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RAISE THE LEVEL OF AIRPORT PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCE: A CHALLENGE IN THE "LAND OF NO ONE BELONGING TO EVERYONE"

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SUMMARY

Background: *According to an estimate by IATA (International Air Transport Association), people who decided to use the plane, during the year before the Covid-19 pandemic, amounted to more than four billion. People working inside airports face every day challenges and difficulties that not insiders cannot even imagine, but which have to be considered in strategic training projects, where people has to be placed at the centre of the training action.*

Subjects and methods: *The GHA project (Genius Handling and Academy) was born with the aim of increasing the quality of the professional commitment made by airport professionals, preparing them to adequately face not only the technical-operational challenges but also the psychological ones underlying a complex and particular environment. such as the airport one. The year 2018 has been the starting point of this training project, the bettering of professional qualification has been the goal during the year 2019, up to the first part of 2020 (March). The headquarters of the pilot project was the 'Leonardo Da Vinci' Rome International Airport. The sample was composed by 25 employees of the 'Genius Handling' , a company operating inside the airport.*

Results: *The results collected at the end of the training period recorded a 37% increase in the quality of professional performance compared to the previous period in which no training activity was carried out.*

Conclusions: *When the airport world had to stop in order to take the restrictive measures for containing contagion, the importance of the airport reality in everyone's economic and professional life has become immediately evident. So, it has become even more urgent to work in implementation and encouraging research and experimentation, with the aim not only to promote the well-being of people who are in transit, but of its 'permanent residents' as well, that is, people who spend their working days there.*

Key words: *airports - innovative strategic training - professional performance*

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INTRODUCTION

The airport areas were defined by Marc Augé (2009) land of non-places, as opposed to anthropological ones, because they are spaces without the prerogative of being identitarian, relational and historical. At the end of 2017, the "flying" passengers exceeded 4 billion per year, recording a constant percentage increase every year, for example adding 7.4% compared to 2016, according to the data presented on June 2019 by IATA (International Air Transport Association, 2017).

However, the unforeseen crisis caused by Covid 19, still in progress, has determined, since March 2020, the put in place a series of restrictive measures, adopted to face and contain the pandemic, with the consequence of a significant drop in the overall volume of travelers. There is no doubt that, when fully operational, airplain is one of the most used means of transport, because of the characteristics of our current political and economic system of things, therefore a stop in this sector determines a substantial stop in all human activities.

In addition to this, we must consider that, historically, immediately after the end of a period of great instability, there is usually a strong propensity towards the restarting of normal activities as well as looking for events, such as for example, travels, that could constitute a sort of escape and restore reassuring normality as soon as possible (Rogers 1978). If the future of the airport sector was determined, until 2019, by the safety of flights, and also by the development of hubs, able to better accommodate travelers, entertain them, make them serene and help them to face states of anxiety and fears related to transit, now, due to the present situation, an additional element has to be taken into consideration, that is the feeling of anxiety related to possible infections contracted in flight or in the airport area (Lowen 1978, Spurio 2016, 2020). The close correlation between the comfort of an environment and the state of physical, psychological and well-being in general, has been proven by numerous studies. (Spurio 2018).

Great international architecture studies, also, which have always paid attention to the design of airports as if they were destinations in themselves, attractive, comfortable and technological, will certainly have to add the security element, from every point of view, even the health one. Cities within cities, in which to love to stay, to be sad when leaving and, perhaps, hoping to return to.

Airports can therefore be considered one of the last challenging frontiers for the researcher and for any professional who, in airline and handling companies, and in general, in the entire airport sector, has the interest in let these places become more important and significant for everyone's life.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Planning the changement in airports: GHA project

"Today we must learn to move between organizations just as our ancestors learned to cultivate fields and raise livestock" cit. Peter Drucker, 1996.

The primary goal for the company success, is therefore change, in the sense of an organizational redesign of spaces and relationships.

Organizational planning should include the following phases:

- Detection of the problem, analysis of the problem and the situation, identification and evaluation of possible alternative solutions;
- Choice of a solution, implementation;
- Evaluation and publication of the results.

Description of GHA project

GHA is an acronym that defines a research work and collaboration between the groups of the 'Genius Academy' and 'Genius Handling, starting the month of March 2018, whose professional team's objective was to better the level of individual performance for professionals working in the airport world.

This is an innovative strategic training programme specifically designed to prepare, not only for technical operational challenges, but also for numerous psychological challenges deriving from working in a very particular environment such as the airport.

The pilot project started in March 2018 and involved an experimentation for the whole year 2019 and the first three-months period of 2020 inside Leonardo Da Vinci International Airport, with the priority focus of studying and improving professional performance, and, derived focus, to raise the level of well-being perceived by people in airport transit. The sample was composed by 25 employees of Genius Handling, operating inside Leonardo Da Vinci Airport, 56% between 20-30 years old, 28% between 31-40 and 16% between 41-50. 12% of these have a University Degree and 78% a high school graduation.

The period

The pilot project lasted two years from March 2018 to March 2020, divided in the following phases:

1) March to August 2018: project preparation;
2) September to December 2018: project presentation to the staff and start of implementation;
3) January 2019 to March 2020 (the project stopped the beginning of March because of the emergency related to Covid-19): operation of the project.

Evaluations

Starting data

In the last three-month period of 2018, the object of evaluations was to be the initial reference data in order to evaluate the bettering of performance in the following period, in which the training intervention took place. Infact, until that time, no personnel control and management plan had never taken place, consequently no objective data was available.

Ongoing monitoring

During the entire year 2019, ongoing monitoring evaluation was carried out with the dual objective of testing the increase and at the same time, to identify the critical issues on which to intervene.

Final evaluation

The last three-month period evaluation was based on objectively detectable data, for example the number of delays in entry/ days of absence due to illness/ omitted non-justified stamping. The data was collected and processed through automatic detection systems. The program that was used, returned a numeric evaluation for each member of the team. The table 1 shows the individual performance value of the 25 employees. The maximum value of the individual indicator is 100 points resulting from the sum of the "type A" evaluation of the organizational performance (max value of 65 points) and the "type B" individual performance (max value of 35 points).

Table 1 "type A and type B evaluation"

The type A evalutation was completed by a tybe B evaluation, committed to a group of three supervisors with a specific responsibility for personnel management and team building, which concerned:

Quality of the contribution

Personal and professional flexibility/support and help to colleagues/ability to perform enriched tasks/ ability to adapt to changes

Demonstrated skills

Precision, time-keeping, productivity/attention to the image of corporate reliability among colleagues and customers/ability to relate to customers and colleagues/ ability to propose innovative solutions/organization skills and planning/ability to produce the expected results.

Professionalism

Level of commitment made/ability in the transmission of skills/motivation for work/problem solving/team leader and team building/knowledge and application of procedures/professional and personal attention of care and image.

The first evalutation was carried out at the end of the first three-month period of 2019 at the beginning of the pilot project, and repeated thereafter on a three-month period basis.

The overall data collection which has made it possible to identify the priority areas of intervention and draw the first frame of possible solutions.

Strategic training measures put in place

The training intervention concerned: general meetings with small groups, and individual ones.

Table 1. Type A and type B evaluation

2018			2019		Three-period month				% growth			
SPV	CATEGORY	IV	SPV	CATEGORY	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV
1	A	89	1	A	97	95	97	98	9	7	9	10
2	A	79	2	A	80	88	90	95	1	11	14	20
3	A	75	3	A	82	82	88	93	10	10	18	25
4	A	74	4	A	78	85	83	90	6	15	13	22
5	B	71	5	B	79	79	81	87	11	11	14	23
6	B	69	6	B	79	81	84	87	14	17	21	26
7	B	67	7	B	78	73	77	84	16	8	14	25
8	B	66	8	B	75	79	75	81	13	19	13	22
9	B	61	9	B	67	60	59	67	10	-2	-3	10
10	B	58	10	B	66	70	73	75	13	20	25	29
11	B	58	11	B	63	63	68	73	9	9	18	27
12	B	57	12	B	61	61	73	78	6	6	27	36
13	B	57	13	B	62	68	71	73	9	20	25	29
14	B	53	14	B	55	61	68	75	5	16	29	43
15	B	52	15	B	61	65	66	78	17	25	27	50
16	B	52	16	B	61	68	75	83	18	32	45	61
17	B	50	17	B	57	61	71	73	15	23	43	47
18	B	48	18	B	50	51	61	52	4	6	26	8
19	B	48	19	B	55	60	66	68	15	26	38	42
20	C	47	20	C	53	55	65	70	13	17	38	49
21	C	46	21	C	52	59	64	71	12	27	38	53
22	C	42	22	C	48	51	60	63	15	22	44	51
23	C	35	23	C	40	40	48	53	16	16	39	53
24	C	31	24	C	35	37	41	50	13	20	33	62
25	C	29	25	C	40	45	51	57	37	55	75	96
		IV 2018			I 2019	II 2019	III 2019	IV 2019	I 2019	II 2019	III 2019	IV 2019
	Average	57			63	65	70	75	12	17	27	37

Legend of symbols: SPV: Employees; Category A: Coordinator and responsible; Category B: Supervisor; Category C: Worker

Table 2. Evaluation type B results

Area	IV 2018	I 2019	%	II 2019	%	III 2019	%	IV 2019	%
Collaboration	62	70	13	73	18	78	26	84	35
Adaptation	55	64	16	67	20	73	31	80	42
Efficiency and image	60	63	5	65	10	68	17	73	27
Effectiveness	58	64	10	68	16	72	24	78	29
Leadership	49	52	8	54	12	57	22	60	31
Average	37	41	11	43	16	46	24	49	32

General meetings

At the end of the first phase of analysis and study of the project (March to August 2018), a series of two meetings began with the whole group (on the 25th of October, and 30th of December 2018), in order to introduce, present the project and its objectives and collect suggestions.

Meetings with individual and small groups

Other individual and parallel meetings with small groups (3–5 people) were planned, in particular with the managers/coordinators. During these meetings, the first critical issues were identified and objectives were assigned at sub-group level, training interventions started with small teams committed to their leadership, a schedule for new meetings was planned, as well as showing analysis of partial results.

RESULTS

Project structure and implementation – type B evaluation

Five subgroups were formed, based on the correlation indices that emerged from the elaboration of the results of the first three-month period. Each of the five

subgroups were given an attribution relating to both the type of correlation and the objectives to be achieved.

1. "COLLABORATION"

Support and help to colleagues (quality of the contribution), ability to improve a reliable and efficient company image among colleagues and customers (demonstrate skills), transmitting of the skills possessed by colleagues also in other functions (professional behavior).

2. "ADAPTATION"

Personal and professional flexibility, ability to carry out complessed tasks (quality of the contribution) and accuracy with respect to time and productivity (demonstrate skills).

3. "EFFICIENCY and IMAGE"

Knowledge of procedures, image and uniform (professional behavior), ability to obtain results (demonstrate skills).

4. "EFFECTIVENESS"

Ability to adapt to changes (quality of contribution), ability to plan and organize activities according to priority criteria (demonstrate skills), autonomy and problem solving (professional behavior).

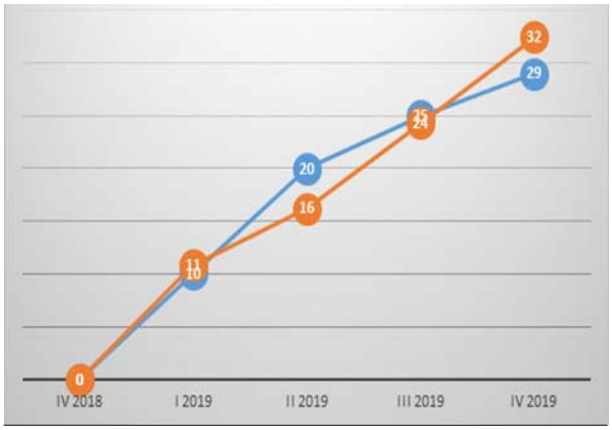
5. "LEADERSHIP"

Support and help to colleagues (quality of the contribution), ability to propose innovative solutions and ability to obtain results (professional skills), level of personal and professional commitment and managerial capacity and autonomy (professional behavior).

Evaluation B results (Table 2, Figure 1, 2).

AVERAGE GROWTH OF DIFFERENT AREAS	*Final measurement: IV 2019*
Collaboration	***35***
Adaptation	***42***
Efficiency and Image	***27***
Effectiveness	***29***
Leadership	***31***

Figure 1. Average growth of different areas



Trend of the average of the type A and type B evaluation	IV 2018	I 2019	II 2019	III 2019	IV 2019
Evaluation type A "objective"	*0*	*10*	*20*	*25*	*29*
Evaluation type B "subjective"	*0*	*11*	*16*	*24*	*32*

Figure 2. Trend of the average of type A and type B evaluation

DISCUSSION

The research results are highly positive, as can be seen from the graphs, which highlight that in just one year there has been an improvement of 37% compared to the first survey. It is not possible to make a comparison with other studies as it is an innovative research. The comparison was made with respect to the data collected and analyzed in the first period (starting data), building type A and type B assessment tools. Even the material collected from some example cases, chosen and reported in the article, opens the way to further studies of improvement and expansion, both of the assessment tools and of strategic interventions

Some Cases

Subgroup ONE, had a very low score in "COLLABORATION" correlation, therefore the assigned goal was to increase the level of collaboration and the exchange of information and skills. G.F., for example, an extremely competent and prepared person, showed no willingness to technically support colleagues having difficulties, he was not flexible in giving shift changes and, in the events of malfunctions, gave blame to ohter employees, D.A. and S.C., for their presumed inefficiencies. S.C. underlined the attitude of G.F. with frequent e-mails of complaints for events that occurred within working hours, while D.A. was often absent due to illness.

The spirit of competition, instead of collaboration, could have negative repercussions on the image of the company. For subgroup one, meetings were prepared during which role playing was carried out, with the aim of highlighting the importance of collaboration in emergency management.

Employees included in subgroup THREE "EFFICIENCY and IMAGE" showed little respect for the company's image, for example the uniform that was supplied by the company was not worn in an acceptable

manner. D.F. also, refused to wear the supplied shirt claiming that it did not exalt his physical qualities sufficiently. In the case of S.S. instead, no attention was shown of following the roles and regulations and procedures or respecting them, on the contrary, he preferred to use improvisation, with his point of view, flexibility consisted of a relaxed attitude.

Subgroup FIVE, "LEADERSHIP", was formed using a correlation based on particularly high scores achieved in each of the indicators considered. This is because, alongside the analysis of the issues to be addressed, it was decided to take advantage of resources already present within the group, that could be used to support the coordinators. In addition to the achievement of the goal of bettering the level of performance in a shorter period of time, this would have allowed the consolidation of team spirit and stronger interpersonal relationships. Three short training meetings were prepared for the three members of the subgroup, based on the theme of leadership, from the period of January to March 2019. As part of the training meetings, completely innovative subjects were presented, such as emergency psychology, reading non-verbal language, notions of group psychology, in order to provide some basic elements to deal with difficult situations that may occur at the airport. Role playing was set up, reproducing typical situations that may occure, also with reference to situation that had already occured to the other four subgroups. After that, starting from the second three-months period of 2019 (April to June) each of the three members of the LEADERSHIP subgroup was assigned to support the coordinators in the meetings of the other subgroups. This resulted to more extensive interesting results. For example, from the results many employees felt more involved and responsible within the group, and also realizing their importance of ones role.

CONCLUSIONS

Data analysis highlighted a significant improvement in both the overall performance and the specific subgroups in which the staff were categorized. It is important to mention the observation of the increase in the willingness to collaborate and team work (+ 35%), or the percentage increase in the level of performance in the first three months of 2019, thanks to the actions already implemented by the coordinators.

The result of the measurements also showed that in each of the four subgroups new figures emerged with characteristics and scores very similar to those of Subgroup FIVE (the LEADERSHIP).

These results are more interesting, considering that the pilot project, born in March 2018, thanks to the Research Centre and Psychological Studies Genius Academy, which has been operating in the airport world for several years and thanks to the presence of 'Genius Handling' in over 50 European and International Airports, will be extended to all the locations where Genius Handling operates.

These results reflect the great importance that a strategic training can play, by focusing and placing the individual with his human and professional difficulties during his training action (Rogers 2000, Nardone 2005, Spurio 2019). It is also understandable how in the airport sector, so peculiar and complex, due to the real difficulties that the work environment presents, training must be pragmatic and useful, free from outdated and useless speeches. If this is true for any workplace, it is even more so when we talk about airports. The psychological dynamics that come into play at the very moment when one enter in this place are so rich in interchanges of things and interactions of people, numerous and interesting (Spurio 2016, 2017). Spaces in which millions of individuals meet without entering into a real relationship, driven by the frenetic desire to consume or accelerate daily operations or as a gateway to change, real or symbolic (Bateson 1972, Ericson et al. 1976). International airports can be considered as a destination in themselves, a kind of third dimension that opens its gate at the point of departure and leads to the reality of arrival.

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