Chapter 12
Airline Culture: International Flight Attendant Service Design

Keiko Yamaki

Abstract The author is Japanese. She became interested in service development for airlines while employed as a member of the cabin crew by an airline (here called H), which while based in Europe flies to Japan. Based on that experience combined with subsequent fieldwork, the research reported here explores changes in the culture of cabin service, paying particular attention to the personal agency exercised by a subset of cabin crew members who are Regional Flight Attendants responsible for providing local language and culturally sensitive service to passengers from their homelands, as they have responded to a changing airline industry environment.

Today's airlines are deeply embedded in the global circulation of people, goods, and capital. They have also been primary actors in promoting changes in their own global culture. As the process of creating a global "airline civilization" has unfolded, they have been forced repeatedly to restructure their organizations in response to changes in their business environment. These changes have strongly influenced both the nature of cabin service and the working conditions of cabin crew members. On the one hand, their jobs have become more demanding. On the other, they have, through service design, maintained a certain distance from their work and continue to enjoy the freedom it offers. They face increasingly stiff demands but remain grateful to the airline for providing the opportunities they enjoy.

12.1 Introduction

The research reported here grew out of observations by the Japanese author while employed as a Regional Flight Attendant (RFA) by a non-Japanese airline that flies to Japan. Using participant observation and interviews, it seeks to clarify changes in airline culture resulting from product development efforts to enhance air travel.

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The development of the modern airline industry allows people to travel long distances quickly. But the airline culture that emerged from this development reflects more than new discoveries and technological advances in aeronautics. It also involves the creation of ways to manage information flows related to the transport of people and things, changes in political and economic institutions, and altered ways of life. As airlines commercialized air travel, they created values that spread through global networks. A new aviation civilization appeared.

As airlines became part of the global circulation of people, goods, and capital, they also became agents of cultural transformation contributing to the emergence of what has been labeled global culture. As airlines restructured their organizations in response to technological and social change, the working conditions of flight attendants were seriously affected. Flight attendants were not, however, passive victims of change.

This report follows the lead of *Enterprise as an Instrument of Civilization* (Hioki 1994) by treating flight attendants as active agents who respond autonomously to airline norms. Using a diachronic approach, it examines changes in work and life design as changes in culture as flight attendants adapted to changes in work environment and procedures.

12.2   Research Method

The research reported here describes the transborder enculturation by the Japanese author primarily while she was working as a flight attendant for a national flagship carrier (hereafter Airline H) based in Europe, an observing participant in what was going on around her from April 2004 to March 2007.[1] Since that time, while residing both inside and outside Japan, she has conducted semistructured interviews concerning working conditions, life plans, and work experience with employees of several airlines. In November 2006 and November 2007, she was given permission by airline D, based in Southeast Asia, and airline O, based in the southern hemisphere, to visit their corporate headquarters, where for 2-week periods, she was able to conduct interviews. Both airlines employed Japanese staff who had left Japanese companies and, in many cases, moved two or three times from one airline to another. Those interviewed included individuals whose combined experience, including airlines that are now out of business, covered five airlines based in Europe, three based in the USA, two based in the Middle East, ten based in Asia, and three based in the southern hemisphere.

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[1] The author did not join an airline for purposes of doing research. She had already been employed as a full-time regular employee by Airline H before she became involved in anthropological research.
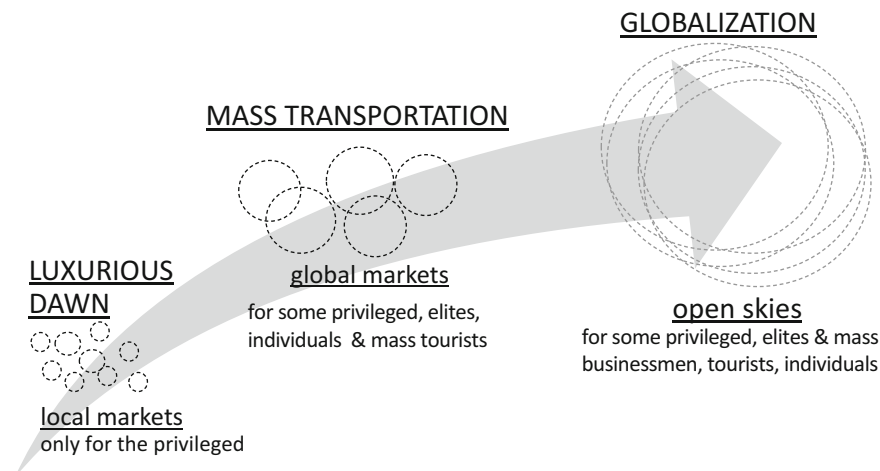
GLOBALIZATION

MASS TRANSPORTATION

LUXURIOUS
DAWN

global markets

for some privileged, elites,
individuals & mass tourists

open skies

for some privileged, elites & mass
businessmen, tourists, individuals

local markets
only for the privileged

Fig. 12.1   Three steps in the creation of airline culture

The analysis presented here employs Atsushi Sumi's conflict approach.[2] The concept of "work design" is used throughout to refer to the details of how flight attendants go about their jobs as seen from their own perspectives.

Transborder work design has been called a "third culture," a culture that emerges in liminal spaces betwixt and between national and ethnic boundaries. In this report, I analyze its emergence diachronically. I see airlines as mechanisms whose dynamics facilitate this third culture's emergence. During this process, there are two major turning points. The first occurred in the 1970s, when the era of mass transportation began. The second occurred in the 1990s, when deregulation's opening-up new markets restructured the industry. These two turning points divide the history of the airline industry into three periods. Here they are labeled (1) Luxurious Dawn, (2) Mass Transportation, and (3) Globalization, as illustrated in the following diagram (Fig. 12.1).

Following the model indicated in this diagram, I will first explain how Airline H, the primary field site for this research, developed flights between Europe and Japan for which Japanese flight attendants were employed. I will then examine how the work environment of Japanese flight attendants changed, following the shift to, first, global markets and then open skies. I will focus, in particular, on Japanese Regional Flight Attendants (RFA) employed to use their native language and service literacy to serve as intermediaries between their non-Japanese colleagues and Japanese passengers. I will then address how these RFA altered their work design to adapt to changes in their work environment.

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[2] From an anthropology of administration perspective, there are two approaches, consensus, and conflict to the study of organizations. The consensus approach is focused on the values, customs, and habits shared by members of the organization and variously labeled corporate, organizational, or management culture. In contrast, the conflict approach focuses attention on differences between members of the organization that arise because they are active agents with different perspectives on the positions they occupy and the roles that they play. Work culture, also known as the culture of the workplace, is seen as the outcome of active agents' interactions (Sumi 2007: 314–318).

12.3 The Airline as a Mechanism of Civilization

12.3.1 Luxurious Dawn (1900s–1960s)

The Wright brothers achieved the world's first manned flight in 1903. The world's first air transport company, Deutsche Luftschiffahrts-Aktiengesellschaft (DELAG), was established in 1909. Airships became airplanes.

Anticipating chaos like that which followed World War I, the International Civil Aviation Organization[3] was founded in 1944. Its establishment reflected a global consensus on the need to ensure safety in the air. Since airlines were recognized as essential components of national infrastructure, it became common practice for national governments to provide the funds required to establish and operate international airlines.

After the end of World War II, airlines developed, primarily in the countries that had won the war. At this early stage, aircraft were salons restricted to society's elite. Only high government officials, top executives, and movie stars could dream of flying.

12.3.2 Mass Transportation (1970s–1980s)

Figure 12.2 shows changes in international air traffic, as reported by the United Nations World Tourism Organization, with projections through 2030 (UNWTO 2014).

Around 1960, international air traffic gradually began to increase. Jet engines made it possible for airplanes to fly at higher speeds, shortening the time required to travel from one point to another. Cheaper travel led expansion of networks as new routes were opened. With the advent of the Boeing 747, nicknamed the "jumbo jet," the era of air travel as mass transportation truly began. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the increase in international air travel accelerated. The skies were becoming a global market.

As airlines became mass transportation for ordinary people, the airlines divided airplane cabins into separate sections. In the first jumbo jets, the upstair cabin was reserved for first class. Equipped with a lounge and a bar, it offered a full range of luxury amenities. Seats for the masses were in the lower cabin.

During the travel boom of the 1980s, airlines noticed that many repeat customers were among the global business elite. Many airlines added business class sections and established frequent flyer programs to reward these special customers.

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[3] The Convention on International Civil Aviation (Chicago Convention) administered by the ICAO strengthened air safety regulations and established rules for training personnel to minimize accidents and other incidents.
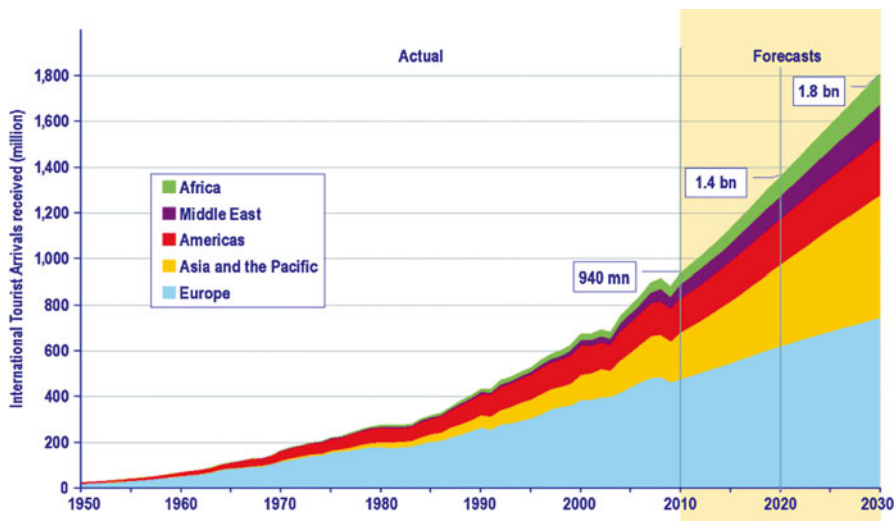
Fig. 12.2 UNWTO tourism toward 2030: actual trend and forecast 1950–2030

For European and Asian airlines, the 1980s were "the glory years." In American skies, however, deregulation was intensifying competition and forcing restructuring. When airlines were deregulated in 1978, during the Carter administration, the first low-cost carriers (LCCs) entered the market. Mergers and acquisitions followed. Some airlines, including Pan American World Airways, the world's largest, were forced into bankruptcy. In the EU, the first steps toward deregulation were taken 9 years later in 1987. British Airways was privatized. The European air travel market began to resemble that in America.

12.3.3   Globalization (1990 to the Present)

Around 1990, the airline industry changed dramatically. Airlines were forced to adapt to three major changes at once: (1) the restructuring of national and ethnic borders, (2) new technology, and (3) market globalization.

The Cold War between the USA and USSR had provided a fixed framework that shaped dynamic, global flows of people, goods, money, and information. Airlines from capitalist countries were not able to fly through the airspace of the former USSR and other members of the Communist bloc. With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, routes linking Japan and Europe via Moscow or Siberia were added.

In 1989, East and West Germany were reunited. Large numbers of people moved from former Eastern bloc countries to the West. Iraq invaded Kuwait, starting the Gulf War. In 1991, allied bombing began, the scale of the war increased. In 1993,

the European Union was formed. In 1997, Hong Kong reverted to China. In 2001, the USA suffered multiple terrorist attacks. The second Iraq War, which began in 2003, continued through 2011. Political instability transformed global flows of people. All airlines had to change their routes. New generations of aircraft made nonstop travel possible.

12.3.4   Technological Innovation

Advances in aviation technology and aviation engineering also made it possible to build larger airplanes, thus making it possible to carry larger numbers of passengers on each flight. In 1989, Boeing introduced the 747-400 "high-tech jumbo," making it possible to fly safely with only two pilots.

Cabin noise was reduced. Interiors based on ergonomics and usability appeared. Improvements in refrigeration allowed development of new menus for in-flight food service. Innovation drove a shift of focus from safety to comfort.

During the last years of the twentieth century, ticketing systems taking advantage of information and communication technology (ICT) were developed. Combined with the spread of credit cards, the development of these new systems allowed passengers to book seats and request special meals from personal computers in their homes.

12.3.5   Open Skies and Airline Restructuring

The USA was the first to implement an open-skies policy. That was in 1992. Airlines were further deregulated, and airport networks restructured into hub-and-spoke systems. New business models, yield management[4] and computer reservation systems,[5] appeared. Airline alliances were launched in 1997, allowing multiple carriers to share the same ICT systems.

In the EU, airline deregulation was completed in 1997. Mergers and acquisitions shrunk the number of airlines operating in the EU. LCCs entered the market. A number of airlines required massive injections of capital to survive through the early 1990s. Those from member states of the European Union received US$10.4 billion in "state aid" in the period up to 1995 which was government funding provided after approval by the European Commission. In addition, several airlines received government funds of various kinds totaling nearly $1.3 billion but not categorized by

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[4] A system for managing reservations and setting prices to maximize financial returns by carrying as many passengers as possible

[5] A system for making airline seat and hotel reservations. When relaxing regulation made it possible to adjust prices freely, complicated terminals were inefficient. The airline industry as a whole banded together to create a shared infrastructure.

the European Commission as "state aid" (Doganis 2003: 1–2). Now they would have to sink or swim on their own.

This completes our brief review of airline industry history in the century that followed the first manned flight in 1903. During that century, air travel as a cultural mechanism became an indispensable infrastructure for all humanity.

12.4   Airline H and Regional Flight Attendants

In this section, we begin our discussion of the impact of the changes described above on Regional Flight Attendants (RFA). RFA occupy a special position different from that of other flight attendants. The primary fieldwork site from which the data described in this section is taken was Airline H.

12.4.1   Overview of Airline H

Airline H, the primary fieldwork site for this research, is a national flagship carrier and the core of a group of more than 400 subsidiary companies that handle air cargo, catering, aeronautical engineering, IT systems, and everything else required to keep one of Europe's largest airlines flying. According to the annual report published at the end of 2008, the year in which the field research was conducted, the Airline H group had 105,300 employees. Its 2,030 flights per day to more than 200 cities in 90 countries carried approximately 62.9 million passengers per year. Its corporate advertising proudly boasted of participation in UN global compacts and presented the airline as a major global player in its industry. The ads talked about its concern for its airplane exhaust emissions and the need to reduce fuel consumption, philanthropic activities in impoverished countries, voluntary participation in relief efforts following natural disasters, and respect for nonnative employees' human rights.

12.4.2   Airline H and Nonnative Flight Attendants

Airline H's homeland is a multiethnic country. 19 % of its citizens are immigrants, and 8 % of its population is composed of foreign residents, who may speak their own languages. In terms of religion, it is 62.8 % Christian, 5 % Muslim, and 0.3 % Jewish.

At Airline H's headquarters, employees with different birthplaces, citizenships, ethnicities, and mother tongues work side by side. They can all communicate in the same language, English, and cultural differences present no barriers. According to Airline H's PR materials, 34.5 % of Airline H employees work outside of the

Table 12.1 Fractions H
airline's flight attendants by
regional group

International Group at the headquarters	94.68 %
Japanese RFA	1.70 %
Indian RFA	1.46 %
Chinese RFA	1.46 %
Thai & Korean RFA	0.70 %

airline's homeland. Employees from Asian or Arab countries, who speak different languages, are used as welcoming agents, whose role is to function as intermediaries between passengers and the airline. In its annual report, the airline speaks positively of being a multicultural organization: "A company that embraces different cultures creates a cosmopolitan platform, making possible for it to create an inclusive and cooperative multicultural corporate culture."

The airline's 14,000 flight attendants include a large number of nonnatives, but there is one group, in particular, employed for special reasons and treated differently from other employees. Its members form groups with their own distinctive cultures and norms to which group members are strongly attached. They behave in ways that set them apart from Airline H's European employees. Their function is to serve as "culture brokers"[6] on routes where passengers include large numbers of their compatriots. At Airline H, members of this group are called Regional Flight Attendants (RFA). As indicated in Table 12.1, RFA are only a tiny proportion of all flight attendants.

Nonnative RFA are a small minority. It should be noted, however, that there are also many other nonnatives in the headquarters' International Group, and it is possible for RFA to transfer to the International Group.

Airline H's RFA managers and trainers believe that if done right, the RFA's job involves a distinctive "service literacy,[7]" based on the RFA and passengers' shared language and culture. But while recognizing the importance of the shared mother tongue and other national and ethnic cultural characteristics, they pay no special attention to citizenship or religion.

RFA not only serve as interpreters for in-flight announcements. They also participate as intermediaries in meetings between headquarters and subsidiary staff, assist in providing route-specific training to other employees, and contribute to developing advertising and service programs.

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[6] According to Dennison Nash, the travel and tourism industry culture brokers are specialists who provide support for guests' travel experience by intervening to prevent differences in culture and habits from causing problems (Nash 1989: 45).

[7] Service literary is the ability to use relevant information in appropriate ways through which both service providers and service recipients achieve their goals (Yamaki 2014: 138).

12.5   The Changing Flight Attendant Work Environment

During the formation of airline civilization, the flight attendant's work environment has changed repeatedly. In this section, I focus specifically on the experience of Japanese RFA employed by Airline H.

12.5.1   The Luxurious Dawn: Airline H Japanese Flight Attendants

The world's first female flight attendant was an American nurse named Ellen Church.[8] The year was 1930. To solidify the image of air travel as safe and secure, one airline after another began to employ women.

As international travel increased, cultural differences between flight attendants and passengers who spoke different languages began to be problems for in-flight service. The earliest attempt to address these problems was in 1955, when US-based Pan American World Airways employed its first Japanese-American flight attendant. She was the first known example of a Regional Flight Attendant who functioned as a culture broker.

When Airline H began flying to Japan in 1961, it employed two Japanese flight attendants who worked only on routes between Europe and Japan. They were labeled "Kimono Stewardesses" and required to wear kimono, their native costume, at all times. While primarily interpreters and explainers of in-flight announcements, they also provided guidance on escape procedures in case of accidents, explained immigration forms, and answered questions about how to transfer to continuing flights. Their role was to answer whatever questions a passenger might ask. One informant recalls that in 1964 when it became possible for any Japanese to obtain a passport for overseas travel, "There was almost no one seen as suitable to represent the nation and the company who could also speak English."

Like their predecessor at Pan American World Airways, Airline H Kimono Stewardesses not only represented the airline. They were also living displays of an idealized Japanese culture. One of the members of the inaugural class recalls that "In any case, we were often used in ads" (Yagai 1987).

Having to wear kimono throughout long flights caused many problems. But when attempts were made to explain these problems to Airline H managers, who didn't understand how kimono are made and worn, their grievances met a wall of misunderstanding. When the flight attendants complained about the gaudy colors preferred by Western Europeans and said that they hated the comment "Japanese move so slowly," often heard because of how they had to carry themselves while wearing kimono, they were told, "No one outside Japan understands Japanese culture, and Japan lost the war. You have to put up with it" (Yagai 1987).

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[8]Church was employed by Boeing Air Transport, the precursor to what is today United Airlines.

12.5.2   Mass Transportation: The International Travel Boom

With the arrival of the jumbo jets, it became possible for a single flight to carry as many as 350–500 passengers. As air travel became mass transportation, ordinary but affluent people began to travel overseas.

Economy class became a mass-produced service. A manual prescribed standard procedures. To maximize efficiency, service had to be quick and simple. At the same time, however, new products and services intended to reduce in-flight boredom were developed. In-flight movies and music programs were translated into Japanese. Japanese-language newspapers and magazines were provided. Simple Japanese meals were added to in-flight menu options.

When permission was granted to fly across Siberia in 1988, direct flights between Japan and Western Europe were started. Travel time was around 12 h one way. As the number of corporate elite traveling overseas increased, airlines introduced new business class concepts. Offered at a price twice to that of economy class but only half to that of first class, business class became very popular.

Japanese RFA employed by Airline H were no longer Kimono Stewardesses. They wore the same uniforms and had the same safety and service responsibilities as other flight attendants. Since they also had to serve as culture brokers for Japanese passengers, their workload was heavy. Many Japanese passengers complained if the service they received did not meet their expectations. They directed these complaints at the Japanese RFA, who, since they spoke Japanese, were expected to share the same sense of what good service consists of.

12.5.3   Deregulation and Industry Restructuring

In the period from the early 1990s to the end of the twentieth century, only airlines able to adapt to free market competition and globalization, the two biggest changes in their operating environment, were able to survive. In 1992, Airline H experienced a historic management crisis. Labor struggles erupted. The workplace atmosphere was filled with tension and anxiety. As competition between airlines intensified, a "service war" erupted. There were numerous cases of overwork due to providing continuous throughout flights. Flight attendants were angry, but because economies were trapped in recession and unemployment rates were rising, a split emerged between those who demanded better working conditions and those just trying to protect themselves.

The opening of routes across Siberia created a flow of people traveling from Africa or South America via Europe to Asia. According to an internal survey conducted by Airline H, at the start of the 1990s, more than half of its passengers were nonnatives of its homeland. This led to an attempt to rebuild its identity as a national flag carrier. It also became increasingly clear that a small percentage of repeat travelers accounted for more than half of the airline's sales.

Given these circumstances, Airline H dramatically raised the level of service in its first- and business class cabins on long-distance flights. Multicourse meals featuring traditional homeland cuisine were added to in-flight menus. A comprehensive effort was made to develop programs and systems to train personnel to provide a higher level of service.

Then, on top of a heavier workload, Airline H employees found themselves facing restructuring. Several 1,000 flight attendants were laid off and rehired by a newly established subsidiary, where they were confined to clerical jobs. These trends widened the gap between RFA and other employees.

The early 1990s saw a substantial increase in the number of Japanese RFA. Large numbers of new Indian, Thai, Chinese, and Korean RFA were also hired. While these new RFA were not subject to the restructuring described above, they were, however, offered contracts with terms substantially different from those in previous contracts. They were required to reside in the airline's homeland. Their salaries were lower. Previous height and weight requirements were eliminated, and age limits were also relaxed. Married individuals and men could qualify by taking tests.

In 1997, Airline H was privatized. The year before, the CEO had traveled to over 200 cities to hold local meetings. The meeting at the Japan subsidiary in Tokyo was a large one, with all of the airline's locally based Japanese employees participating. Some spoke up and voiced their dissatisfaction with the failure of Airline H's service offerings, shaped by its homeland's values, to understand and fully meet the needs of Japanese passengers. This direct confrontation with the CEO became a first step toward greater mutual understanding of issues surrounding cultural differences.

12.5.4   Globalization and Open-Skies Policies

With the introduction of open skies policies, air travel became a single market. During this period, Airline H's management strategy comprised three elements: (1) bifurcation of service between luxury and mass economy poles, (2) services corresponding to a greater diversity of passengers, and (3) stronger risk management.

Around the year 2000, the privileged, wealthy elite disappeared from airplane cabins. They preferred their own private jets or aircraft leased from the airlines, thus avoiding the mass transportation that air travel had become.

International businessmen took their place in first class. There were also numerous frequent flyers in economy class. These favored passengers were those who made the greatest contribution to Airline H's revenue. The largest proportion was managers or specialists who made frequent overseas trips.

Service was divided into luxury/full-service and mass economy segments. World-famous chefs were hired to develop special haute cuisine menus and direct preparation of authentic ethnic dishes for first class and business class. In contrast, food offerings in economy class were reduced to casual dining. The range of menus was, however, expanded to include local specialties as well as options for those with

health issues, weight concerns, or religious prohibitions. Scientific studies were conducted to ensure that food would remain attractive and still be tasty in pressurized cabins with thin air. In-flight movies and other entertainment were digitalized and made available in multiple languages.

Pursuit of greater cabin comfort was not, however, the only issue. Following the multiple terrorist attacks in the USA in 2001, security training for flight attendants was strengthened. Every Airline H employee was required to report personal information covering the previous 10 years to border police. RFA were required to submit documentary proof annually that they had committed no criminal acts in the previous year.

During the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemics, there were many empty seats. Aircraft became transmission vectors for the West Nile virus and Ebola hemorrhagic fever. Everyone became more conscious of the "water's edge." Risk management was repeatedly strengthened to make air travel safer.

12.6 Flight Attendant Work Design

We turn now to what my Japanese RFA informants told me about changes in work design as they adapted to changing business environments.

12.6.1 Transborder Work and Being Japanese

When airplane cabins were salons for the elite and affluent, many Japanese flight attendants were from relatively high-class families. At a time when less than 15 % of women attended college, many had graduated from famous universities. They had participated in student exchange programs or grown up in families where English was frequently spoken.

When air travel changed to mass transport, flight attendants also changed. Many of my informants had left jobs with Japanese companies to join Airline H in the early 1970s. When I asked the reason for this move, the answer was frequently to escape discrimination against women. In an era when there was no equal opportunity employment law,[9] flight attendants were models for women in the same age cohort who wanted to work until retirement and be economically independent. Because of the weakness of the yen, their salaries seemed high. They enjoyed the freedom this type of career offered. Those who joined during the international travel boom and the years of the economic bubble saw themselves as pioneers, opening the way for women to enter the public sphere and travel overseas.

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[9] Inaugurated in 1986, the equal opportunity law prohibits discrimination between men and women in the workplace and requires that men and women be treated equally in recruiting, hiring, raises, promotions, training, retirement, and dismissal.

Then came the time-space compression that Harvey (1990: 140) writes about. Flight attendants' working hours and the burdens of the job changed. Flight attendants became migrant workers. When airlines flew from Japan to Europe via the southern route, flight attendants' trips abroad lasted for 17 days. With the start of direct, 12-h flights from Japan to Europe, round trips lasted only 3 or 4 days. With travel time between Japan and Europe reduced, they seemed to be living in both worlds at once. Long-distance relationships became an everyday experience. Possessions, food, and other habits were all sources of cultural confusion. As Japanese, they missed the experience of changing seasons and weather.

During the 1990s, when larger numbers of Japanese RFA were employed, their work conditions changed dramatically. Once again, the new RFA came from different backgrounds. When these RFA joined Airline H, Japan had just entered its "lost two decades" and "the Japanese employment system[10]" was collapsing. According to many informants, "There wasn't any work in Japan." Leaving Japan and its weak economy behind to work overseas for an airline seemed like a better option. But once these RFA crossed over, they couldn't go back. When I asked, "How do you feel about the differences in pay and treatment between yourself and older attendants who do the same work?" the reply was, "We don't like it, but in times like there is no point in complaining." "We are glad to have work that we like in times as bad as these," they said. Those who had been employed during the airline's golden era said, "We wanted to meet different people and travel abroad." In contrast to such innocent dreams, those employed in the 1990s are ambivalent. Their statements display a complex mixture of push and pull motives.

The glory days of airlines were over. Working hours were increasing and the pressure going up. Incomes were falling. But the Japanese RFA working for Airline H still felt lucky that their jobs working for the airline were more secure than jobs in Japan. All Japanese RFA, including those who live in Japan, are covered by the labor laws of Airline H's homeland. Average working hours are shorter than they are in Japan, and paid vacations are longer. Benefits, insurance, and pensions are all provided, and nonnatives are not segregated in a separate category. If RFAs want to change jobs and join the airline's International Group, its subsidiary companies offer alternative careers. Almost all Japanese RFA, however, choose to remain RFA. They remain transborder workers.

12.6.2   Business Strategy and Culture Brokers

Airlines are transborder businesses. Even employees who work on the ground work day and night. At Airline H, every employee is involved every day in business with someone else on the other side of the world.

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[10] The Japanese employment system referred to here is the combination of seniority pay, lifetime employment, and company unions adopted by Japanese corporations during Japan's postwar economic growth. Its intent was to promote harmonious labor relations and develop human capital in-house. During the half century after the war, its effects permeated Japanese society.

Marc Augé has labeled airplane cabins "non-places" and discussed the experience of being betwixt and between (Augé 1995: 94). In an airplane, the crew and the passengers become for a limited time a community with the same destiny. Regardless of their passports, they are, as they travel from one country to another, in neither country. The cabin is a peculiar place in which people young and old, male and female, people of different nationality, ethnicity, language religion, and occupation are, for the duration of the flight, confined in the same ambiguous space. While on the cutting edge of borderless circulation of culture, the cabin is, at the same time extraordinary, a kind of community with its own rules and feeling of solidarity. In that space, service industry values and the national culture of the country where the airline is based provide a basic framework, but each flight becomes a space with its own specific culture.

Airline H decided to require that its Japanese RFA live in its home country to reduce labor costs. As far as Airline H was concerned, its Japanese RFA would no longer be treated as expats with a special status and perks.

Conversely, globalization made Airline H managers increasingly respectful of regional cultures. Top executives came to recognize that the "local knowledge" accumulated by RFA was a source of profit for a company facing global competition. Flight attendants attached to the International Group underwent dozens of hours of training to understand multiple foreign cultures. Meanwhile, the old slogan "Airline H is the people's company" came to be rarely mentioned at all.

Airline H's Japanese flight attendants found themselves required to "provide perfect Japanese service." Authenticity had become a product value. Most Japanese RFA failed to embody the value that Airline H hoped to realize from them.

Why? Because Japanese RFA were without exception, even before employed, women who distanced themselves from Japanese culture and the constraints imposed by Japanese norms. They accepted being "model Japanese" as part of their job but responded coldly to being told "behave like Japanese" or "because you are Japanese."

12.6.3   Model Japanese Outside Japan

All of my Japanese RFA interviewees had joined Airline H because they "aspired to a world outside Japan." All spoke positively of being transborder individuals. Many had rebelled against Japanese culture and deliberately tried to escape from Japanese work environments. They were disturbed by Japan's salaryman culture and ideal career image, its notions of how ideal women and men should behave, and its organizational and social norms. Not a few said that they had joined Airline H because they were searching for a different way of life.

Nonetheless, Japanese RFA formed their own community, a community with its own norms, inside the big company that was Airline H. During our interviews,

many Japanese flight attendants expressed their distaste for the vertical power relationships within that community. It did, however, seem to function effectively as a work and training mechanism.

After their basic training, Japanese newcomers are trained in service techniques by flight attendants senior to them. They, thus, acquire a new "ethnically Japanese" culture. They have no alternative.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Airline H had hired 15 or so newcomers each year. On any given flight, a newcomer would be only one of four attendants. They were expected to take direction from those senior to them and gradually grow into the job. Through private conversations, they acquired knowledge and information about the company and their workplace. Job-related training contributed to building community.

In 1990, however, the number of Japanese RFA was doubled, from 100 to 200. It then became impossible for each newcomer to receive individualized instruction from those with more work experience. Since newcomers went home immediately after landing in the airline's home country, opportunities for private conversation diminished.

Required to live in the airline's home country, Japanese RFA had to accustom themselves to the life there. Japanese RFA began to form a new type of community. Unlike other airline employees who lived in Japan, for whom workplace ties were the basis of community, those who lived abroad formed a community rooted in everyday life. What was public and what was private was up to the individual. When newcomers expressed grievances about their jobs, the community formed by Japanese RFA living abroad became involved in revamping training programs and revising the manual given to Japanese newcomers. Training now began before newcomers left Japan.

A common refrain in my interviews with Japanese RFA was "Getting along with my Japanese colleagues is much harder than getting along with the non-Japanese." But this observation was not confined to Japanese. Members of other ethnic groups also faced similar issues. Members of the same ethnic group strictly enforce group standards. In contrast, a multicultural workplace, where differences were accepted, is more forgiving. That is why Japanese RFA cherished and defended their special position, emphasizing their independence and refusing to be grouped together with other Japanese and ethnically Japanese workers employed by the headquarters' International Group.

12.6.4   Work Design as a Life Strategy

Because Airline H employees have long vacations, a substantial number of flight attendants live in places distant from the company offices or airports from which they fly. Low-priced commuter tickets for employees make it possible to live in

other cities in the airline's home country or commute from other countries in Europe. Some flight attendants behave like seasonal workers, using work-sharing arrangements to concentrate their work in a few months each year. Some Japanese RFA who live in the airline's home country are married with families in Japan. Their work environment allows them to work in one country and marry and live in another. Some who live in Japan commute from Kansai, Tohoku, or Kyushu. By saving up paid leave, they can then both enjoy overseas travel and fulfilling private lives.

Most Japanese RFA are, however, not interested in being promoted to management. They may be ambitious to increase their expertise and improve their skills, but those who are actively interested in pursuing executive careers are rare. Because they are passionate about cabin service, they may find creative ways to improve service and will do everything in their power for the passengers with whom they deal. Beyond these limits, however, they are interested primarily in having a fulfilling private life.

While conducting my research, I was asked by a manger why Japanese RFA don't cooperate with the company. She found it difficult to understand that they are more committed to their jobs than to the organization.

When I asked Japanese RFA who live in the airline's home country, if they wanted to go back to Japan, many answered, "I am constantly traveling to Japan. I receive information from Japan every day. If I want to return, I can. But my ideal life is one in which I travel back and forth between the same two countries for a year." Those who answer this way do not perceive themselves as immigrants committed to life in a new country.

Meanwhile, Japanese RFA who live in Japan say, "I want to go on working because I like to travel." In both cases, my informants maintain a subtle distance between themselves and their native culture. They prefer a workplace with a lenient "third culture" in which they are not forced to act in culturally prescribed ways. Even though the work is hard, they enjoy working betwixt and between different cultures and aim to be thoroughly professional. These results were not confined to Airline H. Interviewees at other airlines expressed the same preferences.

When I asked my informants what is most difficult about their jobs, they frequently said, "Having to serve as a mediator between non-Japanese flight attendants and Japanese passengers who sometimes don't understand what is happening"; "Sometimes I just can't understand people from the airline's home country, no matter how hard I try"; "I hate people saying, 'Because you are Japanese'"; or "It bothers me when some people arbitrarily draw a line between us and say 'You're an RFA' or when others remove a line and say 'we are all members of the same crew'." They are willing to adapt themselves to the airline's nationality and ethnic character and accept the company's demands to "be good Japanese." But in their private lives, they don't want to be bound by either identity. They want a work environment designed to be as accepting and forgiving as possible. To the Japanese RFA, Airline H is a mechanism that allows her to design a boundary-crossing life into which her native culture fits loosely and comfortably.

12.7 Conclusion

An airline company is a mechanism for mass producing a service product called air travel. Its people participate in an organization with a large and complex division of labor. Considered as a mechanism of civilization, the company provides a platform for human lives.

Airline H's headquarters are in Europe. When forced to adapt to globalization, as one form of restructuring, it transformed its corporate culture to embrace cultural diversity.

Flight attendants are part of its organization and forced to adapt to its work environment. Those who survive in this organization reflect in their work design the greater freedom and acceptance that cultural diversity makes possible. While contributing through their work to the airline as a mechanism of aviation civilization, they themselves enjoy the benefits that civilization brings.

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