

**YOUNG WORKERS IN FLEXIBLE CAPITALISM:
the Brazilian civil aviation experience**

**JOVENS TRABALHADORES NO CAPITALISMO FLEXÍVEL:
*a experiência da aviação civil brasileira***

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Abstract

In this article, we analyse the use of young workers to promote new patterns of work utilisation, illustrating the discussion with an example from Brazilian civil aviation. Data were collected in Brazil during a PhD research. Here we are going to focus on the qualitative element of the study, which draws on 52 interviews with airline and airport workers from a legacy airline (TAM), three low fares companies (GOL, Azul and Webjet) and agencies that provide ground handling services (Swissport and Aero-Park), complemented by three focus groups with a total of 16 workers from low-cost airlines (GOL, Azul, Webjet, Trip). Participants were sampled through local trade union representatives at major airports in São Paulo (Guarulhos and Campinas) and Rio de Janeiro (Galeão and Santos Dumont). Our data shed light on a very dynamic sector that has been making intensive use of a young labour force during a moment of renovation of its competitors, including the low-cost airlines. Thus, our results dwell on the importance of young workers in the implementation of new patterns of labour utilization.

Keywords: Young workers. Flexible capitalism. Civil aviation. Low-cost airlines.

Resumo

Neste artigo, analisamos a utilização de uma força de trabalho jovem para promover novos padrões de trabalho, ilustrando a discussão com um exemplo da aviação civil brasileira. Os dados foram coletados no Brasil durante uma pesquisa de doutorado. Aqui, focaremos o elemento qualitativo do estudo, que se baseia em 52 entrevistas com funcionários de companhias aéreas e aeroportos de uma companhia aérea herdada (TAM), três empresas de tarifas baixas (GOL, Azul e Webjet) e agências que prestam serviços de assistência em escala (Swissport e Aero-Park), complementadas por três grupos focais, com um total de 16 funcionários de companhias aéreas de baixo custo (GOL, Azul, Webjet, Trip). Os participantes foram indicados por representantes sindicais locais dos principais aeroportos do país: São Paulo (Guarulhos e Campinas) e Rio de Janeiro (Galeão e Santos Dumont). Nossos dados lançam luz sobre um setor muito dinâmico que utiliza intensivamente uma força de trabalho jovem durante um momento de renovação de seus concorrentes, incluindo as companhias aéreas de baixo custo. Assim, os resultados desta pesquisa ressaltam a relação entre os jovens trabalhadores na implementação de novos padrões de utilização da força de trabalho.

Palavras-chaves: Jovens trabalhadores. Capitalismo flexível. Aviação civil. Empresas aéreas de baixo custo.

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Introduction

This paper approaches the relationship between generation and labour utilisation patterns in flexible capitalism, exploring the complex relations between generational issues and structural economic demands. We attempt to contribute to this debate by examining how the use of a young workforce has facilitated the introduction of flexible patterns of labour utilization.

The connection between age and attitudes towards flexible work patterns has been pointed out by previous studies. Sennett (2009, p. 110) has already put: “flexibility equals youth; rigidity, age”. Bradley (2009), in this direction, investigated the impact of changes in employment on the lives and life-courses of young adults in Britain, concluding that “the response of the young adult workers to the whole concept of flexibility was by and large favourable” (BRADLEY, 2009, p. 87). His findings draw attention to the generation issue regarding flexible patterns of labour utilization, as younger worker’s responses suggest that “(...) this generation of employees have generally accepted the ‘new rule of the game’ and are prepared to work within them in a way that is markedly different from their parent’s generation” (p. 91). He concludes that “many young workers demonstrate ‘internalized flexibility’ appearing in the main to welcome the idea of change and variety during their work histories. Older workers are much more hostile to change and suspicious of management initiatives: they are often sceptical about flexible strategies” (p. 93). Such enthusiasm of younger workers towards flexible work regimes, in the author’s viewpoint, is exploited within flexible capitalism.

In this paper, we focus on the attitudes of young workers towards flexible forms of work organisation in the context of the Brazilian civil aviation industry, based on the findings of a research project that investigated the development of the airline low-cost model in Brazil (WINTERSBERGER; HARVEY; TURNBULL, 2013). This research highlighted changes to the nature of work, employment, management-worker relations as well as relations between workers and their unions associated with the emergence of the low-cost model. An observed pattern in this research is a split in terms of age between the interviewees employed by a full-service carrier company (TAM) and four low-cost airlines (Trip, Azul, Webjet and Gol). The study suggests that Brazilian newly emerged low-cost airlines have been making use of both a young workforce and sophisticated HR practices aimed at functional flexibility, and underpinned by a paternalist management style which, implemented in conjunction with informal management-worker relations appears to have led to a blurring of the boundaries between managerial and non-managerial work, leading to apparently positive attitudes among the predominantly young workforce, despite being subjected to high levels of work intensity.

This observation made us wonder about the relation between youth and attitudes towards flexibility in the context of a very dynamic industry from Global South, leading us to question: could young workers be functioning as a facilitator in the introduction of new patterns of work in Brazilian civil aviation? Guided by this question, in the light of literature on young workers

and flexible patterns of labour utilisation, we expect to bring new evidences and reflections about the importance of young workers in the implementation of new patterns of labour utilization. Furthermore, we aim to understand how these workers react to it. Evidently, we do not assume that there will be a universal answer, but contextual ones; thus, our discussion is situated in the context of an industry characterised by a high level of formal employment in a country with a high level of informal employment (around 40% of the household income comes from people who work off the book)¹.

In sum, we believe that the Brazilian civil aviation industry offers an opportunity to understand how younger workers, due to their expectations and dispositions, have been a facilitating factor in the implementation of a new managerial approach, connected with flexible capitalism. In the first part of the paper, we present the concept of flexible capitalism and the conditions it poses to the young generation of the workforce. Moreover, we address its implications for young workers facing the challenges of the current labour market in Brazil. In the second part, we sustain and develop the arguments presented with data collected in the Brazilian low-cost aviation sector by Wintersberger, Harvey, and Turnbull (2013). Lastly, we sum up the main conclusions reached in this paper.

Flexible Capitalism and the introduction of a young workforce in the world of work

According to Skorstad (2009, p. 20) flexibility is an ambiguous term: “in some cases it is confined to the question of adjusting demands and capacity in a quantitative sense. In other cases, qualitative aspects are imperative, as in the cases where there is a pressing need to produce something new, voluntarily or under severe constraint.” We argue that this subject is not only ambiguous but also controversial. As Skorstad and Ramsdal (2009) remind us there are different approaches and perspectives related to it. For example, there are those who tend to see it as a positive phenomenon with mutual gains for capital and labour.

Our findings suggest that young labour seems to adapt well to new demands of the so-called flexible capitalism. Changes in the *Artistic level*, i.e. those related to a lack of autonomy and freedom in workplaces (BOLTANSKI; CHIAPELLO, 2009), where most of the “flexible narrative” are included, seems to have a great potential of acceptance among young workers. Nonetheless, in this paper we are going to assume a sceptical outlook in relation to flexibility. Moreover, we opted to adopt a more general perspective. Authors like Skorstad (2009) presented a more mechanistic (Cartesian) approach to the subject, while authors such as Sennett (2009) opted for a more holistic approach. Therefore, we discuss the flexibility at the low-cost airlines through the lens of Sennett’s (2009) definition of “flexible capitalism”. For Sennett (2009, p. 9):

¹ See: <https://economia.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral,informalidade-e-beneficios-respondem-por-40-da-rendada-familias-do-pais,70002765991>

... the phrase 'flexible capitalism' describes a system which is more than a permutation on an old theme. The emphasis is on flexibility. Rigid forms of bureaucracy are under attack, as are the evils of blind routine. Workers are asked to behave nimbly, to be open to change on short notice, to take risks continually, to become ever less dependent on regulations and formal procedures. This emphasis on flexibility is changing the very meaning of work, and so the words we use for it.

One might wonder if there is some social group capable of cope with such changes or be fitted to this brave new world. The point we aim to address is, precisely, the link between this new organizational discourse (and practice) and the disposition of a young labour force. Young people seem to increasingly occupy a central position in sociological debate (PERALVA, 2007), exactly for supposedly being more informed, adaptable to changes, and connected to new technologies.

The case of the IT industry, being very representative of flexible capitalism, contributes significantly to shed light on this. Companies that deal directly with the development of new technology seek to articulate the idea of youth with new forms of work organization and, above all, work control. *Google* appears as an exemplary context in which the traditional ways of thinking about the workspace and the management of workers are questioned (CASAQUI; RIEGEL, 2009). The technology sector, although distinct from aviation, is an important reference because it is increasingly present in all areas and its organizational innovations become inspiration for many sectors.

The generational issue seems significant here. According to Wey Smola and Sutton (2002, p. 363): "A generational group, often referred to as a cohort, includes those who share historical or social life experiences, the effects of which are relatively stable over the course of their lives".

It has been said, in that sense, that those born in 1980s and 1990s have been prepared to take jobs that do not yet exist, using technologies that have not yet been invented, and solve problems that are not still on the horizon (LOYOLA, 2009; OLIVEIRA, 2011; CAVAZOTTE, LEMOS; VIANA, 2012).

Overall, it has been attributed to this social group the following traits: the search for immediate gratification, the ability to do several things at the same time, eagerness for information, transitoriness and mobility (not remaining long in each job), the desire for rapid rise, job motivation through challenges and informality in relationships (OLIVEIRA, 2011; LEMOS, 2012). Young workers would have acquired such characteristics because they have been socialised into a context which challenges ideas linked with the traditional family, and because they have had access to new technologies (OLIVEIRA, 2011; LOYOLA, 2009).

It is worth noting that notions such as "generations" and "youth" require further discussion, given they are social constructions and not only a biological condition. The young people neither form a unitary culture (PAIS, 1990) nor compound a universal and clearly defined population segment, even if they have been defined as such (NOVAES, 2009). Youth, more than an age classification, comes to refer to a socio-cultural predisposition, connected

to certain values and a lifestyle (EHRENBERG, 2010; PERALVA, 2007). Therefore, the “Y generation” idea, vastly spread by media and organisations in recent years, is not a neutral or value-free idea, it significantly meets the current capitalist expectations such as flexibility and mobility. In doing so, this idea comes to justify and reinforce new work configurations marked by instability, uncertainty and intensification (PIRES, 2018). Thus, it becomes naturally accepted that new entrants to the labour market are not expected to look for long term jobs. On the contrary, such ideas would be counterproductive, inhibiting a certain and welcome “creative instability” (LIMA; PIRES, 2017). Short-term perspectives and individualism take the lead, casting aside ideas such as: long term career, and collective aspirations aimed at achieving more equal standards of living and work.

Lastly, it is important to stress that the idea of Generation Y, especially in an emerging economy, would concern to a small portion of young people, more precisely those who have access to a certain amount of economic, social and cultural capital which give them room to take risks and make choices. The vast majority of young people do not have such access and most of times they are not able to engage in well-regarded and desirable social activities which usually require creativity (REGUILLO, 2007, 2010); among those who live “on the fringes” are the so-called NEETs, i.e., young people who neither study nor work.

As points Cardoso (2013, p. 299), “social changes occurring in a specific period of time neither equally impact the different generations” (CARDOSO, 2013, p. 299) nor different parts of the world. Even though there is a general socio-economical trend in contemporary capitalism, its development varies from context to context. This is why Silva (2016, p. 129), when discussing NEETs’ in Brazil, ponders that: if for the young European the current socio-economic situation is a source of disillusion towards a “scenario of deterioration of labour relations”, for the young Brazilian the relative success of PT new developmentalism may have given room to an illusion.

To better grasp Silva’s (2016) point, one needs to learn the main economic and political changes in Brazil during PT governments. After neoliberal presidencies, the country experienced a unique political and economic moment when Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, former metalworker and trade unionist, became president in 2003, representing the Brazilian Labour Party, or Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).

According to Bresser-Pereira (2013, p. 23), with Lula the country shifted from social democracy’s neoliberalism to new developmentalism, whose key points were: “a moderated intervention in the economy through planned investments in low or uncompetitive economic sectors, and through active economic and social policies”. The PT government attempted to build a new social pact between Capital and Labour, as shown by the creation of The Economic and Social Development Council composed by entrepreneurs, trade unionists, civil society representatives, bureaucrats from public sector, and intellectuals. Bresser-Pereira (2013, p. 23) considers that the PT government indeed offered “a truly ideological and economic alternative to neoliberalism – a social developmentalist one”.

Santos, Lima and Puzone (2019), by their turn, present a more sceptical viewpoint, not taking PT's governs as a truly alternative to neoliberalism. For them, "Lulism" is understood as a "conservative compromise" through which Labour Party accepted to abandon class struggle approach in order to govern. Taking it into account, they defend that the use of a particularistic social policy perspective (as opposed to a universal one) gave room to the "dissemination of entrepreneurship as a guideline not only for economic behavior, but also for political and social conduct as a whole" (SANTOS; LIMA; PUZONE, 2019, p. 273). This new *ethos* fostered by PT was underpinned precisely by the "resort to neoliberal dispositives [sic.] of government", and by the aforementioned "conservative compromise" (p. 273).

The idea of neoliberalism as "a normative system", creator of ways of living, social relations and subjectivities based on individualism and the meritocratic and entrepreneurial logic was well put forward by Dardot and Laval (2016). Thus, even though we experienced a series of social advances during the PT governments' period, they were not immune to the neoliberal traits, on the contrary. Thus, in a certain way, it is possible to say that Labour has prepared the ground for those who took control of the country after 2016 coup and undermined even more our fragile social and labour rights. As one can notice, different viewpoints regarding PT's political legacy and theoretical affiliation co-exist. For the purpose of this paper, it seems central to shed light on the introduction and strengthening of a series of policies aiming social inclusion and citizenship promotion. For workers it was also a historical moment due to: decreasing of unemployment rate from 12,4% in 2003 to 5,7% in 2010; 18% increase average real wage; and increasing of *per capita* household income (PASSOS; GUEDES, 2015). It is exactly these conditions that led Silva (2016) to suggest that young Brazilians lived a moment of illusion about their future.

Eventually, the Labour government came to an end with the 2016 coup. From then on, ideas such as development through conciliation, which includes welfare policies, started giving way to liberal ideas, embracing more and more the idea of austerity. The conciliation moment seems to meet its end along with PT's presidencies.

With the recent dismantling of social rights, especially with the first effects of the 2017 counter-reforms to the labour government, the country faces increasing levels of unemployment caused by dismay of young people (KREIN, 2018).

The Brazilian Experience: the low-cost airline industry

This section presents a concrete case of employment of young workforce by new entrants in the airline industry aligned with flexible patterns of control and labour utilisation. Specifically, we discuss how newly emerged low-cost airlines have been making use of a young workforce and implemented an HRM strategy based on functional flexibility and informality.

Firstly, we contextualize the low-cost airlines and their impact on the sector. Secondly, we describe the data-collection process, that took place in the period 2012-14, when the PT was

still in charge of the country. Finally, we present and analyse research findings that reveal the match between the labour utilisation strategy of low-cost airlines on the one hand, and young workers' expectations and disposition on the other.

The low-cost airline entrants and their impact on the sector

There is no doubt that the Brazilian airline industry has overcome a significant period of change with the introduction of low-cost model. As pointed out by Wood Jr. and Binder (2010) the success of the new entrants was evidenced by some indicators such as: higher occupancy rate by flight, shorter aircraft 'turnaround' times on the ground, lower operational costs, lower structural costs, all leading to a reduction of operational costs per seat by 50% relative to full-service carriers. Airline companies adopting this model engage in rigorous minimisation of operating costs by focusing on the imperatives of efficiency and flexibility. It is not surprising that cost cutting attempts are often primarily centred on workers and their terms and conditions, as civil aviation industry is a labour-intensive sector, with labour costs accounting for around 30% of an airline's total operating costs. Furthermore, labour is often the only effective cost control lever in absence of influence over fuel costs and airport landing charges. Finally, with civil aviation being a pro-cyclical and volatile industry, it is also not surprising that the low-cost model is heavily associated with flexible working arrangements such as temporary contracts and outsourcing.

The liberalisation process of the Brazilian civil aviation industry has its roots in the 1990s, when a series of neoliberal policies were started with the aim of stimulating competition. Brazil's first low-cost entrant was Gol, in 2001, absorbing much of legacy carrier 'Varig' in 2007, with Webjet to follow in 2005, and Azul in 2008. By 2009, Webjet, carrying over five million passengers per year became the third-largest airline at the time after TAM and Gol. Azul, within the first three years of operation developed a market share of around ten per cent (AGÊNCIA NACIONAL DE AVIAÇÃO CIVIL, 2013).

The decline of ticket prices is one of the central impacts of low-cost model on the sector. Price reduction after 2005 and 2008, when, respectively, Webjet and Azul were created, is particularly noticeable. While the average airline ticket was sold for 650 Brazilian Reais in 2004, this cost declined to 326 Brazilian Reais by 2013 (AGÊNCIA NACIONAL DE AVIAÇÃO CIVIL, 2013). Adjusted for inflation, this is a three-fold decline in prices over the course of less than ten years.

While low-cost airlines have brought low fares to Brazil, it is worth pointing out that their operational model appears to differ to some degree to their 'ultra low-cost' counterparts such as Ryanair in Europe. For one thing, basic operating costs such as higher taxes as well as fuel duty are less likely to make the ultra low-fares model profitable in Brazil. Such constraints, emanating from a relative monopoly of Petrobras until recently, as well as a USD 18 levy for

every international flight has led some analysts to argue that any Brazilian attempt to lure in low-cost competitors from abroad may be doomed (ROCHABRUN, 2019). As a consequence, the operational model of the low-cost airlines in this study lacks some of the distinguishing features of the ultra low-cost model, including point-to-point flights only² as well as a uniform aircraft fleet³. Moreover, until recently, simple on-board services such as light snacks and refreshments were included in ticket fares, and only in 2012 for example has Gol started charging extra for such ‘frills’ (GONÇALVES, 2012). Finally, also in stark contrast to the ‘single-cabin’ model of ultra low-cost carriers, Brazilian low-cost airlines such as Azul also offer ‘business-class’ seats.

Examining the changes in the Brazilian airline industry from 1990–2006, Garcia (2009) verifies that the increase of internal demand is remarkable, growing up to 174%. Cost reduction, creation of new products and services, and technological novelties are other features identified in the analysed period. The author also detects a change in the workforce profile that is especially relevant for the central argument of this paper. Analysing flight attendants’ age, he highlights that: “The participation of young flight attendants has increased, notably of those in the following ranges: from 18 to 24 years old, from 25 to 29 years old, and from 30 to 39 years old.” The table below summarizes the results found:

Table 1: Flight attendants’ age: 1994 – 2006.

Flight attendants’ age	1994	%	2006	%
18 – 24	1	0	1,371	20,2
25 – 29	221	5,2	2,488	36,6
30 – 39	828	19,5	2,150	31,6
40 – 49	2,177	51,3	731	10,8
50 – 64	876	20,6	58	0,9
65 or more	142	3,3	2	0
Total	4,245	100	6,800	100

Source: Garcia (2009, p. 86)

It can be noted that workers over the age of 30 used to correspond to 94,7% of total employment in 1994, decreasing to 43,3% in 2006, meaning that the presence of the young workers (below 30 years-old) increased from 5,2% to 56,8% in twelve years (see table 1). For Garcia (2009, p.85), “this trend can largely be attributed to the rapid growth of TAM and the

² The alternative ‘hub-and-spoke’ model entails having primary bases to which every flight return, usually at expensive primary airports.

³ Unlike low-cost competitors such as Ryanair that operate with a single aircraft type as a means to achieve economies of scale in purchasing and maintenance, low-cost airlines in Brazil operate with multiple aircraft types in order to accommodate short and medium-haul travel.

entry of Gol into the market". It is important to stress that Gol and TAM have different business strategies. The first may be considered a low-cost airline while the latter is a full-service airline^{4 5}.

Employment terms and conditions of work have changed since the advent of low-cost airlines. The neoliberal reforms in labour law aforementioned, such as the abolition of restrictions on subcontracting and temporary or part-time contracts, appear to have given rise to a 'two-tier' employment system, characterized by a strong divide between a 'core' group of workers directly employed by their airlines, and a peripheral group of workers sourced via multinational ground-handling service provider agencies such as Swissport and local ones such as Aero-Park.

Data Sources and Methods

The analyses we now present are based on data derived from a project that investigated the impact of a low-cost airline model on the nature of work, employment and trade union representation in the Brazilian civil aviation industry. Given the purpose and scope of this paper, we will focus on the qualitative element of the study, which draws on 52 interviews with airline and airport workers from a legacy airline (TAM), three low fares companies (GOL, Azul and Webjet) and agencies that provide ground handling services (Swissport and Aero-Park), complemented by three focus groups with a total of 16 workers from low-cost airlines (GOL, Azul, Webjet, Trip). Participants were sampled through local trade union representatives at major airports in São Paulo (Guarulhos and Campinas) and Rio de Janeiro (Galeão and Santos Dumont)⁶. Of the 68 participants, 9 were employed at TAM, 35 at low-cost airlines, and the remainder at agencies. The sample was comprised of:

- Airline employees: 16 check-in agents; 15 customer service attendants; 10 cabin crew and 4 flight crew members
- Agency employees: 10 security agents; 7 baggage handlers; 6 cargo handlers; 2 ramp agents.

The rationale behind the chosen airports is related to the strength of the union presence at the major hubs in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in comparison to the more remote airports in the less affluent North of the country with more employer-friendly legislation at state level. It was

4 If one considers that the low-cost airlines companies are in one extreme of a continuum, in the other extreme are the conventional legacy-carrier airlines such as Varig. In the middle of it, one would find full-service airlines such as TAM.

5 TAM (now LATAM), despite being a full-service carrier, was never a national 'flag' carrier as would have been Varig for example.

6 Access to interviewees and focus group participants was facilitated by local trade union representatives; hence there was little way to verify whether the sample obtained was a representative cross section of the worker demographics. Moreover, given that the research was funded by the International Transport Workers' Federation, one needs to be aware of potential sampling biases, given the likely agenda of local trade union representatives. On reflection, we felt that the benefits of unrestricted access to notoriously transient groups (e.g. agency and shift workers) outweighed the disadvantages of potentially not obtaining a representative sample with regards to attitudes towards the union.

indicated by the Union representatives of FENTAC⁷, that the sampling of participants via trade union channels would have been quite difficult given what was then very patchy representation at major Northern hubs such as Manaus, Salvador, or Fortaleza. Particularly the strong presence of SindiGru⁸ at Guarulhos airport facilitated researcher access to particularly transient groups such as shift workers in ‘backstage’ functions such as baggage handling and cargo screening. An equally representative sample in Northern hubs would have undoubtedly required management support, which (in the unlikely event of being granted) could have potentially led to issues around biased employee responses.

Interviews entailed open questions regarding the nature of work and employment terms and conditions. All interviews were unstructured (with an interview guide on topics such as work intensity, interpersonal relations with staff, managers as well as customers) and were conducted at the aforementioned airports. Interviewees were reached through snowball and convenience sampling methods with a purposive element. This entailed on the one hand an emphasis on young workers employed at low-cost airlines and on the other hand more tenured workers with work experience pre-dating the emergence of the low-cost model. By doing so, we sought to grasp the views of young workers and to meaningfully compare them with those of older workers.

The focus groups, two conducted at Guarulhos and one at Campinas airport, involved a mix of young and more experienced cabin crew from various functions at Gol (group 1); various airlines’ customer agents from check-in, ticketing and customer information functions (groups 2); and Swissport ramp-agents and airlines’ cabin crew and check-in agents (group 3), as detailed below. The focus groups lasted between 40 minutes (Campinas) and two hours (Guarulhos) and were guided on the basis of key issues that emerged in interviews.

Table 2: Focus group’s participants

Focus Group 1			
Location: Guarulhos Airport, Office of SindiGru			
Participants: six cabin crew (CC) employed at Gol			
Participant code	Age range	Gender	Organization
CC1	25-30	Female	Gol
CC2	25-30	Female	Gol
CC3	30-35	Male	Gol
CC4	25-30	Female	Gol
CC5	50-55	Female	Gol
CC6	50-55	Female	Gol

7 Federação Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Aviação Civil.

8 Sindicato dos Aeroviários de Guarulhos.

Focus Group 2**Location: Guarulhos Airport, Office of SindiGru****Participants: five customer agents (CA) from check-in, ticketing and customer information functions.**

Participant code	Age range	Gender	Organization
CA1	20-25	Male	Azul
CA2	25-30	Male	Azul
CA3	35-40	Female	Gol
CA4	25-30	Female	Trip
CA5	20-25	Male	Webjet

Focus Group 3**Location: Campinas Airport, Staff Canteen****Participants: five staff - cabin crew (CC), check-in agent (CA) and ramp-agent (RA) function.**

Participant code	Age range	Gender	Organization
CC1	25-30	Female	Azul
CC2	25-30	Female	Webjet
RA1	35-40	Male	Swissport
RA2	40-45	Male	Swissport
CA1	20-25	Male	Azul

Source: Wintersberger (2015).

As indicated in the table above, most focus group participants were under 30 years old. It is noteworthy that the two more tenured cabin crew had work experience at Varig, a now defunct legacy carrier, and were able to reconstruct some of the key changes to work and employment associated with the low-cost model.

Analysis of the qualitative data was conducted using a coding approach characterised by multiple stages. Due to the exploratory nature of the study the initial stage was an open coding procedure (BRYMAN, 2012; STRAUSS, 1987), looking for key words or phrases associated with some of the key foci of the study, including the nature of work, employment, management-worker relations as well as relations between workers and their unions. Once such key terms were established, the transcripts were then reviewed systematically through a keyword search using MS Word. Meaning was, then, constructed directly from the language of participants. Eventually, themes - such as job insecurity, conflicting demands at work, etc. - were identified, taking into account both their frequency and significance.

Research findings: the low-cost model of operation and workers' expectations and dispositions

A key feature of this model is an efficient utilisation of labour. Thus, it is not surprising that work intensity has been a common issue raised in interviews by workers from various functions. Operational and staffing figures suggest that those employed at low-cost airlines work harder than their counterparts at full-service carriers (WINTERSBERGER; HARVEY; TURNBULL, 2013). Those respondents with work experience from legacy carriers such as Varig claim that their labour process has been profoundly intensified.

Throughout our research, intensification appeared as a key-point for our interviewees. It is important to stress that it is a multifaceted phenomenon. In terms of the labour process, we discern differences in the perceived work experiences of those working in 'backstage' functions such as baggage and cargo-handling, versus those working at the passenger interface.

In the former case, we observe perceptions that work is 'intensive' (or has intensified) mainly in quantitative terms, characterised by a perceived increase in 'throughput' over the years by those (rare) interviewees with some degree of job tenure within the multinational ground handling service providers. In 'airside' ground operations such as the ramp, time pressure is a common complaint raised primarily by workers employed via multinational ground handling service providers (GHSPs), who provide ground-staff to low cost airlines. One respondent employed as a shift leader at one of the largest multinational GHSPs reported to regularly have to 'run around between aircraft' due to the tight turnaround times of the low-cost airlines.

Now let us focalise passenger interface workers. If, on the one hand, higher seat density has been a problem for low-cost airline's cabin crew members (Representative, FENTAC), on the other hand there is also a qualitative or, we dare say, emotional side connected to labour intensification. It has to do with the potential mismatch between expectation and reality, a key antecedent of dysfunctional passenger behaviours including violence or abusive language used against staff, a regular occurrence particularly for cabin crew and check-in agents. Moreover, tight aircraft turnaround times⁹ lead to passengers boarding the aircraft only minutes after the previous lot of passengers have disembarked. Passengers are reported to become impatient quickly following their boarding of the aircraft, often leading to them rushing cabin crew to perform their service-related duties. Thus, contrary to direct managerial control approaches, passenger facing roles such as the cabin crew function allow management to offload substantial degrees of supervisory duties to the customers, who as a consequence set the pace at which front-line workers need to perform their job duties:

There is no moment where we can sit down, rest, and make preparations for the next flight with the next passengers waiting at the gate (...) If we let them wait too long, they will be angry, making our flight miserable. They decide when we do what, and how fast we must work. (Flight attendant low-cost airline – focus group notes: April 2012).

⁹ Some low-cost airlines target an average time of 30 minutes between disembarkation of the first lot of passengers and take-off for the next flight.

A second qualitative dimension related to work intensification was highlighted by interviewees. It has to do with the level of responsibility put on their shoulders. They believe that those employed at low-cost airlines have higher degrees of responsibility than those at full-service carriers. This is related to the fact that, along the utilisation of workforce in a numerically flexible way (temporary and variable-hour contracts), low-cost companies utilise workers in a functionally flexible manner. Some of those with prior experience stated that the work organisation at low-cost airlines is more flexible and less rigid than at their previous airline. Rules, policies and procedures are minimal, and interviewees indicate that (passenger-facing) workers are left without any explicit codified behaviour rules, but rather asked to be friendly and to 'act naturally' (Cabin crew Gol, interview notes, April 2012).

Perhaps due to the relative novelty and (excepting Gol) small scale of low-cost airline operations, several interviewees (some with first-hand experience with established flag carriers) report finding levels of autonomy and functional flexibility which are quite atypical for the industry. One characteristic of this functional flexibility is that ordinary (non-managerial) members of staff at low-cost airlines, beyond their day-to-day job duties, are heavily involved in quasi-managerial responsibilities such as the maintenance of work schedules and rotas. The latter are overseen by line managers (duty supervisors), many of whom appeared to be 'promoted' to such positions from ordinary front-line service roles at a relatively young age.¹⁰ For example, one supervisor (ground handling) employed at Webjet attained their supervisory responsibilities at the young age of 22. While supervisory staff certainly take on higher degrees of responsibility (e.g. being accountable for key areas such as workplace safety, operational efficiency and punctuality), observations at Guarulhos and Campinas airport have led to the impression that such staff, on top of their responsibility still substantially participate in the labour process. For example, one supervisor at Webjet was observed to personally assist in the check-in of passengers (which was ordinarily the job of agency workers), while concomitantly frantically directing her dispersed staff via a walkie talkie and liaising with supervisors at the gate. While such demands could be viewed as stressful, interview responses however suggest that the relatively high levels of responsibility are perceived to be granted in return for higher levels of autonomy.

As a result, employment at the low-cost airlines appears to be viewed by many of the predominantly young workers as a career path. Many of the young employees spoke very highly of the opportunities at their airline for promotion or for transferable skills relevant for careers at other companies:

It is fantastic here. You get experiences you would only have after five, maybe even ten years at other airlines. (...) It is good for the CV. Duty supervisor at 22? This certainly opens opportunities at other airlines. (Duty Supervisor Webjet, interview notes, April 2012).

¹⁰ Standing (2014, p. 38) calls uptitling the tendency to give "a position with a pompous title to hide situations of precariousness and uncertainty, in which people are transformed into a chief, executive or officer without having an army to lead or a team to model".

Therefore, even if the young worker is in an unstable and very intense job, he is led to understand himself as part of the team and must dedicate himself intensely, based on a bet on the future. The young workers employed at low-cost airlines also appear to display substantial tolerance towards their utilisation in a functionally flexible manner in return for what seems to be perceived as high levels of autonomy. This is in part due to what respondents seem to positively perceive as an absence of 'direct' or bureaucratic forms of control:

We are quite free here. As you know, flight operations are very complicated, and conditions can change quickly. I think the operations manager knows that, and lets us work as we want without disturbing us. (Check in agent- GOL, interview notes April 2012).

We observe, therefore, that the question of autonomy and freedom, widespread by the neoliberal discourse, is central to young workers. Even though this autonomy is mere appearance, disguised by new forms of control, it engages the workers' subjectivity, motivating them to work intensely and under conditions of insecurity and instability. Moreover, it was found that non-managerial workers often assist in some of the administrative tasks associated with supervision, particularly where duty supervisors might be busy or on a break. Overall, this appears to lead to rather blurred boundaries between managerial and non-managerial work. On the one hand, supervisors participate in the labour process, while in turn they are often assisted by their staff with regard to administrative duties.

While this somewhat flexible form of work organisation, and absence of a division of labour may be perceived as stressful by some, the overwhelming response from interviewees, particularly those with limited prior work experience and those who have recently graduated from high school, college or university appears to be positive. Several of the interviewees displayed what appears to be quite a strong involvement and identification with their organisation:

You do feel like part of something bigger. When you hear every few months that we are expanding our network to new destinations, it is exciting (...) If you ask me, yes, I do feel very proud to work for Azul, and not some other airline.' (Cabin crew, Azul, interview notes, April 2012).

It appears that the young workers perceive a strong psychological contract based on the norm of reciprocity, whereby preparedness to work hard (both in quantitative and qualitative terms) is viewed as given in return for the perceived levels of autonomy and promotion opportunities at their airline. This is particularly voiced by those with some degree of line managerial responsibility:

It is normal that when you are a supervisor or manager, you work longer than the other workers. You arrive before them, and leave after them. If not, people would start talking I think. You don't want to be seen leaving on time. (...) You need to look busy and hard-working if you want to make a career here (Duty supervisor, Azul, interview notes April 2012).

It also appears that the young workers respond quite positively to what can best be described as a paternalistic management style, underpinned by an apparently unitarist ideology and attempts to 'substitute' formal collective (trade union) channels of communication through more individualised forms of employee voice such as 'open door' policies and staff-employee consultative committee meetings, supplemented by informal social events such as barbecues and sporting events as reported in the case of Azul, where staff are reminded not to voice concerns via trade union channels, but instead, to 'speak to [management] directly' [representative SindiGru, interview notes, April 2012]. Informal management-worker relations and non-union forms of employee voice appear to be further facilitated by the small scale and novelty of some of the recent low-cost entrants, such as Azul and Webjet.

Regardless of the managerial motivation for the implementation of such informal employee voice mechanisms, many of the policies and practices such as direct communication appear to elicit positive attitudes from young employees who speak highly about the informality at their respective employers:

OK, the work is hard, (...) and supervisors can be unpleasant when things are not going well, but you have to understand, here, it is not like at bigger airlines like TAM. We talk to management like they are our friends. If we need something, they are there for us. Any problems we have, I think we can overcome them by talking to management. (Cabin crew, Azul, interview notes April 2012).

If this informal way may be a motivational factor for some young workers, it is undeniable that contracts have been changing over the years, becoming more and more flexible and bringing **insecurity** to some fellow workers. Nowadays, **temporary** or **fixed-term contracts** are vastly used by companies. Cabin crew at Azul, Webjet and Trip are increasingly recruited on three-year contracts, while those employed in other customer-facing functions (check-in, ticketing) and ground-handling functions via local and multinational agencies are generally employed on one year contracts, particularly in the lesser skilled (and lower paid) functions. **Variable-hour contracts** are also common practice. Many agency employees report short-term/last minute changes to the rota, and only knowing week on week how many hours they are scheduled to work, leading to significant fluctuations in income throughout the year. Under such conditions, workers face insecurity with regards to future employment and earnings, and consequent difficulties in planning ahead. Some in particularly precarious employment with ground handling service providers have been reported by trade union representatives to

'buffer' against financial insecurity by seeking informal employment elsewhere, parallel to their employment with the agency. Reports by works council representatives from baggage handling that some of their colleagues work casual night shifts in hospitality before attending work at the airport the next morning is somewhat concerning from an occupational health and safety perspective, as are reports of 'split shifts' and long commutes to and from some of the airports often causing employees to 'nap in their cars' during breaks between shifts (Representative, SindiGru, interview notes, April 2012).

The job insecurity is exacerbated by financial insecurity as well, resulting from relatively low base salaries of little over R\$ 2,000 at the low-cost airlines at the time of research. While this is still double the state level minimum wage in Sao Paulo, it falls short of legacy carriers such as LATAM or Avianca, where salaries for experienced cabin crew are said to be more than twice those at low-cost airlines. Such a shortfall can to some degree be compensated by performance-based pay, however this leads to further insecurity as workers have little control over various aspects of performance, including sales commission, 'profit triggers' for bonuses, as well as aircraft punctuality records. Moreover, particularly low base salaries for cabin crew increase their dependence on flying, as their base pay would only then be topped up with various variable elements of pay such as 'flight duty' and 'time away from base' pay. For example, in the case of delays, cancellations or having to take time off work due to illness, cabin crew are left only with their base pay, a shortfall of up to 40% if these elements of variable pay are discounted (First officer, low-cost airline, interview notes, April 2012).

As shown above, airline workers have been subjected to a variety of factors that are important for someone to grasp particularities of working for relatively new companies in air industry, in terms of changes, challenges and perspectives to young workers.

Conclusions

During the investigation hereby presented one notable factor is the apparently heavier reliance on young workers on the side of low-cost airlines, consistent with the findings of Garcia (2009) which detected an increase of young workers while analysing flight attendants. Our findings suggest that the use of young and less experienced workers appears to complement the implementation of the new flexible regime by low-cost airlines.

As argued above, those workers were born in a different context and bring a different background that seems to fit well with the low-cost model. Moreover, practices such as direct communication, meritocracy, lighter hierarchy, and informality were also well regarded. As shown above, the same formula used by IT companies to attract and maintain young workers is successful with young workers in the airline sector. Although the two sectors are very different in relation to the characteristics of the activities developed, the young workers of both present very similar speeches. In particular, we highlight a predisposition for intense and unstable work

in exchange for an alleged autonomy. Considering that such findings seemingly differ from the experiences of those employed by traditional companies, it seems to us that all the evidences hereby presented lead to the following conclusion: the young workforce seems to have played a keystone role in the implementation of low-cost model in Brazilian civil aviation. Changing work patterns, surpassing labour resistances has never been easy. Bringing new players to the game seems to be a common business strategy to implement changes. The present case shows how the preference for young workforce can be a strategic tool for it.

The use of a group of workers to impose new patterns of work or labour relations is not something new in history (see, for example, Engels, 2008). The novelty here is the use of a specific group of workers with a particular mind-set (therefore, not connected to nationality or ethnicity).

In line with Bradley (2009), it seems that, ironically, youngsters, who seem to be particularly receptive to the culture of flexibility are also its victims, given the low level of income and earnings of those trapped in flexible contracts, so that flexibility “may well mean poverty and housing problems in the end of their lives.” (BRADLEY, 2009, p. 94). Wey Smola and Sutton’s (2002, p. 379) findings “suggest that workers’ values do change as they mature”. It remains to be known if the myth of flexibility as a sustainable and desirable labour relation model will persist among young workers (especially from peripheral parts of the world) as they age? and ii. who will be put in/out of labour market, i.e., who will form the relative surplus population in this scenario? Those questions can be addressed by future reflexions and researches.

In search of reflexivity, it is important to highlight that the authors of this paper adopt an employee-centred perspective. Other authors have emphasized the industry viewpoint while dealing with flexible capitalism. We strongly believe that such a complex phenomenon needs to be examined from different viewpoints and from different perspectives.

Finally, it is important to stress the limitations of this paper. Considering our qualitative approach, it was not possible to point to a specific causal relation between young mind-set and flexibility. Maybe further quantitative studies might address this matter. A second limitation is related to data gathering. We made vast use of trade unions to get access to workers. Considering the difficulties associated with access without ‘gatekeepers’, and the fact that there are generally always inherent biases associated with over-reliance on gatekeepers, further research adopting an ethnographic approach may provide not necessarily less biased insights, but certainly richer, context-specific information with higher degrees of internal validity.

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