ABSTRACT

This study provides empirical evidence regarding the effect of antecedents and consequences of FLSE commitment to service quality. Of particular importance is the emergence of certain variables that have thwart or encourage initiatives at establishing employee commitment in the organisation. The study was undertaken to determine different antecedents and their consequences of the affecting Frontline service employee’s (FLSE) attitudes, behaviours and commitment towards service quality. Delivering high-quality service to passengers is crucial for airline survival. Since service quality is an important factor for airlines, several researchers have applied service quality related theories and methods in the airline industry. Very few studies are directed towards the behaviour and the attitude of FLSE in the Indian context. Frontline service employee’s (FLSE) attitudes and behaviours significantly influence the quality of service operations, as these employees present the face and the voice of their organizations to customers. The organization has high stakes on how the service employee behaves in service encounters. These service employees are faced with multiple challenges on a daily basis ranging from technical faults to badly behaved customers. It is the manner in which these challenges are dealt with and the degree to which one can cope with the strain of boundary spanning roles, which distinguishes excellent service providers.

Because they span the boundary between the firm and its customers, these employees are directly responsible for service quality, customer satisfaction, and ultimately the overall performance of the firm. Their commitment and willingness to serve is in the best interest of the customers, which incidentally is a prerequisite for achieving service quality. Past findings have established that employees who are committed to the organization will remain loyal and are inversely related to turnover. By using frontline service employees in an airline industry as its setting, this study examines the underlying process through which a set of FLSE variables generate affective responses of job satisfaction (frontline employee feelings towards the job and organisation) as well as the behavioural outcomes (frontline employee feelings towards other employees).
A total of around 300 research papers from the year 1980-2013 were reviewed to depict the major studies and to find the research gap. The literature review comprised of the literature related to Service delivery and employees, Service quality in Airline industry, Antecedents and Consequences of FLSE commitment to service quality, FLSE behaviour, Management commitment to service quality, FLSE commitment towards service quality and the mediating role of job satisfaction. It was concluded that there is a dearth of relevant studies regarding the FLSE commitment to service quality and the Antecedents and the consequences of FLSE commitment especially in Indian Context. The majority of studies has been conducted in the context of a Western culture because the concepts of most management initiatives to improve service quality were developed from Western organizations.

This study investigated a comprehensive model of FLSE commitment derived from the past literature and the Bagozzi’s (1992) framework which includes the reformulation of attitude theory and proposes a self-regulating process, where individuals appraise various past, present and future outcomes. These outcomes produce particular emotions that lead to various coping responses (behaviours). This framework of the Antecedents (Development and reward based activities) and the consequences (Affective and the behavioral outcomes) were developed keeping in mind the various important variables. Fourteen variables were studied which included organisational support, reward, empowerment, training, service technology, supportive management, Servant leadership, job satisfaction, FLSE commitment to firm, FLSE commitment to service quality, FLSE service recovery performance, FLSE job performance, cooperation and Extra role customer service behaviour.

On the basis of conceptual model, research objectives and research questions were developed. The main objective was to analyse the effect of antecedents and the consequences of FLSE commitment to service quality in different domestic airlines of India. The other objectives were to identify and analyse the antecedents and the consequences of FLSE Job satisfaction, their effect on their commitment to service quality and to identify the role of job satisfaction as a mediator between antecedents and consequences. Thirteen (13) Hypotheses were developed on the basis of the relationship between the antecedents and the consequences. Further to find out the mediating effect of job satisfaction on antecedents and consequences, 42 more
Hypotheses were developed. These were framed and placed under two groups. The first group of hypotheses (la-lm) were developed to measure the relationship between development and reward based activities, job satisfaction, affective and behavioural outcome. The second group of hypotheses (2a-8f) was related to the effect of mediator (job satisfaction) on antecedents (development and reward based activities) and consequences (affective and behavioural outcome).

Three research frameworks were developed for the study. The first research framework was used to test hypothesis H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d, H1e, H1f and H1g. It was comprised of different independent as well as dependent variables. The Independent variables were organisational support, reward, empowerment, training, service technology, supportive management, Servant leadership. Job satisfaction was considered to be a dependent variable. The second framework was used to test hypothesis H1h, H1i, H1j, H1k, H1l and H1m. The independent variables that are used in research framework II was job satisfaction and the Dependent Variable were-FLSE commitment to firm, FLSE commitment to service quality, FLSE service recovery performance, FLSE job performance, cooperation, Extra role customer service behaviour. For research framework III, the effect of a mediator i.e. job satisfaction, on the dependent and the independent variables has been examined for which mediation analysis was done.

The present study was conducted at Indira Gandhi International Airport (Terminal 3) and the Domestic Airport (Terminal 1) New Delhi. The three airlines i.e. Air India, Jet airways and Kingfisher operates from Terminal 3 and Indigo, Go airlines and Spice jet operates from Terminal 2. As Delhi is the national capital as well as the city of 21st century and also being a cosmopolitan city, it has a good representation of diversified culture. It has the entire major public sector as well as the private airlines. The Six airlines selected belonged to three different categories -

Full Service Carriers- Public Sector which includes Air India (Domestic)

Full Service Carriers- Private Sector which includes Jet Airways and Kingfisher

Low cost Carriers-Spice jet, Indigo and Go airlines

Air India is the oldest airline of India and the other five private domestic airlines also have nationwide presence. The selected private domestic airlines have also started
operating in an efficient way. As the study was related to the FLSE performance, samples were collected from the FLSE that included the members of cabin crew, CSA-ticketing, CSA-Check in and the Traffic control assistant.

The descriptive research was carried out using a quantitative approach for which a questionnaire was developed. To test the questionnaire, a pilot test was implemented to a convenience sample of 50 employees at the airport. The aim was to ensure that the errors before the survey as carried out on a large scale. Forty seven questionnaires were fully completed (n=47), without any detectable difficulties. The final questionnaire was administered to 282 respondents working in six different airlines, one belonging to public sector and five belonging to private sector. Both primary and secondary data was used to collect information. The empirical study was carried out through a questionnaire survey. The secondary data, indirectly relating to the study purpose, was collected through a theoretical study which comprised of books and articles that were not directly related to the study purpose. Certain websites were also used. The non-probability sampling technique was used to collect the data. Nonprobability sampling happens if there is no way of estimating the probability that each individual or element will be included in the sample; hence, probability of any particular member of the population being chosen is unknown.

A structured survey method was used in which a formal list of questions was asked to all respondents in the same way. The items in the questionnaire were measured on a seven-point scale ranging from “Strongly disagree to strongly agree”. The questionnaire contained close ended 64 items. Each FLSE appraised their commitment towards service quality thereby using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) to indicate the level of agreement on each statement in their questionnaire. The coding of the Likert scale was made as (1=Strongly disagree),(2=Somewhat disagree),(3=Disagree),(4=Neither Agree nor Disagree),(5=Agree),(6=Somewhat Agree),(7=Strongly Agree). Later the data was coded and fed into computers using SPSS 19 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) as software for data analysis. The collected data was processed and analyzed with the help of SPSS package to statistically prove different hypothesis included in the study. The statistical analysis was done for which descriptive and the inferential statistics was used.
On the very outset, demographic analysis was done which indicated that 18.4% of the respondents belonged to Kingfisher airlines, 16.3% to Indigo, 14.9% to Jet airways, 18.1% to Air India, 15.6% to Go airlines and 16.7% belonged to Spice jet. Male constituted 67.5% of the total respondents. 69.1% of the respondents were having a qualification of 12th with some Diploma related to the airline services. To assess the consistency of the entire scale, the reliability of the variables was found out. The reliability of .973 indicated that the instruments’ items and subscales were highly reliable. The Item-Total Statistics for reliability between the variables was also done which indicated the reliability ranging from .645 to .909.

The content validity was measured in the current research which was established by their origins from the extant literature. Extensive discussions were held with airline employees and academicians who reviewed the questionnaire and confirmed that it had face validity. After evaluation of the questions, they judged that all of these were appropriate for measuring FLSE commitment towards service quality in domestic airlines of India.

Descriptive analysis included mean and standard deviation which are described as measures of central tendency and measures of variability or dispersion. Descriptive analysis indicated the variable flse_jp to be the most important variable with a mean of 5.89 and SD of 589. The item with the lowest mean, rated as least important by FLSE was the supportive management with the means of 5.26 and SD of .751.

Inferential statistics comprised of the methods of analyzing and interpreting of data that enables the statistician to develop meaningful inferences about the data. Principal component factor analysis with rotated factor loadings was performed on the survey data to identify the key factors. Variables with a factor loading of higher than 0.5 were grouped under a factor. The analysis of the sixty four variables yielded fourteen indicators. As none of the dimensions were found to less than 0.05, hence all the 64 items were retained. Not a single factor has been dropped out under this circumstance. Further correlation was done and the results indicated that the fl_cf and fl_sq had the highest correlation (r=.782, p<.05) which means a high increase in fl_cf would lead to high fl_sq. The correlation between job satisfaction and servant leadership was also found to be quite high (r=.770, p<.05).
A regression analysis for research framework I, II and III was performed to predict job satisfaction from the combination of the dependent and independent variables. The model for the study placed job satisfaction as a mediator between the seven antecedents and six consequences. In order to test the degree to which job satisfaction acted as a mediator of the relationship between all possible antecedent consequences relationships, Mediation tests were conducted for all the direct, indirect and the total effects. The mediated approach followed the guidelines as outlined by Preacher & Hayes. Using the SPSS script for the indirect procedure, bootstrapping was performed; 1,000 samples were requested; a bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval (CI) was created for $ab$. For this 95% CI, the lower limit and the upper limit were also considered. The test was conducted for all the direct, indirect and the total effects/paths.

It was not surprising to see a strong relationship between rewards, training, service technology, servant leadership, supportive management and the job satisfaction. Among them, rewards and servant leadership displayed the largest effect on FLSE’s job satisfaction. A significant relationship between job satisfaction and the consequences i.e. affective and behavioural outcome was found. When the frontline of the organization are heavily committed to the goals of the organization, they would want the organization to do well. The one way in which these FLSE were able to contribute to the success of the organization is through their own individual performance. Public and private airline managers should also explicitly design and establish organizational policies pertaining to employee empowerment, education/training, and reward systems and so on in order to develop a system that would facilitate a higher level of commitment to the airline and a service-orientated performance.

Job satisfaction was not found to be mediating the relationships between organisational support and the consequences. In this study, organisational support focused on help offered to frontline workers when necessary, appropriate job design, and support for frontline employees’ goals and values. No mediation was found in case employee empowerment either. The discovery that employee empowerment had a significant negative influence on FLSE CSQ was not expected, as it diverges from the tenets of HRD theory, which holds that employee empowerment generates job satisfaction. It also indicated that FLSE cannot handle the passenger problems by themselves as they need to get managements approval before handling passenger’s problems.
Hence no relationship was found in case of organizational support, empowerment and the job satisfaction. No mediation was found in case of both the variables. That means job satisfaction does not mediate the relationships between these variables and the consequences. In case of other variables partial mediation was found. Full mediation was found only in the case of service technology. Thus it is considered to be the most important factor affecting the FLSE commitment to service quality in case of airlines undertaken for the study. Service technology support encompasses sophisticated and integrated tools provided by management to employees to free them from routine tasks so that they can devote more time to customers. Service technology may also elicit positive affective responses by FLSEs because information technology has the potential to streamline processes, make procedures more accurate and efficient and reduce the risk of human error. Service encounters can be improved through the effective use of technology; technology can make employees more effective and efficient. Quantities of information that could not possibly be remembered, filed, or sorted in the past are now available to employees with a click of a computer key. The employees of the airlines undertaken for the study were found to be satisfied with the technology provided to them by the organisation. They were satisfied with the fact that they have ‘state of the art’ technology to enhance service quality. They also agreed with the fact of allocation of sufficient amount of money for technology to support their efforts to deliver better service. Not only this, the management also worked hard to make the systems and processes more passengers friendly.

The other most important variable of the study was found to be a servant leadership. Servant leadership is a practical philosophy, which supports people who choose to serve first, and then lead as a way of expanding service to individuals and institutions. Servant-leaders set service standards by their own behavior and management styles and actively engage in helping, assisting and meeting the needs of employees within the work setting.

The findings represent a step forward in the discovery of implications that may help frontline employees, academicians and managers to better understand and take appropriate steps to improve service employees’ job-related attitudes and behaviours. In terms of theoretical contributions this study is one of the few studies which have been done to determine the relationship between the antecedents and the consequences of
frontline employee’s commitment to service quality in the public and private sector of Indian domestic airlines. Academicians need to study the various factors responsible for the employee’s commitment towards the service quality that they deliver, in detail. In general they have to study how the organizations can adopt various practices that are followed internationally without losing the positive values and culture of Indian setup. Research should also be carried out in order to integrate the factors affecting FLSE commitment with overall strategies and objectives of the concerned organization.

The employees should analyze their existing performance and try to upgrade it by enhancing their level of delivering services, sharpen skills and by setting right kind of work environment. There is a pressing need to develop practices which encourage efficiency in airline sector and for this incentive structure need to be conceived supported by appropriate training and motivation, which aligns the employee’s goals and orientations with the core competencies and strategic advantages of the airline. There is a need to adopt global best practices and adapt them to domestic environment. This largely depends on the functioning and policies of various international airlines. Managers should look inward and recognize the talent within the airline by framing a policy to spot the staff from a specific age-group, subject to suitability and eligibility, promote and develop them for the future. This will result in motivation, building commitment and loyalty among employees.

Organizations that require their employees to develop organization commitment should provide a supportive work environment which creates a mutually beneficial environment. They should demonstrate their commitment for the employees by providing comprehensive training, rewards, support, empowerment for the development and growth of employees within the organization and offer more than market related incentives. Managers interested in fostering communication among their employees can gain by seeking guidance from the growing literature on high commitment towards service quality. The airline managers must be attentive to employees’ needs in order to provide commitment and satisfaction. Committed and satisfied employees contribute to the success of the airline industry company. The managers must, at least, keep the consistency or increase employees’ job satisfaction. They should select and adopt the practices that would contribute to the perception of the organizational commitment to the employees.
The findings represent a step forward in the discovery of interventions that may help frontline employees and managers to better understand and take appropriate steps to improve service employees’ job-related attitudes and behaviours. Based on the research findings and learning’s thereof, some intervention strategies were recommended in the Indian context like improving other kinds of organizational support such as educational resources, materials, equipment, and corporate philosophy, motivating by providing them with both intrinsic as well as extrinsic rewards, empowering them to certain limit, providing and monitoring training programs, utilisation of latest technology, fostering cohesive team work, Morale boosting of the employees, improving the working environment.

A critical examination of the conceptual framework and interpretation revealed certain limitations of the study. The study was confined to Delhi and only six domestic airlines were taken for the study. Random error in measurement of factors of antecedents and consequences may have influenced the correlation and regression results of the present study. There may be some other factors, which have not been included and show equal degree of relationship, such as diversity of workplace, mentoring, and communication etc. could be added in future research. Inter sectorial differences was studied with only Indian public and private airlines. The employees of only domestic airlines have been considered. The results could have been different if the perception of foreign airlines had been included. The influences of different cultures or industries must be investigated.

For further study in future, the refinements and extension of the present problems may be undertaken. Further work on the general framework is required. Specifically, it would be of value to examine further variables within the objective, event, and dispositional classes of antecedents; broaden the domain of consequences to include more objective data; to examine possible recursive effects between job satisfaction, antecedents and consequences, and to replicate our effects in other settings. It would also be interesting to investigate how the observed relationships differ across job types.

The study may give a broader picture if data is collected from different regions of the country, for it may bring into light various factors which have not been studied till date. The various factors which have been undertaken for this study could be studied by
including international airlines operating in the country and it could then be compared with the Indian public and private sector airlines. It would also be useful to examine whether job satisfaction mediates the relationship between more objective indicators of the antecedents and consequences. Studies can be done on the impact of change process on employee commitment like how it changes with the changes in the national political systems and new economic policies, downsizing, mergers, acquisitions, layoffs, leadership transitions, technology transfer, privatization, change in market etc. are some of the variables whose impact on the employees commitment could be investigated.

A longitudinal study of various antecedents and the consequences with larger sample size and different types of airlines with distinctive characteristics would certainly yield better results. A comparative study of employees from the private and the public sector, in order to examine whether this mediation effect (or some other mediation or moderation effect) is viable, is strongly recommended. Lastly, the role of government, support associations and public private initiative in implementing the various practices in this regard can be studied.

This descriptive research presents us with some interesting results that warrant further investigation into whether these antecedents may cause the consequences. The extant literature does not provide us with a logical conceptual model from which to proceed in this area. This researcher has reviewed and consolidated prior research and current theoretical models from several fields of study. This consolidation prompted a framework that can guide future research aimed at explaining and predicting service employee’s behaviour that can also be managerially useful.