The Strategic Management Imperatives of International Airline Alliance Ground Staff Operations in the USA

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ABSTRACT

The post-9/11 travel industry has transformed with partnerships and alliances commonplace between airlines becoming the norm and imperative, and economic and other pressures arising from reduced travel, which were recently further exacerbated by the pandemic. The consequence of these airline unions of economic convenience has warranted the operation staffing with a diverse blend of employees, due to international relocation of employees and demographic shifts in the United States population. The research aim for this study was to peruse the operations environment and explore the management strategies of the resultant diverse workforce and discern the challenges. It is known that organizational performance is contingent upon the deftness of human resources in the optimization of the workforce. The transformational leadership theory was the theoretical foundation and the lens to underpin the exploration of the strategies U.S.based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations use to successfully manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability. A qualitative approach using semistructured interviews included a purposive sample of five airline alliance leaders located in the state of Georgia, who held at least 2 years of successful experience in implementing strategies to manage a diverse workforce. Content and thematic analysis were used to analyze the data, leading to the emergence of the key theme of the importance of strategic human resources management, and leadership in increasing organizational effectiveness. A key imperative is for airline alliance leaders to align diversity, equity, and inclusion policies with corporate human resources strategy. The implication for organizational success is that airline alliance business leaders must deftly manage a diverse and inclusive workforce in a rapidly changing world.

Introduction

An Industry Altered by Events

Following the disastrous events of 911, the more recent pandemic led to other air travel flyer concerns. Decreased flying by passengers is some of the major factors, as a globalized economy has transformed the operations of multinational corporations, airlines, and travel. The airline industry has witnessed the forming of alliances of economic convenience, and their staffing is with employees from diverse ethnicities, backgrounds, gender, nationalities, and age representation in the workforce (Nickerson & Valerie, 2018). Staffing in ground operations with diverse employees poses management challenges. Nevertheless, the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) equitable hiring employment stipulations in the United States guide the nation's employment nondiscrimination laws (Daniels & Thornton, 2019), The EEOC hiring mandates serve as the guidance and benchmark for equitable practices in employee staffing and strategic human resource management.

A Problem Worthy of Research

The airline industry saw its fortunes wane at the beginning of this century, due to the unfortunate incidents of terror. The trend in contemporary times is of alliances as airlines have sought strategic partnerships, perhaps more apparent since the late 1980s. At the organizational level, airlines have also, under the more diverse population demographics in the United States, with greater international locations. Operations are staffed with a diverse workforce because the demographic fabric of the United States workforce is increasingly multicultural and multinational (Byrd & Scott, 2018; Wei, 2018). The ostensible economies of scale, prompt alliances, in airline collaborations, to facilitate routing, code-sharing, block spacing, shareholding, and franchising (Bilotkach, 2019; Subramanian, 2017).

The partnership of Airlines following the Deregulation Act of 1978 led to a new organizational structure. Organizations in the industry became more diverse, which necessitated new approaches to employee management. The critical imperative for organizational sustainability and competitive advantage in this alliance has been deft management (Burns & Ulrich, 2016; Clark, 2017). Arguably, there are challenges in managing a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability of alliances. However, the pressures of generating profits and simultaneously leveraging the capabilities of a diversely staffed airline partnership are tenuous and present a problem worthy of study.

The Aim of the Study

A qualitative single case study was used to explore contemporary and financially pressured ground staff management strategies in U.S.-based international airline alliances. A purposive selection from the target population included the interviews of 5 airline alliance leaders located in the state of Georgia, who had a verifiable track record of successfully using strategies to manage a diverse workforce and achieving organizational sustainability and profitability. The study results from this research can contribute to the existing body of knowledge and may provide insight into the management approaches and imperatives to optimize the performance of a diverse group of employees.

The Invocation of Qualitative Research and a Case Study Design

The qualitative research method was suitable as the aim of the study was to seek an in-depth insight into the nuances of managing a diverse workforce, using semi-structured interviews. The numerical-oriented quantitative methods are not suitable to understand human dynamics; hence, a qualitative approach was considered suitable for this study. Yin (2018) noted the suitability of a case study design in exploratory research to enhance the understanding of a phenomenon.

Overarching Research Question and Interview Questions

The overarching research question for this study was: What strategies do international airline alliance leaders use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure sustainability and profitability?

The important interview questions were:

1. How do these strategies relate to the business goals of achieving sustainability and profitability?
2. What role does a diverse workforce play in ensuring the sustainability and profitability of an international airline partnership?
3. What training did you receive to prepare you for managing a diverse workforce to ensure sustainability and profitability?

The Underlying Theoretical Precepts

The theory of transformational leadership (TFL) was named Downton initially coined in 1973, which Burns further developed in 1978. The relevance of the transformational leadership theory to this study was that the charisma, vision, and integrity of the leader representing important aspects of the theory and postulations, when applied to management can serve to enlighten the reasons for employee motivations (Frazier, 2018).

The key postulations of the theories of transformational leadership are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Frazier, 2018). Idealized influence refers to the role model attributes of the inspirational leader in influencing the employees to emulate the high standards in performance, with sound moral and ethical conduct. Inspirational motivation connotes transformational rallying employees to buy into the organization's shared vision (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018). Intellectual stimulation is a trait of transformational leader quality, which brings out the best in subordinates to be creative and innovative to optimize performance in the workplace (Crede et al., 2019). The theory was hence an ideal lens to underpin this study. It is also relevant to gauge the needs of individual employees or minorities in the organization in terms of what empowers their performance, albeit with accountability and responsibility, with astute leadership leading the organization (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018).

As an international airline, partnerships necessitate the hiring of a diverse workforce, and the transformational leadership style has the potential to facilitate leveraging diverse workforce management strategies to enhance the achievement of the international airline partnership objectives (Mokhber et al., 2015). The postulations enshrined in the transformational leadership theory were therefore pertinent to shed light on the contemporary management strategies of diverse organizational workforce settings when diligently invoked and applied to research.

Potential Significance of the Study

Managing a diverse workforce requires effective and equitable policies along with qualified leaders (Ardakani et al., 2016). The study findings of this research may be of significance to international corporate partnerships, as could be useful to corporate leaders, training professionals, and international partnership managers, in advancing an understanding of diverse workforce management strategies in international partnership environments, which may contribute to business sustainability and competitive advantage. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the study may also add to the current body of knowledge on management strategies for a workforce that is diverse in composition.

Analysis and Critique of Pertinent Literature

The globalized economy has given rise to multinational corporations, staffed with employees from diverse backgrounds, to satisfy the mandates of the EEOC requirements and to provide a cultural fit to stakeholders (Nickerson & Valerie, 2018). Some organizations enter into partnerships with firms in target markets for economies of scale, take advantage of reduced transaction costs, as well as access and deliver superior value to a broader customer base (Kuznetsova, 2016). Having a diverse workforce in international partnerships has thus become a business imperative that requires efficient management.

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM)

A corporate structure is typically composed of various departments such as Customer Service, Marketing, Sales, Finance, Information Technology (IT), Business Operations, and HR. The purpose of setting up departments in a business organization is to coordinate the business activities of a company to fulfill the mission and goals of the organization (Vokoun et al., 2018). The various departments of an organization need to be staffed with qualified employees to execute the functions of the departments. Ensuring that corporate HR management aligns with organizational strategy is imperative (Harrison & Bazzy, 2017).

The HR department typically ensures that the organization achieves success through the workforce using policies and systems, and the human resource management (HRM) responsibilities are, therefore, staff recruitment, training and development, performance appraisal, mentoring, rewards, and benefits management (Lim et al., 2017).

Effective HRM often helps facilitate organizational change and competitive advantage. The traditional HRM functions have been beneficial to organizations over the years but have needed to adapt to the realities of the 21st century (Harrison & Bazzy, 2017).

The need to retain trained and experienced staff aligns HRM with corporate strategy, and organizational culture and has arguably ushered in SHRM as an enhanced form of HRM (Lim et al., 2017). SHRM is thus frequently considered a pragmatic workforce management approach that has denoted an emphasis on enhancing organizational performance by pursuing goal-aligned and performance-based HRM practices.

Unlike HRM professionals who may consider employees as HR, SHRM practitioners frequently refer to the workforce as human capital (Bouaziz & Zouhour, 2018). The SHRM use of human capital carries the resource-based view (RBV) perspective of the workforce as valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-tradable resources (Lim et al., 2017). The emphasis on job satisfaction and organizational effectiveness in SHRM possibly marks a difference from the traditional HRM outlook and function, wherein the focus is on personnel administration issues, sometimes to the neglect of strategic interests (Nyamubarwa & Chipunza, 2019).

The transition from HRM to SHRM was, thus, on the grounds of matching workforce policies to organizational strategy (Lim et al., 2017). There is frequently an assumption held that companies with differing corporate strategies would have differing HR policies. The term "strategic fit" came into existence to emphasize the need for compatibility between organizational strategy and protocols governing the workforce (Das & Kodwani, 2018). Another term found in SHRM literature, reflective of "best practices," refers to certain HR practices that are believed to universally outperform other practices and lead to organizational effectiveness, regardless of corporate strategy and context. Paauwe and Boon (2018) argued that while researchers have consistently found stronger evidence for "best practices," there is limited empirical support for the "strategic fit" perspective.

The efficient pursuit of SHRM policies and programs may have to factor organizational culture as an integral factor in planning (Harrison & Bazzy, 2017). Organizational culture refers to the shared values, perceptions, memories, attitudes, and beliefs that constitute the behavioral component of an organization (Penna de Carvalho et al., 2018). The demographic changes that came along with globalization in the 20th century, coupled with the EEOC requirements in the United States, have invariably led to the creation of a multicultural workforce environment for many companies, especially in multinational corporations, and possibly feed into an organizational culture and model that requires inclusiveness to be sustainable (Ardakani et al., 2016). SHRM practice in a workplace may have to fit into a compatible leadership style to be sustainable.

The Strategic Value of Transformational Leadership

Transformational leaders ostensibly broaden and elevate the interests of employees by generating awareness and acceptance of the purpose and mission of the organization (Asencio, 2016). Transformational leaders invariably promote organizational commitment by aligning employees' values, beliefs, and motives with those of the organization. Pongpearchan (2016) argued that transformational leadership and high-performance work systems provide job motivation for task performance and facilitate change, innovation, and entrepreneurial capability. Transformational leaders have the potential to motivate the workforce toward the organizational vision for the success of the organization and, consequently, could create, communicate, and model the vision to inspire the employees (Amina & Singh, 2017). Unlike transactional leadership, the commonly evident traits of transformational leaders are personal charisma, role models, a sense of consideration towards employees, and intellectual stimulation to staff (Eckhaus, 2016).

Transformational leaders can increase cohesion, commitment, motivation, and trust, leading to positive effects on workforce performance for the firm. The intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation associated with transformational leaders could have a remarkable positive effect on strategic human resource management (SHRM). Eckhaus (2016) noted that there is a significant positive relationship between transformational leadership and the financial performance of an organization. Despite the merits of the transformational leadership style, it is sometimes perceived as lacking in conceptual clarity (Shukla & Chotai, 2017).

Fourie & Höhne (2019) underscored a lack of realism in the TL theory, pointing at a particular heroic bias in the conception of the theory, that is at odds with the fact that all human beings are fallible. The positive effect of transformational leaders on employee task performance has come under scrutiny, following perceptions that the leadership theory may not be as effective as often presented to be. Siangchokyoo et al. (2020) noted that, while some positive outcomes may be associated with transformational leadership, the desirable effects of the leadership style on employees may diminish beyond a certain threshold. The economic theory of diminishing marginal utility could explain the reducing influence of transformational leaders beyond a certain point, which is depicted as a curvilinear pattern of relationship between transformational leadership and positive employee task performance (Chen et al., 2018). Some scholars have also questioned the effectiveness of the frequently used in research, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire in the data collection used in evaluating the transformational leadership style.

International Expansion

Several firms have been known to internationalize by expanding the sales of products and services across national and regional boundaries, to other geographic locations, due to a variety of factors, especially policies and the market conditions in the countries involved (Dinu, 2016). Internationalization is thus a strategy to increase a firm's competitive advantage (Attig et al., 2016). Companies adopting the internationalization strategy frequently also face the challenges of dealing with expanded and diverse stakeholders, including a diverse workforce.

While undertaking international expansion, some firms enter strategic alliances for greater customer outreach, economies of scale, cost sharing, risk reduction, and revenue increase (Bortoluzzi et al., 2018). The avenues for cost and risk sharing serve as motivation for increased revenue, market share expansion, profitability, and business growth. Some companies take advantage of international expansion to escape a hypercompetitive or saturated home market and, therefore, use international expansion as a strategy to enter an emerging or lucrative market (Yoder et al., 2016). Operating in the international market, however, does not guarantee success, as the cultural, legal, and strategic issues represent challenges some companies must navigate (Yoder et al., 2016).

The globalized economy frequently creates a situation where customers look for innovation in product offerings. In the passenger air transport industry, flexible and cheaper flight options along with attractive loyalty programs are sought by fliers. Product, organizational, and marketing innovation constitute important drivers of internationalization.

Firm internationalization is positively related to the organization's CSR rating (Attig et al., 2016). The increased pressure of catering to the interests of a larger and culturally, politically, economically, and institutionally more diverse stakeholder community, usually makes it vital for multinational companies to upgrade CSR endeavors to demonstrate responsiveness to the diverse stakeholders. Internationalization, thus, correlates with improved CSR ratings, and firms with subsidiaries in countries with well-functioning political and legal institutions have better CSR

ratings. It must, however, be noted that multinational corporations that operate in countries where corruption is quite common, also become prone to corrupt practices to further their business interests (Bortoluzzi et al., 2018).

Following the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 in the United States, major U.S. Airlines have experienced increased labor, fuel, and security costs and sought to partner with other airlines in Europe, Asia, and South America to extend the reach for customers and to take advantage of economies of scale (Dinu, 2016). These partnerships require the management of a workforce with proactive cultural, intercultural, and linguistic skills (Zhuwao et al., 2019). While some international partnerships have been successful, others such as KLM and Alitalia have been compelled to go through premature alliance dissolution in 2000, resulting in significant losses in revenues (Yoder et al., 2016).

Relevant Theory and Theories and Strategic Alliances

Various theories seemingly justify the practice of engaging in strategic alliances. Kuznetsova (2016) noted that the theory of transaction cost (TTC), connotes an emphasis on a low cost of operations, which constitutes a reference point to explain the motivation for forming these networks. Cost reduction is one of the reasons firms engage in strategic alliances (Pore, 2018). In ordinary business operations, firms may adopt modes of operation that minimize production and transaction costs. While production cost refers to the direct cost of producing and delivering a product or service, transaction cost involves the cost associated with discovering prices, engaging in negotiations, preparing contracts, and settling negotiations (Coti-Zelati, et al., 2019).

The TTC, based on the notion of the firm as a bundle of transactions and contracts, is inadequate to explain the theory of the firm as a cluster of knowledge and underlying processes (Kuzmin, 2017). The application of the TTC as a theoretical lens may further be more applicable to tangible goods as a cost management theory, and since services are intangible, the TTC may not be appropriate for services (Pore, 2018).

Star Alliance

International airline alliance networks came into existence through code-sharing agreements that resulted from the deregulation of the US and European Union air transport industry (Subramanian, 2017). The Star Alliance was formed on May 14, 1997, when the German-based Lufthansa and the US-based United Airlines came together with Air Canada, Scandinavian Airlines, and Thai Airways as the first airline alliance in the global air transport industry (Mishra et al., 2017). The first code-shared flights occurred in 1997 involving Air Canada and Scandinavian Airlines.

The Star Alliance was initially a virtual organization with offices in Los Angeles and Frankfurt, but a new legal entity, Star Alliance Management GmbH was formed under German law in 2002 with its headquarters in Frankfurt (Subramanian, 2017). The new legal entity had 65 employees stationed at the headquarters, in Frankfurt, and was governed by a Chief Executive Board with representatives from member airlines (Bhattacharyya, 2018). While members had equal voting rights, their roles changed from operational responsibility to advisory, and the alliance staff took up the operational decision-making (Vattikoti & Razak, 2018). Various airlines have joined and left Star Alliance during the 24 years of its existence. Membership of the Star Alliance, thus, availed partnering airlines to a significant number of passengers at these hubs, which translated into increased revenue per passenger mile and market share.

SkyTeam

SkyTeam, another multi-airline alliance, was founded in 2000 as the last of three airline alliances formed to build coalitions of airline companies around the world. The founding members, Aero México, Air France, Delta Air Lines, and Korean Air met in New York City to establish the world's third airline alliance (Subramanian, 2017).

The membership of the SkyTeam alliance in the year 2020, stood at 19 airlines, 11 of which also operate on a cargo-only basis. Apart from the founding members referred to above, other members are Aeroflot, Aerolíne as Argentina, Air Europa, Alitalia, China Airlines, China Eastern, China Southern, Czech Airlines, Garuda Indonesia, Kenya Airways, Middle East Airlines, Saudia, TAROM, Vietnam Airlines, and Xiamen Air. The SkyTeam partners have access to international markets, which facilitates entry into the globally integrated transportation services. Parties to the alliances also enjoy the sharing of revenues/profits and losses, coordinated pricing and revenue management, network, and schedule planning (Subramanian, 2017).

Diverse Workforce

The 21st-century US workforce is comprised of employees from diverse sub-groupings of race, geographic origin, ethnicity, gender, age, functional/educational background, physical and cognitive capability, language, lifestyles, beliefs, cultural background, economic category, and tenure with the organization (Zhuwao et al., 2019). While a diverse workforce could enhance corporate competitive advantage, the differences associated with diversity could be a source of distraction and conflict and, thereby, retarding progress (Goswami & Kishor, 2018). Members of a diverse workforce require intercultural competencies to be effective (Schreier et al., 2019).

Age Diversity

Scholars have made various efforts to understand workforce diversity better to facilitate effective workforce management. One approach involved an interest in the effects of generational differences at work. The different generational cohorts, arguably, hold differing values, beliefs, attitudes, and world views, arising from personal life experiences and historical, and social events that marked the various generations. The workplace is one context where generational differences have been observed and written about extensively (Čič & Žižek, 2017). The workforce in the 21st century, as stated, is composed of four generations of employees, namely Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y (Byrd & Scott, 2018). Generational cohorts born before the end of World War II are also called the Silent Generation. Generation Y, also called Millennials, occupy a place in the generational cohort classification, from the late 1970s to the late 1990s (Roth et al., 2017). With the differences in perspectives, values, and attitudes, age diversity in a workforce constitutes a challenge for organizational management but could present an opportunity as well.

Considering the described generational differences, an age-diverse team may generate tension within the organization, which would require management to ensure intergenerational cooperation and collaboration. Achieving intergenerational cooperation in the workforce may necessitate, first and foremost, training managers in providing leadership for an age-diverse workforce (Byrd & Scott, 2018). Other approaches to managing a multigenerational workforce include mentoring programs, job rotation, job sharing, talent management, and coaching (Roth et al., 2017). Intergenerational cooperation could enhance, and foster differences arising from real and

perceived generation gaps, which could facilitate knowledge sharing, create, expand, and maintain social networks (Kalargyrou & Costen, 2017).

Cultural Diversity

Many companies engage in business activities involving strategic partners in various parts of the world, attributed to globalization. Multinational corporations hire workforces composed of people from differing cultures. Culture influences and shapes the behavior of people and, thereby, constitutes a significant element of identity development. Gupta (2018) argued that culture is a socially constructed phenomenon and as members from differing societies interact, there evolves an intercultural influence process. The varying cultures, languages, values, and worldviews often give rise to misunderstandings and conflicts that require extra effort to build consensus (Jain & Pareek, 2019). Managing a workforce composed of people of different linguistic, racial, political, age, gender, and religious backgrounds calls for strategies to facilitate effective communication, to harness the potential of the workforce to achieve organizational goals.

Gender Diversity

Workforce composition could also be in terms of gender. Indeed, gender diversity is not only a matter of legal compliance but, more importantly, value addition to organizational growth and profitability (Zhuwao et al., 2019). The major issues that business leader soften have to deal with in a diverse gender workforce are social roles**,** gender roles, equality, the wage gap, occupational sex segregation, masculinization of women's roles, work-life balance, and glass ceiling vs. glass escalator.

Research Design

Various qualitative research designs are commonly used namely case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative research, and ethnography (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Mohajan, 2018; Sarma, 2015). The case study design was a suitable approach for this study because it is appropriate for exploratory research and may enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). Researchers apply the case study design for an inquiry into phenomena in various disciplines, including business (McDermid et al., 2014; Sarma, 2015; Yin, 2018). The choice of the case study design was appropriate for this study due to its suitability for an exploratory research focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of the diverse workforce management strategies in the combined ground staff operations of the international airline partnership environment.

Transcribed interview data was made available to participants for review and validation as accurate documentation of views expressed in interviews. Transcript review often enables the researcher to introduce the ethics of collaborative practice to ensure the integrity, validity, and reliability of the study (Saunders et al., 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checking and the procedure of sharing the interview data interpretations with participants to improve the study accuracy may be useful in ensuring the trustworthiness of the research as well as reinforcing collaborative and ethical relationships (Johnson et al., 2020; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, the transcribed data and the interpretations were sent by email to the participants to review, edit, or add, invoking the process of member checking to increase dependability and trustworthiness.

Data Analysis

The interview data was uploaded into the NVivo computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for transcription. Data uploaded into the software

is encrypted and securely stored to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Practical analysis of qualitative data requires that the researcher becomes familiar with the large mass of data by perusing it (Kaye, 2019; Belotto, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using the content analysis approach, the data will be categorized, tabulated, and recombined. It was necessary to review the data in search of patterns, insights, and concepts (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Yin, 2018). The primary and secondary data in the study were read and reread for gleaning detailed perspectives and insights from the information collected. Patterns, concepts, and themes were sought by juxtaposing transcripts from different interviewees and using a process of constant comparison to facilitate the emergence of common themes evident in participant responses.

Coding in qualitative research refers to the assignment of words or phrases to label parts of textual data (Kaye et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). These categories may be derived from the literature review, especially in the conceptual framework, while *in vivo* codes are generated during research data review and manipulation (Belotto, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Correlating themes identified in data to the conceptual framework was critical in research. The codes and themes may be helpful in the analysis of various interview transcripts to determine patterns for understanding the research phenomenon. In this study, a matrix of codes was generated from the primary and secondary data and correlated with the conceptual framework to facilitate the interpretation of the data. Considering the laborious nature of manual qualitative data analysis, the NVivo software was used to undertake the data analysis process.

For accuracy, efforts were made to ensure participant validation through member checking and transcript review. The transcribed interview data and interpretations were made available to participants for the validation of the views expressed in the interview. Beyond the need to ensure accuracy and credibility, member checking, the technique of providing participants with the interview data interpretations for feedback, is useful to ensure trustworthiness in research and to reinforce the collaborative and ethical relationship with participants (Kaye et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). Collaboration between the researcher and the participants could enhance communication and consequently help in eliciting detailed and relevant information pertinent to the research aims of the study.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for the study was as follows: "What strategies do international airline alliance leaders use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure sustainability and profitability?" The views of five U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders from ground staff operations on their strategies to manage and lead a diverse workforce were sought in this study. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to enable the participants to provide in-depth information about diverse workforce management. The analysis of the interview data resulted in the important one important theme, which is the focus of this paper.

Key Emergent Theme: SHRM

Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) emerged as a critical theme that can increase organizational effectiveness when astutely enacted in different approaches in ground staffing performance. The strategic component is an enhanced form of HRM and can serve to facilitate the inspiration, motivation, and retention of trained and experienced staff, and the alignment of HRM to corporate

strategy, and organizational culture (Lim et al., 2017). The important theme that emerged in the interview data analysis was SHRM as presented herein:

Study participant P1 asserted that "the multinational corporation work environment requires employees who have a variety of linguistic, technical, managerial, and cultural skills. Hiring staff to map to these manpower needs is crucial to facilitate the performance of job responsibilities." P5 indicated, "Turnover is extremely expensive when you consider what it takes to train and get someone on board and of course the experience they leave behind if and when they leave the company." P4 noted, "So, HR must look at job functions about the overall strategic mission of the organization." P3 stated that "the focus should be on strategies. Strategy requires, of course, that you have your mission and vision clear, and everybody must be part of it.

Everybody must be part of your mission, vision formulation, and strategy."

SHRM is thus an important corporate function that could bring synergy to the workforce in international airline alliance ground staff operations. The research data analysis revealed hiring, training, career planning and development, succession planning, mentoring, advocacy, compensation, and benefits management as key issues in SHRM. The NVivo-generated word cloud below shows the dominant views participants expressed during the research interviews, see the image below:

Thematic Derivation from Participants' Response Analyses of SHRM Practices

Supplemental research information accessed from Data USA (USA Data, 2020) for triangulation showed that the U.S. airline industry is grappling with ways to improve diversity and inclusion; 92.3% of U.S. airline pilots and flight engineers are White and 93% are male. Women involved in the global airline industry are less than 5% as CEOs and fewer than 13% as top executives. The low level of minority representation is not limited to airlines, but technology and financial institutions are also making efforts to address the issue of diversity in the workforce (Brodock & Massam, 2016). The study findings indicate awareness of the importance of diversity and instituting a culture of inclusion, will mean a conscious effort to improve the representation of the various segments of the U.S. population in these organizations will likely be rewarding in contributing to organizational success.

As multinational corporations, U.S.-based international airline alliance partners often constitute global teams to collaborate on projects involving partner airlines. Global teams experience uncertainty and complexity due to differences in time, distance, and culture (Browne et al., 2016). Remotely coordinating multicultural virtual teams may require skills in diversity and inclusion as well as project management and cultural intelligence. The business case for diversity is that it brings the hope of greater innovation, enhanced engagement, workforce retention, extended customer, and market connection. Research on effective leadership and talent practices has consistently found that a commitment to diversity is one of the key differentiators of companies that build talent and perform well (Burns & Ulrich, 2016).

Recommendations for Strategic Human Resource Management Practitioners

There is a compelling case for hiring culturally diverse, gender diverse, age-diverse, and linguistically diverse staff in international airline strategic alliances. The study findings and the knowledge presented may serve to create awareness of the importance of diversity in the ground staff operations of a global airline strategic alliance. The understanding of organizational performance and business sustainability will require some specific actions, and recommendations which are presented herewith.

Diversity Hiring and Inclusion Measures

It is vital for management to institute talent sourcing, interviewing, and hiring processes devoid of conscious and unconscious biases. Men and women need to have equal chances in these processes, and the wording of job descriptions would need to be less discriminatory. Determining hiring criteria beforehand and diversifying the hiring committee will contribute to scaling down monochromatic tendencies. The use of workplace diversity and inclusion reporting metrics such as diversity scorecards, dashboards, and annual culture surveys could enhance the pursuit of workplace diversity, which often yields greater innovation and organizational performance.

Align HR Policies with Corporate Strategy

This recommendation connotes that the organization may benefit from an HR management initiative to harmonize human capital policies and objectives with corporate business strategy. This strategic management action has the potential to enhance organizational performance by adopting goal-aligned and performance-based HR practices that may lead to competitive advantage, profitability, and sustainability. As HR programs and job designs are in sync with corporate strategy, there is a greater likelihood of ensuring staff retention, which creates stability for the organization and employees to engage in career and succession planning effectively.

Conclusion

International airlines operating in strategic alliances could benefit from economies of scale, access to international markets, and globally integrated transportation services. Other perks of airline international alliance include joint sales and marketing coordination, co-location of airport facilities, reciprocal code sharing, reciprocal loyalty programs participation, airport lounge access, airport ground handling arrangements, aircraft maintenance insourcing, and joint procurement scale. Supporting global air transport operations requires adequate staffing to map to the diverse workforce requirements of multinational corporations. While a diverse workforce is a business imperative in 21st-century international business, there is a need to adopt effective workforce management strategies that are strategic and will serve to serve to increase organizational success, with greater possibilities for profitability and sustainability.

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