudes towards careers as commercial airline pilots, though the profession remains highly desirable. However, the pandemic has underscored the economic and personal risks associated with the profession, leading many to reassess its value. The substantial financial investment required to become a commercial pilot—often amounting to several million baht over a study period ranging from 13 months to 2 years—has increasingly been viewed as potentially unworthy given the uncertainties introduced by the pandemic. Prospective pilots are now weighing several critical factors before committing to this career, including:

1. Employment Prospects: Will they be hired after graduation, or face prolonged unemployment?

2. Career Security: How stable is the career in light of the pandemic and future uncertainties?

3. Return to Work: For those currently unemployed, when will they be able to return to flying?

4. Income vs. Risk: Is the potential income worth the risks associated with the profession, particularly in a post-pandemic environment?

5. Emergence of New Airlines: How soon will new airlines start operating, offering new opportunities?

6. Recovery of Thai Airlines: When will Thai airlines recover, and what will that recovery look like?

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Moreover, internal factors, such as the stringent health regulations enforced by the Civil Aviation Authority, play a significant role in shaping attitudes. Pilots are required to pass a Class 1 medical examination annually, and failure to do so disqualifies them from performing their duties. This health scrutiny has heightened concerns among those considering a career as a commercial airline pilot, especially in the post-pandemic landscape.

Not only have occupational factors been affected, but the behaviors and personality traits of commercial airline pilots have also shifted due to the economic and social impacts of the pandemic. The significant changes in management practices and organizational structures have also influenced pilots' attitudes toward their employers. These organizational changes have inevitably impacted corporate culture from the pilots' perspective. Additionally, the perception of outsiders has shifted, with the once highly esteemed and stable profession of a commercial airline pilot now being viewed as an uncertain career option. The notion that only the brightest and best could pursue this career has evolved into a belief that anyone with adequate knowledge of regulatory standards and sufficient financial resources can enter the field.

This shift in perception reflects broader changes in confidence, individuality, and pride among pilots. The pandemic has served as a great equalizer, impacting all professions without discrimination and reducing the perceived gap between aviation careers and other fields. The traditional governance systems within airlines are likely to evolve in response to the current situation, while the competitive economic environment will continue to influence the aviation market. These changes will have a profound impact on corporate culture, as the shifting attitudes of pilots are bound to affect service delivery and organizational dynamics.

To address these challenges, the Pilot Association of Thailand held an online seminar via Zoom on July 30, 2021. Representatives from various sectors, including pilots, flight schools, air traffic controllers, airports, and the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand, participated to discuss strategies for coping with the pandemic's impacts. The seminar focused on supporting pilots affected by layoffs, unemployment, income reduction, and debt—factors that have directly and indirectly impacted pilots' mental health. These challenges may also influence human factors in aviation safety.

Looking forward, the attitudes toward commercial pilots are expected to continue evolving, particularly in terms of corporate culture, organizational loyalty, individualism, and the consideration of alternative careers. The uncertainty surrounding future pandemics or emerging diseases will likely prompt a reassessment of the occupational stability and required competencies for pilot performance. Aviation authorities may need to expand or create new protocols to effectively manage the changing attitudes towards commercial pilots in the post-pandemic era, ensuring the long-term resilience and safety of the aviation industry.

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