Burnout syndrome of airline crews during crisis and Covid 19 in the world and Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Airline employees also carry the risk of losing their jobs in times of crisis that closely affect the aviation industry. Therefore, it is important to investigate the burnout syndrome experienced by airline workers in times of crisis. This study aims to evaluate the burnout syndrome of airline. Findings show that airline flight crews who experienced high levels of burnout syndrome during normal periods experienced less burnout syndrome during crisis periods. It is understood that the reason for this situation is that they cling to their jobs more tightly against the risk of losing their jobs.

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Introduction

Following the demise of global economic activity in 2008-2009, aviation industry across the globe suffered heavily from sharp decrease in contribution margins and increasing risks for operational activities (Dincer et al., 2017). Successful European airlines implemented strategies out of global recession in order to manage the economic turbulence (Hacioglu, 2019). Particularly, downsizing strategy caused a big risk for employment programs. Moreover, increasing stress among the cabin crew resulted in a burnout syndrome. Pandemic condition is another source of stress causing the burnout syndrome for cabin crew, today (Ozturk, 2020)

Additionally, companies are adopting to pandemic conditions by crafting digital transformation strategies (Hacioglu, 2020) automated systems (Hacioglu and Sevgilioglu, 2019) and blockchain technologies (Hacioglu, 2020b) which may result in downsizing.

Burnout is a psychological disorder that affects both business and social life today. In recent years, the awareness and importance of the concept of burnout has gradually increased as can be seen from the relevant literature. This led to more emphasis on the concept of burnout and seeking solutions. Because burnout syndrome, which seems simple, affects both the social and business lives of people. Burnout is the situations that appear in the form of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low achievement in the individual as a result of the individual's inability to cope with the stress he / she faces due to his / her profession. Burnout is a process, and in this process, the individual is under intense stress due to the work environment and after a while, he/she cannot handle this situation and becomes alienated from his/her job, becomes impassive, cannot feel the energy to do the job in time and considers him/herself unsuccessful. If it is not noticed at an early stage, it can have devastating effects for both the organization and the individual. Based on the literature reviews, it has been observed that burnout is an important concept that especially affects work performance, interrupts social life and even drives people to suicide.

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Although burnout syndrome is seen in every sector in business life, it is frequently seen especially in-service sector employees. Aviation sector is also one of the most important parts of the service sector. The structure of the aviation sector is based on constant time pressure, excessive stress, high responsibility, intense work pace and working with a shift system. Especially this working environment causes employees to be vulnerable to maximum burnout. In the aviation industry, burnout syndrome can be seen in both flight crew and cabin attendants and ground service personnel depending on the work done. This can make the personnel vulnerable to mistakes. In the event of any error / delay in the transactions made by the personnel, the passenger may often be subject to verbal and physical violence. In addition to this, it may also be subject to material / moral sanctions by the company with which they work for. As a result, the passenger does not want to choose this airline on their next flight, and the business suffers both prestige and financial loss. However, employees are most affected by such situations. Because the employee thinks that they cannot satisfy both the passenger and the company. As a result, problems such as stress and the feeling of failure caused by burnout, low energy, feeling constantly tired and exhausted occur. In this context, burnout can be seen frequently in aviation sector employees. This burnout often increases the speed of employee turnover. This situation can create problems for both employees and businesses.

On the other hand, it has been seen that employees may evaluate burnout syndrome differently in times of crisis affecting the aviation industry and involving the risk of employees losing their jobs. Especially the fear of losing their job can reduce the burnout perception of employees and cause them to cling tightly to their jobs.

In this context, this study aims to examine the burnout levels of employees in times of crisis affecting the aviation industry.

This paper organizes as follows: Following the introduction part, this study continues with theoretical and conceptual framework. The paper evaluates the burnout syndrome of airline crews during crisis times and concludes with findings and implications.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background and Conceptual Framework

Crisis

Crises are developments that disrupt the normal functioning of things in a political system and cause irregularities. Crises affect the functioning of the system as well as the values on which the system is built. If the necessary measures are not taken, some crises can create situations that threaten the vital integrity of the political system (Sudhama and Thangavel, 2015).

Crises are unexpected and undesirable events or periods which need to be ready to come across with and to be well prepared anytime, physically and mentally. Because it effects not only the companies or governments but also people in the society. Sometimes this society might be a general population and sometimes might be employees of the company or organizations. We are going to more focus on airline employees especially the cockpit and cabin crews who are executing important critical missions.

In other words, we can say define the crises are process that, as a result of a triggering event (internal or external), highlights a series of dysfunctions that temporarily or permanently affect one or more of the following aspects of an organization or company:

- i. Safety
- ii. Human health
- iii. Environment
- iv. Product
- v. Reputation
- vi. Sustainability

We are going to focus on the human health part of those aspects listed above in this article. Especially How cabin and cockpit crews are affected by those crises and which solutions can be developed.

We can define, classify and divide the crises according to internal and external. But in this project, we will handle most important ones of them. Because Crisis types are increasing every day.

We can name the main crises as are Political Crisis, Natural Disaster Crises, Pandemic and Epidemic Crisis, Oil Crisis, and Financial Crisis. Crises can be divided more subcategories but those are most known and common and main crises which companies, countries and organizations can be come across mostly. More details are listed below.

Pandemic and Epidemic Crisis

According to the oxford dictionary Epidemic is a widespread occurrence of an infectious disease in a community at a particular time. While pandemic is defined as “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people” by World Health Organizations (WHO).

There are a lot of pandemic and epidemic human being have come across till nowadays. There are hundreds of papers and researches that investigating and focusing those pandemics and epidemics. We can talk about the latest one the COVID 19 or can call it new coronavirus.

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) flare-up in December 2019 in Wuhan (China), has tainted more than 1,000,000 individuals and the abundance of 60,000 mortality internationally in almost 100 days. Scale and direction of the spread have driven the World Health Organization (WHO) to announce COVID-19 right off the bat as a worldwide crisis on Feb. 20, 2020, and afterward a pandemic on eleventh March. The significant financial exchanges have seen a decrease in twofold figures with S&P 500 taking 16 exchanging days to post a 30% decay.

Academics research the effect of this considerable wellbeing emergency on significant financial exchanges and stock markets to more likely comprehend the reaction of speculators. By separating the examples into two boundaries, right off-the bat Epidemic (Dec 2019 to March 10, 2020) and Pandemic (- post-March 10, 2020) and furthermore, on the worldwide spread, Phase 1, where Covid passing were restricted to China; Phase 2, European Spread and Phase 3, North American Spread, they have fascinating discoveries.

Researchers locate that Chinese business sectors showed relative quiet with lower instability during both plague and pandemic period, which discredits the new work of Zhenghui and Junhao (2019), who contend that Chinese business sectors are more helpless to vulnerability stuns radiating from China. Then again, the normal instability of securities exchanges in the US, UK, Germany, and South Korea expanded as the coronavirus moved from scourge to pandemic stage. Furthermore, the European lists indicated the most noteworthy unpredictability in the US stage despite the fact that the European stage (Phase II) has recorded a higher casualty rate. These discoveries adjust to the investigations of Antonakakis et al. (2013), Chen and Chiang (2020), and Tiwari et al. (2019), who have examined the effect of monetary vulnerability on monetary market instability.

The current writings are limited to the effect of worldwide wellbeing emergencies like current, as the size of this pandemic has not been seen in longer than a century. Ongoing working papers on the effect of coronavirus noticed that the new cases detailed in China and outside China mixed effect on the economic unpredictability, while the losses announced that out of China draw attention to the more remarkable effect (Albulescu, 2020). Al-Awadhi et al. (2020) is the lone observational paper, distributed as of late, which straightforwardly interfaces COVID influence with securities exchange returns. There are a lot of effect of various financial protections (Equity, Debt, Bitcoin, Gold, Oil) to give expansive headings to financial specialists (Ali et.al, 2020).

Pandemics is the most impressive occurrences which effects the whole economy especially the tourism and aviation business. This effect causes the deep financial loses, crises and even bankruptcy sometimes. Even though not having bankruptcy, feeling and fears of losing job might affect the employees which are working in those sectors, deeply and negatively. This fear or feelings would be one of the biggest reasons to experiencing the burnout syndrome for aviation employees, especially who are working in very strategic and need attention side of it such as cockpit and cabin personnel.

An Application: Burnout syndrome of airline crews at crisis time

Burnout Syndrome in Airline Crews

Cabin Crew

Cabin crews work in one of the areas where the risk of fatigue and burnout is high due to the work they do. Long working hours and the unbalanced and irregularity of these hours, the variability of the holiday days affect both social life and can create a burden both mentally and physically. A normal work routine includes daytime work and night rest, but this is not the case for cabin crews. Teams often have to stay in hotels. This can affect the duration of falling asleep and sleep quality. The fatigue levels of employees who cannot sleep well and cannot rest are also high (Zakrzewska and Stanga, 2017; Öztürk, 2019).

Figure 1: Burnout in Cabin Crew: Source: ITF, 2009.

Figure 2 shows that most employees show signs of fatigue and burnout and their percentage rates. According to these results, it can be said that the burnout level of cabin employees is very high. Approximately 70% of all employees participating in the survey stated that they feel exhausted at the end of the day. Again, 2/3 of the employees participating in the survey stated that they think fatigue and burnout may pose a risk in terms of safety (ITF, 2009).

Chen and Chen (2012) examined the factors affecting work commitment and burnout of cabin crews. For this purpose, 305 Taiwanese flight cabin attendants were surveyed. It was noteworthy that the staff turnover rate was high, together with the working environments

and heavy workload. Here, job-related requirements from flight attendants cause burnout, while job-related improvement has emerged as a factor that increases work commitment and reduces burnout. It has been shown that health problems have a direct effect on leaving the job. According to the results of this research, it has been observed that cabin crews with high job loyalty exhibit better job performance because their perceived burnout levels are low. Again, the same research showed that those with high professional seniority could show a good job performance even when their perceived burnout levels were high. According to researchers, this is because those with more professional experience are more resistant to burnout.

In the study of Tunceli (2012), the relationship between burnout and job satisfaction levels of cabin crews working in THY was investigated. In the research, the effect of burnout on job satisfaction was also measured by applying a questionnaire to 150 flight attendants residing in Ankara and Istanbul working in THY. As a result of the research, the negative effect of burnout on job satisfaction was determined.

Mengenci (2014) stated in his article that the relationship between stress, burnout and job satisfaction, which have an important place among the factors that cause plane accidents. For this reason, he conducted a research to analyze the relationship between stress, burnout and job satisfaction. This research stresses the 1st pilot and cabin crews from several airline companies in Turkey, which determine the level of burnout and job satisfaction surveys were administered. As a result of the research, a positive relationship between stress and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal accomplishment. It was stated that there is a negative relationship between job satisfaction and the negativities mentioned above. According to these findings, it was concluded that a flight crew caught with burnout syndrome could easily make mistakes and cause an accident. It has also been stated that cabin crews can provide poor quality service to passengers and display rude behavior.

Ground Services Employees

Existing scientific research confirms the relationship between burnout and jobs where the individual does not have full control over his / her job, and this control mechanism cannot be caught by personal effort (Cheng-Hua and Hsin-Li, 2012). Specifically, working with people and serving customers directly, which is the way many grounds handling workers work, can cause burnout syndrome. In addition, it is known that working in shifts, long and irregular working hours, and intense working tempo have an effect on burnout. The increasingly intense competitive environment in the aviation sector can also cause companies to put pressure on employees (ITF, 2009).

Figure 2: Burnout in Ground Services Employees; Source: ITF, 2009.

As seen Figure 2, overall, ground handlers report high fatigue and burnout. More than 44% stated that they felt emotionally tired of their work. In addition, more than half of the respondents stated that they wake up tired in the morning as an indicator of chronic fatigue (ITF, 2009).

Nieves (2014) evaluated burnout levels in night cargo teams in his thesis. He stated that night flights have negative psychological and physiological effects on the flight crew and this situation leads to fatigue. It was observed that the team, tired under heavy workload, was naturally exposed to burnout; it has been shown that the highest level occurs when there is high demand-low business resource.

Air Traffic Services Employees

The various tasks performed by air traffic service workers are those that require high concentration, knowledge, skills and training to be applied consistently to the work being done. Work stress is also very different due to high demands and expectations and unpredictable factors. This may cause constant stress, fatigue and problems staying awake. People who work in this way may feel that their ability to do their job successfully is diminished (Öztürk, 2019).

Figure 3: Burnout in Air Traffic Services Employees: Source: ITF, 2009.

As seen in Figure 3, 42% of air traffic services workers stated that most workers feel exhausted at the end of the working day. This is related to high demand, intense mental fatigue and high levels of stress due to the nature of the job (ITF, 2009).

Causes of Burnout in Airline Sector Employees

In the literature research, it was seen that the causes of burnout were examined as individual factors and social (environmental or organizational) factors. As seen in the literature, factors such as age, education, marital status, number of children, excessive commitment to work, personal expectation level, individual performance, individual's ego power, personality traits, work-related stress, job satisfaction and motivation, relationship and communication with colleagues and managers can be listed among the individual and social causes of burnout. Apart from these factors, the following factors related to this job's nature, unlike the general ones in the aviation industry, can be shown as factors that cause burnout in Table 1 (Öztürk, 2019).

Table 1: Factors causing burnout

Excessive Workload

Aviation sector employees, both ground handling personnel and flight personnel, have to control and coordinate many jobs in addition to their work in order to avoid problems in flight operations. Because the flight operation covers many activities and even the small mistakes made create a domino effect and affect the following activities. This situation brings extra workload to the employees. In addition, aviation sector employees are crushed under the excessive workload and have to work extra hours due to the intensity of people traveling more and taking holidays, especially in summer seasons.

Excessive Responsibility

Aviation sector employees should have the ability to be responsible and keep secrets due to their job. Since mistakes made due to the nature of the work being worked on can cost human life, the consequences of even minor carelessness can be severe. This situation puts heavy responsibilities on the employees.

Time Pressure

It is one of the main objectives of employees and companies in the aviation industry to perform flight operations on time. For this, punctuality is of great importance, including during the flight operation or pre / post-operation planning and preparation. There is very limited time and good planning is required for the operations performed most of the time. Employees are also pressured for timing, as even minutes in flight operations create extra costs for companies.

Working Hours

Aviation sector employees usually work in shifts. This situation can bring along physical and mental problems. The social lives of people who work in shifts are interrupted, and the possibility of spending time with family and friends decreases. Sector employees, who mostly work on public holidays and holidays, may have to work extra hours on these special days.

Since the person works in a shift system, they may have sleep problems. This situation can cause hormonal secretions to change and the mental and biological balance of the body to deteriorate (Hunter and Martinussen, 2018).

Burnout Syndrome of Airline Crews at Crisis Time

Airline companies are often adversely affected by plane crashes and may enter a crisis period. Apart from that, many different crises can affect their airline companies. This situation may cause problems in the cash flows, employment, supply chain and many other activities of these companies. Threats that affect the entire aviation industry in general terms and can cause aviation crisis are listed below in table 2 (Sivčev, 2013):

Table 2: Threats affecting the entire aviation industry

Economic crises affecting the whole world,
Ashes emitted by erupting volcanoes affecting their airspace,
Pandemic caused by epidemic diseases,
Nuclear fallout from nuclear power plant or other events,
Major cyber-attacks on the Air Traffic Control system (ATC), air traffic network and software such as airline ticket and reservation, Wars,
Spills caused by dangerous goods carried on board,
Large scale effective fires,
Security threats such as terrorist attacks and hijacking,
Earthquakes, Floods, Strikes and slowdowns,
Bad weather conditions such as hurricanes, snow storms that affect a long period that adversely affect air traffic,
Serious difficulties in the supply of materials needed by aircraft such as aircraft fuel,
Threats originating from space: solar flares, cosmic waves, and meteorites, such as satellite communication system disruption for a certain period of time.

Employees directly affected in the aviation industry in times of such crises run the risk of losing their jobs. For example, with COVID-19, which started in the last quarter of 2019, aviation sector transportation activities decreased by more than 90% worldwide in the first quarter of 2020. Failure to perform aviation operations prevents the generation of aviation revenues. Personnel expenses are the second most important cost item for airline companies after fuel costs. Again, personnel expenses in many different aviation companies in the sector are an important cost item for businesses (Akca, 2020). Although aviation companies try to prevent layoffs with unpaid leaves and state support in this process, continuing the process in this way will require layoff solutions. This situation puts pressure on currently employed personnel. Because employees think that they do not have job security.

Downsizing is often seen in the aviation industry in times of crisis. Consequently, layoffs are common consequences of times of crisis. However, it can be seen that employees in the aviation sector experience burnout symptoms due to job insecurity (Demerouti et al., 2019).

Conclusions

The levels of burnout perceived by individuals working in the aviation industry in times of crisis were investigated in this study. The deductions obtained as a result of the literature review are briefly commented below.

It has been observed that aviation sector employees experience burnout due to various work-related factors such as heavy workload, time pressure, and pressure not to make mistakes, even when they are not in a crisis time. It has been observed that this situation can increase the labor turnover rate of the employees and cause emotional, social, psychological and economic problems for them. In the aviation sector, it is observed that in times of crisis, due to the reduction in the number of flights, the business contracts and resorted to layoffs. Accordingly, it is observed that employees are exposed to risks in terms of job security. Although this may seem negative in terms of burnout, employees actually do not show signs of burnout due to the fear of losing their jobs, on the contrary, their commitment to their jobs increases. Unlike normal periods, severe working conditions that cause burnout in crisis periods are ignored. Employees do their jobs with high performance during these periods.

As a result of this study, it is thought that in order to reduce the burnout levels of flight crews in airline companies, it is necessary to take measures that will provide them with job security in times of crisis. On the other hand, it is thought that it will be beneficial to take the following measures to reduce burnout levels:

- (i) Flight programs should be planned to facilitate the family and social lives of flight crews (pilots and cabin attendants).
- (ii) It is necessary to improve the social rights of flight crews and to establish a performance-based reward system.
- (iii) Company support for flight crews should be increased. Especially in times of crisis, they should be provided with job security.
- (iv) It should be ensured that the monthly average flight times do not exceed certain periods and excessive tiredness of the personnel should be prevented.
- (v) It will be beneficial to ensure the freedom of initiative of flight crews by stretching strict standards of service.

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