

HARMONIOUS EMPLOYER-EMPLOYEE RELATIONS:
THE NEED FOR INDUSTRIAL HARMONY IN AIR
INDIA AIRLINES

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Abstract:

Employer-Employee Relations has become one of the most delicate and complex problems of modern industrial society. The relationship between an employer and its employees is an important factor in the company's success. In the industrial system, the relations between the employers and employees are such that they are bound to give rise to tensions, disagreements and conflicts. Maintaining healthy employer-employee relations in an organization is a pre-requisite for organizational success. Strong employer-employee relations are essential for high productivity and human satisfaction. The creation and maintenance of good relations between the employers and employees is the very basis on which the development of an industrial Democracy depends. Employer-Employee Relations is impossible without employers and employees cooperation and industrial harmony, therefore it's the interest of all to create and maintain good relations between employers and employees. The Objective of the study is to examine the "Employer-Employee Relations in Air India Airlines". Continual losses over the years, frequent human resource problems and gross mismanagement were just some of the problems that plagued the Air India Airlines. The study makes an attempt to understand and analyze the problems of the employees systematically like frequent strikes, delay in wages and salaries, work-stoppages and suggestion are made to trace the contribution of Employees, management and union in rebounding Employer-Employee Relations in Air India Airlines.

Keywords: *Employer-Employee Relations, Airlines, Air India Airlines, Human Resource Policies, Industrial Relations, Strikes.*

Introduction:

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Today, we are living in a transition period; a chaotic period of a new age defined by global competition, rampant change, faster flow of information and communication, increasing business complexity, and pervasive globalization. With these rapid changes, new dimensions in business space are constantly created, while some are destroyed. Forces such as technological breakthroughs, economic growth, market evolution, social changes, and political events can expand or shrink business space. The change creates great opportunities, as well as competition and chances of failures. As a consequence of the pace and the nature of changes and evolutions in the economic and social environment in which organization operate, the nature of the employment relationship is undergoing fundamental changes (Tyagi, A.: 2010). In recent years, the subject of employer-employee relations has experienced numerous challenges including a greater recognition of global factors influencing national systems of work regulations, more sophisticated employment practices by managements, new work arrangements, and the decline in trade union influence across different countries (Michelson, G.: 2009). Companies no longer assure long term employment to their employees; neither do employees profess complete loyalty to the employer. As consequences, the nature of relationship between the employees and the employer is impacted (Tyagi, A.: 2010).

In this scenario, managing Employer-Employee Relationship has become one of the critical challenges facing organizations. Employees occupy a very strategic place in an organization because of their centrality to the production process. They contribute a very indefinable role both in the achievement of various organization goals and objectives (Olakitan, O.O: n.d). Harmonious relationship is necessary for both employers and employees to safeguard the interests of the both parties of the production. In order to maintain good relationship with the employees, the main functions of every organization should avoid any dispute with them or settle it as early as possible so as to ensure industrial peace and higher productivity (www.citehr.com). From the past few years there has been a steady increase in the number of labor disputes, flash strikes, delayed in salaries and mismanagement in Air India which is a Public sector Airline (www.knowledge.wharton). Airline companies must have potential human resource policies and cordial Industrial Relations that help the organization to attain its goals, enable it to employ the skills and abilities of the workforce efficiently, assist to bring about employees job satisfaction and self-actualization and establishing and maintaining harmonious employer-employee relations.

The present study made an attempt to study the Employer-Employee Relations in Air India Airlines. The study makes an attempt to understand and analyze the problems systematically like strikes; wages and salaries problems and suggestions are made to trace the contribution of Employees, management and union in rebounding Employer-Employee Relations in Air India Airlines which are essential for the Industrial Peace.

Employer-Employee Relationship: An Overview

One of the more important relationships in the company is between the employer and the employees. Both parties have something to be grateful for to each other: a person gets employed when an employer thinks that he has the proper ability required by the position, and the company manages to survive because of the employees' hard work (**Mesriani law Group: 2010**). The basic concepts of mutual trust between Employer and Employees are improvements in the lives of employees through the prosperity of the company, and employer and employees thus share the same goal of company prosperity as a common value; management will take into consideration to the greatest possible extent stable employment and will continuously strive to improve working conditions; and employees will cooperate with the company's policies in order to promote the company's prosperity (**www.toyota.co.jp**).

Harmonious relationship is necessary for both employers and employees to safeguard the interests of the both the parties of the production. In order to maintain good relationship with the employees, the main functions of every organization should avoid any dispute with them or settle it as early as possible so as to ensure industrial peace and higher productivity. (**www.citehr.com**). Industrial conflicts arise because of the conflicting nature of the interests of the two parties in industry, i.e., employer and the employees. It is the motive of employers to make more and more profits with less and less costs, including labour costs. On the other hand, it is the motive of the employees to earn more and more wages by doing less and less work. In other words, the employer wishes to buy labour cheaply and the worker wishes to sell it dearly; with this diversity of interest conflicts often arise. When people sell their services and spend their working lives on the premises of the purchaser of these services, a varying amount of dissatisfaction, discontent and industrial unrest are likely to occur. Employees are specially interested in higher wages, healthy working conditions, opportunity to advance, satisfying work, some voice in the industrial affairs, and arbitrary treatment (**Reddy, R.R.: 1990**).

Therefore, the goal of employee relations is to strengthen the Employer-employee relationship, which encompasses everything from strategic human resources management to functional, everyday human resources activities. Of the human resources disciplines, an employee relation is the area that can have the overall most significant impact on an organization's growth, productivity and profitability (www.ehow.com).

Air India Limited:

Overview:

Air India is the flag carrier airline of India. It is part of the government of India owned Air India Limited. J.R.D. Tata is the founder of Air India. National Aviation Company of India Limited (NACIL) was incorporated under the Companies Act 1956 on 30th March 2007 with its registered office at Airline House, 113 Gurudwara Rakabganj Road, New Delhi and corporate office at the Air India Building, Nariman Point, Mumbai (**Annual Reports of Air India 2010-11**). Its corporate office is located at the Air India Building at Nariman Point in South Mumbai. Air India has two major domestic hubs at Indira Gandhi International Airport and Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport. An international hub at Dubai International Airport is currently being planned. Air India has the fourth largest share in India's domestic air travel market, behind Jet Airways, Kingfisher and IndiGo. In August 2011, Air India's invitation to join Star Alliance was suspended due to its failure to meet the minimum standards for the membership (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_India).

Merger with Indian Airlines:

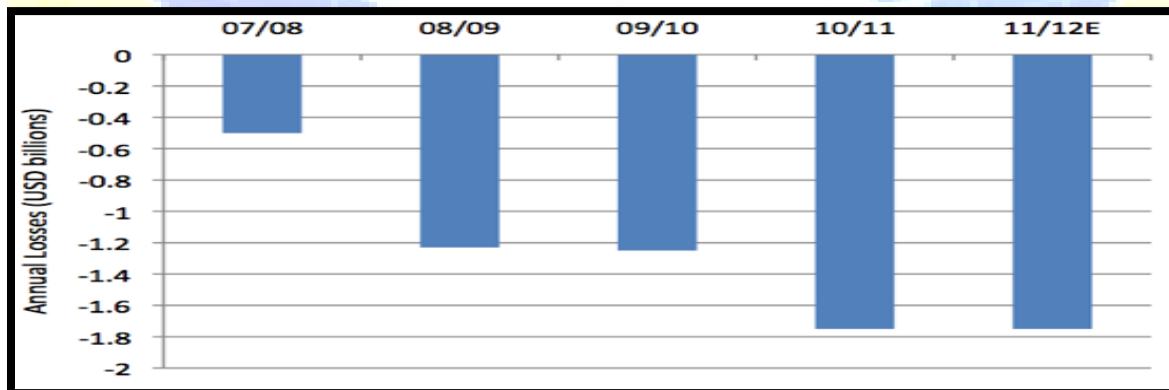
In 2007, the Government of India announced that Air India would be merged with Indian Airlines. As part of the merger process, a new company called the National Aviation Company of India Limited (NACIL) was established, into which both Air India (along with Air India Express) and Indian Airlines (along with Alliance Air) will be merged. On 27 February 2011, Air India and Indian Airlines merged along with their subsidiaries to form (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_India). Justice DM Dharmadhikari submitted their report on the integration of the Air India employees with erstwhile Indian Airline employees to Civil Aviation minister Ajit Singh. Sources inside Air India too agree with the findings of the report stating that both the airlines function as two different entities. "The merger is only on paper not in operation (Singh B. K.: 2012).

Market share

Air India's domestic market share declined from 17.1% in FY2011 to 16.5% in FY2012. International market share also fell, from 19.5% in FY2011 to 18.6% in FY2012. The passenger load factor on domestic routes, however, improved from 66.1% in FY2011 to 68.5% in FY2012. Domestic market share stood at 16.2% in May-2012 with an average load factor of 70.6%. However, Air India experienced a strong 30-35% year-on-year improvement in revenue in the period from Jan-2012 to Apr-2012 as a result of the downsizing of Kingfisher Airlines and due to benefits generated from better integration of the route network. Average domestic revenue per passenger has been strengthening since the beginning of this year (www.profit.ndtv.com).

Air India ranked fourth with a share of 17.6%, followed by GoAir with 7.3% and Kingfisher registering only 5.4% of the total market share. Air India had the highest percentage of flight cancellation at 5.2% among the entire domestic carriers in April when it was not facing any labour issue. Air India's passenger load factor, or average percentage of passengers carried on each flight, was the worst at 70.5%, while Indigo's was the best with 82%. The national carrier also registered the worst on-time performance out of all the six scheduled operators with less than 80% (www.profit.ndtv.com).

Graph 1.1: Showing the Air India financial losses FY2007/08 to FY2011/12 (estimated)



Source: CAPA, (13 FEB., 2012) "Financing of Indian airline losses approaching a dead-end", Retrieved from <http://centreforaviation.com/analysis/financing-of-indian-airline-losses-approaching-a-dead-end-67992>, Assessed on 24.1.13.

Indian carriers need to raise up to USD2.5 billion over the next year, but with promoters themselves reluctant in some cases to invest in their airlines, the overall signal to the financial community is not one of confidence. This is likely to impact the growth prospects of the entire sector (CAPA: 2012).

Staff Strength:

The Staff Strength as on 1 Dec. 2011 was 27,393. The number of local staff at foreign stations as on 31st December 2010 was 237. Pending out of turn Appointments on Compassionate grounds as on 31.12.2010 was 758. The Reservation Policy has been implemented as per the Presidential Directives issued in the year 1975, along with the revised Directives effective 1991 and 1996 (MOCA, Annual Reports 2011-12). Currently, the employee strength of Air India is around 26,481, of which 1,439 are pilots and executive pilots, 1,419 are engineers and executive engineers, 5,064 executives and general category officers, 3,064 cabin crew and executive cabin crew, 3,351 technicians or service engineers and 12,146 general category employees(www.ibnlive.in.com).

Table: 1.1: Showing the Personnel Statistics of Air India during the year 2010-11

Personnel Statistics of Air India during 2010-11			
Category of Staff	No. of Personnel		Total Expenditure (in Rs. Million)
	Mid-Year	Year-End	
Pilots and Co-Pilots	659	690	4,385.21
Other Cockpit Personnel	0	0	0.00
Cabin Attendants	1,894	1,852	3,289.54
Maintenance & Overhaul Personnel	2,971	2,878	4,251.31
Ticketing & Sales Personnel	2,428	2,305	2,170.08
All Other Personnel	5,091	4,929	4,243.89
Total	13,043	12,654	18,340.02

Note: Year ended as on 31st march

Source: DGCA, "Air India" Retrieved from <http://dgca.nic.in/reports/rep-ind.htm>, Assessed on 29.1.13

Hr Issue of Merged of Air India

India's Ministry of Civil Aviation on 21-Jun-2012 published the Justice Dharmadhikari Committee report on the human resources issues at Air India created as a result of the 2007 merger between the two airlines. Key recommendations on ways and means of harmonization and rationalization of the merged workforce include:

Pay scales: Fixed pay scales should be as per Indian Department of Public Enterprises (DPE) guidelines from Apr-2007, when the carriers merged;

Workforce levels: New approach to be taken to determine necessary manpower at various levels of Air India, reflecting operational requirements. Establish a fresh setup with revised hierarchy of positions for the merged entity;

Seniority: Seniority to be granted to workers having longer period of service at either Air India or Indian Airlines, above a worker of the same grade with a shorter period of service;

Pilots and engineers: Granted line seniority based on aircraft for which they are trained and licensed;

Cabin crew: Common seniority, pay structure and career progression;

Promotion and career progression: Establishment of departmental promotion committees to recommend and review promotions formed of equal numbers of workers from Air India or Indian Airlines. All promotions to be vacancy-based on the basis of seniority with due regard to merit. No age bar put on promotions;

Pay linked incentives (PLI): Currently paid “without appropriate linkage to operational and financial performance”. Recommend use of DPE guidelines or abandonment of PLI, to be replaced with alternative schemes;

Free Passage Policy: To be restricted to close blood relations who are dependent on employees;

Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS): Formulation of a VRS, available to all employees with a sizable proportion of the benefits available in the form of an Employees Stock Option Plan. In view of “severe financial constraints” at the carrier, it may approach the Indian Government to support a viable VRS scheme, including a listing stock market. 7000 employees eligible for retirement in the next five years.

On 22-Jun-2012, the Ministry of Civil Aviation confirmed Air India had constituted a committee to implement the recommendations of the report. The Ministry will seek special dispensation from the recommendations to the incentives for certain class of employees including pilots, engineers and cabin crew, as such incentives fall beyond the guidelines of the Indian Department of Public Enterprises. The process of fixation of pay, level mapping and seniority is expected to be completed within 6-8 weeks. The carrier has reportedly estimated it would reduce wage costs by INR2.5 billion (USD43.7 million) in the first full year of implementation of the recommendations (**CAPA: June, 2012**).

Employer-Employee Relations in Air India Airlines:

Air India Airlines the name of India's national carrier conjured up an image of a monopoly gone berserk with the absolute power it had over the market. Continual losses over the years, frequent human resource problems and gross mismanagement were just some of the problems that plagued the company. Widespread media coverage of the frequent strikes by Air India pilots not only reflected the adamant attitude of the pilots, but also resulted in increased public resentment towards the airline (www.goodmorningishan).

Air India recurring human resource problems were attributed to its lack of proper manpower planning and underutilization of existing manpower. The recruitment and creation of posts in Air India was done without proper scientific analysis of the manpower requirements of the organization. Air India employee unions were rather notorious for resorting to industrial action on the slightest pretext and their arm-twisting tactics to get their demands accepted by the management (www.goodmorningishan).

Worried over their uncertain future and poor financial condition of Air India, over 600 employees of the national carrier have either resigned or taken voluntary retirement since 2009. Twenty-four pilots and management pilots and 163 cabin crew and executive cabin crew have either resigned or taken VR since 2009, citing various reasons, a senior Air India official said. Six engineers, including executive engineers, 171 executives and general category officers, 59 technicians and 201 general category employees have left the company, he said, adding that a total of 624 employees have either resigned or taken VR. 23 employees resigned or took VR in 2011, 178 in 2010 and 128 in 2009. This year till May, 95 employees have left the company. Of these, 48 employees resigned, while 47 took VR, the official said (www.ibnlive.in.com).

Most of the pilots left the company in 2011, when they found their future "uncertain" in Air India as it was facing cash crunch and other human resources related issues after its merger with Indian Airlines in 2007. Of the 223 employees who left the company during 2011, 92 resigned and 131 took VR. In 2009, 61 employees resigned and 69 took VR, while in 2010 17 resigned and 118 took VRS. With Air India having the highest aircraft to employee ratio of 1:258, it has launched a VR scheme for permanent and confirmed employees who are above 40 years of age and have rendered a continuous service of 15 years. The VRS aims to target around 5,000 employees in a bid to rationalize manpower, as per the recommendation of Justice Dharmadhikari committee

setup for merging of human resources, as part of its turnaround plan, for which Air India board has also given in-principle approval(www.ibnlive.in.com).

Trade Union:

AI has 12 recognized unions covering several categories of workforce such as pilots, aircraft engineers, ground staff and cabin crew, among others. For instance, pilots have two unions- Indian Pilots Guild and the Indian Commercial Pilots Association (ICPA represents IA). For cabin crew, there are the All India Cabin Crew Association and Air Corporation Employees Union (representing IA crew but was derecognized last year for an illegal strike). There are several other unrecognized unions competing to seek a mandate from employees and negotiating powers with the management.

In May last year, nearly 700 members of the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association went on strike, demanding parity of pay and better conditions. They alleged that their colleagues on international routes earned up to \$4,500 a month more than them. The striking pilots were from the former Indian Airlines and were allowed to fly mainly domestic routes while the Air India pilots flew mainly international routes. That meant the latter group received added incentives like international allowances, stay and other benefits. Now it is the other way round. Staffs from the Indian Pilots' Guild, representing pilots from the Air India faction, are striking. This time it is about who gets to fly which aircraft (**Kannan, S.: 2012**).

Cash-strapped Air India, which has 14 unions representing all sections of its employees, has suffered three strikes since its merger, including two by its pilots. The thorny issues rose during these agitations included pay parity and career progression between the staffers of the two erstwhile carriers. Delayed payments of salaries and allowances have also been critical issues which have created unrest among the employees, which has led several pilots and other high-skilled staffers to quit. Almost five years after the merger, the issues of lack of uniformity in pay scales and career progression paths have been causing much heartburn among the staffers (www.m.financialexpress.com).

Strikes:

Fresh from the success of two strikes by pilots of Jet Airways and Air India, the country's 50,000 airline employee's plans to form a nation-wide trade union that will represent pilots, engineers, maintenance staff, cabin crew and ground handling staff. The proposal, put forward by the trade unions of Air India and Jet Airways, is expected to elicit good response from the airline staff that

face job losses and salary cuts, with the domestic airline industry troubled by losses looking to cut employee costs. Frequent cuts in fares due to cut-throat competition and high fuel prices have seen the industry's accumulated losses mounting to around Rs 10,000 crore at the end of the last financial year (**Roy M.: 2009**).

Since 2009, AI employees have organized six strikes-three by pilots and the rest by disgruntled ground staff demanding salary payment. According to experts, now that a partial lockout is apprehended due to the chain of strikes, the government should immediately start an aggressive plan to offer voluntary retirement scheme (VRS) to reduce the workforce and contain the unrest by offering an attractive package (**Mishra, L.: 2012**). Pilots owing allegiance to the Indian Pilots' Guild (IPG), representing cockpit crew of erstwhile Air India had gone on a 58-day strike on the issue of career progression. Their counterparts from erstwhile Indian Airlines, led by Indian Commercial Pilots Association, had also struck work last year on same issues (www.articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com).

The much delayed demerger proposal of strategic business units-engineering and ground handling-if immediately implemented, will reduce the number of employees to 16,000 from 27,000. While 7,000 employees will be moved to the engineering subsidiary called Air India Engineering Services Ltd, the balance will migrate to the ground handling arm called Air India Transport Services Ltd. This would bring down AI's employee strength to 10,000 and with 122 aircraft in its fleet, the employee per aircraft ratio will come down to 82 from 221. But employees do not want to be shifted to these subsidiaries as they would lose their identity, bargaining power, perks and job security (**Mishra, L.: 2012**).

The government had also acknowledged that Air India's precarious financial situation had led to delays in resolving HR issues in the airline. Replying to a question in Parliament last month, former Civil Aviation minister Vayalar Ravi had said, "Some part of the delay in harmonizing is due to the critical financial condition being faced by the company has also contentious issues like level-mapping, compensation harmonization etc. for all employees" (www.m.financialexpress.com).

Suggestions:

The following measures should be taken to achieve harmonious Employer-Employee Relations in Air India Airlines:

Sound Personnel Policies: The policies should be framed in consultation with the employees and their representatives if they are to be executed successfully and unambiguously so that there is no confusion in the mind of anybody. Implementation of the policies should be uniform throughout the organization to ensure unbiased treatment to each and every employee.

Strong and Stable Union: A strong and stable union is essential in Air India Airlines for harmonious Employer-Employee relations. The employers can easily neglect a weak union on the pretext that it hardly represents the workers. Therefore, there must be strong and stable unions in Air India to represent the majority of workers and collaborate with the management about the terms and conditions of employment.

Mutual Trust: Both management and labor should support in the development of an environment of mutual cooperation, self-reliance and admiration. Management should adopt an impartial attitude and should acknowledge the rights of employees. Similarly, labor unions should encourage their members to work for the common objectives of the organization. Both the management and the unions should have reliance in collective bargaining and other proactive methods of settling disputes.

Workers' Participation in Management: The participation of workers in the management of the industrial unit should be encouraged by making effective use of works committees, joint consultation and other methods. This will improve communication between managers and workers, increase productivity and lead to greater effectiveness.

Mutual Accommodation: The employers must be familiar with the right of collective bargaining of the trade unions. In any organization, there must be an immense stress on mutual accommodation rather than conflict or rigid attitude. One must clearly understand that conflicting attitude does not lead to harmonious Employer-Employee relations; it may promote union aggressiveness as the union responds by engaging in pressure tactics. The management should be eager to co-operate rather than threaten the employees.

Government's Role: The Government should play an effective role for promoting industrial peace. It should make law for the compulsory recognition of a representative union in each industrial unit. It should intervene to settle disputes if the management and the workers are unable to settle their disputes. This will reinstate industrial harmony.

Progressive Outlook: There should be progressive outlook of the management of Air India. It should be aware of its duties and responsibilities to the employees, the passengers and the nation.

The management must recognize the rights of workers to unifications to protect their economic and social interests.

Conclusion:

Thus, it is evident that Harmonious Employer-Employee Relations is the basis of higher production with minimum cost and higher profits. It also results in increased efficiency of workers. New and improved strategies may be introduced for the welfare of the workers and to promote the morale of the people at work. Imbalance and disorder in Employer-Employee Relations can only be reshaped when there will be strong and stable unions in every enterprise to represent the majority of workers and negotiate with the management about the terms and conditions of service.

Air India suffers from heavy losses, and also the relations between the employer and employees are not very cordial because of the flash strikes, delay in payment of salaries, mismanagement and poor working conditions. There's a need that the Air India Airlines must have potential human resource policies and sound industrial relations that help the organization to attain its goals, enable it to employ the skills and abilities of the workforce efficiently, assist to bring about employees job satisfaction and self-actualization and establishing and maintaining harmonious Employer-Employee Relation which are essential for the Industrial Peace.

The Government should also play an active role for promoting industrial peace. It should intervene to settle disputes if the management and the workers are unable to settle their disputes. There should be progressive outlook of the management. It should be conscious of its obligations and responsibilities to the owners, the employees, the passengers and the nation.

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