

# SKY STRESS

A public image at odds with their safety role is one of the factors stressing out cabin crew, the Flight Safety Foundation reports.



Cabin crew continue to battle the “trolley dolly”, “sky girl” and “air hostess” image. Now that most airlines have moved with the times and dropped restrictions relating to gender, marriage, pregnancy and age, a greater variety of people work as flight attendants. This has challenged some of the stereotypes.

However, the service role of flight attendants still sometimes obscures their more important safety role.

Flight attendants world wide are trained to administer medical aid, direct the evacuation of aircraft, handle explosive devices, and manage, control and restrain passengers who are violent, disorderly and abusive. But many passengers are oblivious to this and treat them as glorified waiters and waitresses. This is one of the reasons for the high incidence of workplace stress among cabin crew, a recent study found.

Several studies have examined the impact of the aircraft work environment on the health and comfort of the crew. One found that jobs such as those performed by cabin crew required high standards of performance but offered little reward in terms of public esteem. There were higher rates of burnout, job stress and health problems of employees on shift-work schedules like those of flight attendants.

Caroline Kelleher and Sinead McGiloway, both of the University of Ireland,

surveyed 70 flight attendants aged between 19 and 53, and reported their results in *Cabin Crew Safety*, published by the Flight Safety Foundation. The subjects comprised 57 women and 13 men with an average age of 30. Most had been flight attendants for about six years. One in five participants was a senior staff member (cabin manager or other senior flight attendant), and one in five worked mainly on trans-Atlantic (long-haul) flights.

Twenty-one per cent of the participants described the job as “quite” stressful or “very” stressful, and the largest proportion (29 per cent) said work was a major source of stress in their lives. Almost two-thirds said they had taken from one to six sick days during the previous six months; and 17 per cent had taken seven or more days off due to illness. Eight per cent had taken 13 to more than 24 sick days during the six months before the study.

There were high levels of tobacco smoking (37 per cent) among participants, and all but three indicated regular alcohol consumption – daily or every few days, for example.

The cabin crew results were compared with those from a “public service/safety” comparison group of 252 police officers, fire-fighters and military personnel. Although the flight attendants had significantly better-than-average personal resources than the comparison group in the form

of social support, they obtained significantly above-average scores on parameters including physical strain, role insufficiency (a person’s perception of whether they have the skills to do a job), role boundary (a measure of conflicting role demands) and responsibility.

They were also less likely to engage in personal stress-reducing activities. The high scores of physical strain indicated concerns about physical health, as well as commonly experienced symptoms such as aches and pains, stomach aches and erratic eating habits.

The cabin crew surveyed were also slightly more likely than the comparison group to report being exposed to high levels of environmental irritants, such as noise, heat, moisture or unpleasant odours, and erratic work schedules.

These factors may be compounded by the difficulties reported by the flight attendants relating to their work role. Fifty-six per cent believed there was an unsatisfactory “fit” between their skills and their jobs. Forty-six per cent believed that they were overqualified for their jobs, 34 per cent believed that their careers were not progressing as they had hoped, and 24 per cent believed that their jobs did not have a good future. About 75 per cent also reported that they typically felt conflict between their employer’s expectations and their own desires, and that they had little pride in their work.

The cabin crew felt more responsibility than their counterparts in the norm group for the performance and welfare of others.

Those younger than 30 scored higher than those older than 30 on role insufficiency, although they also scored higher in problem-solving.

Some aspects of the physical work environment, such as erratic work schedules, also appeared to be problems. High scores on a physical strain subscale and, to some extent, a psychological strain subscale, indicated concerns about both physical health and mental health (eg disturbed sleep, aches and pains, feelings of depression and anxiety).

There were also differences in interpersonal strain scores between single participants and participants involved in committed relationships, indicating that the 29 single flight attendants experienced marginally more problems in their interpersonal relationships than their colleagues in committed relationships.

The 18 flight attendants who operated mainly on short-haul flights (eg flights within mainland Europe) scored significantly higher than their 49 long-haul colleagues with respect to psychological strain. This was despite the fact that only five flight attendants in the short-haul group worked primarily on early flights that required very early check-in times.

Flight attendants frequently operate on a roster or shift system that involves overnight stays away from base and reserve duties. The higher psychological strain scores of the short-haul group in the study (when compared with their long-haul counterparts) were consistent with a small but growing pool of research suggesting that disturbed sleep patterns and circadian rhythms – which have been well documented in long-haul staff – may be more widespread than originally thought, the report said.

For example, Swedish short-haul airline flight attendants also reported sleep problems and generally associated them with early morning flights.

Other research found that boarding, distribution of meals and landing were perceived by flight attendants as the most stressful times.

The more often these functions were conducted, the greater the cumulative stress. Flight attendants must remain alert, especially during takeoff and landing, and this “sustained vigilance” could contribute to the high overall levels of work-related stress, the report added.

“Overall, the elevated levels of work related stress in this small, but not atypical, sample have important implications for the recognition of flight attendants as an at-risk group for physical ill health and, in some cases, mental ill health,” the report said.

“The findings indicate, in view of the comparison group used, that there are moderate parallels in terms of work-related stress between the work undertaken by flight attendants and other public service personnel such as police officers.

“However, the flight attendants found specific aspects of their job potentially more stressful than did police officers, firefighters, military personnel and other public-service employees.

“Although the flight attendants had generally good social support, their self-care scores were significantly below the norm, suggesting that flight attendants do not regularly do activities that reduce or alleviate chronic stress to the same extent as their counterparts in the comparison group.”

Air travel has changed dramatically in the last 20 years, and more formal training and support for flight attendants are now required, particularly in the aftermath of recent terrorist attacks and amid increases in “sky rage” incidents in which angry passengers have challenged flight attendants – sometimes initiating physical violence and putting them at direct risk.

A 1986 study of flight attendants in Ireland found that the participants did not appear to be experiencing significant levels of maladaptive stress or

## “THE FLIGHT ATTENDANTS FOUND SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF THEIR JOB MORE STRESSFUL THAN DID POLICE OFFICERS, FIREFIGHTERS, AND MILITARY PERSONNEL.”

strain, but nevertheless tended to have negative perceptions of the job and its long-term prospects.

The Flight Safety Foundation suggested that the primary role of flight attendants – ensuring passenger safety, not just serving refreshments – should be acknowledged. The conflicting requirements of their safety role and their service role may present serious difficulties for flight attendants as they attempt to balance the need for safety and vigilance against the desire to meet passengers’ needs.

Airlines tended to overemphasise the service role of their flight attendants in their company literature and recruitment literature, contributing to public misconceptions and a lack of recognition for the work-related stress associated with the role of flight attendants, the report said.

The FSF said further research and appropriate stress management interventions and programs were needed to quantify and alleviate the risk of exposure among flight attendants to potentially harmful levels of work-related stress. If this was not addressed, the public could be affected.

– Adapted from “Study Finds High Levels of Work-related Stress Among Flight Attendants”, Caroline Kelleher and Sinéad McGilloway, Flight Safety Foundation, Cabin Crew Safety, Nov-Dec 2005.