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INFLUENCE OF PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT ON EMPLOYEE WORK ENGAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE AVIATION INDUSTRY IN THAILAND

by

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ABSTRACT

According to organization management, employees are considered a key factor in enabling an organization to effectively deal with disruptive changes. This study aims to investigate the influence of perceived organization support on employee work engagement in the aviation industry in Thailand. The research question is *How does each feature of perceived organizational support influence employee work engagement?* Using the quantitative approach, data were collected from 592 respondents currently working in four aviation organizations in Thailand. The PLS-SEM was used to test the hypothesis. The findings show that adjustment support, career support and financial support were significantly related to employee absorption. The results of this current study are beneficial to human resource management and development in the aviation industry in Thailand as they enable organizations to determine the most effective ways to manage their employees. Implications of the results are also discussed.

KEY WORDS: COVID19, Human Resource Development, Human Resource Management, Perceived Organizational Support, Work Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Employees are a source of competitive advantage for organizations facing a changing environment that disrupts operations. The current environment, particularly the COVID19 pandemic, has disrupted almost every business. Uncertainty brings fear of loss and affects employees' emotions. It also affects their work and psychological wellbeing. The changes brought about by the COVID 19 pandemic have generated the perception of job pressure and insecurity among employees. However, support from organizations may reduce the strain caused by such disruption (Charoensukmongkol & Phunsoonthorn, 2020). Such support can have a positive influence on employees' attitude toward the organization. During a crisis, a positive attitude is required in order to mobilize the behaviors required by the organization (Kapucu & Ustun, 2018). To support that notion, existing research reveals that organization support can create positive employee outcomes (Eisenberger et al, 2020). One significant outcome is employee work engagement (Kim & Lim, 2020). Extensive research into employee work engagement shows that there are numerous sources of employee work engagement (Smithikrai, 2019; Gimenez-Espert et al, 2020). Social exchange theory (SET) claims that positive interaction between an organization and its employees will increase positive organizational outcomes (Zagenczyk et al, 2020). Based on SET, this current study connects organizational resource levels as a source of organizational support (POS) and employee work engagement (Eisenberger et al, 2020; Lesener et al, 2020).

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The aviation industry is a key factor in many economic activities (Economic Co-operation and Development - OECD, 2020). The COVID19 pandemic has affected all businesses around the world, including the aviation industry. It has caused fluctuating practices and policies in organizations. This current study focuses on the aviation industry because global air transport represents a share of GDP and is related to many activities of other businesses such as the tourism and hotel industry. In Thailand, the dramatic drop in air travel is threatening many aviation organizations. Aviation organizations in Thailand are struggling with financial losses caused by the drop in domestic and international air travel (Kasemsuk, 2021). However, there are no specific policies for dealing with the situation. Several practices and policies have been launched, including layoffs, salary cuts, and leave-without-pay (Kasemsuk, 2021). These policies and practices have created a sense of uncertainty among employees. They are worried about their work future and their financial security. Organizational strategic plans are required to help employees adjust themselves and survive this disruption.

Significance of the Study and Research Question

Based on SET, perceived organizational support (POS) and employee work engagement are linked in this study to investigate how POS influences employee work engagement in the aviation organizations in Thailand during the COVID19 pandemic. POS and employee work engagement are the multidimensional construct variables (Kraimer & Wayne, 2004; Schaufeli et al, 2006). POS consists of adjustment POS, career POS, and financial POS. Work engagement consists of vigor, dedication, and absorption. In the existing literature, it is not clear what role each feature of POS plays in employee work engagement and the multiple criteria of POS have not been incorporated into outcomes. Therefore, it was

thought valuable to examine the POS features in order to increase the ability of organizations to support employee work engagement conditions that would foster organizational performance. This current research aims to examine how each feature of POS influences employee work engagement in the aviation industry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides an overview of related topics: (a) perceived organizational support, and (b) employee work engagement. Research hypotheses are inserted in the related section.

Perceived Organization Support (POS)

Social exchange theory explains that the relationship between an organization and its employees is created through a process of change that requires both parties to move in a positive direction. For instance, an organization will develop policies which provide for both tangible and intangible support for their employees so that they do their best to achieve organizational goals. Properly implemented, these policies result in employees achieving a better quality of life, enhanced well-being as well as knowledge sharing, work engagement, and commitment (Eisenberger et al, 2020; Imran et al, 2020; Yang et al, 2020). Perceived organization support is defined as an employee's perception of favorable or unfavorable treatment from an organization and the extent to which the organization values their contributions and quality of life (Duan et al, 2020; Eisenberger et al, 2020). Kraimer and Wayne (2004) propose that POS is a multidimensional construct. It includes adjustment-related variables, financial support variables, and career support variables.

Adjustment POS is an employee's perception of the extent to which an organization assists their employees in adjusting to the workplace. Based on the theory of work adjustment (TWA), there is a reciprocal relationship between an organization and its employee (Brown & Lent, 2021). An organization implements policies and practices that assist employees in their adjustment to the organizational environment. Policies may include training or assistance programs. Given the nature of these practices, it is expected that adjustment POS will be related to employee work engagement (Yang et al, 2019). Yang et al (2019) state that an employee who has been supported in adjustment to work will "easily immerse themselves and focus on work" (p. 8). Career POS is the extent to which an organization pays attention to their employee's career needs. Organizational policies on career support can enhance an individual's ability to cope with current and future tasks, transitions, and challenges within their career (Caputo et al, 2020). Zacher et al, (2019) propose that career development involves attitude, beliefs, and competencies of an employee and that organizations should emphasize that career POS policies enhance employee work roles.

Financial POS is an employee's perception of the extent to which an organization helps employees to understand and effectively manage their financial issues (Choi et al, 2020). Research indicates that the more effective and adaptive financial programs are, the more employees feel less stress at work. It is recommended that organizations should provide financial advisor programs that can assist employees in planning their finances. Furthermore, a study by Saharuddin et al (2020) reveals that compensation, including both financial and non-financial packages, effects an employee's job satisfaction. Additionally, there

is empirical evidence that POS positively relates to employee outcomes e.g., Eisenberger et al (2020). However, studies on actually how financial support influences employee work engagement have been rare.

Employee Work Engagement

Employee work engagement refers to a positive state of mind towards work. It is the “active, positive work-related state that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Bakker, 2011, p. 265). An employee with high work engagement shows high levels of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, 2012). Vigor refers to the pool of energy resources that helps an employee cope with a tough situation. Qurrahtulain et al, (2020) include vigor as one of the core components of work engagement and found that organizational factors, such as leadership, can affect an employee’s vigor in the workplace. Dedication is defined as a significant level of enthusiasm, inspiration, and challenge (Schaufeli, 2012). An absorbed employee is one completely concentrated on their work and may feel that time is passing quickly for them (Qurrahtulain et al, 2020).

A meta-analysis study by Lesener et al (2020) categorized employee vigor, dedication, and absorption into individual level, organizational level, leader-level, and group-level. The results show a significant relationship between organizational level resources and employee work engagement. A recent study by Teo et al (2020), showed that psychological work environment effects employee work engagement. Sitania et al (2020) find that compensation packages are significantly related to employee work dedication. Xu et al (2020) found that the external factor of social support was a predictor of employee absorption. Existing literature shows inconsistent results regarding these factors of employee work engagement; therefore, this current research has developed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Adjustment support is significantly related to employee work engagement.

- Hypothesis 1a: Adjustment support is significantly related to employee’s vigor.
- Hypothesis 1b: Adjustment support is significantly related to employee’s dedication.
- Hypothesis 1c: Adjustment support is significantly related to employee’s absorption.

Hypothesis 2: Career support is significantly related to employee work engagement.

- Hypothesis 2a: Career support is significantly related to employee’s vigor.
- Hypothesis 2b: Career support is significantly related to employee’s dedication.
- Hypothesis 2c: Career support is significantly related to employee’s absorption.

Hypothesis 3: Financial support is significantly related to employee work engagement.

- Hypothesis 3a: Financial support is significantly related to employee’s vigor.
- Hypothesis 3b: Financial support is significantly related to employee’s dedication.
- Hypothesis 3c: Financial support is significantly related to employee’s absorption.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Procedure

Data for this current research were collected using a pen-and-pencil questionnaire. A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit respondents who currently work in an aviation organization in Thailand that is registered with the Civil Aviation Authority of Thai-

land (CAAT). After agreeing to participate, participants were informed about the guidelines for the study and that responses would be anonymous. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to distribution of the questionnaire. All procedures were carried out in accordance with the ethical standards of Kasem Bundit University and were approved by the university's Ethics Committee.

A total of 650 questionnaires were distributed to the sample respondents. Of this number, 600 were returned (92.30 response rate). After data screening, a total of 592 sets were usable. The sampling size has met the criteria for PLS-SEM analysis since Wong (2019) suggests that a sample size of 100-200 is a good start in carrying out PLS analysis. Of the total number of respondents, 297 (50.20%) were female and 295 (49.80%) were male; 433 (73.14%) were single and 159 (26.86%) were married; most were 21-35 years old (66.9%), 346 (58.4%) had been working in their current organization for 1–9 years, 526 (88.9%) were university graduates, and 494 (83.4%) were working in frontline positions.

Measurement

The measurement instrument for *perceived organizational support* used a 10-item scale based on the instrument developed by Kraimer and Wayn (2004). Three of the items measured financial POS, a sample statement being “*My company has taken care of me financially*”; four of the items measured career POS, a sample statement being “*My company considers my goals when making decisions about my career*”; and three items measured adjustment POS, a sample statement being “*Help is available within my company whenever I have questions or concerns about working in this company*”. Cronbach's alpha scores were calculated to determine scale reliability, the results being 0.93, 0.92, and 0.80 respectively for each factor.

Employee work engagement was measured using a 9-item scale based on the Utrecht work engagement scale – UWES (Schaufeli et al, 2006). Three items measured vigor, a sample statement being “*At my work, I feel bursting with energy*”; three items measured dedication, a sample statement being “*When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work*”; and three items measured absorption, a sample statement being “*I am proud of the work that I do*”. Cronbach's alpha scores were calculated to determine scale reliability, the results being 0.83, 0.88, and 0.76. respectively for each factor.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using partial least square equation modeling (PLS-SEM) by using SmartPLS3 (program was used with permission on trial). There are two sub-models in PLS-SEM including the outer model, and the inner model. Table 1 summarizes the outer models. Wong (2019) and Hair Jr. et al (2020) reveal that the loadings of indicators should be higher than .40. The rho_A coefficient should be equal to or higher than .7 to demonstrate reliability. The convergent validity indicated by AVE should be equal to or higher than .5. Furthermore, the collinearity of the measurement indicated by the VIF value must be less than .5. Indicators f2 and f3 have remained in the model because their rho_A and AVE are higher than the cutoff level although the VIF values are higher than 5.

TABLE 1. Results summary of outer models.

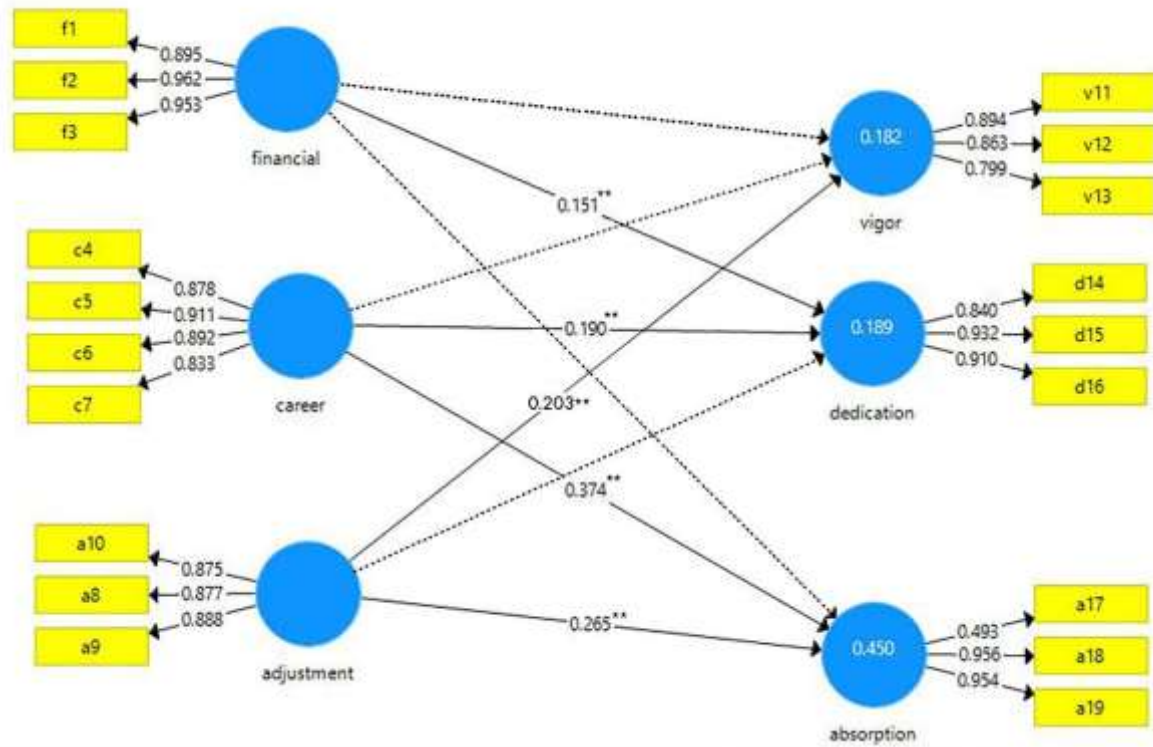
Latent Variables	Indicators	Loadings	VIF	rho_A	AVE
Financial support	f1	.90	2.49	.93	.88
	f2	.96	8.63*		
	f3	.95	7.91*		
Career support	c4	.88	2.67	.91	.80
	c5	.91	3.35		
	c6	.89	2.89		
	c7	.83	2.13		
Adjustment support	a8	.88	2.21	.86	.77
	a9	.89	2.38		
	a10	.88	1.92		
Vigor	v11	.89	1.60	.95	.73
	v12	.86	2.52		
	v13	.80	2.17		
Dedication	d14	.84	2.11	.94	.80
	d15	.93	2.65		
	d16	.91	2.72		
Absorption	a17	.50	1.13	.91	.69
	a18	.96	4.60		
	a19	.95	4.52		

Note: n = 592

Hypothesis Testing

Figure 1 presents the structural model of this current research. The results show that the paths between adjustment POS and vigor, and adjustment POS and absorption (H1a and H1c) are significantly related ($\beta = .20, .27$; $p < .05$). The paths between career POS and dedication, and career POS and absorption (H2b and H2c) are significantly related ($\beta = .19, .37$; $p < .05$). The path between financial POS and dedication (H3b) was also significantly related. All significant relationships are shown by t-statistics that are higher than 1.96 and have a p-value less than 0.05 (Garson, 2016; Hair Jr. et al, 2019). The results do not confirm hypothesis 1b, 2a, 3a, and 3c ($t\text{-value} < 1.96, p > .05$). Table 2. summarizes the hypothesis testing.

FIGURE 1: Structural Model



Note: Dashed line represents non-significant path; ** p < .01

TABLE 2. Significance Testing Results of the Structural Model Path Coefficients.

Hypothesis	β – value	t-statistics	p-value	Result
H1a adjustment → vigor	.20	2.50	.01	accepted
H1b adjustment → dedication	.13	1.61	.09	rejected
H1c adjustment → absorption	.27	3.89	.00	accepted
H2a career → vigor	.16	1.77	.05	rejected
H2b career → dedication	.19	2.29	.01	accepted
H2c career → absorption	.37	4.88	.00	accepted
H3a financial → vigor	.09	1.68	.10	rejected
H3b financial → dedication	.15	2.74	.01	accepted
H3c financial → absorption	.07	1.58	.09	rejected

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the influence of each feature of POS on employee work engagement. The research findings provide valuable information to aviation organizations in Thailand regarding which organizational support might be most effective for improving each feature of employee work engagement. The findings show

that adjustment POS explains 20% of its relationship with vigor, and explains 27% of its relationship with absorption. Career POS explains 19% of its relationship with dedication and explains 37% of its relationship with absorption. Lastly, financial POS explains 15% of its relationship with dedication. Thus, according to this study, career POS and adjustment POS play an important role in employee absorption. In line with the study of Brown and Lent (2021), career and adjustment contribute to individual demand-abilities at work. According to SET, if employees perceive that the organization values their efforts, they tend to have a positive appraisal and interpretation of their life at work. Employees become immersed in their work which indicates a positive state and behavioral engagement (Schaufeli et al, 2006).

Practically, the result shows that an organization needs to apply an appropriate strategy to support their employees. During the COVID19 crisis, some features of organizational support do not affect an employee's work engagement. The results show that adjustment POS does not affect employee dedication and career POS does not affect employee vigor at work. Additionally, financial POS does not affect employee vigor and absorption. This finding adds more understanding to a previous study by Eisenberger et al (2020). It helps organizations develop their strategic HRM plans, especially in aviation organizations in Thailand. Layoffs seem to be a common practice in aviation organizations in Thailand. However, previous research shows that after layoffs, organizations experienced a 20% decline in organizational performance (Sucher & Gupta, 2018). Aviation organizations in Thailand; therefore, might find that re-skills and up-skills might present a better alternative for preparing their future workforce. This study indicates strategies that should be employed to foster employee vigor, dedication, and absorption as these factors enhance employee performance during times of disruption.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Some limitations of this study should be noted. Firstly, this is quantitative research with a cross-sectional design so data were collected during a single period of time. A longitudinal study may help to confirm the result. Furthermore, a qualitative approach may help to get in-depth information. Secondly, this study was conducted during the COVID19 pandemic. Thus, the external environment may have affected the perception of the participants. During such a period of disruption, organizations may have placed more demands on employees and may have had to struggle to provide full support to their employees. Thus, future research could investigate how organizational support is provided under more normal conditions.

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