Reducing Absenteeism in the Airline Industry with Flexible Work Practices

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Cabin Crews' working life is often conflicted by the demands of family and/or the need to attend to pressing personal matters that unexpectedly arise. Their job also requires them to meet tight time schedules outside of what is considered 'normal' working hours. Therefore, the practice of taking a day off sick to attend (i.e., the 'sickie') has become widespread. Thus, a large sample survey (N=1897) was conducted to identify the attitudes toward and underlying behaviours leading to both genuine and non-genuine absenteeism from work of cabin crew in a major Australian airline company (hereinafter referred to as AIRCO).

AIRCO realises that flexibility in workplace practices can lead to a reduction in non-genuine absenteeism. Thus, it offered non-financial support in the conduct of this survey. The company realised that if it can better understand the reasons for cabin crew taking non-genuine absence from work, then it is better placed to address the underlying causes of this practice, whilst also improving the efficiency of this resource. In addition, cabin crew were also supportive of the study, as it would inform them about this critical issue in the upcoming EBA negotiations.

The cabin crew attitudes presented here are consistent with previous surveys conducted in the industry (Stewart, 1999; Pope, 1999), however, the underlying causes identified here go well beyond previous surveys. The authors use the data collected to propose interventions that have potential to reduce the incidence of cabin crew taking non-genuine absence from work to attend to pressing personal matters within 'normal' working hours. Thus, offering AIRCO the prospect of improving operational efficiencies through the reduction in the non-genuine 'sickie' absenteeism and a more flexible approach that allows cabin crew to better balance the demands of pressing personal matters and the demands of work.

Introduction

For years, the Australian 'sickie' has earned that country the title of the Land of the Long Weekend. An increasing number of Australian businesses count the cost of sick leave that is estimated to cost the country $7 bn per annum (Morgan and Banks, 1998; Rodski, 1998). The reported national average work absenteeism rate for 1998 in Australia was up to 9 per cent with only 1 percent representing staff members being too sick to work (The Sun Herald, 21 March, 1999a). Absenteeism, thus, accounted for 2.5 per cent of Australia's workforce being absent from work each working day (Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics).

For the year 1998 in the United States of America one study found that un-scheduled absences by workers have increased by 25 per cent, this being the highest level for

seven years (Cole, 1999). Cole argues that the number one reason for missing work was 'family issues' - this reason being cited 26 per cent of the time. A more in-depth study conducted in the USA (CCH, 1998) found that the average unscheduled absenteeism rate in 1998 was 2.90 percent of working time, compared to a rate of 2.32 per cent in 1997. This translates to a 25 per cent increase in unplanned absences marking the first time that family issues had topped the list of reasons employees take sick. The 'sickie', therefore, is not an exclusively Australian phenomenon, as increasing absenteeism exists in developed economies - if not in all economies.

Absenteeism also does not appear to be gender specific. Wooden (1998) stated that women were almost as likely to absent themselves from work as men. However, Wooden and others (Wooden, 1989, 1995, 1998 and 1990; Scott and McClellan, 1990) argued that because women are usually assigned primary responsibility for family matters, they are absent from work more often than men for reasons such as the care of sick children or other family members.

There is debate as to whether poor health is a convincing or true explanation for the absence from work when, in effect, it may be camouflaging family or personal related matters that is compounded by outdated work practices. A study conducted by Brooke and Price (1989) found that employees with greater family and personal obligations have a higher frequency of absenteeism.

It has been argued that less competent and unmotivated individuals can increase absenteeism when there is a desire to withdraw from the job that they perceive as frustrating (Tremblay et al., 1995). It has also been suggested the longer a person remains in the one position, the less likely the perception that the job offers autonomy, variety, challenge or increased responsibility. Cawsey et al. (1985) noted that those who are most vertically mobile tend to describe their own jobs in a more positive way, see more occasions for growth and for personal development, than the less mobile employees.

Tremblay et al. (1995) and Cawsey et al. (1985) argue that job enrichment among highly competent and motivated individuals decreases absenteeism. This is consistent with the responses given in an earlier study conducted by Stewart (1999) where 'junior' Flight Attendants and Customer Service Manager groups were surveyed. The results of that study indicate that the more highly motivated the person the lower the propensity for absenteeism.

Rodski (1998) suggests that employees have significant responsibilities and accountabilities in their own right, thus, they need flexibility in work commitments to address pressing personal matters outside of work but within work time. To reduce absenteeism, a variety of flexible work time options are necessary. In essence, it is the company's role to facilitate this to allow individuals to organise their own solutions (Moody, 1999). Rodski (1998) acknowledged that workers would take less time off if their bosses were more sympathetic and took more of a personal interest when they failed to show up. Rodski (1998) argues that strategies to reduce absenteeism, such as greater flexibility in working hours are necessary along with a changed workplace culture, whereby employers are seen to demonstrate a greater understanding of the family situations of their employees. He adds, that the problem

should be solved through better communication between all parties and a variety of flexible work time options.

Rodski (1998) also argues that bad management, not bad workers is a contributing factor in absenteeism within Australia. Absence management programs are often poorly managed, thus, all companies do not see a family-personal approach to workplace practices as a process for balancing work and personal responsibilities. Management needs to also support returning employees to a productive state of work regardless of the reason for their absence (Brown et al., 1999).

Opinions reflected in a previous survey (Stewart, 1999) within an Australian airline company indicated that 'junior' flight attendants are ambitious and energetic for success whereas the more 'senior' flight attendant group has vestiges of 'tiredness' and/or self-interest that impact upon their level of commitment to their employer. On the other hand, the Customer Service Manager group in this survey is more closely aligned with management thinking, thus, is more motivated toward improving the profitability of the business. Earlier studies indicated wide-ranging reasons for absenteeism in the airline industry (Stewart, 1999; Pope, 1999; Preiss and Stewart, 2000). The reasons proffered in the survey include:

- genuine illness
- reasons other than their own illness which include family responsibilities,
- "sickies" due to needing time off for personal reasons that are often very valid,
- cabin crew's perception of management's indifference to requests for genuine time-off to attend to legitimate and pressing personal issues

AIRCO, in which this study was conducted, calculated that they could save $1000 a year per employee if they cut absenteeism rates by 1 per cent. Other service organisations are also tackling the problem of absenteeism. They also need to identify the underlying causal mechanisms that lead to absenteeism. Within AIRCO, however, emphasis is placed on a productive workforce as the key to increasing competition in this industry.

AIRCO cabin crews' attendance at work is influenced by a range of factors including family responsibilities and their own or family member illness. The causal effects of working ever-changing and varied schedules each working day may significantly effect employees' health and personal lives, particularly when rosters clash with personal demands, thus, leading to the practice of taking *'avoidable'* leave - or the *'sickie'*.

The literature makes an important distinction between *'voluntary'* or *'avoidable'* absenteeism that is associated with an individual's motivation to attend work whereas *'involuntary'* or *'unavoidable'* absenteeism is associated with the genuine inability to attend work (Brooke and Price, 1989). AIRCO would like to believe that absenteeism is largely *'involuntary'*, that is, caused by genuine sickness, but they also know that the cabin crew's ability to attend work is significantly influenced by the external responsibilities of family and other pressing personal demands and obligations - to what extent, they are unsure. Being a responsible employer, they assisted in the distribution of questionnaires to conduct this company-wide study investigating employee attitudes toward absenteeism.

The link between the demands of work and family cannot always be balanced with the 'right' kind of flexibility or support in place; thus, gender comparisons will be made in this study. It should be noted that women make up the majority of employees in the Short-Haul Division in which this study was conducted.

The Cabin Crew's perception of management's indifference to requests for genuine time-off to attend to legitimate and pressing personal issues could see *'voluntary' or 'avoidable'* absenteeism remaining as an ingrained behaviour. This outcome, however, depends on the cost of absence-reduction measures and the extent to which absence reduction is achievable through management intervention (Balchin and Wooden, 1995). Some theorists argue that an absence reduction program should also include measures to promote healthy living, a practice that may impact on the incidence of *'unavoidable'* sickness (Fowler, 1998; Kweller, 1998).

Gibson (1999) speculates that it is possible that employers have created an entitlement mentality. Employee attitudes could be explained by absence history. There is a practice of taking sick days simply because employers provide them coupled with the attitude that 'if you do not use them you loose them'. This negative effect concerning sick leave particularly non-accumulated is consistent with the findings that past absence behaviour is a good predictor of future absentee behaviour (Morgan and Herman, 1976; Winkler, 1980). For example, cabin crew Upper Respiratory Tract Infection (URTI) sick leave at AIRCO is non-accumulative and, therefore, used in its fullest. Thus, there is a relationship between the entitlement mentality and *'avoidable'* absences.

Flexible working hours are offered by many public agencies in the state of New South Wales, Australia, and have allowed greater flexibility for employers to organise their workforce to meet the demands of business and for employees to better combine their work and family responsibilities (Office of Public Management, 1995). The former Federal Employment Minister, Peter Reith commented: "there are an increasing number of family-friendly provisions and most common are flexible working hours, included in at least 52 per cent of [employment] agreements" (The Sun-Herald, October, 1999b). When there are specified hours of work and the employee is given the freedom to make their own hours within an enterprise agreement or enterprise award, the issue of absence often does not arise (Wilson and Peel, 1991).

The relationship between sick leave entitlements and high absenteeism is of major concern to AIRCO. In essence, employees take sick days just because employers offer them and industries with high rates of absences, are often the industries that grant the most sick leave days. Anecdotal evidence of sick leave taken at AIRCO indicates that sick leave is higher than the industry average of 9 per cent. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to identify cabin crew attitudes about workplace flexibility and family-friendly work policies in assisting cabin crew attend to pressing personal matters that require time off from work. To achieve flexibility, various factors associated with changing present workplace practices need to be investigated and evaluated. The thrust of the future Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) negotiations is to reduce the level of *'avoidable'* absences, whilst also meeting cabin crews' need for time within 'normal' working hours to attend to pressing personal matters.

METHOD

Data Collection

Data was collected via a questionnaire from a sample population of 1897 Cabin Crew drawn from the Short-haul Division of AIRCO across their three main bases in Australia, that is, Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Cabin crew are shift workers who's working hours can be long and with extended periods of time away from home. The division represents the domestic business of the organisation. It is staffed by two classifications of employees: On-board managers and Flight Attendants all of various seniorities and base locations. Three hundred and ninety completed questionnaires (20.5%) were returned.

The questionnaire was designed to collect attitudinal data about workplace flexibility and changing workplace practices aimed at achieving workplace flexibility. Likert Scales were used with a rating of 1 being *Disagree* with the statement presented and a rating of 5 meaning *Strongly Agree* with the statement. An underlying intent in this study was to also collect information from cabin crew that might inform the upcoming EBA negotiations in regards to absenteeism at work. The survey questionnaire was divided into 2 Sections as follows:

Section 1: demographic information used as a basis for comparison across categories;
Section 2: attitudes about four different aspects of work as follows:

- The use of sick leave entitlements and flexible work options/practices (16 statements)
- Balancing work and family/personal responsibilities (7 statements)
- Motivation toward work (6 statements)
- Reasons for absence from work (3 statements)
- Attitudes toward management practices (7 statements).

The respondents fit within two broad classifications:

- Customer Service Manager (CSM)
- Flight Attendant (F/A)

Table 1: Population classification

Group	Classification	Group	Classification
1	CSM's (15yrs +)	5	F/A's (15 yrs+)
2	CSM's (10-15yrs)	6	F/A's (10-15yrs)
3	CSM's (5-10yrs)	7	F/A's (5-10 yrs)
4	CSM's (3-5yrs)	8	F/A's (0-5yrs)

Table 2: Sampling frame

Base	Establishment	% of Full Establishment	% Responses
Sydney	770	40.6	25.0
Melbourne	826	43.5	16.0
Brisbane	300	15.8	22.0

Note: The higher response rate from the Sydney base was most likely a result of it being the second author's home base. This author is a CSM in AIRCO.

Within these two classifications there are four categories of length of service - from new recruit up to fifteen years service for both Flight Attendants (F/A) and Cabin Services Manager (CSM) (refer Table 1). The total cabin crew establishment with issued and returned questionnaires are given in Figure 2.

Results

Table 3: Work flexibility

1.	Workforce attendance contributes to company success.	4.33
2.	Increasing employees' flexibility in work rosters reduces absenteeism.	4.43
3.	Varying hours of work enables employees greater work flexibility.	4.20
4.	Family responsibilities are given appropriate recognition in the workplace.	2.61
5.	18 day Personal Leave (for sick leave, bereavement leave and carer's leave) is adequate.	3.44
6.	Upper Respiratory Tract Infection Leave (URTI) entitlement is being used for illness not related to URTI and also for personal reasons.	3.35
7.	Cabin crew are entitled to use the non-accruable six URTI sick days for reasons other than being sick.	2.66
8.	Cabin crew would *not* use URTI leave for personal issues if this it was allowed to accrue.	3.44
9.	Aircrew Resources' practices restrict management's ability to approve adhoc requests for cabin crew for unforseen personal emergencies.	3.93
10.	The opportunity of dumping some unwanted patterns (tour of duties) into the Open Time allocation would reduce absenteeism.	4.11
11.	Cabin crew should be able to drop hours and the pay for those reduced hours to achieve roster flexibility.	3.98
12.	Cabin crew should be able to pick up additional flying hours from Open Time each month.	4.12
13.	The opportunity of being blocked for less than 123 work hours for different monthly rosters when flying commitments would appeal to cabin crew.	4.18
14.	Being able to move RDOs to accommodate unforseen personal circumstances would assist in reducing absenteeism.	4.44
15.	Giving low-line cabin crew the flexibility to use a Blank Day, in the same month, to cover unforseen personal situations would reduce absenteeism.	3.67
16.	Flexible work practices should allow for accruing a limited number of rostered days off in credit to be used for unforseen personal needs.	4.13

Flexible work practices

The findings here are consistent with an earlier study (Stewart, 1999) where cabin crew indicated that greater flexibility within the roster system would be a significant factor in influencing the reduction of absenteeism (refer Items 2, 3, 13 and 14 in Table 3). Innovative workplace practices including the dumping of tours of duty or picking up additional hours of work, as well as accruing a limited amount of days off are seen by respondents as a means of supporting their time-off needs to attend to pressing personal matters.

The aggregated data indicates a belief by cabin crew that they need greater work flexibility to attend to family responsibilities and this need should be given

appropriate recognition in the workplace. This is consistent with the findings of Brooke and Price (1989) but with one variation, that is, employees with greater family and personal obligations have a high frequency of absenteeism.

Personal and URTI leave entitlements

URTI leave and recognition of family responsibilities are not considered to be adequate by a third of the respondents in the earlier study (Stewart, 1999). The present findings here indicate that recognition of family responsibilities is the issue they are least satisfied with. In addition, cabin crew expressed a continuing level of disagreement about using URTI as an entitlement right to use for reasons other than being sick. Again, this is consistent with the earlier study. More importantly, it also indicates an attitude that is supportive of the need for fairness and honesty in using sick leave for the purposes for which it was intended.

The respondents revealed a stronger rating mean in their attitudes about the use of URTI sick leave for personal matters, if leave entitlement was accruable. In essence, the data supports the argument that 'If you do not use all the (URTI) sick days you lose them'. This is consistent with the findings of other investigations (Morgan and Herman, 1976; Gibson, 1999).

Family-personal issues

The findings suggest that there is an inclination towards using sick leave as a mechanism for balancing personal and work demands (refer Table 4). The pressures of balancing work rosters with demands at home is a possible causal factor in resigning one's position now and in the foreseeable future. Employing more casuals was seen as a means to enable increased work roster flexibility. Presently, the EBA (round iv) does not allow for hiring casuals in the CSM category. Iverson (1999) argues that an effective enterprise bargaining process can lead to a reduction in the amount of 'sickies' taken. Thus, this career opportunity is a matter that may need to be addressed by management directly or through the EBA process. Notwithstanding that a good attendance track record should work in an employee's favour when requesting time-off for unforseen personal reasons.

Table 4: Family/personal issues

1.	Cabin crew attending work is influenced by family/personal responsibilities.	3.80
2.	Cabin crew use sick leave to balance the demands of family/personal with work life.	3.73
3.	Family/personal life suffers when rosters and home pressures conflict.	4.18
4.	Conflicting roster and home pressures could cause me to resign.	2.84
5.	Taking leave from work over school holidays periods would reduce cabin crew absenteeism.	3.69
6.	Employing more casual and fixed term Flight Attendants would increase flexibility in work schedules for the full-time cabin crew.	3.46
7.	A good attendance record should work in an employee's favour when they request time off for unforseen personal reasons.	4.28

Motivation

Cabin crew attitudes about motivation toward their work are presented in Table 5. The data indicates that they see their job as being rewarding and feel a great sense of

enjoyment in coming to work. The cabin crew indicated convincing disagreement with the statements about absenteeism being associated with their lack of motivation to attend work. On the other hand, respondents are not convinced that management recognise their contribution to the success of the organisation. Provisions for improving performance recognition is a matter that needs to also be addressed by management as the cabin crew indicated that greater recognition could have an positive impact on reducing absenteeism.

Table 5: Motivation

1. My job is rewarding.	4.09
2. I enjoy coming to work.	4.17
3. My job offers career growth and personal development.	3.58
4. My absenteeism has resulted from my lack of motivation to attend work.	1.74
5. Management recognises my contribution to the success of AIRCO.	2.52
6. Greater performance recognition would reduce absenteeism.	3.47

Absence from work

Absence from work due to conflict between rosters and personal demands is not strongly indicated (refer Table 6). However, absence from work for personal health reasons (χ = 4.37) is more strongly indicated than for illness of family members (χ = 3.09). This suggests there is potential for debate about whether poor health is a convincing reason or the true explanation for *'avoidable'* absences when it may be camouflaging more genuine family related issues compounded by outdated work practices (Stewart, 1999).

Absence from work for genuine illness is indicated (refer Table 6). This finding is consistent with the results of Rodski (1998). But, in addition to Rodski's findings, absence from work for family/partner illness is also indicated but to a lesser extent. Conflicts between rosters and personal demands does occur, but to a lesser extent.

Table 6. Aggregate Responses - Section 2, Part 3: Absence from Work

1. My absence from work has been associated with genuine illness with myself.	4.37
2. My absence from work has been associated with genuine illness with family/partner.	3.09
3. My absence from work has been directly associated with conflicts between rosters and personal demands.	2.46

Management practices

The respondents indicated support for using absence management programs for monitoring sick leave patterns. There is some concern expressed here by respondents about management interviewing cabin crew to explain their sick leave history. Unlike other studies (Balchin and Wooden, 1995; Fowler, 1998; Kweller, 1998) that have investigated the taking of sick leave, here we have found a direct link between taking leave for non-genuine reasons, combined with a distinct lack of motivation to be called to explain such behaviour. Yet, the respondents indicated that attendance at work contributes to the organisation's success. Thus, it would appear that the cabin crew are demonstrating a lack of understanding of the processes necessary for an effective absence reduction program.

Cabin crew do not feel comfortable in approaching management about special leave requirements or time off to attend to pressing personal matters (refer Table 7). It would appear that there is a lower than desirable level of trust towards management on such matters. Thus, the aim of any intervention program would be to engender greater trust between cabin crew and management in reducing the frequency of cabin crew taking a 'sickie'.

Table 7. Aggregate Responses - Section 2, Part 4: Management Practices

1. It is appropriate for management to interview cabin crew about sick leave history.	2.69
2. The use of absence management programs is acceptable for monitoring sick leave patterns.	3.14
3. Cabin crew who are genuinely sick are treated with compassion by management.	2.65
4. Managers who take more of a personal interest when crew are absent from work would have a positive impact on reducing absenteeism.	3.36
5. I feel comfortable in approaching management with a special leave request.	2.58
6. I am encouraged to talk with management when I need unexpected absences from work.	2.44
7. Crew are reluctant to confide in management about their reason for taking unforseen leave.	3.56

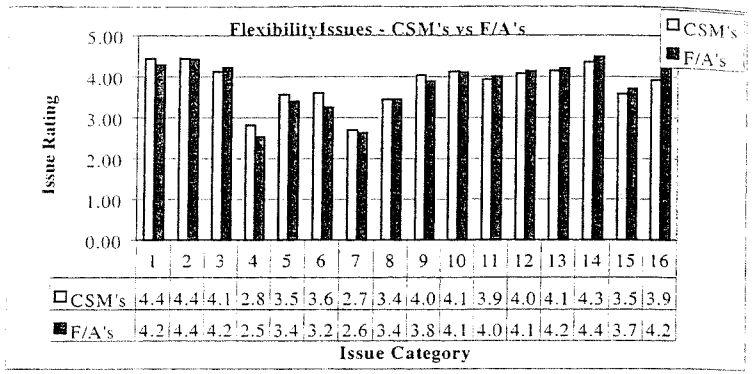
Comparisons by position

Comparisons were conducted between the ratings of Flight Attendants (F/A) and Cabin Services Managers (CSM). A Comparison between the F/As and CSMs responses to the sixteen work flexibility statements is presented in Figure 1. No significant difference was found between the response means for the two respondent categories (t = 0.540, df 15 α 0.597, two-tailed). However, the F/A group did indicate a stronger response to statements 14 and 16 than did the CSM group. That is, moving around rostered days off to accommodate unforseen personal demands and accruing a limited number of rostered days off to attend to pressing personal matters as a way to reduce absenteeism. On the other hand, CSMs indicated stronger opinions about workforce attendance and its contribution to AIRCO's competitive success. The explanation could be that the CSMs take on a more focused business plan perceptive than the F/As.

Responses from both groups indicate a similar level of disagreement to statement 4, that is, family responsibilities are not given appropriate recognition in the workplace. Working a different schedule each day may have a significant effect on the respondents' lives when rosters clash with personal demands, thus compounding a practice of taking *'avoidable'* leave.

Both groups see the eighteen days personal leave as being adequate. There are, as well, also similarities between the responses across the two groups for the URTI leave entitlement. Both positions indicated identical responses to taking URTI leave if it were accruable, that is, it would be used to attend to personal matters.

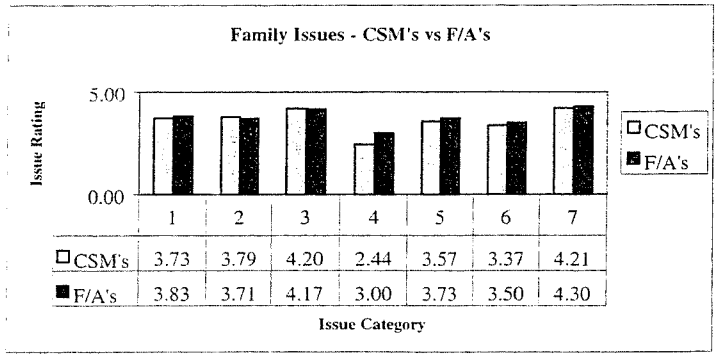
Figure 1: Flexible work practices: CSMs vs F/As



	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
CSM's	4.4	4.4	4.1	2.8	3.5	3.6	2.7	3.4	4.0	4.1	3.9	4.0	4.1	4.3	3.5	3.9
F/A's	4.2	4.4	4.2	2.5	3.4	3.2	2.6	3.4	3.8	4.1	4.0	4.1	4.2	4.4	3.7	4.2

Overall, the F/A group indicated a stronger overall sense of workplace flexibility. The F/As responses were of a higher mean rating than CSMs in regards to attendance at work being influenced by family/personal responsibilities (refer Figure 2) but the level of difference did not achieve significance ($t = -1.695$, df 6, $\alpha = 0.141$). As well, they indicated that in the future they might choose to resign because of conflict between rosters and home pressures. The CSMs indicated slightly more so than F/As that a higher level of sick leave is used as a mechanism for balancing the demands of family/personal with work life.

Figure 2: Family issues: CSM's vs F/As



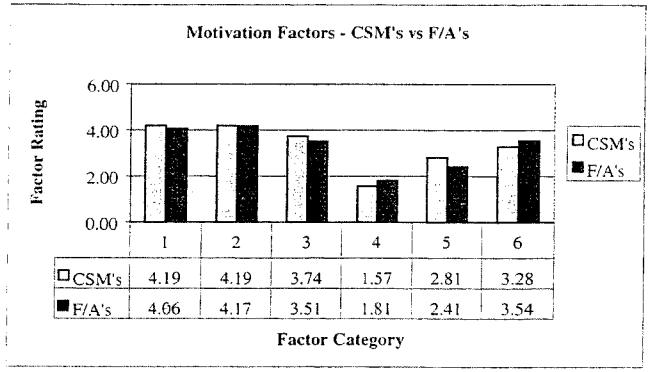
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
CSM's	3.73	3.79	4.20	2.44	3.57	3.37	4.21
F/A's	3.83	3.71	4.17	3.00	3.73	3.50	4.30

The F/A group is more open in their approach to flexible work practices. They indicated greater comfort with flexible work arrangements to assist in meeting their family/personal needs against the needs of the organisation. The data suggests that workplace practices that offer increased flexibility for the cabin crew have potential to reduce absenteeism across the board.

The CSMs indicated a greater sense of career growth, personal development and job satisfaction than did the F/As. The CSMs are at management level, thus, they are more likely to be focused on the 'Big Picture Business Plan' along with a strong business development ethic.

The F/A cabin crew rated favourably their enjoyment of flying as a career and, thus, coming to work. Both groups indicated strong disagreement with the statement that their absence from work is associated with motivational issues (refer Figure 3). The cabin crew, overall, indicated that their contribution to the success of the company is not being adequately recognised by management. The CSM who, as a group are closer to management, appear to hold concerns about their efforts not being acknowledged by management. This is a factor that management needs to look at closely during the CSM's annual performance review and the CSM's trip performance reviews. There appears to be two basic positions in regards the issue of greater performance recognition for F/As. They responded more positively about greater performance recognition impacting upon the reduction of absenteeism. Secondly, the F/A's manager, on a daily basis, is the CSM. Thus, the CSM needs to be more effective in using a wider range of performance feedback mechanisms in acknowledging the F/As contribution to the overall success of AIRCO. Such an approach may well enhance performance, whilst also influencing the reduction in absenteeism.

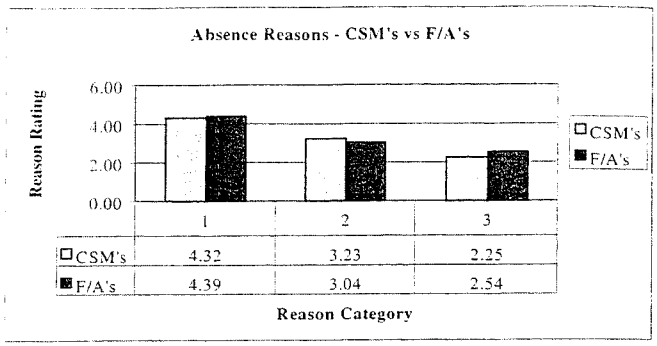
Figure 3: Motivation: CSMs vs F/As



	1	2	3	4	5	6
CSM's	4.19	4.19	3.74	1.57	2.81	3.28
F/A's	4.06	4.17	3.51	1.81	2.41	3.54

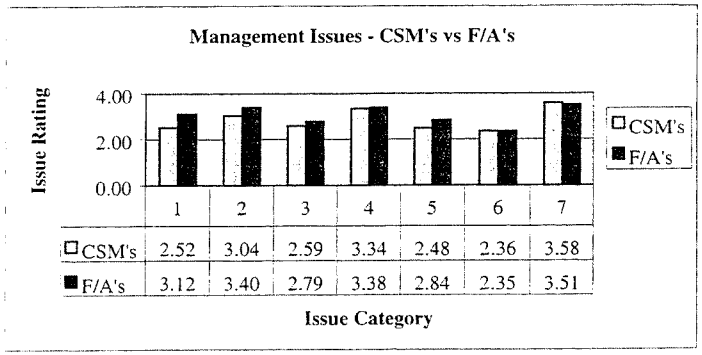
F/As and CSMs indicated a similar level of ratings in regards to reasons for absence from work (refer Figure 4). The most notable outcome is that F/As consider that conflicts between rosters and personal demands have greater impact upon them than for the CSMs, but the difference is marginal.

Figure 4: Reasons for absence: CSMs vs F/As



The F/A group indicated a greater sense of comfort in approaching management with special leave requests than did the CSMs (refer Figure 5). Both positions indicated a lack of confidence about not being encouraged to talk with management about unexpected absences from work. CSM's are regarded as managers and see themselves as a management group who operate more closely in managing the day-to-day demands of business. It is, therefore, of major concern that there is a level of mistrust exists between their management colleagues and themselves.

Figure 5: Management issues: CSMs vs F/As



Gender comparisons

Rating mean comparisons presented in Table 8 suggest that the female respondents seek more flexible workplace conditions than do the male respondents - as evidenced by the consistently higher means for the *flexibility* statements, that is, excluding statements 1 and 4 where the male rating means are higher. A significant difference was found between the mean scores for the two groups (t =3.44, p = 0.01 two-tail, df 6.00 α 0.05). On the other hand, the data for the female sample indicates that they, more than males, perceive that family responsibilities are not given adequate

recognition in the workplace. This outcome could reflect the view that females take a greater load in family matters.

The results presented in Table 9 are consistent with the findings in the work absence literature, that is, women tend to be absent from work more often than do men. It has been found that family responsibilities and job conditions are linked to absence behaviour. It is also argued that because women are usually assigned primary responsibility for family matters, they are absent more often to attend to family obligations (Wooden, 1995).

Table 8: Flexible work practices: Female vs male

Flexibility statement	Female	Male
1. Workforce attendance contributes to the company' competitive success.	4.32	4.35
2. Increasing employees' flexibility in rosters would reduce absenteeism.	4.45	4.39
3. Varying hours of work would enable employees greater work flexibility.	4.24	4.06
4. Family responsibilities are given appropriate recognition in the workplace.	2.53	2.89
5. The eighteen days **Personal Leave** (incorporating sick leave, bereavement leave and carer's leave) is adequate (i.e., EBA iv).	3.38	3.66
6. Upper Respiratory Tract Infection Leave known as (URTI) entitlement is generally being used for illness that is not associated with (URTI) as well as for personal reasons.	3.37	3.25
7. Cabin crew are entitled to use the non-accruable six (URTI) sick days for reasons other than being sick.	2.67	2.63
8. Cabin crew would *not* use the (URTI) sick days for personal issues if this leave entitlement were allowed to accrue.	3.47	3.33
9. Aircrew Resources' practices restrict management's ability to approve adhoc requests for cabin crew for unforseen personal emergencies.	3.99	3.78
10.The opportunity of dumping some unwanted patterns (tour of duties) into the Open Time allocation would reduce absenteeism.	4.16	3.90
11.Cabin crew should be able to drop hours and the pay for those reduced hours to achieve roster flexibility.	4.01	3.86
12.Cabin crew should be able to pick up additional flying hours from Open Time each month.	4.13	4.05
13.The opportunity of being blocked for less than 123 hours for different monthly rosters when flying commitments allow would appeal to cabin crew.	4.22	4.05
14.Being able to move rostered days off to accommodate unforseen personal circumstances would assist in reducing absenteeism.	4.44	4.45
15.Giving low-line cabin crew the flexibility to use a Blank Day, in the same month, to cover unforseen personal situations would reduce absenteeism.	3.71	3.54
16.There should be a flexible work practice that allows for accruing a limited number of rostered days off that would be in credit to be used for unforseen personal needs.	4.14	4.08

Table 9: Family/personal issues : Female vs male

Family/Personal issues statements	Female	Male
1. Cabin crews' ability to attend work is influenced by family/personal responsibilities.	3.81	3.77
2. Cabin crew use sick leave as a mechanism for balancing the demands of family/personal with work life.	3.74	3.70
3. Family/personal life suffers when rosters and home pressures conflict.	4.23	4.01
4. In the future, roster and home pressures conflicting could cause me to resign.	2.96	2.47
5. Opportunities to take leave from work over school holidays periods would reduce cabin crew absenteeism.	3.78	3.36
6. Employing more casual and fixed term Flight Attendants would offer increased flexibility in work schedules for the full-time cabin crew.	3.57	3.05
7. A good attendance record should work in an employee's favour when they request time off for unforseen personal reasons.	4.31	4.16

In regards to gender comparisons about motivation toward work, the female group mean ratings were significantly lower than the males (t = -4.73, p = 0.01, two-tail, df 5.00 α 0.05). Thus, it could be concluded that male respondents are more motivated toward their job than are females.

Table 10: Motivation: Female vs male

Motivation statements	Female	Male
1. I find my job rewarding.	4.07	4.16
2. I enjoy coming to work.	4.16	4.22
3. My job offers career growth and personal development.	3.55	3.64
4. My absenteeism has been associated with my lack of motivation to attend work.	1.72	1.82
5. Management recognises my contribution to the success of AIRCO.	2.47	2.67
6. Greater performance recognition would reduce absenteeism.	3.46	3.52

The mean ratings for the female group in regards to the nature of absence from work (refer Table11) were not significantly different from the male group (t = 3.09, p = 0.09 two-tail, df 2.00 α 0.05). However, this statistic must be taken as indicative at best and should be read with some caution as the comparison between only three mean scores could not be considered an adequate sample on which to apply a statistical analysis of this type.

As for management practices statements (refer Table 12), the female sub-group rated the statements significantly lower that the male group (t = -3.09, p = 0.02 two-tail, df 6.00 α 0.05).

Table 11: Absence from work: Female vs male

Absence statements	Female	Male
1. My absence from work has been associated with genuine illness with myself.	4.42	4.18
2. My absence from work has been associated with genuine illness with family/partner.	3.16	2.85
3. My absence from work has been directly associated with conflicts between rosters and personal demands.	2.48	2.40

Table 12: Management practices: Female vs male

Management practices statements	Female	Male
1. It is appropriate for management to interview cabin crew about sick leave history.	2.62	2.90
2. The use of absence management programs is acceptable for monitoring sick leave patterns.	3.10	3.25
3. Cabin crew who are genuinely sick are treated with compassion by management.	2.58	2.87
4. Managers who take more of a personal interest when crew are absent from work, would have a positive impact on reducing absenteeism.	3.33	3.47
5. I feel comfortable in approaching management with a special leave request.	2.49	2.90
6. I am encouraged to talk with management when I need unexpected absences from work.	2.37	2.67
7. Crew are reluctant to confide in management about their reason for taking unforseen leave.	3.58	3.48

Comparisons by Age

Comparisons were conducted across four different age groups, that is, under thirty, thirty-one to forty years, forty-one to fifty years, and over fifty years (refer Table 13). The over fifty group responded more positively to statements relating to increased flexibility in the workplace and agreed that personal leave is adequate. This group also agreed more strongly than the others that management recognise their contribution to the company's success. Maybe this is a function of this group being closer to management.

The forty-one to fifty years group indicated a slightly higher level of agreement with the statements about the use of URTI Leave. They perceive that URTI is being used, and entitled to be used, for non-genuine illness and for personal reasons. In addition, they believe that cabin crew would not use this leave for personal reasons if it accrued. This forty-one to fifty years group sees a level of comfort with their job offering career growth and personal development. The majority of the respondents are in the thirty-one to forty years group. They disagreed more so than others with the statement that personal leave was adequate. They also inferred that the demands of home and roster conflict might cause them to resign at some time. This outcome could be a reflection of this age group being in the prime child-bearing age bracket.

Table 13: Flexibility statements: By age

Flexibility statement	<30	31-40	41-50	51+
1. Workforce attendance contributes to the company' competitive success.	4.47	4.27	4.34	4.55
2. Increasing employees' flexibility in rosters would reduce absenteeism.	4.50	4.48	4.25	4.55
3. Varying hours of work would enable employees greater work flexibility.	4.23	4.24	4.06	4.45
4. Family responsibilities are given appropriate recognition in the workplace.	2.79	2.48	2.84	2.36
5. The eighteen days Personal Leave (incorporating sick leave, bereavement leave and carer's leave) is adequate (i.e., EBA iv).	3.45	3.38	3.57	3.64
6. Upper Respiratory Tract Infection Leave known as (URTI) entitlement is generally being used for illness that is not associated with (URTI) as well as for personal reasons.	3.32	3.31	3.47	3.27
7. Cabin crew are entitled to use the non-accruable six (URTI) sick days for reasons other than being sick.	2.56	2.67	2.72	2.45
8. Cabin crew would *not* use the (URTI) sick days for personal issues if this leave entitlement were allowed to accrue.	3.34	3.38	3.66	3.45
9. Aircrew Resources' practices restrict management's ability to approve adhoc requests for cabin crew for unforseen personal emergencies.	3.84	3.89	4.09	4.09
10.The opportunity of dumping some unwanted patterns (tour of duties) into the Open Time allocation would reduce absenteeism.	3.95	4.18	4.01	4.27
11.Cabin crew should be able to drop hours and the pay for those reduced hours to achieve roster flexibility.	3.85	4.03	3.93	4.00
12.Cabin crew should be able to pick up additional flying hours from Open Time each month.	4.24	4.13	4.01	4.00
13.The opportunity of being blocked for less than 123 hours for different monthly rosters when flying commitments allow would appeal to cabin crew.	4.06	4.25	4.14	3.91
14.Being able to move rostered days off to accommodate unforseen personal circumstances would assist in reducing absenteeism.	4.53	4.48	4.30	4.27
15.Giving low-line cabin crew the flexibility to use a Blank Day, in the same month, to cover unforseen personal situations would reduce absenteeism.	3.65	3.75	3.50	3.73
16.There should be a flexible work practice that allows for accruing a limited number of rostered days off that would be in credit to be used for unforseen personal needs.	4.34	4.16	3.90	4.09

The two younger groups indicated most strongly that their ability to attend work is influenced by demands of work life with family/personal pressures.

The under-thirty years group indicated that they are not as convinced that flexible work practices including dumping trips and dropping hours will satisfy them. However, they indicated a keenness to pick up more flying, have an opportunity to move days off around and, accrue a number of days off. They also indicated the strongest response for coming to work and finding it rewarding.

Table 14: Family/personal issues: By age

Family/Personal issues statements	<30	31-40	41-50	51+
1. Cabin crews' ability to attend work is influenced by family/personal responsibilities.	3.87	3.86	3.68	3.27
2. Cabin crew use sick leave as a mechanism for balancing the demands of family/personal with work life.	3.77	3.73	3.71	3.73
3. Family/personal life suffers when rosters and home pressures conflict.	4.21	4.20	4.11	4.00
4. In the future, roster and home pressures conflicting could cause me to resign.	2.69	3.04	2.55	2.27
5. Opportunities to take leave from work over school holidays periods would reduce cabin crew absenteeism.	3.70	3.76	3.51	3.55
6. Employing more casual and fixed term Flight Attendants would offer increased flexibility in work schedules for the full-time cabin crew.	3.57	3.59	3.11	3.00
7. A good attendance record should work in an employee's favour when they request time- off for unforseen personal reasons.	4.48	4.22	4.26	4.36

In regards to management practices, there are no obvious differences in the attitudes between the four groups (refer Table 16). However, there is an indication that the younger group are more comfortable in approaching management and more willing to confide in them about their reasons for taking unforseen personal leave.

Table 15: Motivation: By age

Motivation statements	<30	31-40	41-50	51+
1. I find my job rewarding.	4.30	3.99	4.21	4.18
2. I enjoy coming to work.	4.33	4.11	4.26	4.00
3. My job offers career growth and personal development.	3.78	3.42	3.79	3.73
4. My absenteeism has been associated with my lack of motivation to attend work.	1.82	1.81	1.51	1.82
5. Management recognises my contribution to the success of AIRCO.	2.64	2.39	2.70	3.00
6. Greater performance recognition would reduce absenteeism.	3.80	3.41	3.36	3.64

The older group (i.e., over fifty-one years) indicated family/personal reasons impacting upon their work influence them less (refer Table 14). This may be a reflection of them having adult children and being beyond the children responsibility phase of their life. More importantly, they are also less likely to resign because of conflicts between home and pressures of their work roster. It could also be expected that being in the older age group they would have developed more extensive work and life-management skills and, thus, be more in control of their life. On the other hand, the thirty-one to forty and forty-one to fifty age groups are less motivated by their job and by management that oversee them (refer Table 15). The thirty-one to forty age group find their job less rewarding than the other groups and are also less inclined to believe that management recognises their contribution to the success of AIRCO. The forty-one to fifty age group believe more than the others that their absenteeism is linked to motivation toward their work.

Table 16: Management practices: By age

Management practices statements	<30	31-40	41-50	51+
1. It is appropriate for management to interview cabin crew about sick leave history.	2.82	2.58	2.85	2.82
2. The use of absence management programs is acceptable for monitoring sick leave patterns.	3.23	3.13	3.11	3.09
3. Cabin crew who are genuinely sick are treated with compassion by management.	2.52	2.64	2.71	2.91
4. Managers who take more of a personal interest when crew are absent from work, would have a positive impact on reducing absenteeism.	3.31	3.35	3.36	3.64
5. I feel comfortable in approaching management with a special leave request.	2.41	2.51	2.84	2.82
6. I am encouraged to talk with management when I need unexpected absences from work.	2.52	2.31	2.69	2.45
7. Crew are reluctant to confide in management about their reason for taking unforseen leave.	3.64	3.66	3.30	3.18

Discussion

AIRCO professes that their employees are their most valuable resource and the key to their competitive success. Management claim that reducing absenteeism by 1 per cent will significantly improve the financial bottom line. This study seeks to highlight areas where attention should be focused to improve attendance. Innovative strategies that implement flexible work practices aimed at addressing the personal/family pressures that cabin crew experience, are most likely to impact the reduction in absenteeism. The cabin crew has indicated here that increasing flexibility in work practices would lead to this outcome.

The F/A group indicated a stronger overall sense of flexibility in current work practices and the data suggests they are more open in their approach to flexibility than the CSM group. The data also indicates that female respondents feel a higher level of comfort in increased flexibility in work practices to assist in meeting their family/personal needs than for their male counterparts.

Family responsibilities are not considered to be given an appropriate level of recognition in the work environment; an issue that is seen to impact directly on the ability of cabin crew to attend work. Clearly, far too many cabin crew are inclined to use sick leave as a mechanism for balancing the demands of family/personal with work life. In addition, the URTI entitlement is being widely used as days off for non-genuine illness reasons to attend to personal matters. Thus, the findings of this larger study are consistent with the findings of an earlier limited investigation (Stewart, 1999). Clearly, there is in some cabin crew an entitlement mentality when it comes to *'avoidable'* absence from work.

The CSMs as a group revealed a greater sense of career growth, personal development and job satisfaction than the F/A's. Given that the CSMs are at a management level and are required to focus on the 'Big Picture Business Plan', then this outcome is not unexpected. However, responses of the more junior respondents (i.e., three to five years service and of the thirty-one to forty age group) suggest that there is some frustration in this community. They do not see that their individual needs, including family responsibilities are being fairly recognised or catered for by the rostering system or given adequate recognition by management.

In general, cabin crew generally enjoy flying. However, the limited career growth prospects and personal development opportunities have resulted in groups where there are vestiges of "tiredness" and/or self-interest which impacts on their level of commitment to the job. Most obvious is the two groups of cabin crew that are disaffected toward their job in some way. The more 'junior' cabin crew are somewhat frustrated by being motivated toward their job, but see limited personal growth and career development opportunities. This group have above them another group who seem to be less motivated and somewhat more tired in their approach to their job. The third group are flight attendants who have served their time and progressed their career to management level, that is, CSMs. Thus, attention needs to be given to the disaffected, those who are motivated to progress their career but cannot because of the bottleneck of people above them, including those who are much less motivated and just want to do the minimum necessary to survive in their job. Improving performance recognition will most likely have a positive impact on reducing absenteeism.

CSMs are more aware of the need to adhere to the business plan of AIRCO to achieve its overall profit objectives. Therefore, CSMs need to be more effective in using a wider array performance feedback mechanisms that gives due recognition to subordinate cabin crews' contribution and its impact on the success of AIRCO within the stated business plan. These approaches will most likely enhance job performance and influence the reduction in absenteeism.

CSMs also need to be briefed on the linkage between the need to operate to a business plan whilst also focusing on absenteeism reduction whilst motivation subordinate cabin crew to work toward the outcomes prescribed in that business plan. At the same time management above the CSMs must also be more compassionate and sympathetic in their approach to the personal pressures that cabin crew experience; pressures that impact upon their capacity to give their most to their job. This approach will also most likely contribute toward the reduction of absenteeism.

The low level of trust that cabin crew exhibit towards management needs to also be addressed. The resultant aim should be to engender trust between the cabin crew by management demonstrating a more open door approach so that a positive and constructive relationship develops between cabin crew and management in meeting the requirements of achieving the bottom line outcomes. They must be more sympathetic to the family/personal pressures cabin crew experience. Workplace policies that encompass such pressures and demands will lead to more productive workplace outcomes.

There is no doubt that if the above described issues are addressed through the enterprise bargaining process on worker-management relationships, improvements in attendance and productivity and other related benefits in the work place will reduce the amount of 'sickies' taken. Undoubtedly, the introduction of innovative workplace practices offering increased flexibility toward sickness and related leave will reduce incidents of the 'sickie' being taken for non-genuine reasons.

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INTERNATIONAL EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

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The International Employment Relations Association (IERA) was formed in 1993 at the inaugural employment relations conference at the University of Western Sydney. Some years down the track, the association now has over 100 members from many countries. In June 1995 the association published its first edition of the International Employment Relations Review.

From the time of IERA's inception until 1997, the Secretariat to IERA was provided by the Centre for Employment Relations at the University of Western Sydney. At the 1997 Annual General Meeting, it was resolved that the Secretariat of IERA would be based in the School of Management at the University of Technology, Sydney. The current Executive of IERA consist of:

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First published in 2001 by
International Employment Relations Association
C/- School of Management
University of Technology, Sydney
PO Box 123
Broadway NSW 2007
Australia

ISBN 1-86365-850-5

Printed by
University of Western Sydney, Printing Services

Preface

The ninth annual Conference of the International Employment Relations Association (IERA) was held at the Hotel Rendezvous in Singapore from 10th to 12th July 2001. The theme of the conference concerned "Employment Relations Stakeholders in the New Economy". Immediately prior to the conference in Singapore, an IERA Symposium was held focusing upon "Employment, Training, Workplace Change and Labour Markets in the New Economy".

The IERA 2001 Conference in Singapore and the IERA Symposium in Malaysia were jointly organised by the staff from Nanyang Technological University, the University of Western Sydney (UWS) and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Professors Chew Soon Beng and Rosalind Chew from the Nanyang Business School at Nanyang Technological University were the official convenors of the Conference in Singapore. Ms Sue Bond of the University of Western Sydney was official convenor of the IERA Symposium in Malaysia.

A large number of quality papers were presented in both Singapore and Malaysia by academics and some practitioners from many countries including Singapore, Malaysia, China, Great Britain, the United States of America, Canada, Taiwan, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, France, New Zealand and Australia.

Some papers presented at the IERA 2001 conference and symposium were submitted for review and for possible publication. All papers submitted for publication were submitted to a double blind refereeing of the full papers submitted. In some cases, this resulted in papers being rejected for publication. Those who had their papers rejected are encouraged to utilise the IERA network to assist them in developing their papers for possible future publication. In some others cases, the referees' reports led to substantial revisions. All revised papers were subjected to further refereeing.

The papers presented in these proceedings are those that were accepted through a double blind refereeing process of the full papers as well as a refereeing of any subsequent changes.

I would like to sincerely thank the following people who acted as referees for these proceedings:

- Dr Brenda Cochrane
- Mr Colin Innes
- Ms Priscilla Leece
- Prof Richard Morris
- Prof Serge Mukhi
- Ms. Terri Mylett
- Dr Kenneth Preiss
- Dr Stephen Teo
- Dr Fawzy Solimon

Keri Spooner
President, IERA