

Examining Deleterious Effects of Work-Life Conflict towards Work Engagement in Service Industry

Adnan Riaz¹

Rafia Daood²

Shakil Sabir³

Abstract

A plethora of research has been conducted on the relationship between Human Resource (HR) practices and Work Engagement (WE). However, the relationships observed so far are inconclusive and variant in nature. Our study put forward the moderating role of Work-Family Conflict (WFC) between the key HR practices and WE relationships in the milieu of the cabin crew. The research model is examined within the ambit of a developing country like Pakistan, where WFC is expected due to the nature of the job and the cultural setting. Survey responses of 327 incumbents were collected using the questionnaire approach. The cabin crew working in Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) were approached following the simple random sampling technique. The findings showed that HR practices have a positive significant influence on WE. WFC significantly moderated the relationship between Performance Appraisal (PA) and WE, whereas moderation was not significant for the Recruitment and Selection (R&S) and WE relationship, and for Training and Development (T&D) and WE relationship. The study emphasizes managers and practitioners to incorporate key HR practices for employees' WE and to take measures to control WFC.

Keywords: Human resource management practices, Work engagement, Work-family conflict

Introduction

WE as a concept was coined by a renowned pollster Kahn (1990) but it did not get much attention from the researchers for a decade or so. Later, quite a large number of studies were conducted on the topic (Schaufeli, 2013). In a service industry, WE is expected to improve the environment and is positively related to employees' performance, customer loyalty (Salanova, Agut, & Peiró, 2005) and financial outcome of the organization (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2008). The frontline employees of a service organization, like an airline, are the most valuable resource who have direct contact with the customers and thus make or break the image of the organization (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2009). But cabin crew faces many challenges in performing their tasks (Hochschild, 2012) which sometimes result in disengagement at work because of the imbalance to perform family and work roles. A study by Mann and Harter (2016) has

¹ Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad

² Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad

³ Allama Iqbal Open University Islamabad

shown employee engagement crisis across the world, yet organizations are not putting efforts to control and improve the situation. Therefore, it is imperative for such organizations to understand the predictors and outcomes of WE to produce fruitful results.

A plethora of studies have shown a link between key HR practices to engage employees in their work (Koneremann, 2012; Li & Frenkel, 2017). However, the results are inconclusive and deviant in nature. Researchers observed varying degrees of relationships between various HR and high performing work practices with employee engagement, thus calling attention to examine potential moderators and other situational factors (Aybas & Acar, 2017; Guan & Frenkel, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2018). Following these lines of thought, we framed the model based on the axiom of the Job-Demand and Resource (JDR) model and studied the role of key HR practices as job resources enhancing employee engagement (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003). The relationship is mitigated by work-life conflict creating special demands to deplete resources and resulting in disengagement of the cabin crew.

Extant research further shows that employee engagement has been a focus of researchers in various fields (Matthews, Stanley, & Davidson, 2018; Sheehan, Tham, Holland, & Cooper, 2019). But specifically considering the role of the cabin crew, their thorough involvement and attachment with such a high demanding profession as an area needs further exploration. In a nutshell, our study is going to contribute to the extant literature in various ways. First, the study assumes the role of key HR practices towards WE. Second, WFC is to be tested as a moderating factor determinantal to HR Practices – WE relationship. Lastly, the theoretical framework is examined in a special context i.e. cabin crew to get a robust result. Aviation staff at large and specifically cabin crew are more vulnerable to work-to-life interferences; hence the contextual analysis is likely to provide profound results.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Recruitment and Selection to Work Engagement

R&S is a process to identify, attract, and choose the right person to achieve organizational goals (Ghauri & Prasad, 1995). R&S is important to make a person job-fit (Abraham *et al.*, 2015). Since the service industry offers unique characteristics, therefore, employees' induction process has to be proceeded with due care to survive and thrive in a competitive environment. Employees can only make their career as cabin crew if they possess key personality traits and emotional competence. The R&S process helps to screen out the applicants lacking requisite competencies (Chan & Kuok, 2011). Various previous studies showed a strong link between effective hiring and employee engagement (Gill, 2007; Rodriguez, 2017). Hughes and Rog (2008) have also asserted the role of

talent management through proper R&S strategy for employees' engagement in the hospitality industry. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H₁: Recruitment and selection have a positive impact on work engagement

Performance Appraisal and Work Engagement

According to DeNisi and Murphy (2017), PA is considered as a continuous process of assessing the performance of employees' in comparison with predefined standards. Among other HR practices, the performance management system has shown strong effects in encouraging performance and WE. The crux of performance management lies with linking employees' personal objectives with organizational goals (Aguinis, 2009). The goal congruence helps in consistent work motivation. Employees facing vaguely defined duties, unrealistic objectives, subjective evaluation, and rater biases, may result in frustration and demotivation (Brumback, 1988; Ferreira & Otle, 2009). All these are refined and fixed by establishing a comprehensive PA system, that further helps to improve employee engagement. Previous studies have also shown a strong link between effective PA and WE (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Karatepe, 2013). Therefore, it is posited:

H₂: Performance appraisal has a positive impact on work engagement

Training and Development and Work Engagement

T&D is a way to develop competencies including knowledge, skills, and abilities for a particular job (Mathis & Jackson, 2011). Employees are given specialized training keeping in view the distinctive features of a job (Renzetti *et al.*, 2015). This is the reason, training is considered as an important element for service-oriented jobs (Jemmott, 2004). For flight attendants, training sessions are designed to enhance emotional and attitudinal capabilities (Rhoden, Ralston, & Ineson, 2008; Ritzmann, Hagemann, & Kluge, 2014). Learning specific skills and procedures help them to perform the job better. Company culture, handling difficult passengers, time management, and food safety, are among the few areas where detailed understanding is indispensable for proper WE during flight operations (Abdelhakim *et al.*, 2019; Mahony *et al.*, 2008). This is the reason, various empirical pieces of evidence are available, linking T&D with employees' WE particularly in the service sector (Ahmed *et al.*, 2015; Sendawula *et al.*, 2018). Thus, we assume the following:

H₃: Training and development have a positive impact on work engagement

Moderating Role of Work–Family Conflict

WFC refers to a lack of fit between work and family responsibilities (Becker *et al.*, 1998). Employees facing extensive work demands face the challenge to balance work and family roles. We framed the moderating role of work to family conflict on the tenet of the JDR model presented by Bakker and Demerouti (2007). It explains the balance

between job demands and job resources to keep employees motivated and engaged. Job demands include all kinds of emotional, cognitive, and physical tasks required on the job floor. Whereas resources include all the factors to meet job requirements such as time, energies, skills, role clarity, physical abilities, and the list goes on. Lack of resources may result in a feeling of distress and burnout.

The job of flight attendants is uniquely tough due to various factors such as emergency calls, varying time limits, shift duties, non-standard working hours and jet lag (Chung & Chung, 2009; Iskra-Golec, Barnes-Farrell, & Bohle, 2016; Williams, 2000). To counter the imbalance, organizations provide the resources to handle special demands such as hiring the candidates to make person-job fit and provide relevant trainings to develop both attitudes and competencies. They also strive to align individual and organizational goals through a proper performance management system. Despite organizational efforts, work-life conflict depletes the key resources. For example, emergency calls and work overload during peak seasons adversely affect family commitments. Psychologically distressed and emotionally worn-out members can't be engaged in job demands. Resultantly, the pressure caused by WFC cause flight attendants to make a trade-off between work responsibilities and family commitments (Siegel *et al.*, 2005). Thus, we hypothesize:

H₄: Work–family conflict moderates the relationship between recruitment and selection and work engagement

H₅: Work–family conflict moderates the relationship between performance appraisal and work engagement

H₆: Work–family conflict moderates the relationship between training and development and work engagement

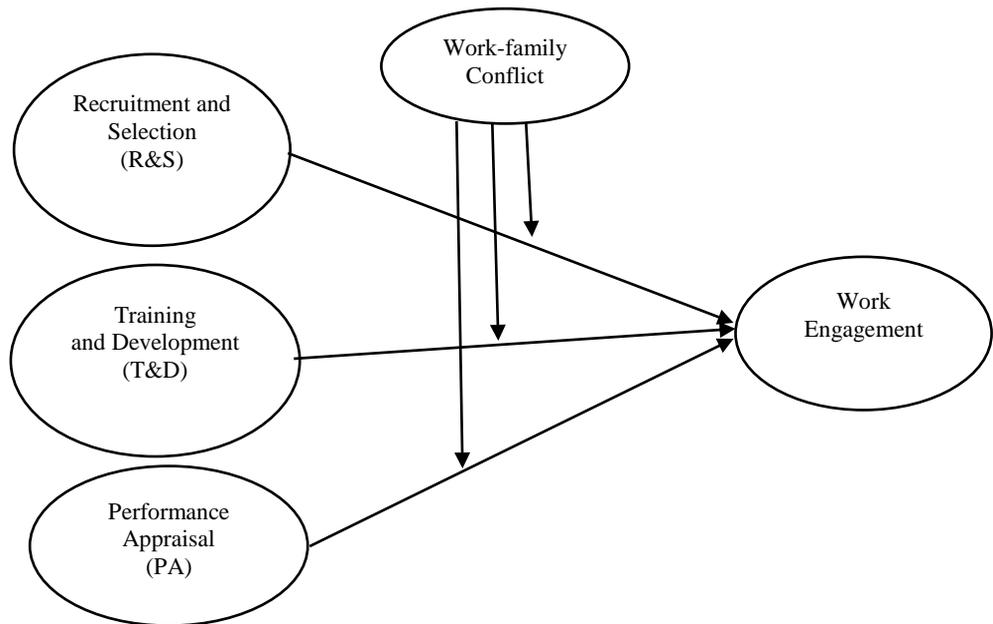


Fig. 1: *Research Model*

Methodology

Sample and Procedure

To test our theoretical model, we selected the members of the cabin crew of PIA, where all the study variables had relevance and due importance. Job engagement of cabin crew is important as they are considered to be the face of the organization and largely responsible for making or breaking the image. Also, they are more susceptible to work-life conflict compared to other job incumbents. Efforts were made to collect data from various positions falling under the cabin crew job category, including senior pursers, flight pursers, flight stewards, and air hostesses. PIA is the flag carrier with the largest operational network nationwide. Therefore, PIA emerged as the first choice for data collection.

A survey questionnaire was employed to examine the study hypothesis. Following the criteria recommended by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), a sample size of more than 300 respondents was deemed appropriate for the current survey-based approach. With consistent efforts, a reasonable size of 327 individuals was collected. The survey was administered personally by following a simple random sampling technique (approaching n^{th} element of the population). The contacts of the second author helped to obtain a sampling frame and collecting responses in a timely manner.

Since the self-reporting is susceptible to common method variance and social desirability response, hence standard practices were employed to control response contaminations. The questionnaire was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the key purpose of study, academic and practical significance, and the ways to maintain confidentiality. The letter also contained a brief introduction of the authors with complete contact details of the principal author to approach in case of ambiguity or concern (Paulhus, 1991; Xiong *et al.*, 2012).

Measures

HRM Practices: Items to measure HRM practices were adopted from the study of Masood (2010). Examples of items include “Recruitment and selection system followed in our organization is well defined” for R&S, “Our organization conducts extensive training and development programs for employees” for T&D, and “Appraisal system in our organization is growth- and development-oriented” for PA.

Work Engagement: A shorter version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) comprising nine items were used to measure WE (Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002). Sample items include “At my work, I feel bursting with energy” and “At my job, I feel strong and vigorous”.

Work-family Conflict: WFC was measured by a 5-item scale developed by Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian (1996). Examples of items include “The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life” and “The amount of time my job takes up makes it difficult to fulfill family responsibilities”.

All the measures for each variable were anchored on a five-point Likert scale, with the anchors Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Uncertain=3, Agree=4, and Strongly Agree=5.

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

The respondents’ profile shows that the majority (55%) of respondents were young and between the age bracket of 26 to 35 and 36% were above 35 years. Females are counted as an under-represented class in Pakistan for various walks of life. But they are encouraged for the various positions of cabin crew, therefore 54% were females and 46% were males. Graduation (14 years of qualification) is the minimum criteria to qualify for the position of cabin crew, hence 67% had a bachelor’s degree. Since the data was collected from PIA and being a public organization, PIA has a policy of fostering job security. Therefore, 91% of employees were enjoying permanent status. A majority of employees (45%) had worked for more than 15 years with PIA. Others had at least one-year job experience and thus were in a better position to apprise about the different features of the job. About various designations, data revealed a balanced representation as

35% were flight stewards, 13% were air hostesses, 38% were flight pursers and 14% were senior pursers.

Data Analysis Strategy

The first phase of data analysis presented the descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and reliability coefficients (α) for all the measures of the study. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to test all hypotheses by using SPSS 20. Demographic characteristics of age, gender, the highest level of education, job, monthly income, years with the organization, and designation were used as control variables in the study.

Results

Reliability and Validity Analysis

A Cronbach alpha higher than 0.7 provides evidence of the reliabilities as recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) and may range up to .95 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Later, the Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to further authenticate the measures. The KMO and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (KMO=.926, $p < .001$) supported the data to determine the factor structure. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all the variables was higher than .5, confirming the convergent validities (Hair, 2006). According to Fornell and Larcker (1981), if the value of Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) is higher than the AVE, it provides support to the discriminant validity (Table 1).

Table 1: *Factor Loadings*

Construct	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE	MSV
Work Engagement	WE1	0.842	0.95	0.714	0.165
	WE2	0.883			
	WE3	0.886			
	WE4	0.724			
	WE5	0.874			
	WE6	0.896			
	WE7	0.731			
	WE8	0.894			
	WE9	0.853			
Performance Appraisal	PA1	0.756	0.93	0.601	0.399
	PA2	0.689			
	PA3	0.882			
	PA4	0.736			
	PA5	0.812			
	PA6	0.653			
	PA7	0.772			
	PA8	0.821			

	PA9	0.800			
	PA10	0.802			
Recruitment and Selection	RS1	0.843	0.94	0.628	0.267
	RS2	0.828			
	RS3	0.823			
	RS4	0.857			
	RS5	0.895			
	RS6	0.688			
	RS7	0.804			
	RS8	0.694			
	RS9	0.664			
	RS10	0.792			
Training and Development	TD1	0.795	0.92	0.524	0.399
	TD2	0.749			
	TD3	0.736			
	TD4	0.691			
	TD5	0.666			
	TD6	0.812			
	TD7	0.819			
	TD8	0.591			
	TD9	0.632			
	TD10	0.710			
Work-family Conflict	WFC1	0.799	0.91	0.682	0.069
	WFC2	0.849			
	WFC3	0.853			
	WFC4	0.827			
	WFC5	0.798			

By ensuring convergent and discriminant validities, we further examined the fit indices of the measurement model. The analysis provided acceptable model fit indices as i.e. χ^2/df is 3.791, CFI=.806; and SRMR=.067 (Hair, 2006).

Descriptive and Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and reliability coefficients (α) for all the measures of the study. The correlation matrix indicated that R&S were positively and significantly related to work engagement ($r=.41$, $p<.01$). Moreover, performance appraisal was positively related to work engagement ($r=.36$, $p<.01$). The correlation was also found to be positive and significant between T&D and work engagement ($r =.37$, $p<.01$).

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations among Variables*

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 Recruitment and Selection	2.99	0.96	(.94)				
2 Performance Appraisal	3.61	0.61	.486**	(.94)			
3 Training and Development	2.93	0.54	.462**	.576**	(.914)		
4 Work-family Conflict	4.07	0.67	-.054	-.033	-.046	(.95)	
5 Work Engagement	2.97	0.91	.412**	.364**	.372**	-.248**	(.91)

***. Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).*

Values in parenthesis () shows values of Cronbach's Alpha

Regression Analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to test all main effect hypotheses (Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3). Age, gender, the highest level of education, job, monthly income, years with the organization, and designation were controlled in Step 1 with explanatory variables and moderators. Interaction terms were added in Step 2 to test the moderation. The results given in Table 3 show the positive impact of R&S ($\beta=.33$, $p<.001$), PA ($\beta=.20$, $p<.01$), and T&D ($\beta=.27$, $P<.01$) towards work engagement. All these supported hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

Table 3: Result for Main Effects and Moderated Regression Analysis

	Work Engagement			
	β	R ²	ΔR^2	F
Step 1				
Age	0.022	0.275	0.275	10.686***
Gender	0.029			
Highest Level of Education	-0.015			
Job	0.105			
Monthly Income	0.011			
Years with this Organization	-0.008			
Designation	0.018			
Recruitment and Selection	0.332			
Performance Appraisal	0.195			
Training and Development	0.274			
Work-family Conflict	-0.302			
Step 2				
Age	0.024	0.286	0.011	8.91***
Gender	0.017			
Highest Level of Education	-0.01			
Job	0.108			
Monthly Income	0.006			
Years with this Organization	-0.009			
Designation	0.02			
Recruitment and Selection	-0.043			
Performance Appraisal	1.24			
Training and Development	-0.379			
Work-family Conflict	-0.125			
R&S×WFC	0.103			
PA×WFC	-0.267*			
T&D×WFC	0.162			

Note: n=327, R&S=Recruitment and Selection, PA=Performance Appraisal, T&D=Training and Development, WFC=Work-family Conflict
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Moderating Influence of WFC

The results presented in Table 3 showed that the interaction term of PA×WFC was significant and negatively related with work engagement ($\beta=-.267, P<.05$), thus the result supported hypothesis 5, while the interaction terms of R&S×WFC ($\beta=.10, p>.05$) and T&D×WFC ($\beta=.16, p>.05$) were not significant for work engagement. To further confirm the moderating effect of WLC on hypothesized relationships, the two-way interaction plot of high and low (mean \pm SD) values of the moderator was drawn. Figure 2, 3, and 4 show that among all the hypothesized relationships, WLC had a significant negative impact on PA to WE relationship only. Hence, hypothesis 4 and 6 were not supported.

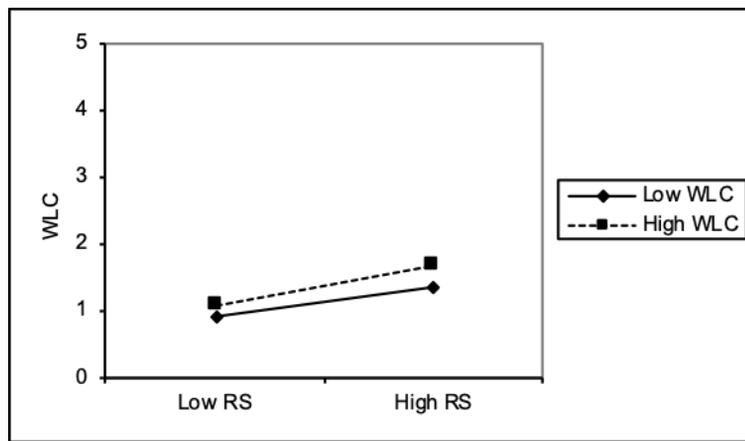


Fig. 2: Interactive Effects of Work-family Conflict (WLC) and Recruitment and Selection (R&S) on Work Engagement (WE)

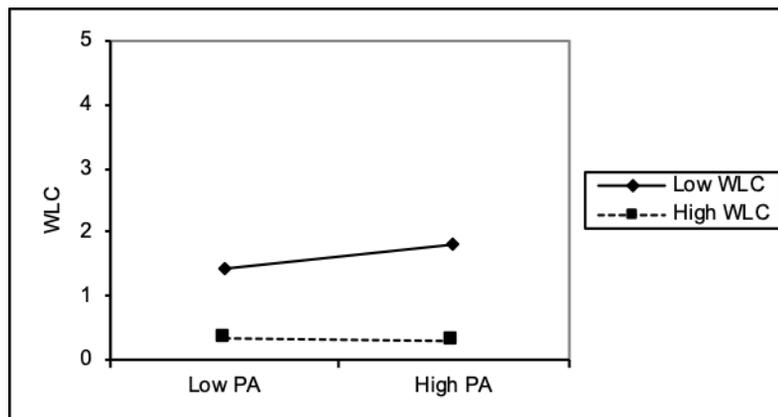


Fig. 3: Interactive Effects of Work-family Conflict (WLC) and Performance Appraisal (PA) on Work Engagement (WE)

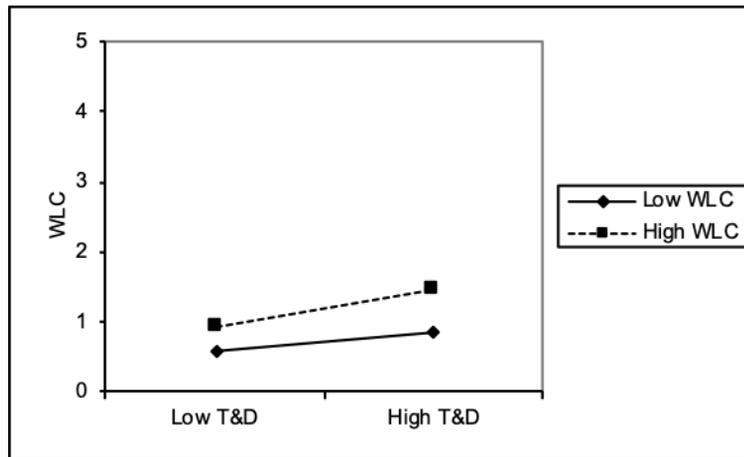


Fig. 4: *Interactive Effects of Work-family Conflict (WLC) and Training and Development (T&D) on Work Engagement (WE)*

Discussion

The basic premise of the present study was to investigate the effects of key HR practices such as R&S, T&D, and PA on WE of the cabin crew working in the airline industry. Previously, the positive role of HR practices towards WE was well established (Bhatnagar, 2012; Chaudhary, Rangnekar, and Barua, 2012; Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli, 2006; Koyuncu, Burke, and Fiksenbaum, 2006). However, the findings were varying in nature, calling a need to examine potential moderators, changing the strength of relationships in different settings (Albrecht *et al.*, 2015; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2015). Taken together, we also examined the moderating role of WFC on the assumed relationships.

The results generally supported all the direct hypothesis. Key HR practices, including R&S, T&D, and PA help to enhance employees' engagement for service employees. The job of cabin crew is demanding in nature therefore candidates with the requisite competencies can only build their careers in this profession. The demands include emotional labor, psychological strain, and fatigue during long travel (Chen & Chen, 2012). Airline companies have also incorporated personality assessment in their selection process (Butcher, 2016; Pettitt & Dunlap, 2018) to induct the most relevant candidates. Lack of key skills also poses a threat to employees' job absorption. Compromising the steps involved in hiring can be perilous. The results further indicate that companies should also provide extensive training to develop competencies keeping in view the unique skills required for service jobs (Keselova *et al.*, 2019). Lastly, the performance management system motivates employees to work with full of dedication

(Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2008). When transparency and equity issues are involved in the performance management process, it results in demotivation and cynic attitude among employees (Schiemann, 2009).

The moderating effect of WFC on the relationship between PA and WE was in the expected direction only. Effective PA works well when employees have low WFC. Employees in uncertain situations to meet work and family demands may cause disengagement, irrespective of the comprehensively devised appraisal process (Parkes & Langford, 2008).

Contrary to our expectations, the positive relationship between T&D and R&S with employee engagement was not affected in the presence of work to family conflict. A possible reason can be the strong positive role of the hiring process and development opportunities towards positive employees' outcomes. Effective hiring and competencies development plans overweigh the negative effects of WFC. In the contemporary environment, employees qualifying for the position of cabin crew are given realistic job previews to know the undesirable features of the job (Raub & Streit, 2006). Cabin crews deeply understand the demanding nature of the job (Roma *et al.*, 2010) and join after knowing all adversities including WFC. Likewise, the T&D process also helps to mitigate the WFC effects since cabin crews are given detailed orientation about job crafting and scheduling. The current surge of social media and internet connectivity also helps to mitigate the effects. Moreover, coping with homesickness using the latest technological means is a common topic of discussion in training programs of modern HR systems (Mahony *et al.*, 2008; Rhoden *et al.*, 2008).

Practical and Theoretical Implications

The study provides several theoretical and managerial insinuations. Theoretically, the link between key HR practices and WE has yet to be examined for front-line employees. Effective hiring, development opportunities, and transparency in performance evaluation are the core areas that can enhance the WE of cabin crew. Secondly, results complement the axiom of the JDR model. WFC depletes the necessary resources to meet work and home demands. Consequently, necessary arrangements are required to cope with the deleterious effects of work-life conflict.

For practicing managers, HR components have been found to have a positive impact on WE for frontline employees such as cabin crew. According to Kusluvan *et al.* (2010), it is a strategic move of service industries to have highly engaged frontline employees as they positively influence customer's perceptions about service quality. Airlines should consider recruiting staff best suited to task requirements. Organizations concerned about expansion and progress ought to take on translucent measures for R&S of human resources on a competency basis. Similarly, for an engaged and committed

workforce, train them to develop requisite skills so that they can bring positive change in behavior to fulfill the diverse demands of the customers. With more comprehensive training programs, it can be anticipated that a new inductee will be able to cope with job anxiety and decipher into a more encouraging work approach. For existing frontline workers, the airline management may make obligatory to attend the least number of hours of service training on a yearly basis. In this way, the cabin crew can rejuvenate their practical skills.

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