



## **The Employee Experience of Cabin Crew During Covid-19**

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## Abstract

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The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating effect on aviation. Thousands of aircraft have been grounded, leaving flight crew without work. Cabin crew all over the world have suffered the consequences, with some having had their working conditions and contracts changed, while others have been laid off for different periods of time, and many have even lost their jobs.

The objective for this thesis was to discover how these measures taken by airlines to survive the crisis have been experienced by cabin crew, and what could've been done differently. The author also wanted to discover whether the airlines' actions to cut costs had had an effect on the sense of safety on-board, and how these aviation professionals envisioned the future of the industry.

The theoretical framework consists of the concept of employee experience, as well as some aspects of aviation that were relevant to the objective of the thesis. Employee experience was studied and defined using some of the most popular theories and models. Airline safety, issues specific to the cabin crew profession, and the current situation in aviation were introduced to give the reader a better picture of the industry in question.

In order to answer the research questions a quantitative survey was conducted online between the last week of March and the first week of April 2021. The survey was distributed in several cabin crew groups on social media, and the data collected was analyzed using statistical visualization.

The results of the study show that the experiences of cabin crew during the pandemic are very divided. The conclusion the author came to was that the cabin crew who were already unsatisfied with their airline before the pandemic hit have had a very negative experience, and the crew that have experienced the crisis in a more positive way had a good employee experience to start with.

The current uncertainty has not affected the cabin crew's sense of safety on-board enough to cause concern, but the situation will need to be monitored in the future. Most cabin crew in 'the eye of the storm' see aviation faced with a slow and difficult recovery in the future, with worse working conditions, but some also see the sun behind the clouds and believe that once the pandemic will be over the industry will 'boom'. To avoid a negative experience in a similar situation the crew say that airlines should communicate with their employees honestly and transparently and listen to them in an effort to solve problems. Cabin crew want to feel valued and cared for by their employer.

**Keywords**

Aviation, Cabin Crew, Experience, Pandemic

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## 1 Introduction

In the end of 2019 the first cases of an illness caused by a novel Coronavirus were observed in Wuhan, China. Initially it seemed like it would be contained easily and be short-lived, but within the first months of 2020 the illness had spread globally, and by March the disease caused by the Covid-19 virus had been declared a pandemic. (World Health Organization 2021) To try to combat the spread of the disease the borders of many countries were closed repeatedly, and heavy restrictions, such as quarantines and requirements for Covid-19 testing before entry had been imposed on travelling. The whole world was asked to stay home.

Many industries have been affected severely by the pandemic, but the global travel restrictions and steep reductions in air traffic mean that the airline business has been reduced to the level it was 30 years ago, after experiencing nearly continuous growth until 2019. (UNWTO 2021) Because of this unprecedented crisis in aviation airlines have had to make drastic measures in order to survive the downturn. Airline employees everywhere have been affected by the cost-cutting efforts in one way or another. With the instability of the status quo, and the uncertainty of the future in aviation, the employment situation of especially flight crew has suffered. In 2020 51% of the world's aircraft have been grounded due to Covid-19 and there were 6.1 million less flights than in 2019. (Eurocontrol 2021) This means that there is less need for crew to operate on flights and the actions many airlines have taken to cut operational costs are reductions in wages and other contractual terms and conditions, as well as reducing staff numbers by laying off or letting go crew.

The objective of the thesis is to discover how cabin crew have experienced the measures taken by airlines to survive the restrictions imposed on the aviation industry due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and what could've been done differently. The research question is: "How have the airlines' measures to combat the Covid-19 crisis been experienced by the cabin crew?", with sub questions: "How have the current situation and the actions taken by airlines affected the sense of safety on-board?", "How do cabin crew see the future of aviation?" and "What could've been done differently?"

The author chose this topic because of her past in aviation. She worked as cabin crew for one of the biggest airlines in Europe for nearly 15 years and experienced aviation at its very best, but also witnessed difficult times. During her career there were HR disasters, volcanic eruptions, labour disputes, a global recession, terrorist attacks, fatal air crashes and epidemics that all made their impact on the industry. With each crisis the environment

in the skies changed. When the airline needed to make savings the cabin crew were the first in line to have their numbers reduced and wages cut, and the overall treatment got worse time after time. As the author is passionate about aviation, as well as being aware of the inner workings of the profession of cabin crew, she wanted to study the effects of the current crisis on the frontline workers of an industry in distress. She wanted to be able potentially give solutions to the issues her previous colleagues are still struggling with, every time unexpected events occur.

As a way of exploring the experience of cabin crew the theory of employee experience is studied in chapter two. Employee experience is defined, its evolution explained in brief, and some of the most common frameworks behind it are explained. The framework on employee experience from Jacob Morgan (2017, 49) is used as a theoretical base for the study conducted in the empirical part, and to reach the objective for the thesis. This framework consists of three environments: the physical environment, the technological environment and the cultural environment, that together become the employee experience. (Morgan, J. 2017, 49) These environments are explained more thoroughly and the author uses her own experience in the airline industry to explain how they would be applied for the profession of cabin crew.

In chapter three the topic of aviation is then explained briefly, with a focus on airline safety, issues that are specific to the cabin crew profession, and the current situation in aviation. The importance of airline safety and its main issues are discussed, followed by the unique challenges cabin crew deal with in their profession. The current situation in aviation and the employment in the industry during the Covid-19 pandemic are then explored with figures and examples of the actions taken by two different airlines. The fourth chapter consists of the reasoning behind choosing the quantitative research method, and how the study was conducted and the data are analysed. The results are explained in chapter five with charts, quotes and a short explanation of the answers given, and the sixth chapter includes the discussion on the results of the study. Research questions are answered and recommendations for further study and development are given. In the final subchapter the author describes her own learning process while writing the thesis.

The results of this study could be potentially beneficial for airlines, and even other tourism and hospitality companies. The airline business ultimately consists of customer service that happens to take place up in the air. Good customer service comes from happy and fulfilled employees, and for this reason it would be extremely advantageous for companies to discover how to improve the satisfaction of their frontline customer servants, especially in challenging times. Another benefit for companies would be to discover whether the

safety of airlines' operations, the most important aspect of aviation has been compromised, and how to rectify the situation if this is the case. Naturally the thesis also has the potential to be helpful in solving some of the underlying challenges that exist in the profession of cabin crew, making it beneficial to the employees as well.

## 2 Employee Experience

For the longest time businesses only focused on customer experience and how to make it better. In the last few years however, a concept called employee experience has made its way to the forefront of what is considered successful management. Companies can benefit enormously from having happy, engaged employees. Companies that offer a positive employee experience are more profitable, are able to retain their skilled workforce, and allow for more innovation in their field. Better yet, a successful employee experience leads to a successful customer experience. (Unily 2021)

### 2.1 The Evolution Towards Employee Experience

Evolution is a fact. Everything evolves and this generally happens towards the better. This is also true when it comes to working life, and the management of it. Employer-employee relations haven't always been beneficial to the worker, but with better understanding of what the workforce wants, the world has entered the age of the employee, where the employee doesn't have all the power, but does have more options than ever before. (Maylett, T. & Wryde, M. 2017, 29) Employee experience has existed for quite a long time already, but only in recent years it has become a thing that companies focus on. Previously the modus operandi have been all about efficiency, speed and quality (Whitter, B. 2019, 6)

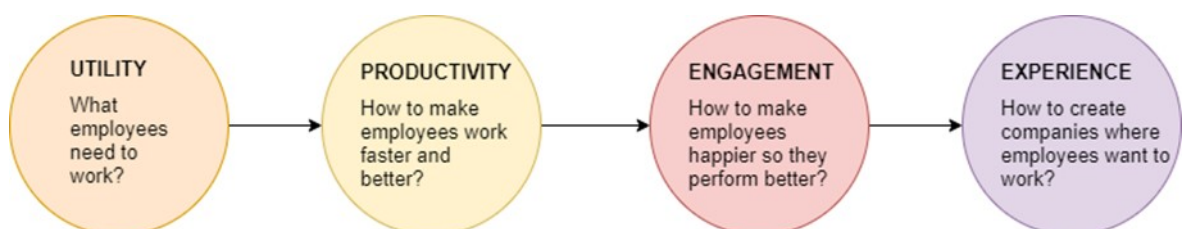


Figure 1. The evolution towards Employee Experience (Adapted from Morgan 2017, 4)

The concept of how the evolution towards employee experience happened is quite similar among the authors that have studied and developed the topic, and for the sake of simplicity, the most common model is explained. The evolution has four chapters (Figure 1), and it started with an era of utility, transformed into the age of productivity, evolving into that of employee engagement and ultimately to employee experience. (Morgan, J. 2017, 1) In the era of utility, many years ago, the employer needed a job done, the employee needed a job to make money, and the worker was offered only the essential tools to fulfil their task. The era of utility was followed by that of productivity. During these times the biggest focus was on how productive the workforce was. Employers used all the tools available to increase employee productivity and output. In these first two stages the worker was considered a means to an end. What followed next was the age of engagement. Employers

shifted some of their focus to the employees as people, and what makes them tick. It became clear that the more engaged the employee, the better the outcome would be. Engagement in turn gave way to the age of employee experience. Employee experience didn't replace engagement however, as they exist simultaneously. As a matter of fact, according to Morgan employee experience is an organizational design to create engaged employees (Morgan, J. 2017, 3-6)

## **2.2 What is Employee Experience?**

All employees have an experience at work. It can be good or bad, accidental or by design. (Whitter, B. 2019, 16) What the concept employee experience brings to businesses is the chance to make this experience good by design.

Companies have already considered customer experience as an important factor in organizational strategy for a long time. Now, however many companies are realizing the potential and importance of employee experience. (Netigate 2021)

Maylett and Wryde (2017, 25) define employee experience in simple terms as the sum of perceptions the employees have of the interactions with their employer. It can also be defined as a holistic view of working life that requires constant feedback, action and monitoring. (Flynn, J. & Mazor, A. 2017)

Morgan's (2017, 8) definition is that employee experience is the convergence of the needs, wants and expectations of the employee and those of the organizational design. Employee experience is also described as the entire employee life cycle. It begins from the first day of work, continues until the last day at the workplace, and even further than that. It is the employee's every day experience at work, as well as the experience that the employer has conceptualized and designed for the employee. (Netigate 2021)

## **2.3 Employee Experience Frameworks**

The topic of employee experience has been studied and developed by several authors, and while the definitions are very much alike, the frameworks developed vary slightly.

In one of the frameworks it is said that excellent employee experience is built on three critical components: Expectation Alignment, The Three Contracts and Trust. (Maylett, T. & Wryde, M. 2017, 15) The expectation alignment presents the intersection of an employee's expectations and the actual experience they feel like they have. This alignment is vital to forming a transformational employee experience. These expectations are based on

the promises given in the beginning of the employee life cycle, such as pay and other agreements made with the employer, but they can also change with time due to different factors. The alignment is built on six pillars; fairness, clarity, empathy, predictability, transparency and accountability, and according to a study conducted, if at least four of the pillars exist consistently the level of engagement is higher than of those with less pillars present. If only a few of the pillars exist, employee experience suffers. An expectation gap is the space between the expectation and the actual experience, and it is the one the biggest sources of issues in performance at work. (Maylett, T. & Wryde, M. 2017, 53-61)

The three contracts are the Brand contract, the Transactional contract and the Psychological contract. The Brand contract consists of all the actions the brand makes to create expectations, such as its culture, its people's behaviour, reputation, any media, as well as marketing. It is the way the company presents itself to the world. It has the potential to affect customers and employees throughout the whole life cycle they have with the company, in good and bad. The Transactional contract is a mutually agreed and accepted basic terms of the relationship with the agreeing entities. It is often written down, but doesn't need to be, as long as it is precise. It is intentional and expectations are created upon agreements, such as requirements, rules and rewards. The Psychological contract has the potential to have the biggest effect on employee experience. It is the unspoken, unwritten responsibilities and expectations in terms of dialogue in a relationship. It is based on emotions and expectations, and is interpreted often differently on each side. If neither of the other contracts are present, the psychological contract is applied. (Maylett, T. & Wryde, M. 2017, 89-135)

Trust is the basis of employee experience, the basis of trust is creating expectation alignment and controlling the expectation gap, and having strong contracts helps trust grow. Events that challenge the promises made in the contracts are called moments of truth, and they always have an effect on them, either by validating them, violating them, or creating a completely new one. If the promises in the contracts are not fulfilled, trust suffers. (Maylett, T. & Wryde, M. 2017, 139-147)

The Simply Irresistible model (Figure 2) presents five factors that contribute to a positive employee experience. The five factors are meaningful work, supportive management, positive work environment, growth opportunity and trust in leadership. All of the factors work together under the umbrella of cross-organizational collaboration and communication to create a positive employee experience. (Flynn, J. & Mazor, A. 2017)



Figure 2. The Simply Irresistible model (Adapted from Flynn, J. & Mazor, A. 2017)

The author of the thesis studied several frameworks about employee experience and finally decided to delve deeper into only one of them. In the framework that she chose it is described that in order to create a great employee experience, companies need to come up with a Reason for Being as the basis of the three employee experience environments. As seen in figure 3, these three environments are physical space, technology and culture. (Morgan, J. 2017, 49)

The reason for being is not a company's mission statement. A good reason for being would be the effect the organization has on the world and people around it. Its focus is not making money. It's unattainable and it gets the employees moving. (Morgan, J. 2017, 51-52)

The physical environment covers 30% of the employee experience. It is the actual environment that the employees work in every day. Morgan has abbreviated the aspects that need to be considered in order to create a good employee experience as 'COOL'. The letters stand for 'Chooses to Bring in Friends or Visitors', 'Offers Flexibility', 'Organization's Values Are Reflected' and 'Leverages Multiple Workspace Solutions'. (Morgan, J. 2017, 60)



Figure 3. Employee Experience (Adapted from Morgan 2017, 57)

Opening up the workplace for visitors is usually a sign the company has made an effort to create a good employee experience and the employees are proud and excited to show off their work environment. When organizations are flexible towards their employees it results in a better experience. If employees are allowed to work around their own schedules and choose the place they work there is increased productivity and less stressed employees, but also a higher level of trust. This also shows the employees that they are cared for and the employer wants to help make their lives easier. A company's values help set the culture and actions it takes. It is important for the values to be actually present in real life, instead of being just words. If the values are words like 'respect' or 'fun', there needs to be a fun atmosphere at a workplace where people respect each other. The last thing to be considered when it comes to physical environment is where employees work. The employer should allow the work to be done wherever the employee feels that they can work the best. When employees get to choose their environments the employer shows that they understand the needs of their workers. (Morgan, J. 2017, 62-74)

The Covid-19 pandemic has definitely had a big effect on the physical environment of employee experience, with a strong recommendation to work from home if in any way possible. Despite the challenges working remotely poses, the overall response has been positive, with 58% of respondents to a study conducted feeling more productive when working virtually. 53% said that it was that it was only somewhat likely, or unlikely that they would return to the office setting when the time came. (Kushner, T. 2020) Working from home allows for the flexibility to work how and where employees feel the most productive. Some

companies have also supported these arrangements by giving allowances to invest in equipment to work remotely, and even helped with child care while parents work. (Liu, J 2020)

The author worked in aviation for more than a decade, so she can speak from her own experience, and from an airline point of view the application of the physical environment is slightly different. The flight crew work in two different, and in some cases three different environments. When they come to work they report to an office, or a crew room at the airport, their actual work is done in an aircraft and on possible layovers they stay in hotels. As the aircraft are designed with functionality and passenger comfort in mind, the aspects that airlines can try to focus on the crew are the crew room and the hotel the crew stay at, making sure they are as comfortable and appealing as possible. Bringing friends to work is simply impossible due to safety regulations, and flexibility and allowing employees to work where they feel most productive are also out of the question for obvious reasons. Aviation is one of the fields with the least flexibility when it comes to, for example schedules and cabin crew cannot fulfil their duties anywhere but an aircraft.

The technological environment is defined to consist of three concepts: 'Availability to Everyone', 'Consumer Grade Technology' and 'Employee Needs versus Business Requirements'. The first concept means that the same commitment to innovating, collaborating and communicating is for everyone in the company. Secondly, the employees should be given technology that is modern, simple and attractive, instead of the outdated business IT solutions that nobody wants to use. Lastly, the company and its IT department should listen to what the users of the technology, the employees would actually want to use. (Morgan, J. 2017, 78-85)

From the author's experience the technological aspect of the cabin crew profession is quite limited. Technology is naturally used once on-board, but as most of the aircraft technology cabin crew use are safety related, the employees don't have much of a say in their functionality, apart from when they stop working and need to be reported to the engineering department. The other type of technology crew use are the computers used to check-in once arriving to work and the handheld devices used in some airlines to, for example process sales on-board. The use of technology isn't at the centre of the job and thus doesn't require as much focus as for example an office job would.

The cultural environment is the only one of the three that can't be touched, felt, seen or breathed in. It can only be felt. Yet this is the environment that companies care about the

most. Culture dictates for example how employees are treated, as well as how work is being done. There are ten attributes to focus on, and the first on the list is that the company is viewed positively. This is because if the view is negative it will have a negative effect on the employee experience as well. Businesses need to make sure they protect their reputation and project a good image to the public, but also to their employees, to keep them happy about being a representative of the company they work for. The second attribute is everyone feeling valued. According to studies people value the benefits and compensation from their work differently, but they always come to play, as generally not many employees will want to work for free. It is also of importance that the workers feel like they are heard, and that what they say is actually acknowledged and actions are taken. Another way of making someone feel valued is to give them recognition for the work they do. (Morgan, J. 2017, 89-99)

The third point is a legitimate sense of purpose. This makes the employee feel connected to the employing entity, the employer knows that the worker is doing their best, and that they are doing their best for the right reasons. The right reason being that they want to do it, instead of having to do it. Next, employers need to ensure the employee feels like a member of a team. It is important for a person to feel like they belong, and often when one does not feel like a part of a team they tend to feel more reserved, conservative, and less likely to think outside of the box and share their ideas. Believing in diversity and inclusion continues as the fifth on the list of attributes. Most people say that it is important to have a diverse mix of people working together. This creates an open and welcoming company, that appreciates and respects people. (Morgan, J. 2017, 100-111)

It is also important that referrals come from employees. If the employee experience in a company is at a high level, the employees are more likely to refer other people to work there. By referring someone else, the employee shows that they are loyal to the company and truly enjoy working there. Ability to learn new things and given the resources to do so and advance is the seventh attribute. This means that if employees want to grow and learn more, they can, and the employer gives them the tools to do so. They should be given the possibility to learn and develop in order to adapt to changes, as well as the chance to advance in their careers. As all these may mean different things to different people, it is extremely important to listen and find out what the employee actually wants. (Morgan, J. 2017, 112-120)

Continuing on, it is quite obvious that it is important that the company treats the employees fairly. This means that there is no bias, and that the actions taken are honest and just.

Other things that exist within being fair are treating employees as people and actually listening and understanding them, basically being a human and treating other like they were adults. Another attribute listed is that executives and managers need to be seen as coaches and mentors. The idea of the manager being of top is being challenged in today's working life. Those that are considered high up are actually keeping the employees lifted up. A manager needs to be there for the employees and care about their success. The last, but not the least thing on the list of attributes is being dedicated to employee health and wellness. Being unhealthy and stressed can be detrimental to working life. Employers that think, understand that instead of just offering a job to someone, they need to care about them in order to get the best out of them. (Morgan, J. 2017, 120-126)

From an aviation point of view, the cultural environment is the most important of the three. All of the attributes of this environment can be applied in the same way as in a 'regular job'. The airline that the author worked for had over 10 000 air crew stationed all over the European continent, often quite far from the managers and the HR department. Employees were viewed as 'numbers' instead of individuals, and no actual effort was made to boost employee morale. Needless to say there was a lot of discontent crew, leading to dissatisfied customers. There is no surprise then, that the airline in question has been continuously voted as having the worst customer service among its competitors. On the other hand, airlines that put that effort into making employees feel like they are appreciated and listened to have much happier crew. The crew will then transfer their happiness onto the passengers, allowing for a positive on-board experience. After all, to create an outstanding and sustainable customer experience, companies need to first create an outstanding, sustainable employee experience. (Maylett, T & Wride, M. 2017, 24)

### **3 About Aviation**

Aviation as an industry is unique for many reasons. Despite seeming like the it is dominated by flying machines, it is actually operated by people. It is customer service at its finest, but also at its most challenging. The industry is a global giant, but also very prone to fluctuations due to different events, from oil prices to global pandemics.

#### **3.1 Airline Safety**

Safety is the most important aspect of aviation. Despite the goal of the airline industry being to make money, the ultimate goal for every single flight is to arrive safely at the destination. Without a safe flight there is no revenue.

Since commercial aviation begun the industry has come a long way safety-wise. The aircraft have become more sophisticated, air traffic control systems have evolved, lessons have been learnt from accidents and incidents, and safety regulations have been put into place. Yet, accidents happen. This is partially due to external factors, such as forces of nature or terrorism, but the most common denominator nowadays is human error. (FAA 2021)

Most accidents and incidents have human error as an underlying cause. These errors happen due to internal and external causes. The internal causes, or the 'dirty dozen' are lack of communication, distractions, lack of resources, stress, complacency, lack of teamwork, pressure, lack of awareness, lack of knowledge, fatigue, lack of assertiveness and norms. The external factors can be, as mentioned weather or, for example changes in procedure. These factors can lead to errors, such as mistakes, slips and lapses, that can then have disastrous results. (Carter, L. & Johnson, A. 2016) To try and address these issues Crew Resource Management, or CRM was introduced into the training of the crew. This method allows flight crew to discover and avoid threats by communicating and planning actions required. It also helps in managing and avoiding human errors. It also improves morale at the workplace, as well as facilitating a more efficient operation. (APA 2014) Crew resource management is exactly what the name suggests; it allows for all resources to be used and managed, which is vital when working within a limited environment, such as an aircraft.

Reputation and being considered safe by the public are of the utmost importance in aviation. After an incident there is potential to a lot of reputational damage, which can lead to

an economic disaster for the company. Let's use an example. In 2019 there were two fatal air crashes involving a new aircraft type, the Boeing 737 MAX. Initially Boeing, the manufacturer of the aircraft claimed that it had no blame in the accidents, but as it turned out there were flaws in the design that lead to further complications, and finally fatalities. The manufacturer lost the trust of the flying public, that in a study said that they would pay more just to ensure that they would not have to fly on the 737 MAX. Despite hundreds of the new aircraft types ordered by airlines around the globe, all of the aircraft were grounded. (Consultancy.eu 2019) In 2020 the airline manufacturer made a record loss of 11.9 billion dollars. The massive losses were caused by a combination of crises, the 737 MAX, made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic. After almost two years on the ground the 737 MAX has been allowed to fly again. However, as a precaution some airlines are allowing their passengers to change their flights if they do not feel comfortable flying on the MAX. (The Guardian 2021)

What happens then, when the whole industry has been turned upside down by an event or a threat, such as a pandemic? Covid-19 has had a direct and undeniable effect on the health and safety of airline passengers and staff. As a result of the restrictions imposed on commercial aviation, airline employees have been left in a difficult situation, and at the mercy of companies that are forced to make tough choices in an unprecedented and unpredictable situation. Have the actions taken by airlines had an impact on these factors that can lead to error? Could airlines, already under a large amount of pressure survive a potential incident and the subsequent loss of reputation and public trust? Is there a chance that airline safety has been compromised due to the effects of Covid-19?

### **3.2 Issues Specific to the Cabin Crew Profession**

Cabin crew, air hostesses, stewardesses, trolley dollies, glorified waitresses. Cabin crew is a profession that is often overlooked and the people working as cabin crew can be underestimated. Most people think that their only job is to serve coffee and look pretty. In reality cabin crew are essentially safety professionals. The training to become cabin crew takes several weeks and is very intensive. During those weeks the candidates learn the airline's code of conduct and customer service, but also firefighting, first aid and aircraft-specific safety drills. Cabin crew are trained to be prepared to resolve any and every issue that could arise during a flight. This might mean anything from a disgruntled passenger to a serious safety threat, such as a possible evacuation. The pilots are in charge of flying the plane, and cabin crew are in charge of everything else. (Bigelow, G. 2019, 117)

The entire work environment of a cabin crew is unique and challenging. Aviation never stops, so all flight crew are required to work at all hours. This disturbs eating and sleeping schedules, together with the body's circadian rhythm. The circadian rhythm is easily affected when crossing time zones, resulting in 'jet lag'. These disturbances can then lead to more serious health issues. (The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health 2017a)

There are more physiological aspects that exist because of a very unique work place. As the cabin crew work at 10 000 ft. up in the air, there have been studies about exposure to cosmic radiation. This radiation from space can cause similar health issues to other types of radiation, such as that from atomic bombs. Radiation exposure has been linked to, for example different cancers and reproductive problems. (The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health 2017b) The air in the aircraft cabin poses challenges itself. The air has less humidity than the air at sea level, so crew need to drink large amounts of water to compensate the lack of hydration, and their skin and eyes can also get very dry. On top of that all the constant vibration of the aircraft can cause damage to bones and other tissue, and the noise from constantly being in close vicinity of the engines can affect hearing. The pressure changes during flying can also cause problems. If enough pressure builds up in body cavities, it can cause pain, burst an eardrum, and even force a tooth filling to pop out. This is why there are regulations in place for crew to not work immediately after going to the dentist or when they are ill.

Health aside, cabin crew face their fair share of labour issues. If an airline needs to make changes, the 'frontline' employees are in the frontline for those changes too, despite being the face of the company. When it comes to airlines, staff costs make up the largest chunk of all operational costs. Of course a lion's part of these costs are made up of pilots' salaries, but the sheer amount of cabin crew required for operations means that they are costly too. This means that when cutting costs, staff is the logical first place to evaluate. Airlines need to ensure that there is the right amount of staff at the right price. (Doganis, R. 2006, 128)

With every crisis there is turmoil among airline staff. Recessions, terrorist attacks, diseases and safety concerns about aircraft design have all left their mark. During these crises there have been changes that affect cabin crew work stability. Airlines can aim to reduce losses by lowering or freezing salaries, offering worse conditions or reducing staff. (Doganis, R. 2006, 136) There are also long-term money savings strategies applied by airlines. Some airlines employ their cabin crew through 'temporary work' agencies. Crew with contracts with these companies tend to have lower salaries and worse conditions

than those working for the company directly. There has been much debate whether these temporary staffing agencies are fully legal, and decisions from courts have already been dealt that condemn these practices in Europe. (Europapress 2021)

### 3.3 The Current Situation in Aviation

Aviation is one of the industries that have been hit the hardest due to the pandemic. Since March of 2020 the borders of many countries have been closed, opened, and closed again, with strict entry restrictions and a strong recommendation against all non-essential travel. Many countries require a negative Covid-19 test result, a proof of receiving the vaccine or proof of recovering from Covid-19 as an entry requirement. (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland 2021) Before countries requested these documents in order to enter, a two-week quarantine was required when travelling, complicating travel plans.

In the early months the expectation was that the effects of the virus would be short-lived, but by the end of March 2020 aviation had practically come to a halt. Already by April the passenger figures had dropped by 92% globally compared to those of 2019. (UN News 2021) A slight recovery happened in the summer due to the extensive lockdown in the spring, and the reduction in the number of new Covid-19 cases, but the in the last months of 2020 the situation was bleak again as the second wave of infections took place.

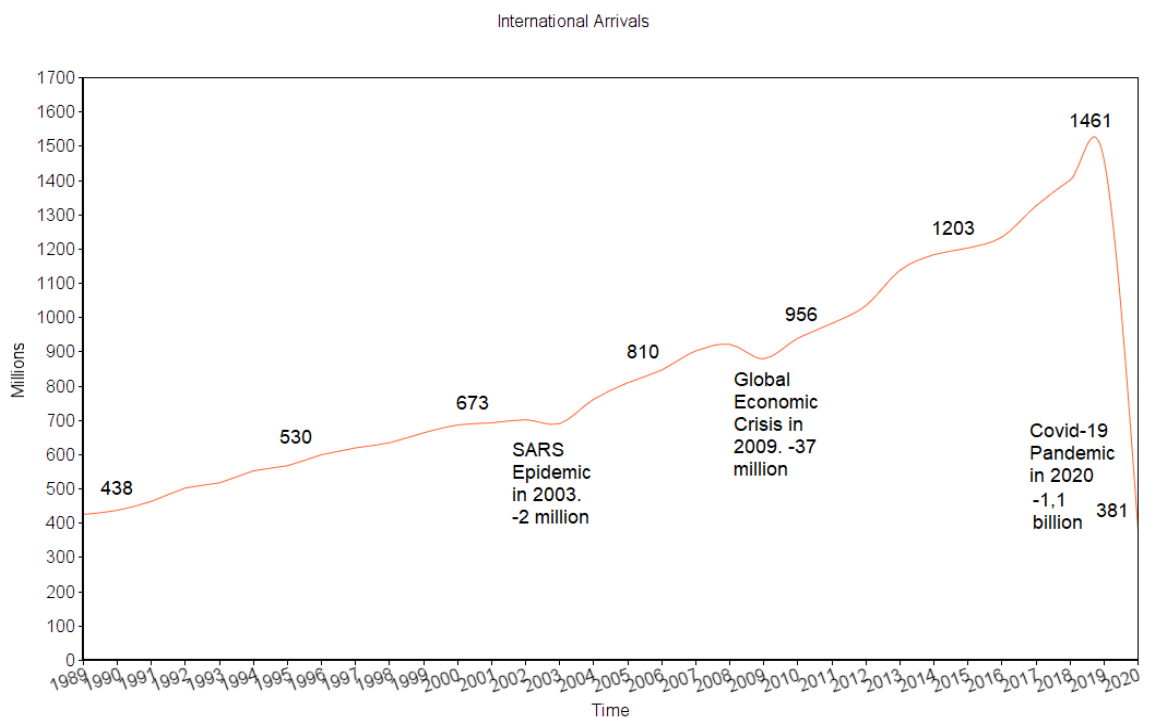


Figure 4. International Tourist Arrivals 1989-2020 (Adapted from UNWTO 2021)

Commercial aviation has been growing ever since its birth, with only small dips due to external factors, such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the SARS epidemic in 2003 and global economic crisis in 2009. This was true until 2019, when the passenger numbers grew by 4%. In 2020 Covid-19 caused a historical 74% drop in the figures compared to the previous year. In 2019 there were 1,5 billion international tourist arrivals, compared to 381 million arrivals in 2020, and international tourism has reverted back to what it was more than 30 years ago, as is seen in figure 4. The loss on global GDP is estimated at 2 trillion US dollars, or 1,7 trillion Euros. (UNWTO 2021)

Many airlines have taken action to survive the pandemic by cutting costs, but only in the first few months of the unprecedented crisis in aviation there were bankruptcies and voluntary administrations. Some companies are now being restructured, and some have ceased operations for good. The list of airlines that that are no more include companies from all over the world, and even include flag carriers. Most of the bankruptcies were caused by previous struggles, and the pandemic was the last nail in the coffin. For example, British airline Flybe had already been rescued once, but could not cope with the status quo and ceased flying in March of 2020. (Pallini, T. 2021)

The recovery of the industry is hard to forecast due to different variables and the unknown face of Covid-19. The return to 'the old normal' is considered to be dependent on several factors, such as travel restrictions and containing the Covid-19 virus at a slow pace, as well as low consumer confidence, the economic environment and resuming flights slowly. According to tourism experts, aviation will only reach the pre-pandemic level in the year 2023. (UNWTO 2021)

### **3.3.1 The Current Employment Situation in the Airline Industry**

Prior to the pandemic, during the so-called normal times aviation directly employed more than 11 million people worldwide. According to an analysis conducted by Air Transport Action Group (ATAG) 4.8 million of those aviation jobs are at risk due to Covid-19. If all those jobs were lost during the pandemic it would mean a 43% reduction comparing with 2019. In the report ATAG urges governments to do whatever it takes to help with the recovery of the sector, helping with the recovery of the economic, as well as the employment situations. (ATAG 2020)

Currently the employment situation in aviation is dire. Airlines have cuts costs in many corners, but staff seem to be at the forefront of those savings. Crew have been furloughed, transferred, been given new contracts with less favourable conditions and many

have been made redundant. As the recovery of the industry is foreseen to still take a few years the return to normal, when it comes to airline jobs normality is also far away.

Covid-19 and the restrictions on travel have forced airlines to make unprecedented decisions to stay afloat. Measures to save money on staff are only natural. There is however some speculation on whether airlines see the pandemic as a way to permanently lower staffing costs. The next two chapters will explore two different approaches to staff cuts. The examples are the measures conducted by flag carrier British Airways and those of low-cost carrier Ryanair.

### **3.3.2 British Airways**

In April 2020 British Airways informed its staff about a possible loss of 12 000 jobs as a response to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. BA warned the staff that if an agreement with the workforce was not reached they would be fired and then re-hired with new contracts. (BBC 2020) There was speculation that the airline was taking advantage of the pandemic to lower so-called legacy contracts of more senior crew that were the most expensive to the airline.

By August more than 6000 people had voluntarily been made redundant either as a protest to the measures, or in hopes that they would be re-hired once more jobs would become available again. In August crew found out whether they would be made redundant, keep their jobs and conditions, or whether they would still have a role, but with most likely worse conditions. (Guardian 2020a) There was still however much uncertainty among the crew, as the airline still claimed they needed to downsize their staff.

Between April and September, the crew had to wait to see what exactly would happen to their jobs. The airline was finally made to change these plans due to pressure from the unions, politicians and the media. The actions of British Airways were deemed disgraceful. The final result of the labour struggle was that on top of the measures that took place earlier, the crew had to accept maximum 15% cuts in their salaries, among other permanent and temporary changes (Daily Mirror 2020)

### **3.3.3 Ryanair**

Ryanair has had its share of controversy during its 36 years of business, from labour disputes to distasteful comments in the media, for example about free sexual services on flights. (Stuff 2009) In the past few years the company has had struggles with its' employees, resulting in strikes and lawsuits. It doesn't come as a surprise then, that the actions

the airline has taken faced with losses from Covid-19 have not gone down well with the workers.

As an initial move the airline announced that it would have to cut up to 3000 jobs, or 15 % of its entire air crew. In France the pay cut required to avoid job losses was 10 % for the next 5 years, and a reduction in working hours for those who already received the national minimum wage, or to be faced with the redundancy of 27% of all French based cabin crew. This information did not receive a positive reaction, as the current rights and salaries of the crew had been achieved with earlier disputes with a 'difficult management'. (The Guardian 2020b)

These announcements of redundancies and pay cuts were made all over the Ryanair network, and received similar responses. Ultimately crew in many countries agreed to a 'four-year deal' of pay cuts, where the staff would agree to have their salaries reduced for the duration of the recovery of aviation. (Sky News 2020) The reduction in flight capacity also meant that some of Ryanair's smaller bases would be closed temporarily, with significant route reductions in selected bases. As a result, many crew members who had already seen a big reduction in working hours would be laid off temporarily to avoid permanent job losses. (Ch-aviation 2020)

Redundancies could not be avoided in bases where the new agreement was not agreed upon. In the Portuguese bases of Porto and Lisbon, Ryanair offered the deal, and the crew that did not agree to a cut that would significantly lower their salaries were a part of a group dismissal. This dismissal of the crew was deemed illegal by Portuguese labour courts and Ryanair was ordered to re-hire some of the crew that still wanted to work for the airline. The rest of the dismissed crew decided to take Ryanair to court for illegal dismissal and other illegalities during their careers. (Expresso 2021)

Considering the current situation in aviation, these cuts and redundancies would be justifiable, but the fact that Ryanair keeps on expanding makes these action a bit dubious. Despite making cabin crew redundant and the extensive lay-offs of crew, the airline is constantly recruiting through its recruitment partner, temporary work agency Crewlink. (Crewlink 2021) Ryanair has also announced its expansion to new bases in Croatia and Greece. The three new bases in Greece will be opened in July 2021 and altogether operate 46 routes. (Ch-aviation 2021) The new base in Zagreb, Croatia's capital will open in September 2021, with 12 new routes. (Reuters 2021)

## **4 Research Method**

The Covid-19 pandemic has not only been a health crisis, as it has impacted the world's economic situation heavily. Aviation has been one of the business sectors that have suffered the most with the general recommendation against travel, border closures and other challenges. As a result, airlines have had to take drastic measures to combat the losses. These measures to cut costs have had a major impact on airline employees, in the form of uncertainty and job losses.

The main purpose of the thesis was to understand how the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on the aviation industry have affected its frontline employees, the cabin crew. With the devastating impact the pandemic has had on the sector it is clear that the general experience has not been good, but the goal is to discover how the direct and indirect effects have been experienced by the ones affected and what they think could have been done differently. The goal was to gain insight on the entire aviation industry, instead of just a specific country or a segment, so the study was conducted internationally.

### **4.1 Research Questions and Objective**

The objective of the thesis was to discover how cabin crew have experienced the measures taken by airlines to survive the Covid-19 pandemic, and what could've been done differently.

The research questions the author aimed to answer were "How have the airlines' measures to combat the Covid-19 crisis been experienced by the cabin crew?", "How have the current situation and the actions airlines have taken affected the sense of safety on-board?", "How do cabin crew see the future of aviation?" and "What could've been done differently?"

### **4.2 Research Planning**

Research can be conducted with a qualitative or a quantitative method. The chosen method for the research was the quantitative method. This method collects numerical data through standardized techniques and then draws conclusions by using statistics. Quantitative research aims to study a specific group of people and then apply the results to a larger group to get objective results. (Bhatia, M. 2018) This method was chosen, as the goal of the study was to focus only on cabin crew, but also to get as large a sample as possible. In this case it would mean studying some cabin crew members and then making the assumption that this is the shared opinion of all cabin crew.

A quantitative study can be performed in several different ways. The descriptive method is the most common one, and results in an overall summary of the topic of the study. Statistics, graphs and figures are analysed to reach conclusions. A correlational study looks at the relationship between the entities studied, and an experimental research is a controlled study of the cause-and-effect of the variables. The study can also be conducted in different ways, such as an experiment, as survey, systematic observation or secondary research. (Bhandari, P 2020) The descriptive method was chosen in the form of a survey. The author wanted to study the bigger picture in the simplest way possible, and felt that the descriptive method would allow for the best results. The other methods also would not give answers to all of the research questions the study was meant to answer. An online survey was used, because it was a quick and simple way to get responses, and the analysis of the responses would be easier with online graphs.

The study was planned with the research questions in mind, and the questionnaire was compiled while writing the theoretical part. The plan was to make a questionnaire on Webropol and then to share it with as many cabin crew as possible, from all over the world, in order to be able to see the effect on the entire industry, instead of just regionally. Webropol was chosen as the data collection method because the author was given recommendations to use it from peers, and her university had it listed as one of the tools available for thesis writing, but as well because Webropol has been proven to be a suitable tool for quantitative studies like this one. Webropol also offered a simple analysis tool with charts and figures made by the program, but that were easily modified by the user.

The questionnaire was designed to be as simple as possible, with as few questions as possible, in order for the respondents to understand all the questions, but also to encourage them to answer the questionnaire. If possible respondents would've deemed the questionnaire too long or complicated they could've chosen not to respond at all. The target for the amount of questions was originally less than 15, but during the process it expanded to 19 questions that were all considered relevant to the research. The simplicity of the questions was also important in order to preserve the reliability and validity of the study. There are less chances of erroneous responses if questions are simple and easy to understand. The questions were based on the theoretical part of the thesis, taking into consideration the theory of employee experience, as well as the aviation-specific part. Before distributing the questionnaire, it was sent to an experienced cabin crew member to respond to, to give it a 'test run'.

### 4.3 The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into themes. First the respondents were asked to answer questions about their background, then the actions of airlines were discussed, with a chance to explain what could've been done differently. The next theme was airline safety and the last one was the way cabin crew saw the future of aviation. The first theme consisted of six background questions that explored who the surveyed were. It was considered important to find out how old the people who answered were, as well as their gender and where they were from, to discover how well they represented the target group. The next three questions were about working in aviation; the airline they worked for, how long they had worked in aviation, and whether they considered working as cabin crew a career. These questions were used, because the author wanted to find out how dedicated and connected the respondents were in both the airline they worked for, and aviation in general, as she believed that this could affect the responses.

The background questions were followed by questions about the measures taken by airlines and how they were experienced. The next five questions were on how the cabin crew perceived their working conditions prior to the pandemic, how their work had been affected, and whether the actions of the airlines had been fair and transparent. All of these questions were multiple choice questions that had a 'free text'-field to explain the answers. Cabin crew were also given a chance to offer their own views on what could've been done differently.

The next theme of the questionnaire was airline safety. In the next seven questions the crew were asked whether they had received any help from their employer, and whether the uncertainty of the situation had affected their sense of security in life, and the sense of safety on-board. While exploring the topic of airline safety, the airlines' measures on Covid-19 prevention, as well as passengers' attitude towards the pandemic were examined, and ultimately the cabin crew were asked whether they felt safe at work. The last question was about the future of aviation post-pandemic, and how these frontline professionals saw it through their own experience.

Most of the questions in the questionnaire were multiple choice questions, as it was considered easier to analyse them considering the large amount of questions and the heavy topic. Some questions had a 'free text'-field where the respondents could explain why they answered the way they answered. A simple yes or no would've been too simple and wouldn't truly show the reasoning behind the answer. Some multiple choice questions allowed the respondents to choose all the options that apply. There was a small amount of

open questions included as well, as it was considered beneficial to receive responses worded entirely by the people that chose to answer them. None of the questions were compulsory in order to ensure that the respondents would continue answering even if they did not want to answer a specific question. The questionnaire and the cover letter that was sent with it are annexed.

Facebook was chosen as the media for the sharing of the survey, as the author was aware of an international group dedicated to cabin crew and their coping mechanisms throughout the challenges created by the pandemic, as well as some other cabin crew groups. The author used to work in aviation and has a lot of connections on social media from that time, so a decision was made not to share the questionnaire on her own social media profile pages to avoid too many friends from aviation responding to maintain an objective perspective, and also to try to ensure that most of the responses did not come from the airline she had worked for.

The goal was to reach cabin crew from all over the world to receive different points of view on the topic, so the questionnaire ended up being shared in several groups. On 29.03.2021 it was shared in the group "Cabin Crew United #Stronger Together" that has over 12 000 members. The initial thought was to only share it this group, as the author had seen other questionnaires from members gain large amounts of answers, but as the answers came in at a very low pace and the author was impatient, a decision to share in other groups was taken. On 30.03.2021 the questionnaire was shared in 'Ryanair Cabin Crew - All Bases' with more than 8200 members, and 'Norwegian Helsinki Cabin Crew' with 210 members. The next day the author decided to share the questionnaire in a group for Portuguese speaking cabin crew called 'Café dos Tribulantes' with over 4600 members. The author attempted to share the questionnaire in a few other groups for airline crew, but for privacy reasons she was not allowed to do so. It was however shared in three private Whatsapp groups for cabin crew from various airlines. This all resulted in receiving responses from 150 cabin crew from 19 different airlines.

The plan was to keep the questionnaire online for a week to ensure enough answers were received. The target was at least 100 answers, and this was reached in two days, but the questionnaire was still left open for the planned duration, in order to receive as much data as possible. The questionnaire was shared on Facebook in the afternoon of 29.03.2021 and reached 100 responses in the evening of 30.03.2021. It was closed on 04.04.2021 with 150 responses.

There were no reminders to answer the questionnaire, as enough responses were received in such a short time, but the author kept checking the progress so that the amount of answers would stay within limits. It is hard to say which answer came from which group, as theoretically all responses could've come from the multi-airline group the questionnaire was initially shared in. Once it was shared in an airline-specific group more responses from the airline in question came in, but it would be speculation nevertheless to say where the respondents found the questionnaire, as there was not a question about it in it.

#### **4.4 Data Analysis**

The data collected was analysed with the help of charts from Webropol and going through the written answers of respondents and connecting similar themes. Three types of charts were used in order to maintain the simplicity of the results. Some answers were shown with pie charts, some with bar charts and the rest were shown with columns. The open questions were read and connected together according to the themes present in the answers. Many answers followed similar reasoning, so they were simple to stack together under the same heading. If an answer had several points they were recorded in the results and separate opinions. These answers were then turned into pie charts in the website [www.meta-chart.com](http://www.meta-chart.com) to simplify reading the finished work. The answers were then explained by using quotes as examples.

## 5 Results

The results of the questionnaire are presented and explained according to the four themes that were used in the questionnaire. First there were background questions, then questions about the actions of airlines and how they were experienced. Questions about airline safety and how it may have been affected were next, and finally there was a question about the future of aviation.

### 5.1 Background Information

150 cabin crew members responded to the questionnaire and most respondents answered all questions. There were six background questions altogether to find out who the respondents were, and whether they represented the population that the author had hoped study.

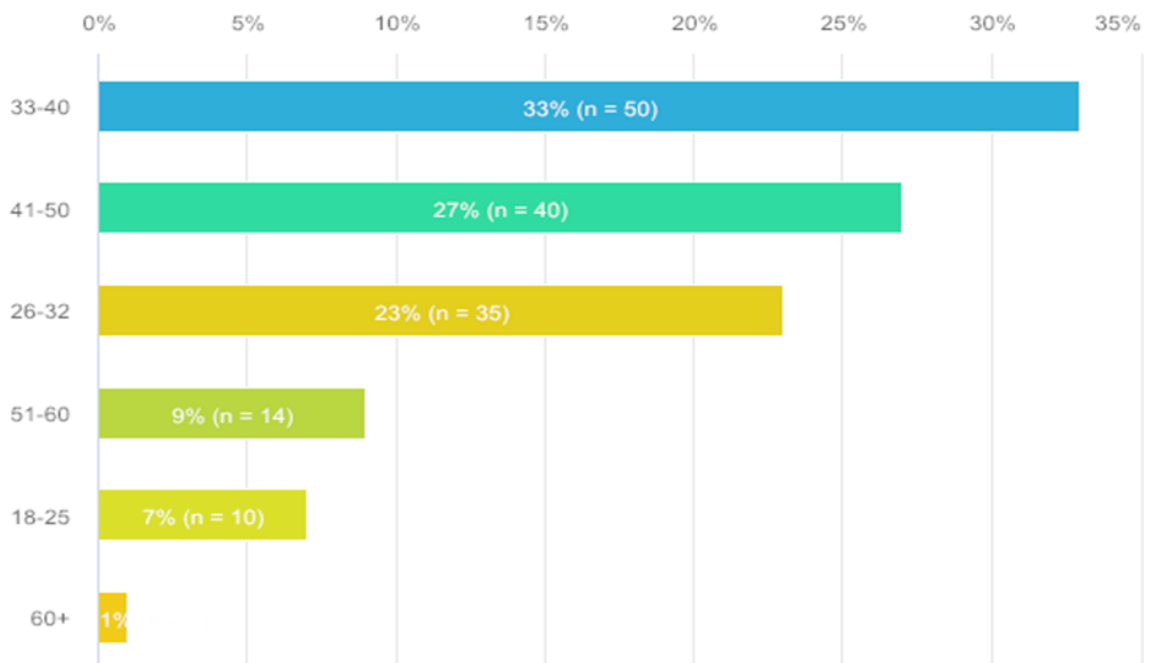


Figure 5. The age of respondents (n=150)

Figure 5 shows the ages of the respondents. The majority, 33% were between 33 and 40 years old. The second biggest age group was the 41-50-year-olds at 27%. 23% were in the age group 26-32. The age groups of 51-60 and 18-25 were nearly the same, at 9% and 7% respectively. Only 1% of respondents were over 60.

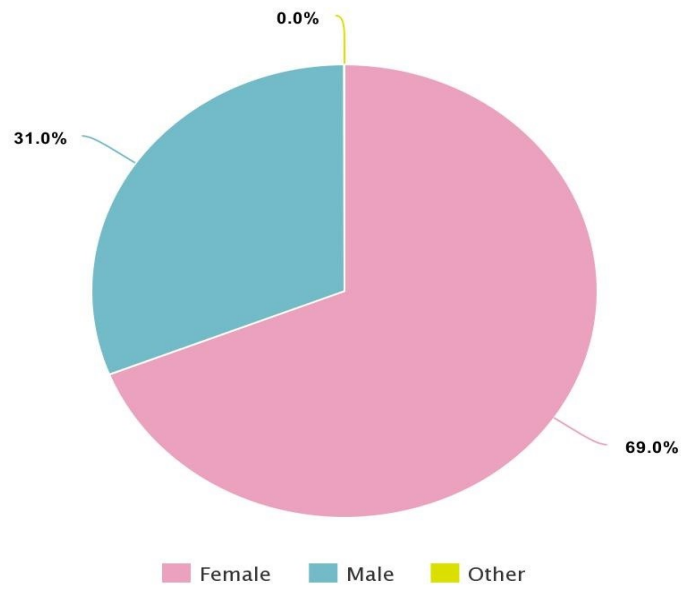


Figure 6. The gender of those who answered (n=150)

The cabin crew that answered the questionnaire were 69% female and 31% male. (Figure 6)

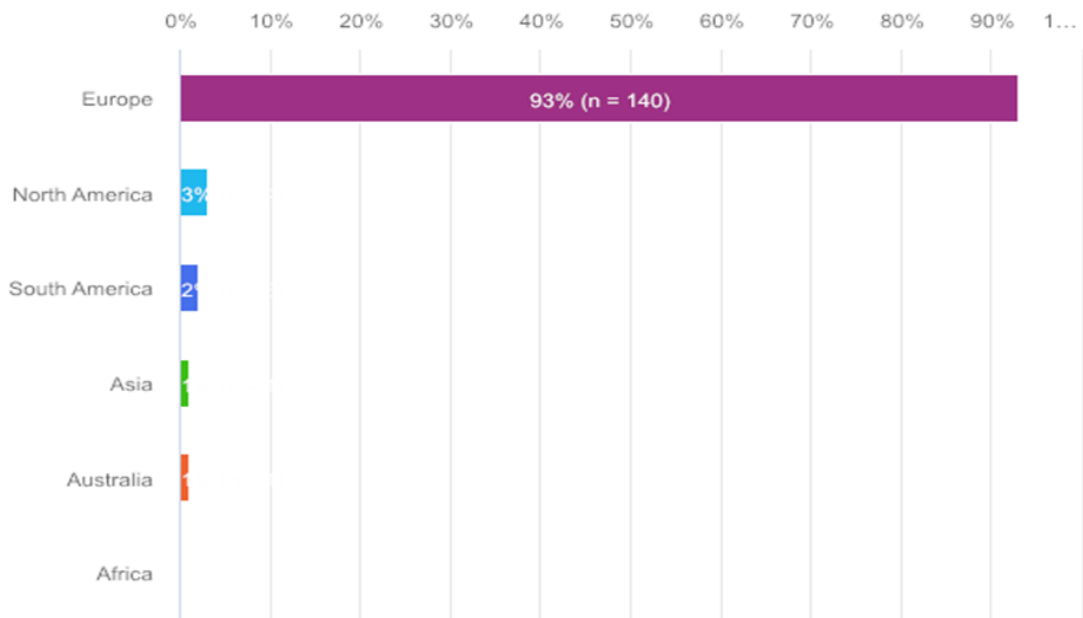


Figure 7. Where respondents were from (n=150)

As seen in figure 7 the vast majority, an impressive 93% of respondents were from Europe. 3% were from North America and 2% Asian, while the continents of Africa, Asia and Australia were represented by less than 1% each.

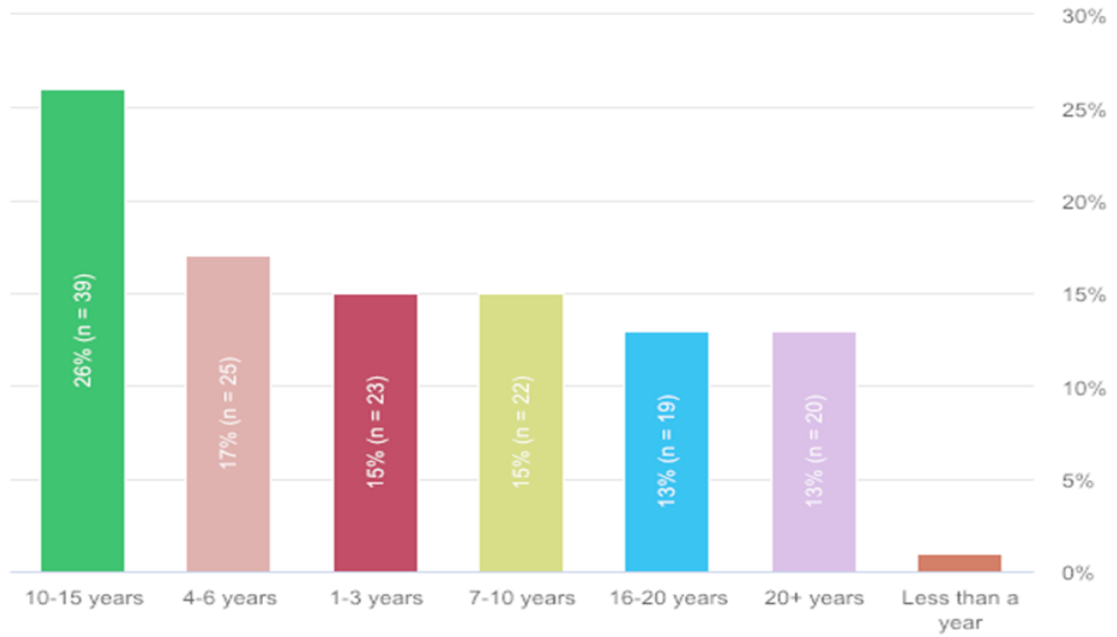


Figure 8. The time respondents had worked in aviation (n=150)

In figure 8 the pillars show the time the respondents had worked in aviation. The majority of respondents, 26% had been flying for 10-15 years, while 17% had 4-6 years of experience. 15% had 7-10 years of flying experience, and another 15% had worked in aviation between 1 and 3 years. Those that had worked for 16-20 years, or over 20 years comprised 26% percent of the total amount, with 13% each. Just over 1% had worked as cabin crew for less than a year.

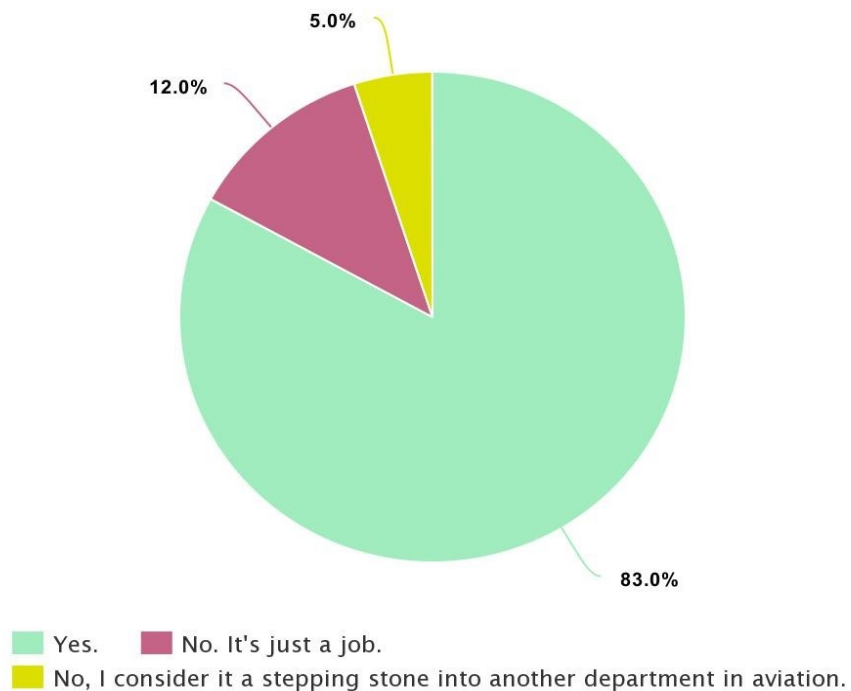


Figure 9. Is working as Cabin Crew a career for the respondents (n=149)

Question 5 was “Is working as Cabin Crew a career for you?”, to which 149 people responded. An overwhelming majority of 83% responded ‘Yes’. 12%, or 18 people answered ‘No’ and the rest, 5% said that they considered being a cabin crew a stepping stone into another department in aviation. (Figure 9)

Table 1. The airlines the respondents worked for. (n=142)

Ryanair	44	Argentine Airlines	1
Norwegian	25	Air Canada	1
TAP Air Portugal	20	Avantiair	1
EasyJet	11	Etihad	1
British Airways	10	Qatar	1
Finnair	8	Lufthansa	1
NORRA	3	Swiss	1
Westjet	2	Brussels Airlines	1
Virgin	2	Azores Airways	1
White Airways	1	No answer/Empty	7

142 people responded to the question “Which airline do you work for?” and 7 of those left the field empty. All in all, cabin crew from 19 different airlines responded to the questionnaire. The largest group were 44 Ryanair cabin crew, followed by 25 Norwegian crew, 20 from TAP Air Portugal, 11 from EasyJet and 10 working for British Airways. There were also eight cabin crew members from Finnair, three from NORRA (Nordic Regional Airlines), two from Westjet and two from the Virgin Group. The rest of the airlines, White Airways, Air Canada, Argentine Airlines, Etihad, Avantiair, Azores Airlines, Qatar, Lufthansa, Swiss and Brussels airlines all had one cabin crew member to contribute to the questionnaire. (Table 1)

## 5.2 The Actions of Airlines and How They Were Experienced by the Cabin Crew

The next question was “Were you satisfied with the working conditions in your airline prior to Covid-19? If you chose 'No', can you please explain why.” Out of the 149 respondents 83% said that they had been satisfied with their working conditions, while the rest, 17% said that they had not. (Figure 10)

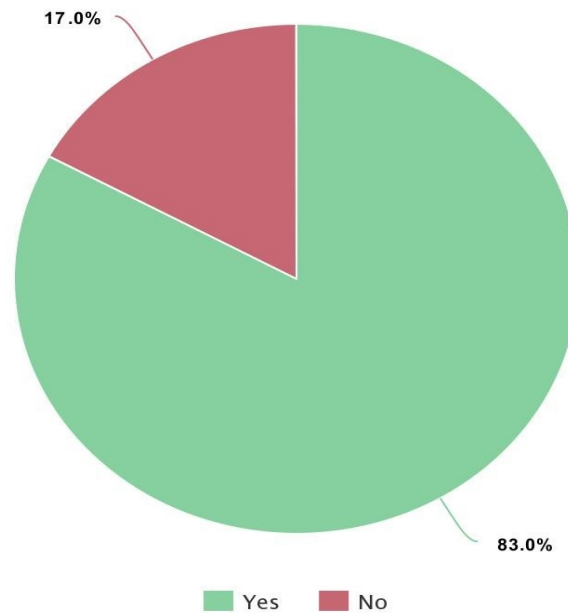


Figure 10. Were crew satisfied with their working conditions prior to the pandemic?  
(n=149)

In the 'free text'-field 21 people that answered 'No' were given a chance to explain why. 13 people listed general bad working conditions, such as pressure and bullying from management, as well as the airlines not following labour laws. Some clarified their answers simply by: "Ridiculous conditions" or "Horrible treatment of employees" and "Barely treated as human beings". It was also mentioned that management had not been listening to the crew and their concerns. Seven respondents listed issues with remuneration as the reason they had not been satisfied, with statements like: "Non-transparent payslips, incorrect sales commissions". One respondent felt that a lot of crew had been working fatigued due to lack of crew.

The next question was: "How has the pandemic affected your work?". The responses are shown in figure 11. In this question respondents were allowed to choose all that applied, and 150 people chose the applicable option 260 times. Nobody answered that their job hadn't been affected at all, and nobody had entered early retirement due to the pandemic.

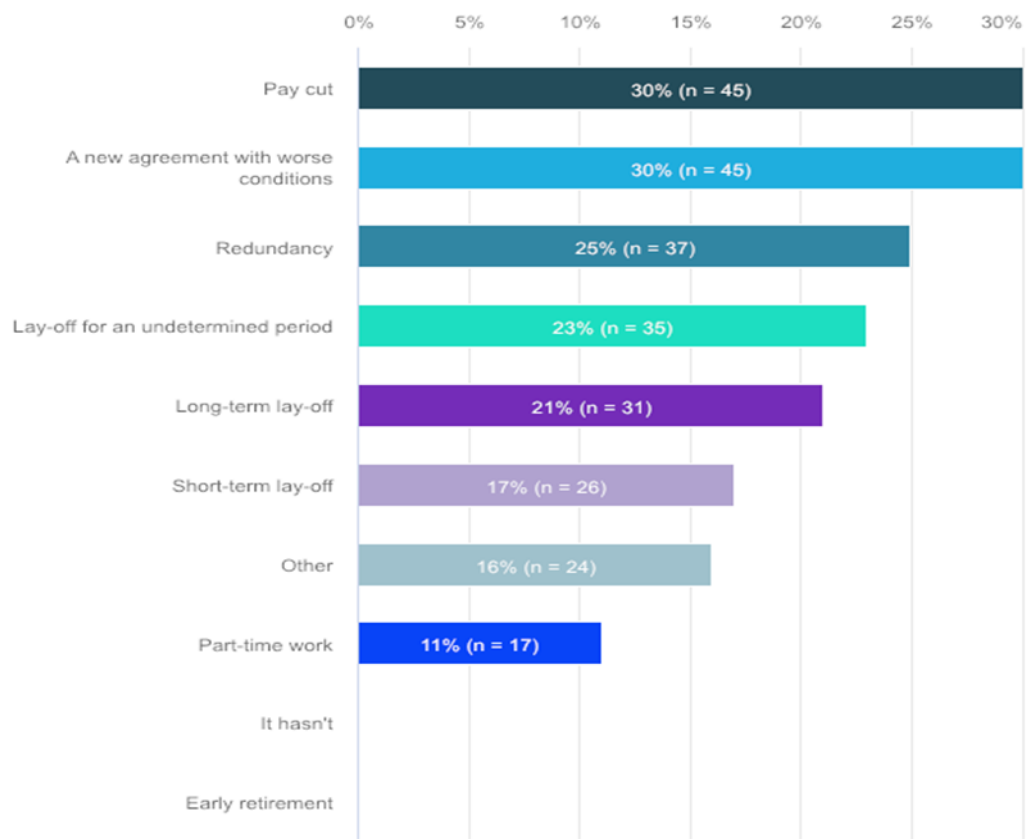


Figure 11. How the pandemic has affected the respondents' work (n=260)

Lay-offs of different durations (short-term, long-term and undetermined period) were chosen 92 times. 8 respondents chose 'Other' and explained that they had been furloughed. This is a matter of what term is used, as the terms lay-off and furlough have the same meaning. For the purposes of the questionnaire they were put together, making the amount of temporarily laid off crew members 100. The option 'Pay cut' was chosen 45 times. Redundancy was selected by 37 people. Again, 12 respondents had chosen 'Other' to explain they had lost their jobs for various reasons, making the total of crew made redundant 49. Part-time work was chosen 17 times. 'Other' was chosen 24 times and 23 people explained what 'other' meant for them. 12 people had lost their jobs for various reasons, for example due to the bankruptcy of the company, base closure, or non-renewal of contract. Eight people explained they had been furloughed. Two people had finished their cabin crew training course but had not gotten offered a contract due to the pandemic, while two had had a reduction of hours but no actions taken by the airline.



Figure 12. Did Cabin Crew consider the actions of the airline to be fair? (n=148)

Figure 12 shows whether cabin crew felt that the actions of the airline had been fair. 58% considered the actions fair, while 42% did not feel that they had been fair. Those that said 'No' got to explain their choice and 50 answers were given to explain. According to 12 responses the crew affected had been left with no help from the airline. 10 people answered that they believed that the airlines had used the pandemic as an excuse to worsen cabin crew contracts and conditions. Seven people thought that the staff reductions had been, and continue to be excessive and partially unnecessary. Six answers pointed a finger at the airlines for bad communication and not being transparent with the employees. Five respondents believed that work had been distributed unevenly among crew.



Figure 13. Did the crew feel that airlines' actions were transparent? (n=149)

The pie chart shows whether cabin crew felt that the airlines' actions were transparent. 59% said 'Yes' and 41% said 'No'. (Figure 13) Those that said that the actions were not transparent got to explain their view if they wished.

There were 42 explanations. 17 people said that they had not been given enough updates and general info on the situation. One respondent said: "Didn't communicate with cabin crew. Got to know the news through the media." 13 respondents believed that the little info that had been given had not been accurate, and that airline management had even lied to employees at times. According to eight people changes in terms and conditions had not been discussed with crew before implementing them. Five of the respondents had found out from social media that they had lost their jobs.

Question 11 was "If you do not agree with the airline's actions during the pandemic, what could have been done differently in your opinion?". There were 59 respondents to this open question. (Figure 14) The most common answers were about the need for improvements in transparency and a requirement for improved communications from airline management (21 respondents). One respondent said: "I would like to see more transparency regarding the airline actions towards us and more information about redundancy of employers". Another one responded: "The message about redundancy should have come directly to my email. Instead, I read about it from company's social media page that the agreement with our base was finished."

15 people suggested that it would've been more fair and potentially more beneficial to all involved to talk to the crew to try to come up with solutions. The crew could've been asked what measures they would've been willing to do in order to cut costs. Part-time contracts could've been used instead of lay-offs, lay-offs instead of redundancies, voluntary redundancies and early retirements instead of forced ones. All voluntary options should've been exhausted before forcing crew to do anything. One of the respondents explained: "They should have started by the early retirements and if handled well could have avoided many redundancies. We were being pressured to accept whatever they offered, it was ridiculous."

10 respondents believed that while the measures taken had been harsh they had been necessary due to the severity of the situation. One said: "Difficult times, difficult decisions".

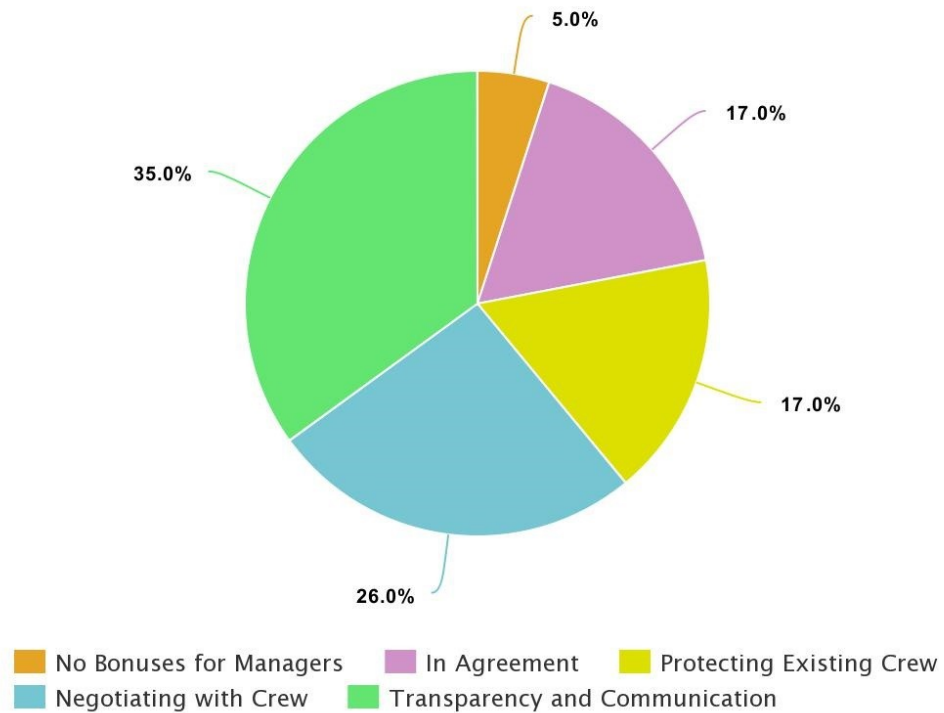


Figure 14. What could have been done differently? (n=59)

10 respondents brought up the need for airlines to ensure that existing crew are protected as well as possible and that everyone gets treated equally. On the same topic some respondents were concerned about new crew being hired and other crew being transferred within the network while existing crew didn't have enough work to make ends meet. "The airline shouldn't've recruited or transferred people during the pandemic, causing existing crew to have less (close to 0) flying hours. They should have implemented a part-time roster the workers agreed to on the addendum before dismissing experienced workers" was one of the responses. Three people did not agree with management receiving large bonuses while the workforce were receiving pay cuts.

### 5.3 Airline Safety

Figure 15 presents the answers to the question about airline assistance offered during the Covid-19 pandemic. 55% of respondents had received no help from their employers. 18% had been provided help with the psychological effect of the situation with 11% still receiving healthcare services. Another 11% had received help with applying for benefits and 10% had received monetary aid. 7% of respondents had been helped in finding a temporary job by their employer.

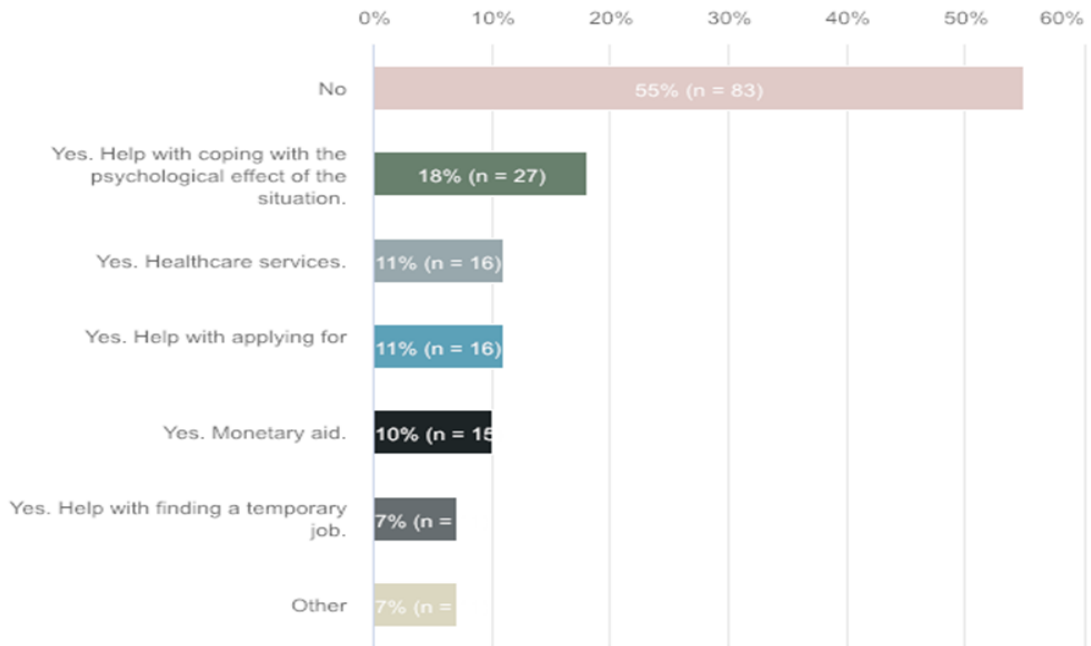


Figure 15. Has your employer offered Cabin Crew any assistance during Covid-19? (n=179)

The 7% that answered 'Other' had received help from their unions or governments, or were unaware of any help given by the airline after being made redundant.

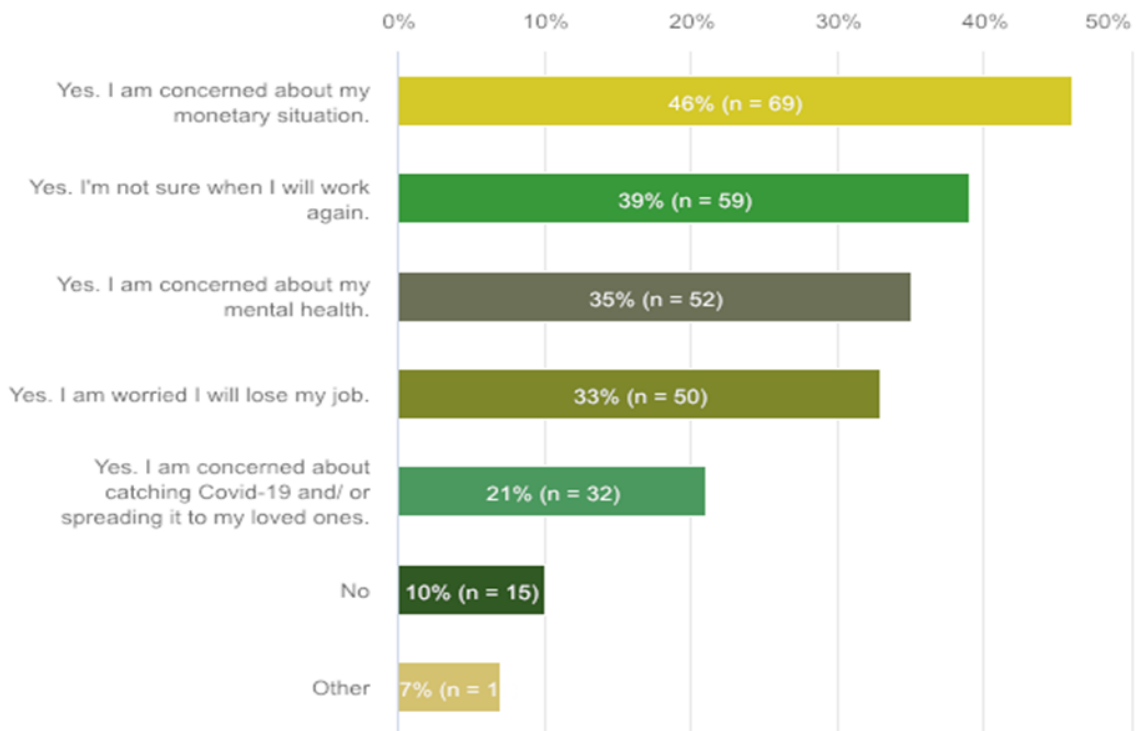
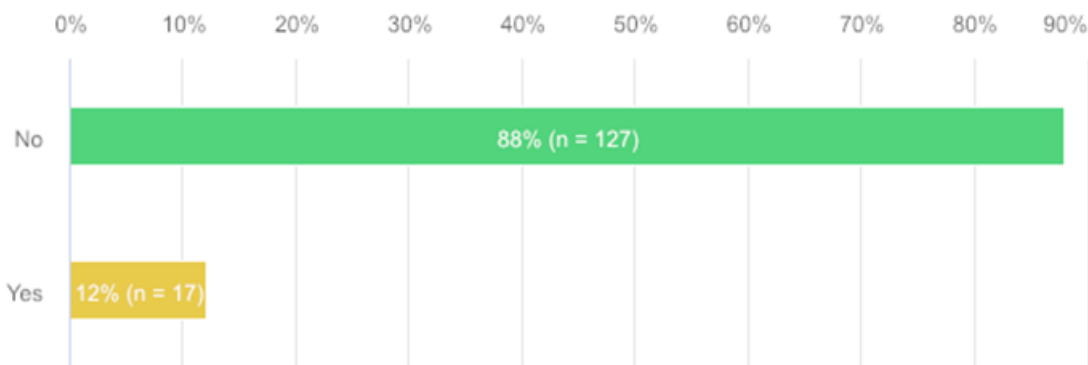


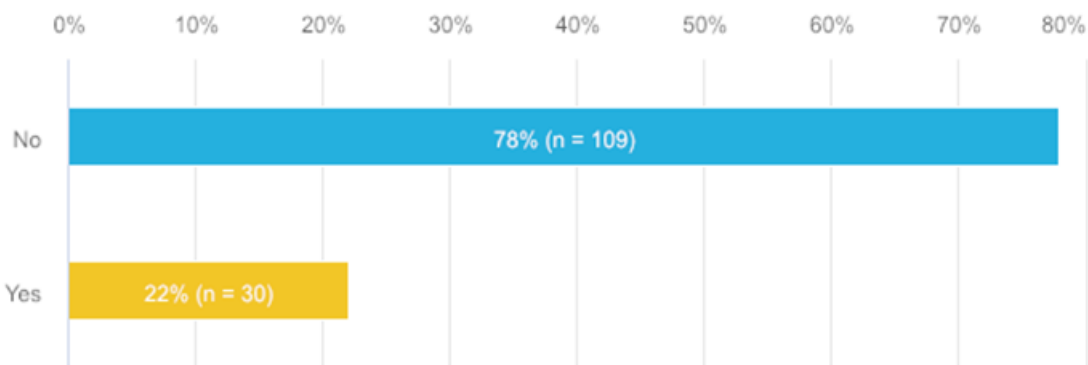
Figure 16. Have you felt that the uncertainty at work has affected your sense of security in your day to day life? (n=288)

In this question the cabin crew were allowed to choose all the options that applied to them, and 150 respondents chose 288 different options that applied to their situation. Figure 16 shows that 69 people were concerned about their monetary situation. 59 were not sure when they would work again, while 52 respondents were concerned about their mental health. 50 people chose the option 'Yes. I am worried I will lose my job.' and 32 clicks were placed on 'Yes. I am concerned about catching Covid-19 and/or spreading it to my loved ones.'. 15 respondents said that they were not affected at all by the uncertainty.

The 11 that chose 'Other' either were not happy with the loss of routine, were concerned about the future of aviation or the economic situation of the world.



Has the uncertainty of the current situation affected the respondents' safety performance on-board? (n=144)



Has the current uncertainty had an effect on your colleagues' performance regarding safety on-board? (n=139)

Figure 17. (Above) Has the uncertainty of the current situation affected the respondents' safety performance on-board? (n=144) (Below) Has the current uncertainty had an effect on your colleagues' performance regarding safety on-board? (n=139)

As seen in in the top part of figure 17, 88% of the respondents felt that their safety performance on-board had not been affected by the uncertainty of the current situation. 12% answered 'Yes', and explained that the lack of flying had resulted in less focus and lack of

routine and situational awareness. A few respondents also pointed out that some crew might not be fully aware of changes in procedure. More focus and thought had been put into Covid-19, minimizing contact, keeping spaces clean and being a “mask police”, which meant less focus on “normal” safety duties.

In the lower part of figure 17 it can be seen that the majority of 78% felt that the safety on-board had not been affected due to the uncertainty of the current situation, this time concerning their colleagues’ performance. 22% did consider the safety on-board affected. The reasons they listed were similar to the ones in the previous question: Lack of focus, too much time away from work, lack of situational awareness and new procedures. Some also said that a lot of crew were under a lot of pressure and the worsening of their working conditions had made them less motivated. Respondents said that cabin crew had come to work even when they had not been fit to fly in fear of losing their jobs, or simply not being in a place where losing the flight pay was an option. One respondent also pointed out a lack of team work, as due to Covid-19 restrictions crew had gotten accustomed to taking their breaks at different times and thus had no opportunity to get to know each other.

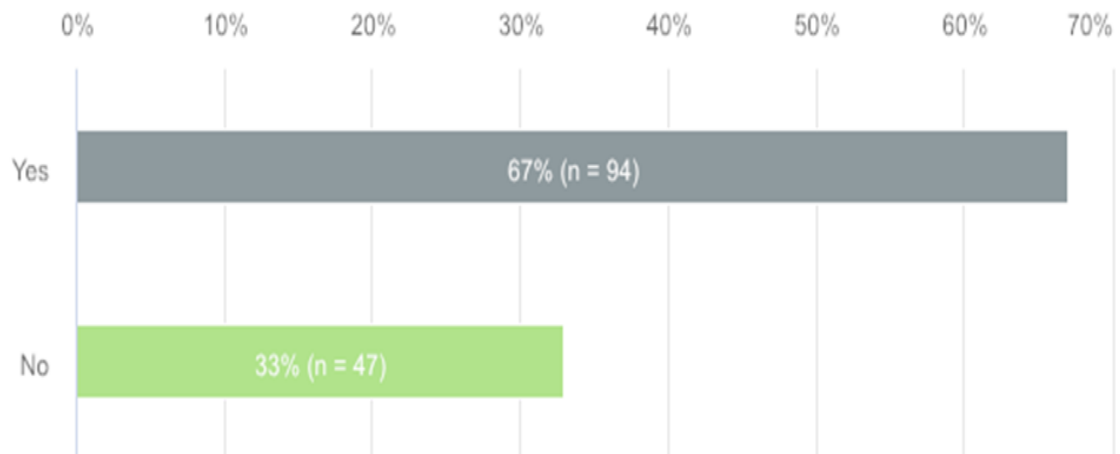


Figure 18. Do you think the measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 have been sufficient in your airline? (n=141)

67% of respondents felt that their airline’s Covid-19 prevention measures have been sufficient, and those 33% that didn’t agree were given the chance to explain. (Figure 18) They pointed out that some flights were still full, making it impossible to practise social distancing. Some also claimed that aircraft did not go through sufficient cleaning and that not enough protective equipment had been given to cabin crew. It was also mentioned that cabin crew, as frontline workers dealing with potentially being in contact with hundreds of people daily should be prioritized to be given the Covid-19 vaccine.

The top part of figure 19 shows that cabin crew were very divided about whether passengers had taken the pandemic seriously. One half said yes, the other half said no. In the lower part of figure 19 it is shown that 71% of the cabin crew that responded felt safe at work during the time of questioning, while 29% didn't. The ones that did not feel safe mostly point the finger at the non-compliance of the Covid-19 restrictions.

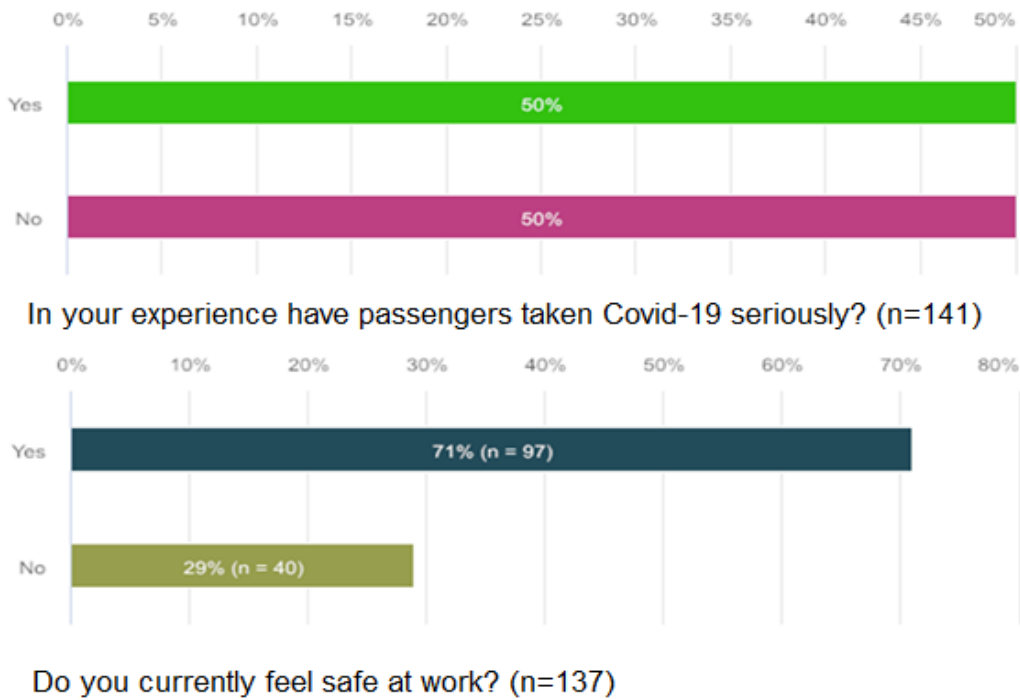


Figure 19. (Above) Have passengers taken Covid-19 seriously? (n=141)  
(Below) Do you currently feel safe at work? (n=137)

**5.4 The Future of Aviation**

The last question in the questionnaire was: “How do you see the future of aviation post-Covid-19?” 124 people responded to the open question with their view. (Figure 20)

The most common answer was that the recovery would be slow and challenging. One stated: “It will take years to go back to pre-Covid passenger numbers, but we will get there. We’ve learned from history that life always goes back to normal after worldwide crises. The world will get used to Covid and one day the panic will shrink and we will slowly move on.”

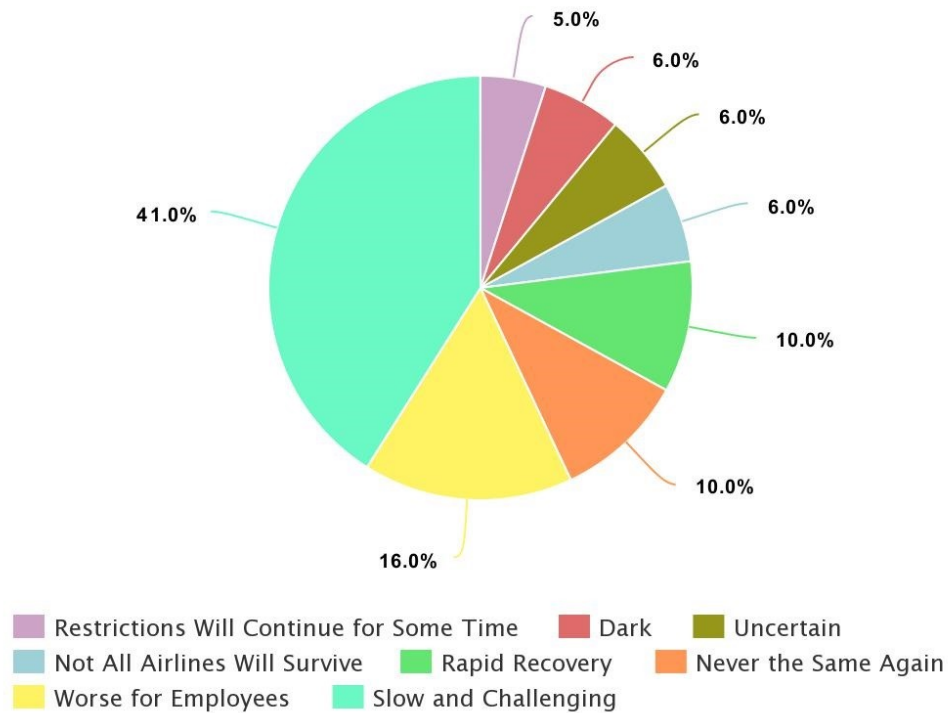


Figure 20. How respondents saw the future of aviation (n=124)

20 people believed that the future of aviation would be worse for the employees, with less jobs, worse conditions and less pay. “Pay cuts, less availabilities for experienced more expensive employees. Young and cheaper will be hired instead and the industry will be having more short careers due to bad payments” was one of the answers that sums it all up. 12 respondents didn’t think that aviation would ever be the same again. On the more positive side 12 people believed that aviation would make a rapid recovery after travelling was considered safe again. Most common answers were along the lines of: “Industry will recover quickly because people are eager to go on holiday and visit family and friends abroad.”

Eight people simply saw the future of aviation as ‘dark’, while eight respondents thought that not all airlines would make it through the pandemic and seven people said that it was too uncertain to foresee, or that they simply didn’t know. Six people also foresaw some restrictions sticking around for a while, stating: “Like after 9/11 it will change aviation’s rules to have a higher level of security and air safety”.

## 6 Discussion

The following chapter explains the main findings of the research and suggests further actions on the topic based on the results. The objective of the thesis was to discover how cabin crew have experienced the measures taken by airlines to survive the restrictions set on the aviation industry due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and what could've been done differently. The research question was: "How have the airlines' measures to combat the Covid-19 crisis been experienced by the cabin crew?", with sub questions: "How have the current situation and the actions taken by airlines affected the sense of safety on-board?", "How do cabin crew see the future of aviation?" and "What could've been done differently?"

### 6.1 Main Findings

The majority of the respondents had been satisfied with the working conditions in their airline before the pandemic hit, but according to the questionnaire all of their jobs had been affected in one way or another. Despite the results showing a very divided group, a little more than half of the respondents felt that the airlines' actions faced with the pandemic had been fair and transparent. They understood that difficult decisions had to be made in order for the companies to survive the crisis. The large amount of cabin crew that agreed with the measures was slightly surprising, as many livelihoods were under threat.

The nearly 50% of respondents that didn't agree with the measures taken also didn't think that the actions had been fair and transparent. The issues the crew considered as unfair were staff cuts that were deemed unnecessary and excessive, no protection to those affected from the cuts and unfair work distribution. Many also believed that the airlines had been wanting to make changes in contracts and lower pay already before, but they used the pandemic as an excuse to do that. It was also brought up that while the cabin crew were facing changes for the worse the management were still receiving large bonuses. Those that considered the actions to not have been transparent said that there was a general lack of information, and some believed that information given by the companies to have been at least partially false. Airlines had also not discussed with the crew before deciding on the measures that had been taken. In the most extreme cases the respondents had found out that they were being made redundant from the airline's social media.

When looking at the results from the employee experience point of view it is visible that some of Morgan's employee environments have been affected during the crisis. (Morgan,

J. 2017, 90-126) As mentioned earlier, the physical space and the technological environment are not necessarily all that relevant in the cabin crew profession, but it is clear to see that the main aspects of the cultural environment have not been fulfilled, and this has affected the experience of the cabin crew during Covid-19. Initially most cabin crew saw their company positively, but the actions that airlines have taken have weakened the cultural atmosphere in the airlines in question. The reductions in pay and worsening of contracts can make employees feel less valued, and crew not feeling like their treatment has been fair, and that their voices are not being heard will negatively impact their experience. Some crew also felt that instead of managers being on their team, they were cashing in bonuses when crew were faced with salary reductions.

So, how have the airlines' measures to combat the Covid-19 crisis been experienced by the cabin crew? Cabin crew seem to be very divided when it comes to answering this question. Why did cabin crew have different experiences while being in similar situations? The author believes that this is caused by the kind of employee experience the respondents had had before the pandemic hit. All of the respondents that were not happy with their working conditions prior to Covid-19 also felt that the actions of their employer had been unfair. This means that the crew members that had a very negative experience during the Covid-19 crisis were already unhappy in their situation at work, and already felt that their treatment had been unfair. The ones whose experience had been slightly more positive had previously been satisfied with the airline they were working for and felt a real sense of purpose at work. It is also a real possibility that some airline's actions truly have been more responsible and fair than others, which in turn might affect the employee experience during the pandemic. As a conclusion it does seem that the cabin crew that had a more positive employee experience to begin with continue to experience the actions of their airline with a more positive outlook, despite the severity of the situation, and those that viewed their employer in a less positive light also experienced the measures taken as more unfair.

The questions to find out how the current situation and the actions taken by airlines had affected the sense of safety on-board were the biggest surprise that came from the questionnaire. More than half of the respondents said that they had received no help from their employer despite their jobs being on the line, or lost. Only 10% said that the uncertainty of the situation at work had not affected their sense of security in their day-to-day lives, while others were worried about their monetary situation, and their health, both physical and mental.

With these answers in mind the author had expected a larger number of participants to say that their, or their colleagues' safety performance at work had suffered. Less than a quarter of the cabin crew surveyed felt that their sense of safety on-board had been affected due to the performance of cabin crew. Despite more than half of the respondents feeling that passengers had not taken the pandemic seriously, a majority thought that the airlines' actions had been sufficient in the fight against Covid-19.

According to responses in the questionnaire the sense safety on-board hasn't been compromised to a point where it would be a concern. Over 70% of the respondents said that they felt safe at work currently. As mentioned earlier, human error is the underlying factor in most aviation incidents. Human error can be caused by many of the things that the crew listed in their answers, such as lack of routine, stress, fear and complacency. (Carter, L. & Johnson, A. 2016) It is then reassuring to find out the vast majority of cabin crew feel like the safety on-board has not been compromised because of the insecurity of the status quo. Safety is the number one concern in aviation after all, and the results from the research present good news.

The only concern the author has is that the situation might become worse as more time goes by. The Covid-19 pandemic is expected to slowly be getting better, so the safety in regards of health and the restrictions will most probably improve quite rapidly. However, if airline employees' working conditions are permanently lowered, the safety of airline operation could take a downturn.

Unfortunately, many did not see a bright future ahead for aviation any time soon. The recovery was expected to be slow and challenging, with worse conditions for employees, in a more complex industry with less competition. The respondents believed that the worsened contracts would be here to stay, as airlines know that there will be less airlines to hire all the cabin crew eager to work again, and they can take advantage of the situation. There were however some glimpses of hope, as many expected that once the pandemic was over and the recovery had started the industry would be 'booming' with so many people desperate to travel. The view of the future of aviation is very similar to the official predictions of the industry returning to pre-Covid levels in 2023. (UNWTO 2021) Whether the cabin crew who responded are basing their own views on this official prediction, or they came to the conclusion themselves is up for debate. The respondents that believed that once travel restrictions are lifted the industry would 'boom' might just be right. The vaccination process is well underway all over the world, and some countries have already started loosening their restrictions for vaccinated travellers, potentially contributing to a quicker recovery (Kuta, S. 2021)

What could've been done differently? The respondents of the questionnaire pointed out the issues that had led to dissatisfaction and were also asked to offer solutions for them. The most common issues among the respondents were about communication between the airlines and their employees. Cabin crew wanted the management of their companies to be more transparent with the situation and let the crew know what was going on, even if the news were bad. The respondents also would've wanted to be consulted before any measures were put in place. They felt that the airlines could've tried to work with the cabin crew to come up with solutions that would've been more favourable for both sides.

Cabin crew were also not satisfied with managers receiving large bonuses while the staff were facing cuts and even job losses. They suggested that during difficult times managers should show more solidarity towards the workforce, and either not accept bonuses or divide the bonus with the workers. As another sign of caring about the employees, the respondents suggested that current workers should be protected before taking on new recruits. There should be no recruitment or transfers before ensuring the existing, experienced crew's jobs were safeguarded. As a conclusion, cabin crew said that they wanted to be a 'part of the team' in the airlines they worked for, with their voices heard, and the airlines keeping their crew up to date honestly and transparently. They want to feel valued and cared for by their employer.

## **6.2 Recommendations for Development**

As seen in the discussion, many of the attributes of creating a positive employee experience were missing in the actions that airlines had taken, and some had been already missing in the first place in some companies. Despite the results of the research being surprisingly positive there is work to do. Airlines should focus more on creating a positive cultural environment for their employees, especially in times of crisis. Having a motivated and dedicated workforce with a sense of purpose will help in difficult times, and even make recovery easier.

On the aspect of safety, it was already mentioned that if the working conditions of cabin crew fail to improve the situation can deteriorate. One possible solution, at least for now could be offering additional training to the crew to ensure that they are fully aware of any new procedures and reminded of the standard operating procedures. Cabin crew generally go through recurrent training once a year, but with less flying, routines are hard to get back to, and many things can be forgotten. Some training could be done as a reminder,

especially after a long break from flying. Well trained crew members would give a heightened sense of safety to the airlines', and the crew themselves would feel more confident in doing their jobs.

### **6.3 Suggestions for Further Research**

Further research can, and should be conducted to understand both the short-term, as well as the long-term effects of the tough measures put in place by airlines. Once the pandemic is nearing its end and the recovery of aviation has started, another questionnaire could be compiled and distributed to more or less the same amount of people from the same, or similar geographical locales.

Once the situation has reversed to the same, or nearly the same as it was prior to Covid-19, another survey could be conducted. The findings of this research can be compared to those ones to find out how the pandemic truly affected the industry and its frontline workers. It would also be beneficial to see what actions have followed the cost-cutting measures once the situation has calmed down. For example, will airlines continue with the terms and conditions set during the pandemic, or focus on improving the employees' conditions? Will aviation companies take advantage of the affected cabin crew who are eager to get back to flying and offer worse contracts in exchange for a job, or will they practise good Corporate Social Responsibility and be responsible in their recruitment processes?

### **6.4 Validity and Reliability**

Validity in research means that the study measures what it set out to measure, and the reliability of the study measures whether the results are repeatable if the study would be done again. (Ruddock, A. 2000, 18) A study with a high degree of validity measures what it was supposed to, doesn't have systematic errors and offers the correct results. The questions in the study need to be simple and give answers to the research questions, and the population needs to be well defined. A reliable research gives specific answers, and is repeatable with the same results. In order to get reliable results, the population needs to be large enough and represent the target group as a whole. The data collection and analysis needs be done with care and without error. Validity and reliability measure the trustworthiness the results of a research. (Heikkilä, T. 2014)

There were some issues in the validity and reliability of the study conducted. A lot of the theoretical background comes from only one source. This is due the fact that employee experience is still reasonably new as a concept, and the literature is sparse. Most of the articles studied lean on the same models from Jacob Morgan that were used in the thesis.

There were also issues with the questionnaire. The amount of responses was quite low compared to the amount of people the questionnaire was distributed to on Facebook. The groups it was shared in had tens of thousands of members altogether, and the questionnaire received 150 responses in one week. Only 33 % of those that opened the questionnaire finished responding. The feedback the author received is that some respondents did not want to say which airlines they worked for in order to protect their privacy and stopped responding at that point. It was also mentioned that the questionnaire had been quite long with too many open questions.

The study was also supposed to be conducted on an international group of cabin crew from many different airlines, but the respondents ended up being mostly from Europe and some airlines were over-represented in the results, possibly leading to a different outcome than a more even spread of airlines would've resulted in.

Despite the attempt to keep the questions simple and easy to understand in an effort to sustain a good level of validity and reliability, there is a chance that some of the questions were not fully understood by the respondents before answering. Some of the written answers to open questions were written in quite limited English, and some answers either did not answer the question at hand, or didn't make sense considering what was asked. There were also some issues with the terms used in some of the questions. For example, the terms 'lay-off' and 'furlough' can mean the same thing in some cultures, and different things in another, and the term 'redundant' was not understood by all respondents, leading them to not choose that answer, but then explaining that they had been fired. These matters allow for some margin of error in the results.

The responses from the study did give answers to the research questions, but overall the study conducted doesn't fare well when validity and reliability are measured.

## **6.5 Own Learning**

The study path of the author has been slightly abnormal, as she has only been physically present in school for 3 periods in 5 years, with the rest of her degree being studied long-distance. She also had a full-time job as cabin crew for most of the degree, as well as having a baby during the first year. This means that there were some breaks in her studies and the scheduling of courses was slightly messy.

Before starting work on the thesis she only had a few courses in the previous semester, so she lost the routine and it was a little bit challenging to get back to. Once the thesis

process started she realized she only had little over a month to finish the entire thesis. This brought on quite a bit of stress and pressure, but also motivation to get things done. Because of the lack of time, the author started working on the thesis at a very quick pace, and once she was appointed a thesis supervisor she had already reached the point of starting the discussion part. In the first meeting with the supervisor she was slightly scared that she had made big mistakes that couldn't be undone, but instead she received valuable advice to improve the final product.

The author always had very little guidance from school while studying long-distance, so she had had to learn most things on her own. While writing the thesis she did her first questionnaire on Webropol, finally became semi-confident with the reporting guidelines of Haaga-Helia, created her first charts and figures, and learned how to look for relevant sources properly. Not being confident in doing all the things listed above was initially slightly worrisome, but the author learned by doing, like she has during her whole studies.

The whole thesis process started initially in August 2020, when then original topic was chosen and approved. Since then the topic changed several times, with the final one forming during the writing process. The changes were caused by many aspects, but the main reason was that the topic of employment in aviation is currently an enormous issue that might be very sensitive to many, and would need a large-scale study in order to be done properly. The author discussed her choices with graduates from other degrees, who pointed out the enormity of the topic itself. These discussions helped in forming the final product. Originally the idea was to study the whole European aviation industry, then focus on just aviation employees, then a comparison between the experiences of employees and passengers, and finally the employee experience of cabin crew. This was a big lesson in learning how to limit the scope, as well as working with the time constraint.

The final topic brought a lot of fresh knowledge when studying the theory of employee experience, and what makes a workplace a great workplace. This was probably one of the most important lessons in the author's managerial studies, and it is something that she hopes to be able to put in use one day as a manager. She also gained a more knowledge about aviation than she had before, and deepened her understanding about how cabin crew experience difficult times. But the biggest discovery during the thesis process was that she was actually capable of doing it. The amount of work and dedication the thesis took was something she had never experienced before. There were challenges she had never faced that she still managed to conquer them with a little extra effort. Another big lesson was that the next time a big project comes along she won't leave it for the last minute. The time constraint did bring quite few sleepless nights. Luckily the author was able

to take time off work and dedicate all her time on doing her research, and the whole writing process took a bit more than a month.

During the thesis process the author received some surprises. She was expecting one result and got another. This presented a new challenge, as the discussion she had in mind changed quite a bit and required more work to complete. She was however positively surprised at the good results and felt reassured the industry she loves will bounce back from the devastation of Covid-19.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. The Cover Letter

Hi!

I'm finishing my degree on Hospitality, Tourism and Experience Management this spring and I need your help! I am writing my thesis about the effects of Covid-19 on Cabin Crew and I need your wisdom!

I've made a little questionnaire with some questions about the human experience of Cabin Crew during the pandemic. All answers are 100% anonymous. The questionnaire takes a few minutes to answer, and I would be ever so grateful for your answers! 😊

Thank you in advance, and stay safe! 😊

## Appendix 2. The Questionnaire

### The effects of Covid-19 on Cabin Crew

#### 1. Age

18-25

26-32

33-40

41-50

51-60

60+

#### 2. Gender

Female

Male

Other

#### 3. Where are you from?

Africa

Asia

Australia

Europe

North America

South America

#### 4. How long have you worked in aviation?

Less than a year

1-3 years

4-6 years

7-10 years

10-15 years

16-20 years

20+ years

5. Is working as cabin crew a career for you?

Yes

No. It's just a job.

No, I consider it a stepping stone into another department in aviation.

6. Which airline do you work for?

7. Were you satisfied with the working conditions in your airline prior to Covid-19? If you chose 'No', can you please explain why.

Yes

No

8. How has the Pandemic affected your work? Choose all that apply.

It hasn't

Short-term lay-off

Long-term lay-off

Lay-off for an undetermined period

Part-time work

Pay cut

A new agreement with worse conditions

Redundancy

Early retirement

Other

9. Do you consider your employer's actions towards its Cabin Crew during Covid-19 to be fair? If you chose 'No', can you please explain why.

Yes

No

10. Do you consider your employer's actions during Covid-19 towards its Cabin Crew to be transparent? If your answer is 'No', can you please explain why.

Yes

No

11. If you do not agree with the airline's actions during the pandemic, what could have been done differently in your opinion?

12. Has your employer offered cabin crew any assistance during Covid-19?

No

Yes. Monetary aid.

Yes. Healthcare services.

Yes. Help with applying for benefits.

Yes. Help with coping with the psychological effect of the situation.

Yes. Help with finding a temporary job.

Other

13. Have you felt that the uncertainty at work has affected your sense of security in your day to day life?

No

Yes. I am worried I will lose my job.

Yes. I am concerned about my monetary situation.

Yes. I'm not sure when I will work again.

Yes. I am concerned about catching Covid-19 and/ or spreading it to my loved ones.

Yes. I am concerned about my mental health.

Other

14. Has the uncertainty of the current situation had an effect on your performance regarding safety on-board? If your answer is 'Yes' can you please explain why.

No

Yes

15. Has the current uncertainty had an effect on your colleagues' performance regarding safety on-board? If your answer is 'Yes' can you please explain why.

No

Yes

16. Do you think measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 have been sufficient in your airline? If your answer is 'No', can you please explain why.

Yes

No

17. In your experience have passengers taken Covid-19 seriously?

Yes

No

18. Do you currently feel safe at work? If your answer is 'No', can you please explain why.

Yes

No

19. How do you see the future of aviation post-Covid-19?

Thank you!