Developing the Inflight Customer Experience of Airline X

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As the airline business is constantly changing, the companies need to stay on top of the competition and develop their products and services. The inflight service is a vital part of the airline customer journey and has a major effect on the customer satisfaction. The cabin crew members can be considered as the face of the airline, and the ones who can break or make the customer experience. Therefore, paying attention to their training and performance is of utmost importance.

The thesis is commissioned by a European regional airline that has requested to stay anonymous. The project started from the commissioner's need to find measures to develop the inflight customer experience and the customer service skills of the cabin crew members. The thesis focuses on identifying the touchpoints of the inflight customer journey which need the most attention in order to improve the customer satisfaction. It also aims to provide tools for developing the customer service training of the commissioning airline.

The theoretical framework consists of exploring the concepts of service quality, customer experience, and the role of customer service employees in relation to them. Also, the concepts of emotional intelligence and emotional labour are discussed, as they impact the performance of employees, especially in highly demanding customer service roles such as the role of cabin crew.

The main focus of the research was to compare the perceptions of the passengers and the cabin crew regarding the level of customer service. A quantitative research method was used, with questionnaires sent out to passengers and cabin crew members. The research also included an opportunity for the passengers to give open feedback. In addition, open questions were presented to the cabin crew members to discover their suggestions for developing the customer experience and the service training.

The results indicated a noticeable difference between the perceptions of the passengers and the cabin crew regarding the service quality. The parts of the customer journey that will need most attention from the airline were also identified in the research. In addition, valuable data was collected from the cabin crew regarding how they would improve the training and the customer experience. The findings of the research are used by the airline to develop their internal processes and the cabin crew training. The results of the research are confidential.

Keywords Service quality, customer experience, emotional intelligence, airline, cabin crew

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1 Introduction

The basic product of all the airlines is the same; providing transport from point A to point B. What makes them different from one another is the business model and the strategy the airline applies regarding, for example, marketing, pricing, route network, and the level of customer service. Some airlines are more focused on providing excellent customer service and use the level of service as a competitive advantage. Some others compete with pricing or emphasize safety, reliability and punctuality. All the components of the airline customer journey affect the customer experience. Still, the most visible part for the passengers is the service provided and the level of inflight service has a major role in creating outstanding customer experiences. (Reichmuth & al. 2008, 5-14.)

Cabin crew members can be considered as the face of the airline and have a major impact on the customer experience. Even with exceptional inflight products, it is usually the human touch that makes a difference. My experience working as a cabin crew member for a major Middle Eastern airline is reflected in the thesis in many ways. The thesis project has allowed me to compare the different service cultures and procedures. My background has also allowed me to see things from a different perspective and introduce fresh ideas.

The thesis is commissioned by a European regional airline which operates over 50 000 short-haul flights annually with its 24 aircraft. The mission of the airline is to provide safe, high-quality regional flight operations for other airlines ecologically, cost-effectively and in an agile way. Currently, the airline is a preferred partner of a major European airline and operating flights on their behalf. The airline currently employs approximately 300 cabin crew members. The commissioning airline will be referred to as airline X in this thesis as they wish to stay anonymous. (Airline X 2019.)

The thesis project started from the need to find measures to develop the customer experience and the customer service skills of the cabin crew members. The thesis focuses on identifying the points of the inflight customer journey which need most attention in order to improve the customer satisfaction. It also aims to provide tools for developing the customer service training of the commissioning airline.

The theoretical framework consists of exploring the concepts of service quality, customer experience, and the role of customer service employees in relation to them. The concepts of emotional intelligence and emotional labour are also discussed, as they impact the performance of employees, especially in highly demanding customer service roles such as the role of cabin crew.

The research part consists of quantitative research conducted with both the passengers and the cabin crew. The main focus of the research was to compare the perceptions of the passengers and the cabin crew regarding the level of customer service. The research also included an opportunity for the passengers to give open feedback. In addition, open questions were presented to the cabin crew members to discover their suggestions for developing the customer experience and the service training.

2 Service quality and the role of customer service employees

The concepts of service quality and customer experience are discussed in this chapter. There is a specific focus on customer service employees, how their performance affects the customer experience, and how the performance can be improved with internal marketing.

2.1 Service quality

Service can be described as a process where the activities are more or less intangible in nature. The consumer also usually participates in the service production process. One of the characteristics of service is that it is to some extent produced and consumed simultaneously. This makes it difficult to manage quality control since there is no pre-produced quality to monitor before the service is sold. Most of the service production process is invisible for the customer, but the visible part is what matters in the customer's mind. (Grönroos 2015a, 49-50.)

The service quality has two dimensions: a technical outcome-related dimension and a functional process-related dimension. The technical quality refers to what customers receive in their interaction with the company. For example, an airline passenger is transported from one place to another. The functional quality is about how the customer receives the service. This refers to, for example, the appearance and the behaviour of the customer service employees. The functional quality is more difficult to evaluate as it is perceived very subjectively by the customers. In addition, the company image affects the perception of quality. If the customer has a favourable image of the company, minor mistakes might be forgiven. A negative image causes the impact of any mistake to be considerably greater. The image can be considered as a filter when it comes to the perception of quality. (Grönroos 2015a, 95-96.)

Every individual has different expectations of the customer service experience. Primary expectations are the most basic requirements. For example, that the cabin crew will be carrying out the meal service during the flight. Secondary expectations are based on previous experiences. For example, if the customer has received very good service previously, they expect the same the next time. This leads to the importance of consistent service to avoid disappointing the customer. (Harris 2014, 23.)

Good perceived quality is obtained when the experienced quality meets the expectations of the customer. The expected quality is influenced by various factors, such as marketing communication, word of mouth, social media, company image, and the customer needs.

Customers also experience the service situations differently. This is based on perceptions that are developed over time and reflect the individual's values, priorities, prejudices, and sensitivity to others. For example, two people can experience the exact same customer service situation but describe it very differently. Also, the emotions and the mood of the customer can influence the perceived quality. By anticipating customer needs based on their prior interactions and aiming for excellent customer service, the customer service employees can work towards making the most current perception a positive one. (Grönroos 2015a, 98-101; Harris 2014, 22.)

One of the earliest studies concerning the perceived service quality was conducted by British Airways in the 1980's. The aim of the research was to determine which factors influence the passenger experience the most. The following factors were identified as a result of the research:

1. *Care and concern:* customers feel that the organization and its employees are committed to serving them and solving their problems

2. *Spontaneity:* the employees are willing to approach the customers and take ownership of the problems. They are also capable of individual thinking without blindly following the company guidelines.

3. *Problem solving:* The employees should be skilled, and trained well, to provide excellent service.

4. *Service recovery:* When something goes wrong or something unexpected happens, an employee will do their utmost to recover the situation.

The differences between the expectations and the perceived quality were not taken into consideration in this research. Still, these factors form the core of the perceived service quality. (Grönroos 2015b, 112-113.)

As a result of further service quality studies, the following five determinants of perceived service quality were found:

1. *Tangibles:* The appeal of facilities, equipment and materials, and the appearance of service employees.

2. *Reliability:* Providing customers accurate service without making any mistakes and delivering it as promised on time.

3. *Responsiveness:* The employees of the company are willing to help the customers and respond to their requests, inform them when service will be provided and then give prompt service.

4. *Assurance:* The employees' behaviour will give customers confidence in the company and the company makes the customers feel safe. The employees are also

always courteous and have the necessary knowledge to respond to customers' questions.

5. *Empathy:* The company understands customers' problems and performs in their best interests while giving customers individual personal attention and having convenient operating hours. (Grönroos 2015a, 102.)

The attributes describing the features of the service can be used to measure the service quality. This is the most widely used method in academic research as well as in business practice. The most well-known instrument is the SERVQUAL instrument which is based on the five determinants of perceived service quality listed above. The five determinants are usually further described by 22 attributes and respondents are asked to evaluate them on a seven-point scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". The determinants and attributes should always be customized according to the situation at hand. (Grönroos 2015a, 101-104.)

A qualitative approach, the critical incident method, can also be used to measure service quality. In this method, the customers are asked to think of situations where the service clearly deviated from the norm, either in a favourable or an unfavourable way. They are also asked to describe what happened and what made him consider the incident critical. The researcher then analyses the material in order to find out what kind of quality problems exist and why these problems occur. This research method gives the company rich material indicating problem areas and strengths. It may reveal the underlying causes for low service quality, such as lack of resources, inadequate skills of employees or negative attitudes towards customers. Often the findings give direct indications about what actions need to be taken. (Grönroos 2015a, 105-106.)

In addition to the research conducted by the companies themselves, the service quality of airlines is measured by many independent agencies. One of the best known of them is Skytrax based in the United Kingdom. Skytrax presents the Airline of the year-awards annually where the top 10 airlines are given a 5-star status. Most airlines value these awards highly and aim for the 5-star status. Receiving the award gives the airline plenty of publicity in the global media and the possibility to use the award logo in their marketing. Skytrax claims that 21,65 million people responded to the survey in 2019. The details of how the results are calculated are not disclosed, but the attributes are publicly available. For example, below are the attributes determining the quality of the inflight customer service. (Garcia 2015; Skytrax World Airline Awards 2019.)

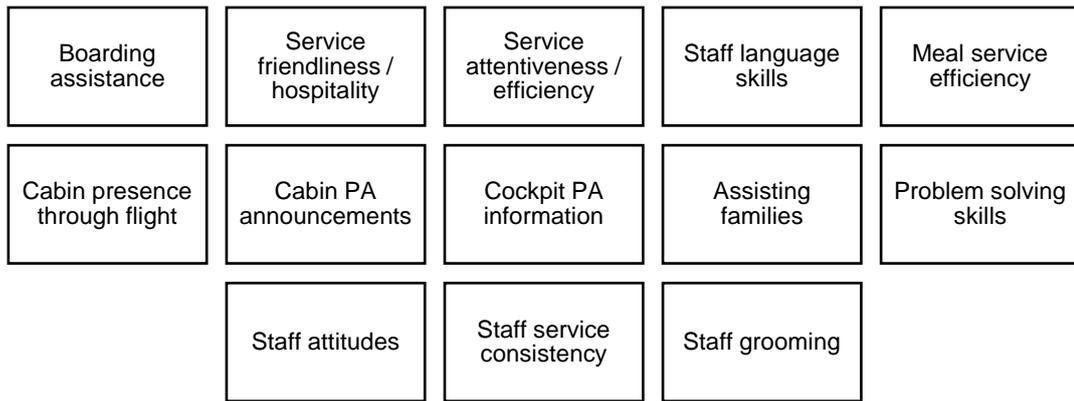|				
Boarding assistance	Service friendliness / hospitality	Service attentiveness / efficiency	Staff language skills	Meal service efficiency
Cabin presence through flight	Cabin PA announcements	Cockpit PA information	Assisting families	Problem solving skills
	Staff attitudes	Staff service consistency	Staff grooming	

Figure 1. Attributes determining the quality of the inflight customer service (Skytrax World Airline Awards 2019)

There have been doubts about the objectivity of Skytrax, as the company also provides paid consultancy services to airlines. For example, Hainan Airlines and Lufthansa have received awards after a consulting project had been completed with them. Skytrax has also refused to give information about their methodology, metrics, and business organization. (Garcia 2015; Wikipedia 2019b.)

2.2 Customer experience

The customer experience can be described as a combination of three elements; the service product, service setting, and service delivery system. The service product is the reason why the customer is involved with the organization, and the service setting the environment in which the experience takes place. The service delivery system refers to the human components and the physical production processes. The most important part of the system is the people interacting with the customers, as they are the most able to make a difference in how customers feel about the value and quality of the experience. (Ford & Sturman 2020, 10-12.)

Customer experience is the sum of the encounters, images, and feelings that the customers experiences during the interaction with the company. An important aspect of customer experience is that it is not a rational decision, but an individual experience which is highly influenced by feelings and subconscious perceptions. Organizations can choose which kind of experiences they are aiming for, but they never can fully control the final perception of the customers. (Löytänä & Kortesuo 2011, 11.)

One of the most important aspects of customer experience is exceeding customer expectations. The customer experience can be divided into three parts: the core experience, the expanded experience and the elements exceeding expectations. The core experience is where the customer's basic needs are fulfilled. For an airline, it would be providing transport from point A to point B. The expanded experience is adding something to the product that increases the value to the customer. This could be, for example, the airline providing meals, entertainment or free internet during the flight. When new elements are added to the expanded experience, the experience exceeding expectations is formed. For example, this can be the exceptional customer service given by the cabin crew. The attributes listed in Figure 2 are often used when describing an experience exceeding expectations. (Löytänä & Kortesuo 2011, 59-64.)
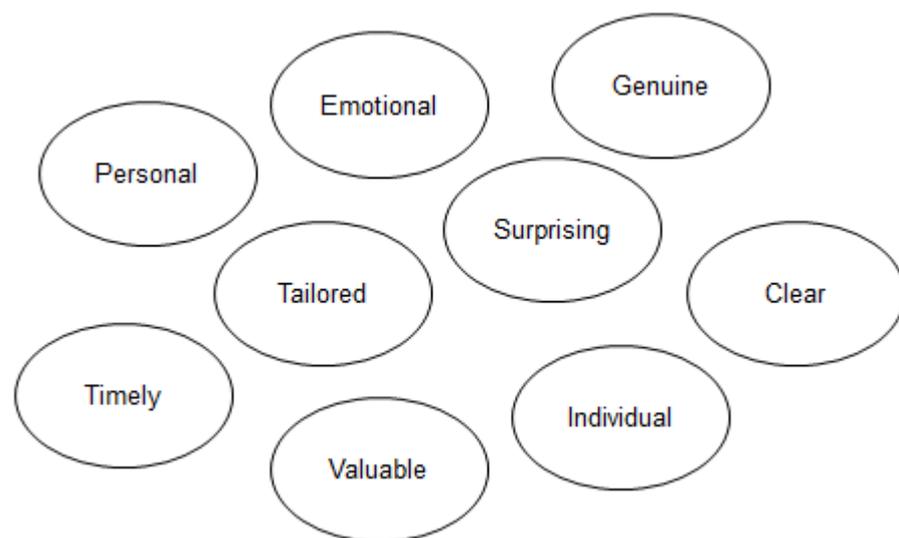
Figure 2. Attributes describing the experience exceeding expectations (Löytänä & Kortesuo 2011, 59-64)

When the customer is in contact with the company, the interaction takes place at different touchpoints. This can be visualized by forming a customer journey that is built up from all the touchpoints. Customer journeys can be used to illustrate how all the different functions of the organization are building customer experience at different touchpoints. When the interaction at a certain touchpoint has been functional, enjoyable, useful or exceeding expectations, it has a positive effect on the overall experience. On the other hand, if the interaction has been disappointing or not meeting expectations, it has a negative effect. Below is an example of the customer journey of an airline passenger. (Löytänä & Kortesuo 2011, 113-115.)

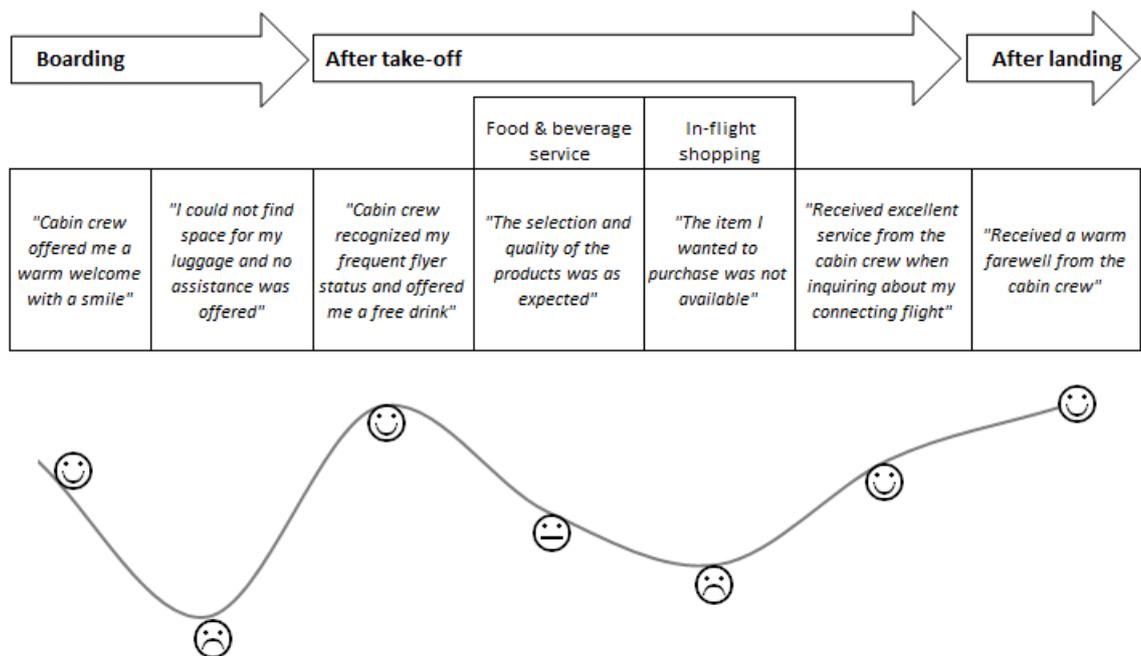| Boarding		After take-off			After landing	
			Food & beverage service	In-flight shopping		
"Cabin crew offered me a warm welcome with a smile"	"I could not find space for my luggage and no assistance was offered"	"Cabin crew recognized my frequent flyer status and offered me a free drink"	"The selection and quality of the products was as expected"	"The item I wanted to purchase was not available"	"Received excellent service from the cabin crew when inquiring about my connecting flight"	"Received a warm farewell from the cabin crew"

Figure 3. Airline passenger inflight customer journey (adapted from Löytänä & Kortesuo 2011, 116)

The touchpoints with the most influence on the customer experience should be prioritized when working on developing the customer journey. In addition to focusing on the current touchpoints, also missing ones can be identified when analyzing the customer journey. It should be considered whether an additional touchpoint would create more value for the customer. The peak-end rule suggests that the customer experience is mainly formed according to the highest point, which could be either negative or positive, and the ending of the encounter. When this rule is applied to the example presented in Figure 3, the highest point would be the negative experience during boarding, but the encounter is ending in a positive way. Based on these two encounters, the passenger is most likely to form the overall customer experience. When an organization is aiming to develop and improve the customer journey, it should especially pay attention to the end of the service encounter and creating positive high points along the journey. (Löytänä & Kortesuo 2011, 117-118.)

A service encounter is the person-to-person interaction or series of interactions taking place while the service is delivered. The terms moment of truth and critical incident refer to the service encounters which are of crucial importance to the customer's evaluation of the service quality. These encounters can make or break the entire guest experience. The distinguishing characteristic of most customer experiences is how the people providing the service performed. The moments of truth also create competitive advantage, as they each provide a possibility to create memorable experiences that differentiate the organization

from others. It is important to identify when and where these moments of truth occur and ensure that they are managed well. Also, the employees need to be aware and informed about them. (Ford & Sturman 2020, 12-14.)

For an airline passenger, the customer service received during the flight is usually a notable and important part of the customer experience. In general, customers value personalized and individual service. Customer engagement is also driven by consistent service. For example, the passenger may receive exceptional service on one flight, but if the experience is not similar on the next one, the customer engagement may remain low. To deliver exceptional customer service, first the organization needs to get the basic elements right and satisfy the minimum requirements of the customers. This is illustrated in Figure 4. (Cook 2015, 5.)

Figure 4. The Service Pyramid (Cook 2015, 5)

The basic elements of a service differ depending on the organization. They can be a mixture of physical elements and the actions by the service employees. For an airline, it would be, for example, the comfort of the seats in the aircraft and the cabin crew greeting the passengers. The basic elements do not always increase customer satisfaction, but when done poorly, they invariably lead to complaints and dissatisfaction. (Cook 2015, 6.)

Satisfying the customer needs refers to meeting the requirements which are important to the customer with minimal effort. For example, this could be the flight arriving on time and the availability of beverages onboard. Factors such as efficiency, reliability, quality,

knowledge, and responsiveness generally help to meet customers' requirements. However, these factors are not what inspire the customer or differentiate the experience from other service providers. (Cook 2015, 6.)

As the majority of service encounters lead to satisfactory customer experiences, the real customer engagement comes from exceeding the expectations and delivering exceptional service. When the customer is emotionally engaged with the organization, they become promoters of their products. Personalized service by offering a service that recognizes individual preferences, is one way to increase customer engagement. For an airline it can be, for example, offering more meal choices and the freedom to choose what time to eat during the flight. Another way to create customer advocacy is the above and beyond service which exceeds customer expectations. This can be even a small thoughtful unexpected addition to the service. For example, a cabin crew member may put extra effort into finding a certain meal choice for a passenger. (Cook 2015, 7.)

The last driver of customer engagement is effective service recovery. Complaints should be taken seriously, dealt quickly and by giving the customer the benefit of the doubt. During the flight, the cabin crew members should bear these factors in mind when dealing with complaints. They should be empowered and instructed to take the necessary measures to solve the issue already during the flight. Research shows that the longer the customer has to wait for their complaint to be solved, the less likely they are to be happy with the resolution. These three drivers of customer engagement can differentiate the organization and create a sustainable competitive advantage. (Cook 2015, 8.)

2.3 Employee perceptions

The perceptions are not only limited to how the customers experience the service, but they are also related to how the customer service employees perceive themselves as service providers. For example, they can see themselves as excellent service providers even though other people around them experience it very differently. The Johari Window is a model that illustrates how the views that people have of themselves contrast the views that others have of them. The Johari Window can be used as a tool for improving interpersonal communication and relationships. (Gallrein, Carlson, Holstein & Leising 2013, 464-465.)

Self-Knowledge

                    Low   High

       ┌─────────────────────┬─────────────────────┐
       │   │   │
 Low   │   Unknown Area   │   Hidden Area   │
       │   │   (Bright Spot)   │
Other- ├─────────────────────┼─────────────────────┤
Knowledge   │   │
 High │   Blind Area   │   Free Activity   │
       │   (Blind Spot)   │   Area   │
       │   │   │
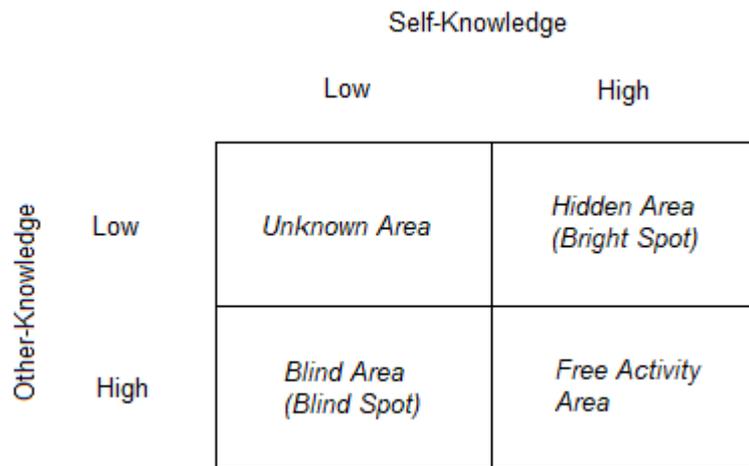   └─────────────────────┴─────────────────────┘

Figure 5. The Johari Window (Gallrein & al. 2013, 465)

The free activity area contains the personality characteristics which are equally well
known to the person himself and to others. The hidden area, the bright spot of self-
knowledge, contains the characteristics that only the person himself is aware of. It is be-
lieved this section covers most of the personality characteristics. Still, there may be an un-
known area that contains the characteristics that neither the person himself nor other peo-
ple are aware of. The blind area, the "blind spot", includes the personality characteristics
that the person fails to recognize but others accurately do. (Gallrein & al. 2013, 465.)

Research has shown that the typical person is not aware of some of the ways in which
they are perceived by others. The blind spot relates to, for example, how the customers
see the customer service provider. The staff member might believe that he is providing ex-
cellent customer service, but the customers' experience is totally different. The Johari
Window can be used as a tool for coaching and training customer service employees. Es-
pecially the concept of the blind spot can be very useful in developing self-awareness. By
being more aware of the individual blind spots, also the customer service skills can be de-
veloped. The blind spots can be discovered through self-disclosure and feedback from
others during group exercises. (Gallrein & al. 2013, 469; Chew 2018.)

2.4   Internal marketing

For an airline, there are numerous obstacles in the way of delivering excellent customer
service. These can be, for example, technical problems with the aircraft, weather condi-
tions or other restrictions that are beyond the control of the customer service personnel.
Still, many barriers to excellent service are directly related to the customer service provid-
ers, such as the cabin crew. These barriers are listed in Figure 6. (Harris 2014, 21.)

Laziness
Poor communication skills
Poor time management
Attitude
Moodiness
Lack of adequate training
Inability to handle stress
Insufficent authority
Serving customers on autopilot
Inadequate staffing

Figure 6. Barriers to providing excellent service (Harris 2014, 21)

Internal marketing is a way to enhance the abilities of employees and match them with the organizational goals. It includes training, management support, internal and external communication, and human resource management. The ultimate goal of internal marketing is to increase service consciousness and customer orientation of the employees. Internal marketing is connected to customer-oriented behavior by improving employee motivation and satisfaction, and organizational commitment. This leads to improved service quality and customer satisfaction. With effective and more frequent internal marketing, organizations can improve the communication between themselves and the employees. Especially in the case of front-line customer service employees, such as cabin crew members, clear communication about the company's missions and goals will inspire employees to be more committed. The devotion to the job will alter the emotional reactions of the employees and lead to enhanced interaction with the customers. (Fu 2013, 49-56.)

The predominant part of internal marketing is often the attitude management. This refers to managing the employee attitudes and their motivation for customer-focus and service-mindedness. The second part is the communications management as employees need information about, for example, job routines and products. The employees also need to communicate to management about their needs, findings of what customers want and views on how to improve performance. (Grönroos 2015a, 413-414.)

Internal marketing is most commonly used in three different situations. The first of them is when an organization is creating a service culture. Service culture refers to an organizational culture where all employees are service-focused, and where giving good service is one of the most important values. Here the goal of internal marketing is to enable employees to understand the service perspective and business mission of the company. It also aims to create positive relationships between people, develop a service-oriented management and leadership style, and teach all employees service-oriented communications and interaction skills. Internal marketing is also used to maintain a service culture. In addition, it is needed to introduce new products, services and procedures, and making employees aware of external marketing campaigns and activities. (Grönroos 2015a, 416-418; 448.)

The goal of internal marketing is also to promote employee engagement. The level of how engaged the employee is with the organization has a major influence on the customer service delivery. Employee engagement can be described as harnessing discretionary effort as delivering exceptional service depends highly on the employees' commitment and willingness to go the extra mile. Recruiting for attitude and providing exceptional training and development are characteristic for an empowered customer-centric environment. There are also other factors that encourage high levels of engagement. (Cook 2015, 11-18.)

The first factor of engagement is freedom and accountability which refers to empowering employees to make it right for the customer without referral to others. For example, cabin crew should be empowered to deal with customer issues as they see appropriate during the flight without having to refer to other parties which could only be contactable after the flight. Authorized autonomy allows cabin crew members to deal with situations and demands from passengers according to their own judgement. Another factor is simplification and making it easier for the employees to deal with the customer. This can be done by encouraging employees to present ideas for improvements and involve them in developing procedures and policies. The organization also needs to be consistent in communicating that creating exceptional customer experiences is a key priority. Ultimately, line management and leadership impact the individual's commitment to spending discretionary effort the most. Research has shown that employee engagement is highly related to how the management values and cares for employees. At a productive workplace, people feel trusted and safe. (Cook 2015, 15-17; Fu 2013, 50-56.)

The employees can also be motivated with a reward system, recognition, and by making the work environment more enjoyable. Especially in customer service roles, empowering employees is an important strategy. It is the assignment of decision-making authority and

responsibility to an individual. By knowing the organization's mission and goals, and understanding and believing in the organization's culture, the employees can be empowered to make the right decisions. Empowerment can stretch the responsibility for knowing how performing on the job fits within the organization's overall purpose and mission. It also sends a powerful message to the employees that they are trusted, and builds self-respect, self-confidence, and interest. When the circumstances are new, unique or unexpected, empowerment enables employees to act the right way. (Ford & Sturman 2020, 235-237.)

Quicker and more direct response to customer needs in the service process, especially in service recovery situations, is one of the benefits of employee empowerment. Empowered employees are usually more satisfied with their job and treat customers more enthusiastically. They can also be a valuable source of new ideas. The quick, skillful and service-oriented approach of the employees leads to good word-of-mouth referrals and positive comments on social media which will increase customer retention. (Grönroos 2015a, 433-434.)

As every service encounter is different, it is impossible to prescribe in advance how to deal with all of them. Empowered employees know how to handle the encounters in the most favourable way. The approach used by Ritz-Carlton is one of the most widely known examples of empowerment. One of the company's service values is: "I am empowered to create unique, memorable, and personal experiences for our guests". The employees of Ritz-Carlton are authorized to spend up to $2000 a day to make it right with the customers. Still, the money is rarely used as the employees take pride in solving the issue without having to resort to financial compensation. The core component of empowerment at Ritz-Carlton is the company culture. The employees are not paid premium compared to companies, but the difference is how they are selected, treated and trained. The orientation for new hires lasts two days, while with most other companies it usually is a few hours. The orientation at Ritz-Carlton covers the history, values, mission and illustrates how employees can make a difference for its customers. (Ford & Sturman 2020, 235-236; Taneja 2010, 108.)

Creating these great customized experiences require great employees. Unsatisfied, ill-trained and unengaged people are unlikely to provide outstanding experiences for customers. The individual's service aptitude is involved with the ability to deliver good experiences. This aptitude refers to the ability to recognize and act upon opportunities to exceed a customer's expectations. These soft skills are often learned through training provided by the airline. According to research, more than 90 percent of the training is usually focused on hard skills such as product knowledge and operational and technical skills. Training for

soft skills, including customer service, experiential training, relationship building, role-playing, and service recovery training, is less than 10 percent of the employee training. (Taneja 2010, 87-88.)

Insufficient training can be named as one of the largest drivers of inconsistency and lack of great customer experiences. For airlines, the minimized training can be due to costs, but also due to the pressure to get the employees "online" and working as soon as possible. Still, the passengers do not usually care if the employee is new or not, and expect consistent and seamless service. An inexperienced employee, with little training on soft skills, is unlikely to provide outstanding customer experiences. Investing in employees means investing in customer experience. Outstanding customer experiences occur when the employees are equipped with the capabilities to provide them. This transformation from an average hire to a customer-centric employee happens during the training process. The successful airlines known for the customer-centric approach, such as Southwest Airlines and Singapore Airlines, follow the rule of hiring for attitude and training for skills. (Taneja 2010, 88-90.)

3 Emotional intelligence and emotional labour in service delivery

In this chapter, it is discussed how emotional intelligence and emotional labour affect the service delivery and the behaviour of the customer service employees. Also, the concept of cultural intelligence is explored briefly.

The work of cabin crew can be described as a highly demanding customer service job. The customers come from all walks of life and present different nationalities and cultures. Also, an aircraft as a working environment can be challenging and places restrictions on service delivery. Physical and mental stress can be caused by continuous take-offs and landings, jet lag after long flights, radiation exposure and the need to maintain a friendly attitude in all situations. This all is reflected in the emotional reactions of the cabin crew. The typical characteristics of the work of cabin crew, such as low job autonomy and long working hours, can also lead to emotional exhaustion. (Fu 2013, 49-50.)

Delivering excellent customer service highly depends on the personal qualities of the cabin crew. One of them is emotional intelligence. Also, the emotional labour of the cabin crew members affects the quality of the service delivery. An airline can provide several guidelines related to customer service, but since every customer encounter is different, it is up to the cabin crew member to choose the most suitable action according to the situation.

3.1 Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence includes five different components; self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Self-awareness means having a deeper understanding of one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. A high degree of self-awareness allows people to recognize how their feelings affect them, other people, and their job performance. It also extends the understanding of a person's values and goals. Self-aware people can be recognized by their ability to assess themselves realistically and by their self-confidence. During performance reviews, they can be identified as being comfortable talking about their limitations and strengths. (Goleman 2004, 82-85.)

Self-regulation refers to the ability to control one's disruptive feelings and impulses, and even channel them in useful ways. People with a high degree of self-regulation are able to create an environment of trust and fairness where politics and fighting are reduced, and productivity is high. These people also usually adapt to changes more easily and can even lead the way. Self-regulation also enhances integrity which is an organizational

strength as many bad decisions are a result of impulsive behavior. (Goleman 2004, 85-87.)

Motivation is also a component of emotional intelligence. Motivated people can be recognized from a passion for the work itself and from a persistent energy to do things better. People with high motivation remain optimistic even in case of a failure and often see them as learning experiences. Motivation also leads to a higher commitment to the organization. (Goleman 2004, 88-89.)

Empathy is considered as the easiest one to recognize from all the components. It means the ability to thoughtfully consider the feelings of others in the process of making intelligent decisions. Social skill refers to the ability to move people in the desired direction. Socially skilled people have a wide network of connections and are able to find common ground with people of all kinds. Social skill can be considered as an outcome of the other dimensions of emotional intelligence, as they are what makes the person to "glow" and be popular. Socially skilled people excel in managing teams and are good persuaders. They are also effective in leading change. (Goleman 2004, 89-91.)

There are also other approaches to defining emotional intelligence. It can be described as the ability to perceive, understand and manage emotions, and facilitate thoughts. People with emotional intelligence are able to recognize emotions in others, analyze them and understand how they are connected. It involves also understanding that emotions can enhance other kinds of thinking. Emotional intelligence also includes the ability to regulate emotions in order to promote emotional and intellectual growth. (Trenholm & Jensen 2013, 124.)

Emotional intelligence can be considered as a better predictor of employee work performance than the traditional intelligence quotient. Employees with a high level of emotional intelligence show greater commitment, devotion, collaboration, and creativity compared to the ones with a low level of emotional intelligence. (Jeon 2016, 347-348.)

3.2   Emotional labour

The ability to express appropriate emotions in face-to-face interaction with the customers can be considered as a cabin crew job requirement. The cabin crew members may experience emotional dissonance when the emotions required by the organization clash with their inner feelings. This may lead to lower job satisfaction and higher turnover. The way the cabin crew members manage their emotions at work is a critical factor in predicting individual and organizational outcomes. (Lu 2010, 1.)

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild introduced the concept of emotional labour while investigating the work of cabin crew members. Cabin crew do physical labour while conducting the meal service and mental work when preparing for emergencies. In addition to these, a cabin crew member does emotional labour. This refers to the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. Emotional labour may involve enhancing, faking, or suppressing emotions to modify the emotional expression and it has exchange value as it is sold for a wage. In general, emotions are managed in response to the display rules of the organization. (Hochschild 2012, 20-29; Grandey 2000, 95.)

There are two main ways to manage emotions: surface acting and deep acting. In surface acting one regulates the emotional expressions; deep acting refers to consciously modifying feelings in order to express the desired emotion. Surface acting can be considered as faking of emotions, as deep acting involves an attempt to actually experience and display the desired emotion. An example of surface acting is when a cabin crew member fakes a smile when they are in a bad mood or have to deal with a difficult customer. Surface acting is also applicable to emergency situations when a cabin crew member needs to stay calm despite their inner feelings. Surface acting relates to putting on an act in order to deal with customers in an appropriate way. Deep acting can be also described as the customer service provider working hard to feel the emotions that they must show to the customers. It involves treating customers as someone deserving of authentic expression. (Grandey 2000, 96; Jeon 2016, 348-364; Fu 2013, 50-53.)

Research has indicated deep acting having a positive impact on the commitment to customer service while surface acting having a negative one on the same. Employees may be required to use both these methods which may cause negative outcomes such as job stress and burnout. The emotional exhaustion usually leads to a lower level of commitment to customer service. (Grandey 2000, 96; Jeon 2016, 348-364.)

Difficult customers are an unavoidable part of any customer service profession. Dealing with these customers requires more emotional labour and can be emotionally exhausting for the employees. Research conducted with customer service employees indicates that encounters with difficult customers have a negative impact on employees' job satisfaction. The research also indicated that deep acting mediates the negative impact of difficult customer service encounters. Also, co-worker support moderates the impact of these encounters on emotional labour. (Lu 2010, 1-4.)

The effect of emotional labour on perceived service quality has also been investigated. The research supported the benefits of employees' deep acting. When the employees display authentic emotions, it can be recognized by the customers. This enhances the customer confidence in the reliability, responsiveness, and assurance of the service. In return, this results in customer loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. Surface acting, on the contrary, may lead to customers questioning whether employees are truly interested in their needs and motivated to work to satisfy them. (Abd Aziz, Najafi, Al-Shuaibi & Mohd Shamsudin 2016, 162-166.)

The emotional display of frontline employees has a critical impact on the customer experience. The challenge is how to encourage employees to engage more in deep acting. Choosing the right people for customer service roles starts from recruitment where the abilities to manage and regulate emotions should be taken into consideration. Selection tests can be used to uncover the abilities for deep acting. Also, training programs for existing employees should be used to reinforce their emotional regulation behavior. Especially sharing the experiences with others regarding emotional displays should be encouraged, as it has been suggested that peer support is key to behavior modification. (Abd Aziz & al. 2016, 166.)

Research has shown that internal marketing activities are significantly increasing deep acting in the emotional reactions of cabin crew members. In addition to enhancing the competencies of the employees, also the psychological stress of the job should be taken into consideration. With good quality training and empowerment, the employees are able to identify with the internal marketing goals of the organization. This will be demonstrated in the behavior of the cabin crew members by, for example, them being more willing to undertake the assigned tasks and to reflect the desired company image while performing their jobs. This relates to the cabin crew members consciously changing their emotional reactions and performing their jobs with sincerity rather than responding to customers with superficial emotions. When it comes to satisfying customers' needs, it is much more difficult when the customers' emotions are dealt with superficially. (Fu 2013, 55-56.)

Effective internal marketing can also help employees to express their emotions appropriately. Especially job autonomy can alleviate the level of emotional exhaustion. With authorized autonomy, cabin crew members will perceive service duties as a personal responsibility where the goal is to satisfy the customers' needs. (Fu 2013, 50-56.)

3.3   Emotional intelligence in service organizations

The concept of emotional intelligence can be applied to the recruitment, organizational development and training strategies of an airline inflight service department. In recruitment, it is an effective tool to estimate individual work success or performance. (Lee, Kim & Jeon 2013, 681.)

The research conducted by Aeeun Jeon emphasizes the importance of recruiting cabin crew members with high emotional intelligence and providing training to develop it. The high level of emotional intelligence is related to greater service recovery skills, teamwork, organizational commitment and loyalty, and job satisfaction. This leads to many positive outcomes. The increased job satisfaction leads to low turnover rates that lower the recruitment and training costs. The high levels of emotional intelligence may also reduce the need for additional training of the cabin crew members. Also, the service quality may improve as a result of the better teamwork and service recovery skills. (Jeon 2016, 364.)

As stated earlier, service recovery is one of the key elements of service quality. Service recovery can be described as the actions taken by the service provider to mitigate and repair the damage to a customer resulting from the provider's failure to deliver the service as designed. For any service provider, it is impossible to always provide perfect customer service and service failures are inevitable. For cabin crew, working inside an aircraft creates a unique and challenging service environment with limited resources, space and time. This makes the service failures a lot more difficult to reconcile. The unique circumstances also contribute to the importance of emotional intelligence of the cabin crew members. Research conducted among cabin crew members has supported the positive effect of emotional intelligence on service recovery. In addition, the research indicated that organizational loyalty is connected to emotional intelligence and is also affecting service recovery positively. (Lee, Kim & Jeon 2013, 666-681.)

Emotional intelligence can be considered an important element in creating and maintaining a climate of high-quality service as the skills can be learned by the employees. People with high emotional intelligence are likely to confront the organizational challenges better, be more committed and excel in interpersonal interactions. Emotional intelligence also helps people to learn service skills that result in job success and increased performance. In addition to employee satisfaction, emotional intelligence also leads to customer satisfaction and loyalty. As better service leads to customer satisfaction which commonly results in enhanced employee satisfaction, a virtuous circle is created. (Kurian 2013, 82-84.)

Improved quality

Customer satisfaction

Employee satisfaction

Figure 7. The virtuous circle created by emotional intelligence (Kurian 2013, 83)

Research and practice show that emotional intelligence can be learned, especially by training the limbic system which learns best through motivation, extended practice, and feedback. Developing emotional intelligence involves breaking old behavioral habits and establishing new ones, which requires sincere desire and concerted effort. (Goleman 2004, 86-87.)

Emotional intelligence can be measured with a variety of tests and online tools. Through training, employees can learn how to boost their emotional abilities where they are lacking. Problem Based Learning (PBL) can also be used to discover the emotional competencies of people. PBL is a pedagogy in which people learn about a subject through the experience of solving an open-ended problem. In relation to the work of cabin crew, this could be a challenging customer service situation. The PBL process allows the development of knowledge acquisition, enhanced team working skills and communication. In addition to training, an organization can promote the importance of emotional intelligence by including it in the company policies such as recruitment guidelines and rewarding systems. (Kurian 2013, 87; Wikipedia 2019a.)

Even though the importance of emotional intelligence is widely recognized in the service industry, still a few organizations have a high emotional quotient. This is due to a variety of factors that create an obstacle for developing it. People in the management of the organization can be more focused on facts and logic than emotions and sensitivities. The rapid pace of today's business world has also to lead to many people suffering from work overload and stress. The warning signs of poor quality and customer dissatisfaction can be missed due to the increase of information and data and the inability to handle it. Glob-

alization has led to more opportunities for confusion and distortion as the cultural difference and barriers can harm the ability to understand and to be understood. The management can also be reluctant to empower others by rather sticking to the autocratic leadership style. As a poor role model for others, they can create a cycle that repeats itself. These are all factors that should be taken into consideration when developing the emotional quotient of the organization. (Kurian 2013, 88-89.)

3.4 Cultural intelligence

As air travel is constantly growing, the passenger profile is also becoming more and more multicultural. This emphasizes the importance of the cultural intelligence of the cabin crew. As stated earlier, service recovery is one of the key elements of perceived service quality. Customers with different cultural backgrounds attach different values to recovery options like compensation, the status of the frontline employee who offers an apology, or an explanation depending on their cultural background. Cabin crew members not sharing the same cultural background with the customer can add a significant layer of complexity in service recovery performance. (Costers, Van Vaerenbergh & Van den Broeck 2019.)

Cultural intelligence can be described as people's knowledge about cultures, the behavioral enactment of this knowledge, the ability to regulate their energy for a specific task or situation in cultural situations, and the processes to gain and understand this cultural knowledge. In relation to emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence is considered to pick up where emotional intelligence leaves off. It enables employees to understand and enact their role expectations with cultural sensitivity and cultural appropriateness. (Costers & al. 2019.)

The influence of cultural intelligence on service recovery skills was investigated in a study conducted among the cabin crew members of a Southeast Asian airline. The results indicate that cultural intelligence has a stronger relationship with service recovery performance than empowerment or rewards. With employee training, the relationship is equally strong. The research also investigated the relationship between cultural intelligence, service recovery performance and work engagement. The results support an indirect effect of cultural intelligence on service recovery performance through work engagement. This implies that culturally intelligent employees provide better service recovery by being more engaged. (Costers & al. 2019.)

The research suggests that it is beneficial to recruit employees who have the potential to develop good cultural intelligence. This includes selecting candidates with international

experience or other exposure to different cultures. With cultural training, also the service recovery skills can be improved. (Costers & al. 2019.)

4 Research

This chapter focuses on the planning and implementation of the research. First, the research method is discussed, followed by a more detailed look into the process. Finally, the collected data is presented.

4.1 Introduction to the research

The main focus of the thesis project was to investigate the perceptions of the cabin crew members regarding customer service. The hypothesis was that the perceptions of the cabin crew concerning the level of customer service differ from the actual customer experience of the passengers. For example, the perception of the cabin crew would be that they have provided excellent service, but from the customers' point of view, the experience is only mediocre. For this purpose, the research was conducted among both the passengers and the cabin crew members. The objective of the research was to identify where and how the customer experience differs from the cabin crew perception. An important aspect was also to discover the level of customer satisfaction in general. In addition, open questions for the cabin crew were included to discover how they have experienced the customer service training received in the past, and what suggestions they would have to improve it. The cabin crew were also given an opportunity to give suggestions on how to improve the customer experience in general.

With the results, customer service training for airline X could be developed with the focus on the issues identified in the research. The results would be also used as a material in the training to provide factual information to cabin crew members about how the passengers perceive the level of the customer service.

4.2 Research method

In research, data can be collected using qualitative or quantitative methods. The basic distinction between these two methods is that quantitative research employs measurement and qualitative does not. The choice of method also reflects the perspective on knowledge and research objectives. The quantitative methods have an emphasis on testing and verification, especially testing a hypothesis. It is a logical and critical approach with controlled measurement. Quantitative research provides an objective outside view distant from data and the aim is to have results that can be generalized by population membership. (Ghauri & Gronhaug 2010, 104-105.)

Surveys are one of the most popular data collection methods in business studies. Conducting a survey is a fast and an efficient method producing a large number of results that can be analysed statistically. Surveys mainly produce superficial information which is one of the weaknesses of the method. Also, it is difficult to evaluate the mindset of the responders and how they have perceived the survey. In general, it is considered that with quantitative methods the results are more reliable but superficial. With qualitative methods, more in-depth results are achieved, but they cannot be generalized widely. (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2015, 121.)

For this thesis research, a quantitative method was chosen as a large number of people needed to be reached. Especially the passengers would have been difficult to reach with other methods. Controlled measurement also was needed to be able to compare the answers between the passengers and the cabin crew members. An anonymous questionnaire also improved the reliability of the research, especially with the cabin crew members. If, for example, interviews would have been conducted, probably most of them would not have been comfortable to comment on their individual job performance face-to-face.

4.3 Planning and implementation of the research

The planning of the questionnaire begun from mapping the inflight customer journey and identifying the key points of engagement. To gain more in-depth knowledge of the current service standards and procedures of the airline, the author attended a flight pair as an observer. The main phases of a flight include boarding, inflight service, and disembarkation. As airline X operates only short-haul routes, there is only a little, or no time left on the flight after the active service in the cabin has been completed. Therefore, the cruise phase of the flight after the inflight service was not included in the final customer journey.

Customer satisfaction is already measured constantly at the airline, but a new set of questions was needed to match them with questions directed to the cabin crew members. Airline X has a set of customer service goals and focus points which also influenced the planning of the questionnaire. In addition, the airline management was consulted regarding the final set of questions. The questions also reflect the factors influencing the passenger experience the most, which are introduced in Chapter 2. The attributes measured by Skytrax (Chapter 2) were also taken into consideration. The passenger and cabin crew questionnaires include the same set of questions to allow comparison and they were limited mainly to address the behaviour of the cabin crew and the level of customer service (Appendices 1 & 2). Both questionnaires also include the opportunity for the responder to

give open feedback, the cabin crew questionnaire also includes specific questions regarding customer service training. The SERVQUAL instrument was used as a basis when planning the questionnaire and the layout.

From the airline's network, flights to eight specific destinations (LED, OSL, HAM, CDG, TXL, WAW, BMA and GDN) were chosen for the research. The research was conducted only on the outbound flight from the home base. The destinations were chosen based on the high load factor and the specific need to improve the customer experience on these sectors. Flights were chosen also to include flights operated on both aircraft types of the airline. The airline was conducting another research at the same time, and the destinations included these projects needed to be different from another. This unfortunately limited the choice of destinations. The research was conducted among passengers on board and cabin crew operating the flights during the period of 14 days in May-June 2019. The research was originally planned to last for only one week, but it was extended to two weeks in order to receive more responses.

The cabin crew members were informed about the upcoming research in a company newsletter two months prior (Appendix 3). A memo with more specific information and details about implementation was released in the electronic communication channels of the airline five days prior to the start of the project (Appendix 4). In addition, an email reminder was sent to all cabin crew members. Information about the research and instructions were also added in the flight information brief required to be read by all cabin crew members. These were written by the author in cooperation with the communications department of the airline.

The both questionnaires were created in the Qualtrics system used by the airline. For the passengers, the link for the questionnaire was sent out automatically two days after their flight, and they were able to access it for seven days. After careful consideration, the part of the research involving the cabin crew was chosen to be conducted as a paper questionnaire handed out to them. This was mainly due to the strict duty regulations of the cabin crew and the difficulties of them being able to fill the online survey during duty hours. If the cabin crew would have been requested to answer the survey during their time off, this could have resulted in a low number of responses. As the research was conducted only on the outbound sectors, it allowed the cabin crew to fill the questionnaire during the inbound flight. The answers by the cabin crew were manually entered into the Qualtrics system later by the author.

For calculating the suitable sample of the passengers, the number of flights for the chosen destinations was checked. According to the traffic program available two weeks prior to the research, 105 flights would have been operated. It was predicted that the load factor on the chosen flights would be very high. If the load factor would have been 100%, 17944 passengers would have been travelling on the flights. The number of flights per destination is available in Figure 8.

Destination	Number of flights
BMA	26
LED	26
WAW	20
GDN	14
CDG	6
HAM	6
OSL	5
TXL	2
Total	**105**

Figure 8. Number of flights per destination

75% of the passengers travelling on the chosen flights were contacted via email. The airline preferred the remaining 25% of the passengers to be available for other research conducted. Excluded from the research were also airline staff, passengers under 18 years of age, and the members of parliament. In addition, the survey was not sent out to the passengers who have responded to one within the last three months. It was assumed that 15% of the contacted passengers would respond. Based on these calculations, the goal of receiving 500 responses was set.

4.4 Collected data

After taking into consideration the limitations stated earlier, the invitation to participate in the survey was sent out to 4593 passengers. 462 responses were received from them before the survey closed. That makes the response rate 10,06%, which is less than expected. The low number of responses was most likely caused by a system error in sending out the survey invitations. This error was later spotted, and invitations sent out, but some passengers received the email even as late as two weeks after their flight. This may also influence the reliability of responses as passengers might not have clear memories of the flight when more time has passed. The number of responses is mostly in line with the number of flights, except the high number of responses received from BMA flights (Figure 9).
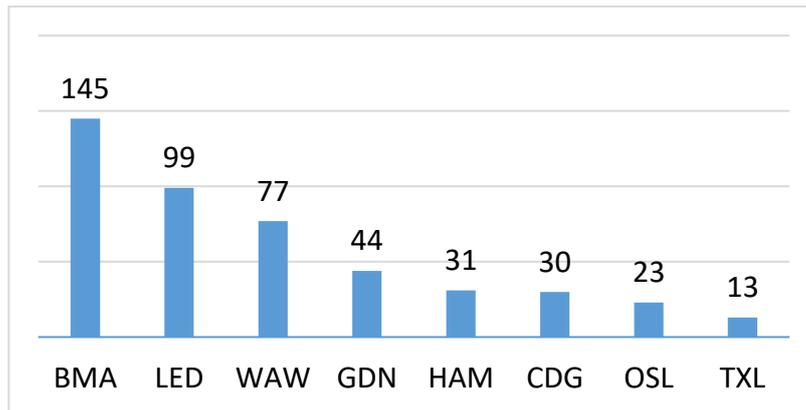
Figure 9. The number of responses from passengers per destination

From the passengers, 457 had been flying in economy class and only five in business class. As the frequent flyers are an important focus group for airlines, the top-tier members were identified in this research. 38 of the passengers participating in the survey belonged to this group of the highest ranks of the frequent flyer program.

On each flight, there were two cabin crew members, which makes the total number of cabin crew 210 on the 105 flights. Surprisingly, 260 questionnaires were returned by the cabin crew. The most likely explanation is that some cabin crew members filled the questionnaire also regarding the inbound flight, even though it was instructed to rate only the outbound flight from the home base. Still, the flight information filled in the forms was matching with the outbound flight details in all the questionnaires. Only three questionnaires were excluded from the research due to missing flight details, making the total number of included responses 257. Since the number of responses was so high despite the discrepancies, it is assumed that the response rate is very close to 100%. The number of responses by destination can be seen in Figure 10.
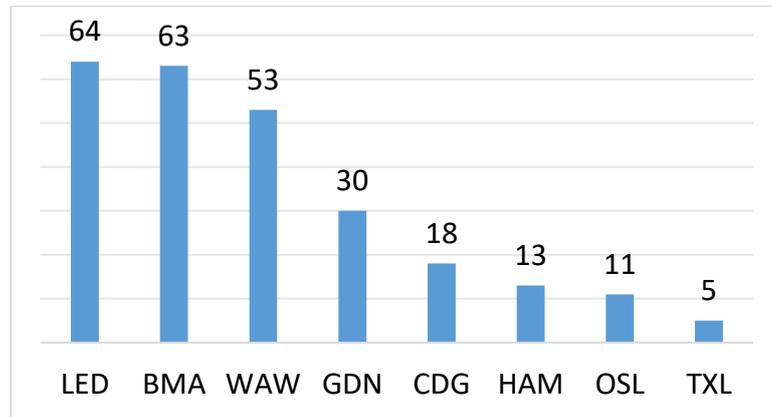
Figure 10. The number of responses from cabin crew per destination

5 Key results and conclusions

In this chapter, it is described how the data was analysed and the all key results are introduced. First, the results for overall satisfaction are presented. This is followed by the results for the statements of both the passenger and the cabin crew questionnaire. Next, open feedback from the passengers is presented. Finally, based on the data received from the passenger and the cabin crew surveys, suggestions for the cabin crew training and improving the customer experience in general, are discussed.

5.1 Analysis of the data

After the survey was closed, the data was analysed using the tools in the Qualtrics system and by transferring it to Excel for further processing. The responses for the open questions were studied and divided into different groups based on their content. The comments that were not directly related to the inflight experience were excluded first. The comments from the passengers were then classified based on the phase of the customer journey, i.e. if they were regarding boarding, food and beverage service, onboard shopping, cabin crew performance or the overall experience. The comments from the cabin crew regarding the questionnaire statements were classified in the same manner. This allowed a comparison between the passenger and the cabin crew responses. The cabin crew suggestions for the training and improving the customer experience were also classified based on the topic. In addition, a word cloud-tool was used to examine the data from the open questions, but the results received were not conclusive. As there were comments in two different languages, English and the local language, it added in making the word cloud-analysis unreliable.

Except for the question about overall satisfaction, the same questions were presented to the passengers and cabin crew members. In general, the responses from the cabin crew were more positive compared to the ones from the passengers for all statements. The number of "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" responses from the cabin crew for all statements was very low. This can be expected, as the cabin crew is evaluating themselves which makes it unlikely to give totally honest answers despite the anonymity. Some cabin crew members even chose to write their names in the questionnaire. The passengers' responses can be considered mostly honest.

5.2   Overall satisfaction (confidential)

5.3   Boarding and disembarkation (confidential)

5.4   Food and beverage service (confidential)

5.5   Onboard shopping (confidential)

5.6   Overall experience

The last ten statements of the questionnaire were related to the overall customer experience and cabin crew performance.

5.6.1   Cabin crew appearance and presentability (confidential)

5.6.2   Teamwork between cabin crew members (confidential)

5.6.3   The approachability of the cabin crew (confidential)

5.6.4   Warm and caring customer service (confidential)

5.6.5   Problem-solving skills (confidential)

5.6.6   Making passengers feel special (confidential)

5.6.7   Recognizing frequent flyer status (confidential)

5.6.8   On-board announcements (confidential)

5.6.9   The general atmosphere on-board (confidential)

5.6.10 Handling of irregularities (confidential)

5.7   Open feedback from passengers (confidential)

5.8   Suggestions on how to improve customer experience (confidential)

5.9   Suggestions for cabin crew training (confidential)

6 Discussion

In this chapter, the whole thesis process, as well as the results of the research are discussed. Also, the trustworthiness and the ethical viewpoints of the research are looked into and the suggestions for further research are discussed. In addition, it includes the evaluation of the thesis process and personal learning achieved.

6.1 Results of the project

The main goal of the research was to investigate the perceptions of good customer service with both passengers and the cabin crew members. The hypothesis was that the perceptions differ from each other. The results of this research clearly support the hypothesis. This is concluded from the fact that the responses from the passengers for nearly all the statements are more negative than the ones from the cabin crew members. Enough data was also received from the open questions for the cabin crew to allow making suggestions for training and improving the customer experience.

As the results indicate, the key areas that need attention in order to develop the customer experience were identified in the research. The commissioner found the results very valuable and is using them to improve internal processes and to develop cabin crew performance. For example, a recurrent service training to be attended by all cabin crew members is designed based on the results of the research.

6.2 Reliability and validity

The quality of the research can be evaluated with the concepts of reliability, validity, and objectivity. The concept of reliability is used to evaluate if the data collection techniques and analytic procedures would produce consistent findings if they were repeated on another occasion or if they were replicated by a different researcher. For the sake of reliability, each stage of the research work must be reported in a fully transparent way to allow others to replicate the study if necessary. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2012, 192-193.)

Ensuring reliability is not easy and there are multiple threats to it. The threats can be related to the participant or the researcher. Participant error includes all the factors which adversely alter the way in which a participant performs. These could be, for example, time constraints or stress. When any factor induces a false response, the participant is considered bias. If the anonymity of the participant is not guaranteed, it may lead to participants providing false answers. Researcher error refers to any factor which alters the researcher's interpretation. The researcher may allow his own subjective view or disposition

to influence the fair recording and interpreting the responses. This indicates that the researcher is bias. (Saunders & al. 2012, 192-193.)

As discussed earlier in Chapter 4.4, the technical errors influencing the distribution of the questionnaire pose a risk to the reliability of the research. If the passengers would have received the survey two days after their flight as planned, their memories of the flight would have been more accurate. Also, the response rate would have probably been higher. If a reminder would have been sent to the passengers to encourage them to answer the survey, this would have probably also increased the response rate. It was specified in the survey invitation that the answers should reflect the specific flight operated by airline X. Still, with some responders probably the whole journey including connecting flights was reflected in the answers. Some responders may have also misinterpreted how to answer the questionnaire which decreases the reliability. These factors also present a threat to reliability.

Regarding the cabin crew, the honesty of the responses can be considered as the biggest threat to reliability. As their own performance was evaluated, it is likely that most people were sticking to positive responses despite the anonymity. The small amount of disagreeing responses to the statements also supports this. It is also possible that some cabin crew members felt that it was mandatory to respond to the survey, and filled it out without even contemplating their responses properly.

In addition to reliability, various forms of validity have also been identified to ensure the quality of research. Validity stands for the compatibility of the research subject and method, meaning if the method is suitable for studying the phenomenon in question. Construct validity refers to which extent the research method is actually measuring what is intended to assess. When the research demonstrates a causal relationship between two variables, internal validity is established. For example, in a questionnaire-based survey, internal validity is established where a set of questions can be shown statistically to be associated with an analytical factor or outcome. External validity determines if the research findings can be generalized to other relevant groups. Researchers and their clients often want to be able to generalize their findings to other contexts. Still, it will be necessary to replicate the study in that other context to be able to establish such statistical generalizability. (Heikkinen, Rovio & Syrjälä 2007, 147; Saunders & al. 2012, 193-194.)

There are a number of factors which may be considered as a threat to the internal validity of the research. Past or recent events related to the subject, which occur during the research, may change the participants' perception and influence the results. Also informing

participants about the research may alter their normal behavior, for example, their work habits, if they believe it might lead to future consequences. The change in a research instrument or participants withdrawing from the study during the research will also have an impact on validity. Lack of clarity about cause and effect will also constitute as a threat. (Saunders & al. 2012, 193.)

When planning the research, there was plenty of time spent forming the questionnaires for both passengers and the cabin crew. The questionnaires were edited and updated according to the views of the airline management and the customer research department. As a result of the careful planning, it can be stated that the questions were measuring the correct elements and aspects of the customer journey. This supports the validity of the research.

The response rate of the passengers being 10,06% can be considered adequate to ensure the external validity with the overall results. The validity of the results regarding the specific destinations with only a small number of flights (CDG, HAM, OSL, TXL) can be considered low. Ideally, the number of flights to each destination would have been high enough to lead to valid and transferable results. Unfortunately, due to other research conducted at the same time, the choice of destinations was limited.

As the cabin crew members knew that the research was conducted on their flights, it could have influenced their behavior and effected the internal validity. As it assumed that the response rate was close to 100%, the validity of the results in this aspect is very high. In general, if the cabin crew survey could have been conducted electronically, it would have allowed a different structure of the questionnaire. For example, more open questions could have been placed after each statement. This could have resulted in more responses with more valuable and detailed data.

Objectivity consists of the credibility and the impartiality of the findings. Impartiality refers to the researcher, if he can understand and comprehend the research subjects as themselves, and not through the researcher's own mindset. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2009, 135-136.)

I believe the objectivity of the research is very good. This is first and foremost because I was not employed in the airline and have no strings attached to it. Many parties, such as the airline management and customer research department, were involved in the planning of the research which also supports the objectivity.

6.3   Suggestions for further research

There are many topics that could be researched in the future relating to the customer experience and the cabin crew training at the commissioning airline. As mentioned earlier in the report, research concentrating on a more specific area, such as the inflight catering and products, could be conducted. As this research indicated, the passengers were not satisfied with the product selection and the pricing. This could be looked into by rethinking the service concepts and product selection with each destination. Also, the catering operations could be investigated from the logistics point of view to discover how to ensure that the appropriate number of products is available on each flight.

In addition, qualitative research with both passengers and cabin crew would provide more in-depth information about many subjects discussed in this thesis. Interviews with passengers, with the focus on top-tier frequent flyers, could be conducted to gain information on their overall experience. The critical incident method described in Chapter 2.1 could also be used.

The topics related to customer service training include many different possibilities for further research. A possible topic for a project could be developing both the initial and recurrent service training further. With cabin crew members, for example, interviews, group discussions and other qualitative methods could provide more detailed data on how the training could be developed. Another way to approach the subject would be benchmarking other airlines regarding the customer service training and procedures. The problem is that with most airlines details of them are confidential and it could be difficult to gain knowledge of.

A new training program, designed based on this research, will commence shortly with the airline. After the training is completed by all cabin crew members, new research could be conducted among them to discover how they experienced the training and how it still could be developed. New research could also be conducted among passengers to investigate if the training has had any effect on the customer satisfaction.

6.4   Reflection of the thesis process

The thesis project has also given me an opportunity to work almost as if I were a project manager, which has been a good learning experience. In general, it was interesting to work with the airline management and to see things from that perspective. As I have work experience with an airline that operates in a very different environment, I have learned a lot about airline operations in Europe.

As I have only a little experience in taking part in projects like this, it was difficult to know what to expect. The airline had a tight schedule for conducting the research as they needed the results to plan the training for the cabin crew members, which caused some stress. Also, I was not able to predict the large number of people from the airline that would be involved in the process. In addition to the commissioner, people from the airline the commissioner is operating for were tightly involved. Before the research was able to commence, numerous meetings were required. As people were very busy with other projects, it sometimes took time to be able to proceed with my research. As many people from different departments were involved, it also led to some confusion and misunderstandings as described relating to the reliability of the research. What I learned from this, was that when you are working in this kind of project, you need to be extra careful in how you communicate and make sure everyone is on the same page with every small detail. Basically, you should not take anything for granted and make assumptions.

When it comes to the theoretical framework, I found the concepts of emotional intelligence and emotional labour, and how they influence the service delivery, especially interesting. The concepts were briefly discussed during my studies and it inspired me to learn more about them. I believe that instead of focusing only on the service quality and customer experience, the aspect of emotional intelligence has given a new perspective on the subject.

I hope that in the future I will be able to take advantage of everything I have learned during the thesis process and apply my knowledge in the working life.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Passenger questionnaire

Welcome, we invite you to share your feedback about your recent journey with Airline X!

For this survey, we would like you to think about the journey that you took from yyy to xxx on date.

The survey focuses on in-flight services. Thank you!

Head of Cabin Operations

Airline X

Source of the contact details: Airline X booking database

To get more information about how customer data is processed, please check the Airline X Privacy Policy.

Q2 **Based on your experience on this flight, how would you rate your overall satisfaction with Airline X?**

○ Extremely dissatisfied (1)

○ Somewhat dissatisfied (2)

○ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (3)

○ Somewhat satisfied (4)

○ Extremely satisfied (5)

○ Cannot say (6)

Q3 **Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements related to your flight.**

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neutral / Undecided (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Cannot say (8)
The cabin crew welcomed me onboard with a smile (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The cabin crew gave assistance during boarding with baggage and settling in (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The cabin crew wished me a warm farewell when I was leaving the aircraft (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

Q4 **Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements related to** *the food and beverage service.*

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neutral / Undecided (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Cannot say (8)
The product knowledge of the cabin crew was at good level (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The product selection met my needs (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The products presented good value for money (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The food & beverage service was delivered smoothly (9)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q5 *Do you have any other comments related to the food and beverage service that you would like to share?*

_____

_____

_____

Page Break

Q6 **Did you purchase any duty-free product(s) from the sales trolley during your flight?**

○ Yes   (1)

○ No   (2)

○ Cannot say (3)

Q7 **Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements related to *onboard shopping.***

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neutral / Undecided (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Cannot say (8)
The product knowledge of the cabin crew was at good level (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The cabin crew were able to recommend me suitable and alternative products (1)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The product selection met my needs (7)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The products presented good value for money (8)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q8 *Do you have any other comments related to onboard shopping that you would like to share?*

Page Break ───────────────────────────────────

Q9 Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements related to the cabin crew of the flight.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neutral / Undecided (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Cannot say (9)
The appearance of the cabin crew was professional (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
Team work between crew members appeared to be smooth (11)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The cabin crew were approachable (13)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The customer service I received was warm and caring (14)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The cabin crew were proactive in solving any issues (15)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The cabin crew made me feel special (16)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q10 *Do you have any other comments related to the cabin crew that you would like to share?*

_____

Q11 **Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements related to your overall experience on the flight.**

	Strongly disagree (1)	Somewhat disagree (2)	Neutral / Undecided (3)	Somewhat agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Cannot say (9)
My frequent flyer status was recognized by the cabin crew (2)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The quality of onboard announcements (tone of voice, clarity, timing) was good (11)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The general atmosphere onboard was calm and relaxed (12)	○	○	○	○	○	○
The irregularity situations (e.g. delays), if any, were handled well by the cabin crew (13)	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q12 **Do you have any other comments about your recent experience with Airline X that you would like to share?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix 2. Cabin crew questionnaire

Dear crew member,

Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements according to your perception by circling the number accordingly. Please note that the questionnaire continues on the second page.

Please choose the *"cannot say"* option, if you were not the crew member responsible for the task (for example onboard announcements) or the statement could not be applied for your flight (for example there was no onboard shopping available).

Thank you!

Background information:

Flight number: _____   Date: _____   Sector: HEL - _____

	1 = Strongly disagree	2 = Somewhat disagree	3 = Neutral / Undecided	4 = Somewhat agree	5 = Strongly agree	Cannot say
Boarding & disembarkation						
I welcomed the passengers on board with a smile	1	2	3	4	5	☐
I offered assistance with baggage and settling in	1	2	3	4	5	☐
I wished a warm farewell during disembarkation	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Food & Beverage Service						
My product knowledge was at good level	1	2	3	4	5	☐
The service was delivered smoothly	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Onboard shopping						
My product knowledge was at good level	1	2	3	4	5	☐
I was able to recommend suitable and alternative products	1	2	3	4	5	☐
Overall passenger experience						
My appearance and presentability was up to standard	1	2	3	4	5	☐
The team work between the cabin crew members was smooth	1	2	3	4	5	☐
The passengers perceived me as approachable	1	2	3	4	5	☐
I offered warm and caring customer service	1	2	3	4	5	☐
I was proactive in solving any issues	1	2	3	4	5	☐
I was able to make the passengers feel special	1	2	3	4	5	☐
I recognized the frequent flyers as per guidelines	1	2	3	4	5	☐
The quality of my onboard announcements (tone of voice, clarity, timing) was good	1	2	3	4	5	☐
The general atmosphere onboard was calm and relaxed	1	2	3	4	5	☐
I handled the irregularity situations (e.g. delays), if any, well	1	2	3	4	5	☐

Please turn the page ➔

- Do you have any comments related to the previous statements?

- Have you received adequate training in handling customer service situations and how to enhance the customer experience? Do you have any suggestions for improving the training?

- Do you have other suggestions for improving the inflight customer experience with the focus on interaction between passengers and crew?

Appendix 3. Article in the company newsletter (confidential)

Appendix 4. Cabin crew memo about the research (confidential)