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Workforce Management Strategies in the International Airline Alliance Ground Staff Operations

Francis K. Kumaka
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Francis Kofi Kumaka

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Review Committee
Dr. Lionel De Souza, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Matasha Murrelljones, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. William Stokes, University Reviewer, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
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Abstract

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Francis Kofi Kumaka

MA, Kent State University, 2010

M Phil., University of Ghana, 1998

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

In the 21st-century international airlines' alliance ground staff operations environment, a lack of effective strategies to ensure a diverse and inclusive workforce has the potential to affect an organization adversely. Some U.S. based international airline alliance leaders are concerned with the lack of effective strategies to ensure an inclusive and diverse workforce, as it may negatively affect corporate sustainability and profitability. Grounded in the transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this single case study was to explore strategies U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations use to successfully manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability**.** Data were collected using semistructured interviews in computer-mediated conferencing format with five airline alliance leaders located in the state of Georgia, who held at least 2 years of successful experience in implementing strategies to manage a diverse workforce. Content and thematic analysis were used to analyze the data, leading to the emergence of three themes: diversity and inclusion, strategic human resources management, and leadership. A key recommendation is for airline alliance leaders to align diversity, equity, and inclusion policies with corporate human resources strategy. The implications for positive social change include the potential for airline alliance business leaders to institute a diverse and inclusive workforce, where each employee can realize their potential.

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Dedication

To God Almighty for granting me the presence of mind and the resources to complete this program. I also dedicate this study to my family and friends for the support in very challenging times; you have been my bulwark. We have shared great moments of laughter and rallied together to share views on navigating situations that required attention. My daughter, Gladys, I appreciate your understanding of the length of time I had to commit to the doctoral journey.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The globalized economy has accentuated the operations of multinational corporations. The 21st-century work environment requires employees from diverse backgrounds to facilitate international business transactions (Nickerson & Valerie, 2018). Organization management practitioners and theoreticians have emphasized the value of workforce diversity in organizational performance and competitive advantage (Kundu et al., 2019). While hiring employees from various backgrounds in terms of culture, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and disability could present some challenges, many businesses endeavor to staff operations with a diverse workforce representation to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is in furtherance of social justice that the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) requirements in the United States are intended to enforce the nation's employment nondiscrimination laws (Daniels & Thornton, 2019).

Background of the Problem

Several airlines have been involved in forging strategic partnerships in the global market since the late 1980s. The major areas of collaboration between the different airlines are in routing, code-sharing, block spacing, shareholding, and franchising (Bilotkach, 2019; Subramanian, 2017). As the business of passenger travel services involves international locations and geographies, airline alliances are usually between U.S. airlines and foreign partners, which are staffed with diverse workforces because the demographic fabric of the United States workforce is increasingly multicultural and multinational (Byrd & Scott, 2018; Wei, 2018).

The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 lifted several federal controls on airfares, routes, and entry into the air transport business. The removal of these restrictions enabled small airlines to provide low-cost offerings by carriers in fares to benefit from price competition to the disadvantage of the major airlines (Subramanian, 2017). The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks created a compelling need for restructuring in the airline industry, resulting in the emergence of four major global international airline alliances (Seo, 2020; Wei, 2018).

A well-trained and managed workforce plays an especially important role in an organization's performance (Vokoun et al., 2018). The objective of this study was to research and explore the management strategies implemented to manage a diverse workforce in collaborative airline ground staff operation. The findings of this research study may contribute to organizational profitability and the sustainability of U.S.-based international airline alliances.

Problem Statement

The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 generated intense competition in the industry, forcing major U.S. airlines into international partnerships (Subramanian, 2017), necessitating effective diverse workforce management for organizational sustainability and competitive advantage in these alliance (Burns & Ulrich, 2016; Clark, 2017). The 11% decline of S & P stock index, low patronage of air transport, and falling airline revenues after the September 2001 terrorist attack (Burch et al., 2016) increased airline alliances, where the aim was to benefit from code-sharing, antitrust immunity, enhanced pricing, cost/risk sharing, and offering improved value propositions to travelers

(Bilotkach, 2019). The general business problem is that some leaders in U.S.-based international airline partnerships face the challenge of managing a diverse workforce essential for organizational sustainability and profitability of the alliance. The specific business problem is that some U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations lack effective strategies to manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability. The target population consisted of 20 airline alliance leaders located in the state of Georgia, with successful experience in using strategies to manage a diverse workforce to contribute to ensuring organizational sustainability and profitability. The findings of this study may contribute to positive social change by fostering an environment conducive to encouraging fair management practices to reduce discrimination based on race, gender, age, and other human differences. Business leaders managing diverse and multinational workforces could use the study findings to increase organizational operations performance. The effort to explore effective strategies to manage a diverse workforce has the potential to promote a management approach that could bring the best out of a workforce composed of a diverse group of employees and provide greater harmony in the community and among different groups of society.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative researchers seek an in-depth insight of social phenomena within a natural setting or context using various research exploratory strategies, including open-ended questions in semistructured interviews, observation, data triangulation, and member checking (Mohajan, 2018). The qualitative research method was suitable for this study because the aim of the study was to seek an in-depth insight of a social phenomenon, notably in managing a diverse workforce, within its natural setting using semistructured interviews. Conversely, quantitative researchers use close-ended questions to examine relationships between variables and test hypotheses (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The mixed method involves qualitative and quantitative methods to seek a broader understanding of phenomena (Johnson, 2019). A quantitative or mixed approach was not appropriate for this study because the focus of the study was not to measure relationships or test hypotheses, rather to gain deep and meaningful insights from firsthand experiences of managers innately associated with the phenomenon. The numerical oriented quantitative methods are not suitable to understand human dynamics; hence, a qualitative approach was considered suitable for this study.

Yin (2018) noted that the case study design is suitable for exploratory research to enhance the understanding of the subject under study. The phenomenological design is useful to describe the common lived experiences of individuals (Miller et al., 2018) but was not suitable for this research study because the focus was not on exploring individuals' lived experiences**.** The grounded theory design is used to develop a theory from data (Yin, 2018), which made it unsuitable for this study because the objective was not to develop a theory. The ethnographic design is useful in researching the shared values and patterns of a group in its natural setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) but did not fit the objective of this study because the intent here was not to identify the shared values and patterns of a particular group. However, the case study design is a more flexible approach that also facilitates data triangulation for enhanced research quality (Yin, 2018) and, therefore, had greater potential to explore strategies airline alliance leaders use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure business sustainability and profitability and was the reason I selected the case study design over others.

Overarching Research Question and Interview Questions

The overarching research question for this study was: What strategies do international airline alliance leaders use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure sustainability and profitability?

Below are the interview questions:

1. What important managerial strategies are necessary for managing a diverse workforce in the ground staff operations of international airline partnership settings?
2. What challenges have you encountered managing a diverse workforce in international ground staff settings?
3. What specific sustainability and profitability strategies have you implemented to effectively manage a diverse workforce?
4. How do these strategies relate to the business goals of achieving sustainability and profitability?

5. What role does a diverse workforce play in ensuring the sustainability and profitability of an international airline partnership?
6. What training did you receive to prepare you for managing a diverse workforce to ensure sustainability and profitability?
7. What kind of mentoring and training are necessary in this diverse workforce environment?
8. How are staff guided on flyer/customers in relation to airline partnership goals?
9. What recommendations do you have for a better management of a diverse workforce in the ground staff operations of international airlines partnership work environment?
10. What other issues are important regarding diverse workforce management and business sustainability, which we have not discussed?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual perspective that grounded this single case study, was the theory of transformational leadership (TFL). Downton initially coined the term "transformational leadership" in 1973 and Burns later developed the term into a leadership theory in 1978. Other scholars, namely Bass and Riggio (2006), have contributed to the development of the theory by emphasizing its intrinsic motivation element (as cited in Eckhaus, 2016). The benefit of adopting transformational leadership theory was that the postulations of charisma, vision, and integrity of the leader, when applied in management, often enable the employees to develop a sense of competence and creative self-efficacy, which contribute positively to productivity (Frazier, 2018).

The tenets of transformational leadership are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Frazier, 2018). Idealized influence refers to the leader's role model status in influencing the employees to emulate the high standards of the leader's moral and ethical conduct. Inspirational motivation depicts the high expectations that transformational leaders communicate to employees through motivation to enable the employees to buy into the organization's shared vision (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018). Intellectual stimulation involves the encouragement that the transformational leader gives subordinates to be creative and innovative to review beliefs and values in ways that bring practical solutions to challenges at work (Crede et al., 2019). The individualized consideration refers to the open-door policy in the transformational leadership style that facilitates attending to the peculiar needs of individual employees or minorities in the organization (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018).

Transformational leaders are more likely to provide a workable framework for exercising diverse workforce management strategies because of the recognition given to individual circumstances of employees, the open-door policy for minorities, and employees with unique circumstances (Amina & Singh, 2017). As international airline partnerships necessitate the hiring of a diverse workforce, the transformational leadership style has the potential to facilitate leveraging diverse workforce management strategies to enhance the achievement of the international airline partnership objectives (Mokhber et al., 2015). The postulations enshrined in the transformational leadership theory are, therefore, are pertinent in the contemporary management of a diverse organizational workforce settings, when diligently invoked and applied.

Operational Definitions

Key terms used in the study are defined in this section to facilitate the understanding of the reader:

Airline strategic alliance: A collaborative arrangement involving two or more airlines in terms of joint operations**,** with the explicit objective to enhance competitiveness and performance (Gayle & Thomas, 2015).

Code-sharing: An arrangement where one airline markets a flight that is operated by a second airline by placing its own flight code on the ticket to offer a seamless journey to the traveler who is flying to a destination not covered by the airline (Subramanian, 2017).

Competitive advantage: A firm’s ability to create superior value for customers by providing goods/services at relatively lower prices than competitors for equivalent or unique benefits that more than offset a higher price (Sigalas, 2015).

Diverse workforce: A workforce is composed of employees from various backgrounds of race, geographic origin, ethnicity, gender, age, functional/educational background, physical and cognitive capability, language, lifestyles, beliefs, cultural background, economic category, and tenure with the organization (Sharma, 2018).

Frequent flyer: Someone who travels regularly on commercial airlines and who is registered on the loyalty program of an airline to benefit from promotional offers for traveling (Knorr, 2019).

Strategic alliances: A union of one or more organizations to derive synergistic strengths substantially higher than would be individually possible, which often provides benefits in superior organizational customer reach and performance and in solving strategic problems (Kuznetsova, 2016).

Transformational leadership: A style of leadership where a leader works with subordinates to identify needed change, creates a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and build positive relationships between leadership and employees based on values (Salem, 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts deemed to be true without verification in the context of a research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the conduct of research, assumptions are perspectives that the researcher holds to be true to continue with the study (Saunders et al., 2016). Researchers need to take cognizance of assumptions to enhance the credibility of research findings. The research in this study entailed two major assumptions. First, it was assumed that participants understood the interview questions and therefore provided honest and truthful answers. The second assumption was that the sample of participants, drawn from the population, was adequate to explore the themes of diverse workforce management strategies and business profitability.

Limitations

Limitations in research are the potential weaknesses over which the researcher has no control (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). One possible limitation of this study is the applicability of the findings to other business organizations that are not service oriented. As airlines are service organizations, diverse workforce management strategies in an airline environment may not be applicable to a nonservice organization. Another limitation is that the results of the study likely reflect the views of the managers interviewed, leaving out the perspectives of other managers in the companies sampled.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the parameters set by the researcher to define the scope of the study by identifying the location, population, sample size, research topic, research questions, and variables (Yin, 2016). The first delimitation in the study was that this research was conducted in the contemporary and existing international airline partnership environment. The choice of international airline alliance environment was appropriate to explore the strategies that are effective in managing a diverse workforce. The second delimitation was that participants must have managed a diverse workforce for a minimum of 2 years as an important participation inclusionary criterion. The third delimitation was only conducting research at an international airport in the southeastern part of the United States meant excluding other airports and geographic regions.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

The efforts of organizational leaders to undertake international expansion come with the challenges to cater to the needs of an expanded and diverse stakeholders, including a diverse workforce (Attig et al., 2016). Managing a diverse workforce requires effective and equitable policies along with qualified leaders (Ardakani et al., 2016). The study findings may be of significance to international corporate partnerships, as could be useful to corporate leaders, training professionals, and international partnership managers, in advancing an understanding of diverse workforce management strategies in international partnership environments, which may contribute to business sustainability and competitive advantage. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the study may add to the current body of knowledge on management strategies for a workforce that is diverse in composition.

Implications for Social Change

An international business partnership environment requires the staffing of workforce with differing cultural, linguistic, educational, and gender backgrounds (Burns, 2016). The findings of this study, therefore, have the potential to increase knowledge and awareness of equitable and fair management practices that could serve to reduce discrimination based on race, gender, age, and other human differences. By contributing to reduce discrimination at the workplace, the findings of the study may create the workplace atmosphere that is conducive to enhancing job satisfaction, job security, productivity, business growth, and sustainability. As a diverse workforce is an asset for competitive advantage (Nickerson & Valerie, 2018), the findings of the study are likely to contribute to advancing market share expansion and better employee remuneration. By enhancing business growth, productivity, and sustainability, the study findings, if applied, may lead to more satisfied and motivated employees, and, thereby, to positive social change.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Literature Review Opening Narrative

The globalized economy has given rise to multinational corporations, staffed with employees from diverse backgrounds, to satisfy the mandates of the EEOC requirements and to provide a cultural fit to stakeholders (Nickerson & Valerie, 2018). Some organizations enter into partnerships with firms in target markets for economies of scale, take advantage of reduced transaction costs, as well as access and deliver superior value to a broader customer base (Kuznetsova, 2016). Having a diverse workforce in international partnerships has thus become a business imperative that requires efficient management. The organization of the literature review in this study principally revolves around workforce management strategies in the international airline alliance ground staff operations and has four constituents. The first section deals with business sustainability perspectives of sustainable business practices (SBP), sustainable competitive advantage (SCA), and strategic human resource management (SHRM). In the second segment, the focus is on an analytical discourse on transformational leadership, the conceptual framework of the study. The third and fourth constituents are on international expansion and diverse workforce management respectively.

The sources used for this review of academic and professional literature included peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and information from government websites. Most of the literature sources materials were drawn from the Walden University Library journal databases. The major databases that yielded useful articles are EBSCO, Academic Search Complete/Premier, SAGE Premier, ProQuest Central, ScienceDirect, and Thoreau

Multi-Database Search. Specific search terms being used included *globalization*, *strategic alliance, airline alliances, workforce diversity, diversity management, intercultural communication, risk management, multicultural management, leadership, transformational leadership*, and *strategic human resource management.*

The search from an extensive array of journal databases for this literature review presented herein resulted in a broad range of refereed articles published within the last 5 years. Google Scholar and the Journal of International Business are the other sources perused. The databases queried were accessed using the search parameters to source articles by topic, name of author, title of article, and Boolean operators. The literature search strategies brought forth many useful publications specific to international corporate partnerships and diverse workforce management. Relevant titles found in the references of earlier publications read are found in the databases, using the "Find exact Article" tab. The search terms indicated earlier were also entered in Google Scholar to find publications that had a direct bearing on the doctoral study topic. Table 1 shows the resources used with a date range from 1984 to 2020. Eighty-eight percent of the sources were peer-reviewed, and 89% of the total sources had a publication date within 5 years of my anticipated graduation completion date.

Table 1

Statistics of Sources in Literature Review

Reference type	Total	Less than 5 years	More than 5 years
Peer-reviewed journals	106	91	15
Nonpeer reviewed journals	15	10	5
Dissertations	3	3	0
Total	124	104	20

Application to the Applied Business Problem

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the workforce management strategies that are effective in ensuring business sustainability and profitability in the ground staff operations of U.S. and international partner airline alliances in contemporary management structures and organizational staffing demographics. The target population was airline alliance leaders located in the state of Georgia with successful experience in using strategies to manage a diverse workforce to contribute to ensuring organizational sustainability and profitability.

Business Sustainability

The motivations for business initiatives are often to generate revenue, provide employment, and satisfy a particular need in the community. To achieve these objectives, it is sometimes necessary to adopt the corporate governance that could sustain the organization as a profitable entity. Sustainability is thus an imperative in business to achieve the medium-term and long-term goals of an organization (Silvestre et al., 2018). The concept of sustainability in business has evolved from a point where ethical, social, and environmental obligations were once considered peripheral or irrelevant to business (Vogt & Weber, 2019). Business sustainability in the 21st century must include environmental stewardship, human resources management, corporate governance, human rights, corporate social responsibility (CSR), and corruption prevention (Mahsud et al., 2018). In the pursuit of corporate growth, organizations and airlines usually tend to adopt SBP, SCA, and SHRM. While these sustainability initiatives may be conducive for business growth, there is the tendency to consider them as mere buzz words that may not necessarily bring solutions (Groves, 2019).

SBP usually entails adopting ethical, social, and environmental principles in the conduct of business (Iverson, 2018). As part of SBP, business leaders endeavor to match corporate workforce needs with business objectives. Over the years, the SBP construct has become an essential element of the strategic management consideration, and business leaders often take account of this in planning (Mahsud et al., 2018). Accordingly, Delta Air Lines, a leading U.S. airline leader, often undertakes to adopt human resources (HR) policies that promote a diverse workforce and partners in national social justice campaigns. To demonstrate the airline's commitment to sustainability, an amount of $1 billion has been voted over the next 10 years to mitigate the potential deleterious effects of carbon emissions (Crabb, 2020). Various management models are used to measure

SBP, namely, the Balanced Score Card, Triple Bottom Line, and a Corporate Model of Sustainable Business, to mention a few (Mahsud et al., 2018). Merely generalizing the SBP concept to all organizations and industries may, however, not depict the reality of sustainability in business practice (Mahsud et al., 2018).

SCA is a strategic management engagement to underscore the necessity of long-term business profitability and growth, where ethics constitutes a means to the end of wealth creation (Pratono et al., 2019). Issues of employee morale and job satisfaction, business reputation, and customer perceptions of quality have become important determinants of SCA. Almada and Borges (2018) argued that HR management plays a vital role in the achievement of SCA. In the airline industry, various recognition programs, such as the Delta Chairman's Club, are instituted to boost employee morale to improve the organization's value proposition for new customers, frequent flyers, and travelers. The importance of HR management in ensuring business sustainability is, therefore, evident. Defining and measuring SCA for some stakeholders to the detriment of others could, however, undermine sustainability (Mahsud et al., 2018).

In the 21st century, the business environment is full of challenges in economic downturns, global financial crises, debilitating diseases such as AIDS, COVID-19, and Ebola, not to mention uncertainties in a highly competitive market. Organizations, therefore, must take a keen interest in managing the human capital to navigate these challenges. Bouaziz and Zouhour (2018) noted that HR management often plays a significant role in developing and analyzing organizational resilience. Hiring candidates with the required knowledge and skills for the right positions is crucial in building the human capital that could steer the company through crisis and competition (Kendrick et al., 2019). The airlines in the United States have generally endeavored to hire qualified staff and have also been proactive to reach a $ 25 billion deal with the U.S. government to retain and pay airline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Crabb, 2020).

Considering the ethical dimension of the concept of business sustainability, business scholars and researchers often only apply sustainability to business organizations that deal with products and services that are not destructive to human life and the environment (Mahsud et al., 2018). While every company is likely to tout its sustainability initiatives, the operations of firms in the defense, weapons, and tobacco industries may be perceived as unsustainable because their processes often lead to severe social and environmental damage. Regardless of how much a company's processes comply with SBP and how much economic gain is realized, the fact that its products and services cause harm to human life and the environment could undermine its sustainability endeavors (Tura et al., 2019). Sustainability perspectives regarding defense and ammunitions may, however, be considered with pragmatism, as the protection of national territorial integrity requires defense and weapons. In the airline industry, unethical practices of price gouging, overbooking flights, poor customer service, discrimination in workforce management, and faulty cancellation policies could compromise and potentially retard business growth and sustainability

Critics of the sustainability concept have described it as a term in vogue that is too vague to offer any guidance and too late to address the world's problems (Groves, 2019). There is also the notion that most of the views expressed and found in literature, education, and practice of sustainability are directed at describing problems of negative human impact on the environment and prescribing strategies to reduce the adverse impact of human actions on the world. McGhee and Grant (2019) noted that reducing social and environmental threats may not necessarily translate into creating a flourishing world, and minimizing unsustainability is not always synonymous with creating sustainability. In the business world, routinely applying the SBP idea to all firms and industries could fail to depict the very essence of business sustainability (Mahsud et al., 2018). In the same vein, determining and evaluating SCA for some stakeholders at the expense of others could compromise business growth and sustainability.

SHRM

A corporate structure is typically composed of various departments such as Customer Service, Marketing, Sales, Finance, Information Technology (IT), Business Operations, and HR. The purpose of setting up departments in a business organization is to coordinate the business activities of a company to fulfill the mission and goals of the organization (Vokoun et al., 2018). The various departments of an organization need to be staffed with qualified employees to execute the functions of the departments. Ensuring that corporate HR management aligns with organizational strategy is an imperative (Harrison & Bazzy, 2017).

The HR department typically ensures that the organization achieves success through the workforce using policies and systems, and the human resource management (HRM) responsibilities are, therefore, staff recruitment, training and development, performance appraisal, mentoring, rewards, and benefits management (Lim et al., 2017).

Effective HRM often helps facilitate organizational change and competitive advantage. The traditional HRM functions have been beneficial to organizations over the years but have needed adapting to the realities of the 21st century (Harrison & Bazzy, 2017).

The need to retain trained and experienced staff aligns HRM to corporate strategy, and organizational culture has arguably ushered in SHRM as an enhanced form of HRM (Lim et al., 2017). SHRM is thus frequently considered a pragmatic workforce management approach that has denoted an emphasis in enhancing organizational performance by pursuing goal-aligned and performance-based HRM practices. Unlike HRM professionals who may consider employees as HR, SHRM practitioners frequently refer to the workforce as human capital (Bouaziz & Zouhour, 2018). The SHRM use of human capital carries the resource-based view (RBV) perspective of the workforce as valuable, rare, inimitable, and nontradable resources (Lim et al., 2017). The emphasis on job satisfaction and organizational effectiveness in SHRM possibly marks a difference with the traditional HRM outlook and function, wherein the focus is on personnel administration issues, sometimes to the neglect of strategic interests (Nyamubarwa & Chipunza, 2019).

The transition from HRM to SHRM was, thus, on the grounds of matching workforce policies to organizational strategy (Lim et al., 2017). There is, therefore, frequently an assumption held that companies with differing corporate strategies would have differing HR policies. The term “strategic fit” came into existence to emphasize the need for compatibility between organizational strategy and protocols governing the workforce (Das & Kodwani, 2018). Another term in SHRM literature, “best practices,” refers to certain HR practices that are believed to universally outperform other practices and lead to organizational effectiveness, regardless of corporate strategy and context. Paauwe and Boon (2018) argued that while researchers have consistently found stronger evidence for “best practices,” there is limited empirical support for the “strategic fit” perspective.

Workforce training is a key function of SHRM for organizational sustainability. The purpose of training is to equip employees with relevant knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes to promote organizational value proposition (Chhetri et al., 2018). The approach to training has, however, had to change over time with the advent of technology tools, social media, networking, and the diverse composition of the workforce in the 21st century (Solis, 2017). Organizations have tended to adapt corporate training programs to the technological and generational changes that characterize the personnel, thereby, harnessing the power of technology and networks to design online and computer-based learning, which have evolved into convenient personalized digital experience for employees (Solis, 2017). Developing a training program for a workforce that spans various age groups, continents, markets, and cultures could be challenging, requiring formal and informal approaches, mentoring, and coaching (Caine, 2018).

Efficient pursuit of SHRM policies and programs may have to incorporate the organizational culture as an integral factor in planning (Harrison & Bazzy, 2017). Organizational culture refers to the shared values, perceptions, memories, attitudes, and beliefs that constitute the behavioral component of an organization (Penna de Carvalho et al., 2018). The demographic changes that came along with globalization in the 20th century, coupled with the EEOC requirements in the United States, have invariably led to the creation of a multicultural workforce environment for many companies, especially in multinational corporations, and possibly feeds into an organizational culture and model that requires inclusiveness to be sustainable (Ardakani et al., 2016). SHRM practice in a workplace may have to fit into a compatible leadership style to be sustainable.

Transformational Leadership

The term "transformational leadership" was initially coined in 1973 by Downton, and Burns (1978) later developed the concept into a leadership theory (as cited in Gyanchandani, 2017). Other scholars, notably Bass and Riggio (2006), expanded the theory by emphasizing its intrinsic motivation elements (as cited in Eckhaus, 2016). The main tenets of the theory transformational leadership are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Frazier, 2018). Transformational leaders ostensibly broaden and elevate the interests of employees by generating awareness and acceptance of the purpose and mission of the organization (Asencio, 2016). Transformational leaders invariably promote organizational commitment by aligning employees' values, beliefs, and motives with those of the organization. The positive traits of these leaders, such as inspirational motivation, idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, may render the transformational leadership style suitable for diverse workforce management (Amina & Singh, 2017). The individual consideration trait, in particular, may facilitate taking account of the circumstances of all the segments of the workforce in designing suitable and optimal management strategies.

Pongpearchan (2016) argued that transformational leadership and high-performance work systems provide job motivation for task performance and facilitate change, innovation, and entrepreneurial capability. Transformational leaders have the potential to motivate the workforce towards a vision for the success of the organization and, consequently, could create, communicate, and model the vision to inspire the employees (Amina & Singh, 2017). Unlike the transactional leadership, the commonly evident traits of transformational leaders are personal charisma, role models, a sense of consideration towards employees, and intellectual stimulation to staff (Eckhaus, 2016).

Transformational leaders may increase cohesion, commitment, motivation, and trust, leading to positive effects on workforce performance. The intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation associated with transformational leaders could have a remarkable positive effect on strategic human resource management (SHRM). Eckhaus (2016) noted that there is a significant positive relationship between transformational leadership and the financial performance of an organization. Despite the merits of the transformational leadership style, it is sometimes perceived as lacking in conceptual clarity (Shukla & Chotai, 2017).

Fourie & Höhne (2019) underscored a lack of realism in the TL theory, pointing at a particular heroic bias in the conception of the theory, that is at odds with the fact that all human beings are fallible. The positive effect of transformational leaders on employee task performance has come under scrutiny, following perceptions that the leadership theory may not be as effective as often presented to be. Siangchokyoo et al. (2020) noted that, while some positive outcomes may be associated with transformational leadership, the desirable effects of the leadership style on employees may diminish beyond a certain threshold. The economic theory of diminishing marginal utility could explain the reducing influence of transformational leaders beyond a certain point, that is depicted as a curvilinear pattern of relationship between transformational leadership and positive employee task performance (Chen et al., 2018). Some scholars have also questioned the effectiveness of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire in the data collection used in evaluating the transformational leadership style.

International Expansion

Several firms have been known to internationalize by expanding the sales of products and services across national and regional boundaries, to other geographic locations, due to a variety of factors, especially policies and the market conditions in the countries involved (Dinu, 2016). Internationalization is thus a strategy to increase a firm's competitive advantage (Attig et al., 2016). Companies adopting the internationalization strategy, frequently also face the challenges of dealing with expanded and diverse stakeholders, including a diverse workforce.

While undertaking international expansion, some firms enter strategic alliances for greater customer outreach, economies of scale, cost sharing, risk reduction, and revenue increase **(**Bortoluzzi et al., 2018). The avenues for cost and risk sharing serve as motivation for increased revenue, market share expansion, profitability, and business growth. Some companies take advantage of international expansion to escape a hypercompetitive or saturated home market and, therefore, use international expansion as a strategy to enter an emerging or a lucrative market (Yoder et al., 2016). Operating in the international market, however, does not guarantee success, as the cultural, legal, and strategic issues represent challenges some of the companies must navigate (Yoder et al., 2016).

The globalized economy creates a situation where customers look for innovation in product offerings and, in the air transport industry, flexible and cheaper flight options along with attractive loyalty programs. Product, organizational, and marketing innovation constitute important drivers of internationalization. The resource-based view (RBV) of innovation refers to a strategic resource that facilitates firm expansion into international markets to gain competitive advantage by offering new and value-added solutions to customers (Bortoluzzi et al., 2018). The strategic, tactical, and operational supplier-customer engagement provides avenues for product innovation (Jajja et al., 2017). In the air transport sector, innovation takes the form of routing merger between partnering airlines, code sharing, block spacing, shareholding, loyalty programs, and franchising (Alexander et al., 2015).

Firm internationalization is positively related to the organization's CSR rating (Attig et al., 2016). The increased pressure of catering to the interests of a larger and culturally, politically, economically, and institutionally more diverse stakeholder community, usually makes it vital for multinational companies to upgrade CSR endeavors to demonstrate responsiveness to the diverse stakeholders. Internationalization, thus, correlates with improved CSR rating, and firms with subsidiaries in countries with well-functioning political and legal institutions have better CSR ratings. It must, however, be noted that multinational corporations operate in countries where corruption is quite common, also become prone to corrupt practices to further their business interests (Bortoluzzi et al., 2018).

Following the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 in the United States, major U.S. airlines have experienced increased labor, fuel, and security costs sought to partner with other airlines in Europe, Asia, and South America to extend the reach for customers and to take advantage of economies of scale (Dinu, 2016). These partnerships require the management of a workforce with proactive cultural, intercultural, and linguistic skills (Zhuwao et al., 2019). While some international partnerships have been successful, others such as KLM and Alitalia have been compelled to go through premature alliance dissolution in 2000, resulting in significant losses in revenues (Yoder et al., 2016).

Strategic Alliances

Strategic alliances are flexible arrangements for cooperation between companies, which can benefit from the strengths of the partnership to solve organizational problems (Kuznetsova, 2016). Some business entities can leverage these benefits for competitive advantage. In the global e-commerce environment, companies encounter threats from local and overseas competitors (Winata et al., 2016). To cope with challenges and derive economies of scale, offer customers better value for money, while penetrating new markets, some organizations engage in forming strategic alliances. Some of the governance structure options for strategic alliances include joint ventures, minority equity alliances, and contractual alliances (Teng & Das, 2008). Strategic networks in the air transport business involve a high level of competition, industry standards, and entry barriers (Kuznetsova, 2016).

The gains of forming international strategic alliances are many and varied, justifying, thereby, the existence of such business and strategic initiatives. It may, however, be worth noting that the legal, political, and sociocultural circumstances of each country being different, the organizational culture of each firm participating in an international strategic alliance may often be different (Kraus et al., 2018). Partnering with foreign companies in a business initiative invariably comes with cognizance of language, cultural, legal, and policy differences that could constitute challenges, and strategies to surmount these for the smooth running of the alliance. The alliance difficulties of Honda/Rover and Alitalia/KLM demonstrate the uncertainties associated with international strategic alliances (Bilotkach, 2019).

In the globalized economy, some airlines have entered strategic alliances to extend the reach for customers, reduce operational costs, and increase competitive advantage (Subramanian, 2017). Four major global international airline alliances have emerged over the years, namely Star Alliance, SkyTeam, OneWorld, and Wings (Seo, 2020). The international operations of US airlines involved in international strategic alliances and the diverse demography of the US population, have led to workforces comprising of many different nationalities and ethnicities (Mishra et al., 2017). One key operational level of the strategic international airline alliances is the management of combined ground staff operations of these alliances, which are often comprised of a racially and ethnically diverse workforce.

Important Theories of Strategic Alliances

Theory of Transaction Cost (TTC)

Various theories seemingly justify the practice of engaging in strategic alliances. Kuznetsova (2016) noted that the theory of transaction cost (TTC), connotes an emphasis on a low cost of operations, which constitutes a reference point to explain the motivation for forming these networks. Cost reduction is one of the reasons for firms engaging in strategic alliances (Pore, 2018). In ordinary business operations, firms may adopt modes of operation that minimize production and transaction costs. While production cost refers to the direct cost of producing and delivering a product or service, transaction cost involves the cost associated with discovering prices, engaging in negotiations, preparing contracts, and settling negotiations (Coti-Zelati, et al., 2019).

While TTC could serve as a good motivation for firms to engage in strategic alliances, some limitations may be identified in its application. The TTC**,** based on the notion of the firm as a bundle of transactions and contracts, is inadequate to explain the theory of the firm as a cluster of knowledge and underlying processes (Kuzmin, 2017). The application of the TTC as a theoretical lens may further be more applicable to tangible goods as a cost management theory, and since services are intangible, the TTC may not be appropriate for services (Pore, 2018).

Resource-Based View (RBV)

The resource-based view (RBV) is a business model, with a share of proponents who have argued that the resources of a business organization constitute a source of competitive advantage (Pore, 2018). On the RBV, Barney et al. (2001) took a counter position to the Industrial Organization (IO) model of Chandler (1962), who had suggested that firms competing in the same industry often have access to a homogeneous pool of resources that are mobile across firms. The advocates of the RBV have contended that the resources of firms usually consist of all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, and knowledge controlled by an organization to formulate and execute strategies efficiently (Pore, 2018). The list of resources referred to in the preceding sentence, may not be homogenous for firms competing in the same industry. The theory of transaction cost (TTC) is perhaps relevant to explain the desire of companies to form strategic alliances in order to share in the pool of facilities that become available in the alliance. As no single firm has all the necessary resources and capabilities to compete effectively, and strategic alliances are invariably an option to join forces with other firms for business profitability, sustainability, and competitive advantage (Bortoluzzi et al., 2018).

Strategic alliance arrangements make it possible for member firms to undertake research and development jointly, share knowledge, costs, risks, processes, and services (Winata et al., 2016). The advocates of the theory of industrial markets argue that mutual dependence of companies from foreign countries often brings synergy and positive results. However, joining a strategic alliance requires careful consideration since, over the years, some of these partnerships have turned out to be unstable and prone to organizational failure (Vaidya, 2017). Engaging in strategic alliances also involves some significant formation and maintenance costs that are considered difficult to predict. mainly due to the required depth in focus required, to derive benefits from such associations and strategic alliances (Szymura-Tyc, & Kucia, 2016). With increasing globalization and emerging technologies, it is difficult to have a sustainable competitive advantage in a rapidly changing business environment and market (Teng & Das, 2008). While strategic alliances are useful in reducing costs and building synergy, the different organizational cultures of the partnering companies could be a source of tension (Vaidya, 2017).

In an international corporate partnership, the top management of the alliance frequently formulate and set the legal framework for the effective management of the partnership (Lehene & Borza, 2017). The success of a strategic alliance is, however, determined by the day-to-day operations and interactions of the workforce in teams of engineers, salesforce, and operational workers (Nielson, 2010). While the diverse character of the workforce in an international strategic alliance may be challenging to manage, it may also constitute an asset for competitive advantage and business sustainability. The need to effectively manage a diverse workforce in the ground staff operations of a US-based airline alliance can, therefore, not be overemphasized and was the focus of this research.

Legitimacy and Competitive Significance of Strategic Alliance Membership

The perception of legitimacy may be a compelling consideration for joining an airline strategic alliance network due to the rigorous vetting applicants go through before being accepted into the network (Bilotkach, 2019). The case of Turkish Airlines may serve as an example to demonstrate how the membership of an international airline alliance network gives legitimacy to an airline. From a situation where 98% of its equity was owned by the Turkish government and constrained by the Turkish and European economies, Turkish airlines have needed legitimacy and recognition to access the international market to fulfill its quest for growth (Subramanian, 2017). On becoming a member of the Star Alliance in 2008, Turkish Airlines have gained increased legitimacy and international recognition, resulting in its steady growth and transition into an important global carrier (*The Economist*, 2015). In the midst of many strategic alliance failures, however, membership of a strategic alliance is not enough to provide legitimacy.

Airline Deregulation

The international airline alliance networks came into existence through code sharing agreements that resulted from the deregulation of the US and European Union air transport industry (Subramanian, 2017). While the reason for reforming the US airline industry was to manage inflationary macroeconomic challenges, the pressure for reform had been building for some time. The fares, costs, and services of unregulated intrastate airlines were significantly less than regulated domestic airline services (Sun, 2017). It became clear that the regulation was not meeting its stated goals. The Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) also gained a reputation for bureaucratic complacency, and airlines were delayed when they applied for new routes or fare changes. Continental Airlines began operations between Denver and San Diego, eight years after applying to serve that route. The 1978 Airline Deregulation Act removed most of the economic controls on airline operations and paved the way for the changes that resulted in international airline alliances.

Star Alliance

International airline alliance networks came into existence through code-sharing agreements that resulted from the deregulation of the US and European Union air transport industry (Subramanian, 2017). The Star Alliance was formed on May 14, 1997, when the German-based Lufthansa and the US-based United Airlines came together with Air Canada, Scandinavian Airlines, and Thai Airways as the first airline alliance in the global air transport industry (Mishra et al., 2017). The first code-shared flights occurred in 1997 involving Air Canada and Scandinavian Airlines.

Star Alliance was initially a virtual organization with offices in Los Angeles and Frankfurt, but a new legal entity, Star Alliance Management GmbH was formed under the German law in 2002 with its headquarters in Frankfurt (Subramanian, 2017). The new legal entity had 65 employees stationed at the headquarters, in Frankfurt, and governed by a Chief Executive Board with representatives from member airlines (Bhattacharyya, 2018). While members had equal voting rights, their roles changed from operational responsibility to advisory, and the alliance staff took up the operational decision-making (Vattikoti & Razak, 2018).

Although the primary objective for forming the alliance was to codeshare, members also engaged in joint purchasing and maintenance agreements, joint frequent flier programs, and sharing airport terminals (Mishra et al., 2017). At the early stage, the members of the alliance were primarily focused on code sharing and common frequent flyer benefits. Subsequently, the Star Alliance network became stronger with more airline members joining in, covering broader routes, sharing airline facilities such as check-in counters and ground handling services (Lee-Anant & Sucher, 2017).

Various airlines have joined and left the Star Alliance during the 24 years of its existence. The membership in 2017, stood at 28 airlines, operating a fleet of about 5,033 aircrafts, serving approximately 1,290 airports in 194 countries, transporting 637.6 million passengers a year on more than 18, 000 daily departures (Lee-Anant & Sucher, 2017). One advantage that members of the Star Alliance have, is access to five busy global hubs, namely Frankfurt, London-Heathrow, Chicago O'Hare, Singapore, and Bankok (Lee-Anant & Sucher, 2017). Membership of the Star Alliance, thus, availed partnering airlines to significant number of passengers at these hubs, which translated into increased revenue per passenger mile and market share. IATA (2016) indicated that the Star Alliance airline network accounts for 23% total globally scheduled flights.

SkyTeam

The SkyTeam, another multi-airline alliance, was founded in 2000 as the last of three airline alliances formed to build coalitions of airline companies around the world. The founding members, Aeroméxico, Air France, Delta Air Lines, and Korean Air met in New York City to establish the world's third airline alliance (Subramanian, 2017). Operating under the slogan, "Caring More About You," the SkyTeam partners link travelers with over 1,150 destinations in 175 countries, scheduling approximately 16,000 daily flights for over 730 million passengers annually (Delta, 2020). SkyTeam Cargo was later formed with Aeromexpress, Air France Cargo, Delta Air Logistics, and Korean Air Cargo as founding cargo members. The SkyTeam comes second with 20.4% of total globally scheduled flights (IATA, 2016).

The membership of the SkyTeam alliance in the year 2020, stood at 19 airlines, 11 of which also operate on cargo-only basis. Apart from the founding members referred to above, other members are Aeroflot, Aerolíneas Argentinas, Air Europa, Alitalia, China

Airlines, China Eastern, China Southern, Czech Airlines, Garuda Indonesia, Kenya Airways, Middle East Airlines, Saudia, TAROM, Vietnam Airlines, and XiamenAir. The entry of these new airlines extended the coverage of the network in the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America (SkyTeam, 2019).

The SkyTeam partners have access to international markets, which facilitates entry into the globally integrated transportation services. Partnering members benefit from joint sales and marketing coordination, co-location of airport facilities, reciprocal code sharing, reciprocal loyalty programs participation, airport lounge access, airport ground handling arrangements, aircraft maintenance insourcing, and joint procurement (Delta, 2018). Parties to the alliances also enjoy the sharing of revenues/profits and losses, coordinated pricing and revenue management, network and schedule planning (Subramanian, 2017).

Delta Air Lines

Delta Air Lines entered the travel business about 80 years ago and has gone through various transformations, restructurings, mergers, and partnerships that have made it a major international carrier in 2020. With its headquarters in Atlanta, Delta Air Lines employed almost 80,000 employees worldwide and operated a combined fleet of almost 1,300 aircrafts during the immediate pre-COVID 19 pandemic era (Delta, 2017). Delta and the Delta Connection carriers served 340 destinations in 64 countries on six continents (Delta, 2018). As far as the company's profitability is concerned, Delta reported $ 3.9 billion profit and 99.65 % completion factor in 2018 (Delta, 2018).

As part of its marketing strategy, Delta Air Lines has strategic alliance arrangements with foreign carriers namely Virgin Atlantic, Air France, KLM, AeroMexico, Virgin Australia and its affiliated carriers, Korean Air Lines, and WestJet (Delta, 2018). The relationship with these foreign carriers has facilitated Delta Air Lines' access to international markets and thereby provide globally integrated transportation services. The benefits of these arrangements include joint sales and marketing coordination, co-location of airport facilities, reciprocal code sharing, reciprocal loyalty programs participation, airport lounge access, airport ground handling arrangements, aircraft maintenance insourcing, and joint procurement (Delta, 2018). Parties to the alliances also enjoy the sharing of revenues/profits and losses, coordinated pricing and revenue management, network and schedule planning (Subramanian, 2017). As Kuznetsova (2016) noted, the theory of transaction cost explains the rationale and motivation for these strategic arrangements.

The alliance with Virgin Atlantic has enhanced Delta's operations on the non-stop routes between the United Kingdom and North America. By owning a non-controlling 49% equity share in Virgin Atlantic Limited, Delta Air Lines has bolstered this alliance to support the airlines marketing strategy (Delta, 2018). Having Air France and KLM in the strategic network merged Delta's routes into the Air France/KLM transatlantic routes, thereby extending the reach for customers within the global market for Delta Air Lines. Strategic alliances constitute large entities that gain competitive advantage by virtue of size and pooling resources. The alliance with AeroMexico strengthened Delta Air Lines transborder flights with Mexico and this relationship was further developed by the 51%

non-controlling shares that it owns in AeroMexico (Delta, 2018). Each member of the Delta Air Lines strategic network promoted the airline's marketing strategy and extended its global routes farther. For this useful network to be sustainable, requires a workforce that has the requisite cultural, linguistic, technical, and skills in ground operations and staff management.

Diverse Workforce

In the globalized economy, workforce diversity has become a common feature of international business because of the changing demographic nature of populations and the need to have a staff that matches corporate customers profile **(**Tanwar & Kumar, 2019). The 21st century US workforce is comprised of employees from diverse sub-groupings of race, geographic origin, ethnicity, gender, age, functional/educational background, physical and cognitive capability, language, lifestyles, beliefs, cultural background, economic category, and tenure with the organization (Zhuwao et al., 2019). While a diverse workforce could enhance corporate competitive advantage, the differences associated with diversity could be a source of distraction and conflict and, thereby, retarding progress (Goswami & Kishor, 2018). Members of a diverse workforce require intercultural competencies to be effective (Schreier et al., 2019).

Age Diversity

Scholars have made various efforts to understand workforce diversity better to facilitate effective workforce management. One approach involved the interest in the effects of generational differences at work. Urick et al. (2016) identified two levels of analysis in generational differences, namely age as the surface level characteristic, and differences in values and attitudes as the deep-level diversity. Generational cohorts are often grouped into birth years, and although there is a debate over the demarcation years, four major generations can be identified, namely Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millenials (Weeks et al., 2017). While millennials are better at using technology tools and multitasking, the older generations perform better with work ethics and work-life balance (Weeks et al., 2017).

The different generational cohorts, arguably, hold differing values, beliefs, attitudes, and world views, arising from the personal life experiences, historical, and social events that marked the various generations**.** The workplace is one context where generational differences have been observed and written about extensively (Čič & Žižek, 2017). The workforce in the 21st century, as stated, is composed of four generations of employees, namely Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y (Byrd & Scott, 2018). Generational cohorts born before the end of World War II are also called the Silent Generation. The Baby Boomers, a generational cohort are those born between the end of World War II, and early to the mid-1960s; Generation X came between the early to mid-1960 and the mid to the late 1980s (Weeks & Weeks, 2017). Generation Y, also called Millennials, occupy a place in the generational cohort classification, from the late 1970s to late 1990s (Roth et al., 2017). With the differences in perspectives, values, and attitudes, age diversity in a workforce constitutes a challenge for organizational management but could present an opportunity as well.

The points of divergence between the generations in a workplace are likely to be in terms of work ethics, communication, significance of work, motivation, work/life balance, and reward. The work ethics of Veterans may be expressed by being respectful to authority and working hard (Byrd & Scott, 2018). Baby Boomers tend to be workaholics, desire quality, and may question authority (Čič & Žižek, 2017). Generation X cohorts could be self-reliant, skeptical, and may eliminate the task, but Millennials could be entrepreneurial and engage in multitasking (Oliveira & Cabral Cardoso, 2018). Regarding communication, while Veterans are more likely to use the formal memo, Baby Boomers may prefer in-person contact, as Generation X would use direct and immediate approach, and Millennials, who are technology-friendly, would use email or voicemail (Byrd & Scott, 2018). Veterans may feel motivated in being respected, Baby Boomers by being valued and needed, Generation X by being accorded freedom, and Millennials by working with other bright people (Ali et al., 2018). As Veterans would prefer to keep work and life balance separate, Baby Boomers usually do not want any balance, but seek to "live to work", while Generation X and Millennials seem interested in a balance so they "work to live" (Roth et al., 2017). Veterans may consider a job well done as a reward, but Baby Boomers apparently prefer money, title, and recognition; Generation X would take freedom as a reward, and for Millennials, meaningful work may constitute a reward (Kalargyrou & Costen, 2017).

Considering the described generational differences, an age-diverse team may generate tension within the organization, which would require management to ensure intergenerational cooperation and collaboration. To achieve intergenerational cooperation in the workforce may necessitate, first and foremost, training managers in providing leadership for an age-diverse workforce (Byrd & Scott, 2018). Other approaches to managing a multigenerational workforce include mentoring programs, job rotation, job sharing, talent management, and coaching (Roth et al., 2017). Intergenerational cooperation could enhance, and foster differences arising from real and perceived the generation gap, which could facilitate knowledge sharing, create, expand, and maintain social networks (Kalargyrou & Costen, 2017).

Cultural Diversity

Many companies engage in business activities involving strategic partners in various parts of the world, attributed to globalization. Multinational corporations hire workforces composed of people from differing cultures. Customs, understandings, arts, beliefs, language, social institutions, and values are the essential ingredients of a culture (Vlad & Stan, 2018). Culture influences and shapes the behavior of people and, thereby, constitutes a significant element of identity development. Gupta (2018) argued that culture is a socially constructed phenomenon and as members from differing societies interact, there evolves an intercultural influence process. Effective intercultural engagement requires cultural intelligence without which there could be potential for miscommunication, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation, and which could arguably adversely affect productivity (Vlad & Stan, 2018).

Multiculturalism as an internal manifestation of plural cultural meaning systems, and hence is critical for global managers and multinational corporations to display awareness and foster harmony (Carrizales et al., 2016). Understanding how to manage cultural plurality often enables multinational corporations to engage in such critical undertakings as global integration of dispersed operations, cross-border transfer of management practices, and learning across different environments (Dumitrescu et al., 2014). Intercultural competency is a cognitive aptitude to understand more than one societal culture, necessary to make informed cultural interpretations in various situations (Vlad & Stan, 2018).

Multicultural team managers often face challenges associated with the heterogeneity in the workforce, which usually manifests in terms of differences in languages, values, beliefs, practices, and understandings (Dwyer & Azevedo, 2016). The varying cultures, languages, values, worldviews often give rise to misunderstandings and conflicts require extra efforts to build consensus (Jain & Pareek, 2019). Managing a workforce composed of people of different linguistic, racial, political, age, gender, and religious backgrounds calls for strategies to facilitate effective communication, to harness the potential of the workforce to achieve organizational goals. Dumitrescu et al. (2014) noted that a multicultural team manager may need to speak one or more foreign languages, demonstrate empathy, tolerance, flexibility, and respect for values of other cultures.

Gender Diversity

Workforce composition could also be in terms of gender. As more females join the workforce in the 21st century, issues of gender diversity and the necessary policy and legal provisions have engaged the attention of corporate leaders (Hassan et al., 2017). Indeed, gender diversity is not only a matter of legal compliance but, more importantly, value addition to organizational growth and profitability (Zhuwao et al., 2019). The major issues that business leaders often have to deal with in a diverse gender workforce are social roles, gender roles, equality, the wage gap, occupational sex segregation, masculinization of women's roles, work-life balance, and glass ceiling vs. glass escalator.

Social role theory

The social role theory (SRT) is a social psychological perspective that relates to sex differences in social behavior and personality (Yin Ho et al., 2017). Propounded by Eagley (1997), SRT depicts a sexual division of labor with males as breadwinners, assuming roles in a paid economy that requires exercising physical strength, assertiveness, and leadership skills, while females tend to be homemakers and primary caretakers of children (Corrington & Hebl, 2018). The leadership and assertiveness associated with males may create a hierarchy with the men occupying the upper tier. With industrialization, greater educational access to both males and females, and the entry of females into the workforce, management practice has to cope with policy issues regarding gender equality since the differences between male and female gender may perpetuate gender stereotypes at the workplace.

Diverse Workforce Management

Managing a team composed of members with varying backgrounds is a particularly challenging undertaking. A well-managed diverse workforce brings about a competitive advantage (Schreier et al., 2019). Diverse workforce management is, thus, often considered a challenge for HR management, entrusted to placing importance on ensuring organizational justice (Ardakani et al., 2016). An organization's international expansion requires SHRM with an emphasis on cultural awareness (Karadjova-Stoev & Mujtaba, 2016). The absence of SHRM in Euro Disney's initial strategy was the reason for the project's failure in Europe (Karadjova-Stoev & Mujtaba, 2016). Companies that have diverse, inclusive, and talent management strategies appear to outperform competitors on both talent and financial outcomes (Burns & Ulrich, 2016).

A workforce composed of various age, gender, cultural, religious, and disability groups, therefore, needs diverse workforce managers to understand and use the four HRM orientations namely ethnocentric, regiocentric, polycentric, and geocentric approaches to vary HR strategy to suit the specific business circumstances of an organization (Karadjova-Stoev & Mujtaba, 2016).The importance of inclusiveness in contemporary business constitutes the basis for increased programming and policy implementation in the US public sector, for improving cultural awareness (Carrizales et al., 2016). Cultural competency at the organizational level often translates into specific actions and policies that a company leverages to be effective in serving its diverse populations. The pursuit of cultural competency in a business entity may help promote organizational change, good governance, and effective service delivery (Davis et al., 2016). The HR role of business leaders is critical to ensure diverse workforce management by implementing equal employment opportunity (EEO) policies in corporate HRM practices.

HR management practice in the 21st century globalized, and digitized economy usually involves innovation for enhanced organizational performance (Chen et al., 2016). Diverse workforce managers are required to define roles and responsibilities that encourage combinations of work arrangements and human resource policies that advance the organization's interests (Camuffo & De Stefano, 2016). The close relationship between HRM and organizational culture provides an avenue for matching HRM practice with innovation for growth, sustainability, and profitability. Legal settlements with some international corporate giants demonstrate how detrimental ineffective diverse workforce management can be to an organization (Davis et al., 2016).

Ahmed et al. (2015) underscored the need for diverse workforce managers to develop relevant competencies to provide effective leadership for the team. Firm internationalization creates a supply chain environment that requires team collaboration within and across organizational boundaries (Boughzala & de Vreede, 2015). Project management in multinational corporations requires constituting global, diverse, and virtual teams that have the necessary competencies. Providing leadership for a workforce in such a globalized work environment calls for skills in foreign languages and cultures, international communication, performance recognition, SHRM, and training (Browne et al., 2016)

To the extent that employee perception of trust in leadership plays a significant role in job satisfaction, effective diverse workforce management contributes to employee retention (Asencio, 2016). With the development of technology and the ease of researching organizational practices, SHRM, in terms of diverse workforce management, could constitute a basis for organizational attractiveness (Ardakani et al., 2016). The efforts at internationalization positively correlates with corporate social responsibility (CSR), effective diverse workforce management can aid in the contribution to this positive correlation (Attig et al., 2016).

For inclusive corporate governance, there is a need for a leadership style that facilitates diversity management. The transformational leader will usually seek to attain organizational goals by providing idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Eckhaus, 2016). The transformational leader frequently helps employees to develop creative self-efficacy, a trait that contributes positively to productivity (Hassan et al., 2015). The individualized consideration component of the transformational leadership style perhaps constitutes an avenue for attending to the specific circumstances and needs of minorities. Transformational leadership, therefore, is often an effective leadership style for enacting diverse workforce management strategies because of the recognition given to individual circumstances of employees and the open-door policy for minorities and employees with peculiar circumstances (Mittal & Dhar, 2015).

The diverse workforce management considerations of an international airline involved in a strategic alliance cannot be discussed without reference to customers. Madireddy et al. (2017) underscored the need for business leaders to endeavor to understand customers' needs and to leverage that knowledge into differentiated product and service offerings for competitive advantage. As airlines serve various categories of customers (frequent flyers, business, leisure, domestic, and international customers) in different locations of the world having varying legal, financial, cultural, and linguistic contexts, it is necessary to sensitize the workforce to dealing with the public using the relevant knowledge and cultural intelligence. In pursuing the international airline alliance goals, the relationship between the workforce and customers is vital (Rocha et al., 2019).

A literature review constitutes a critical evaluation of current knowledge on a subject matter to clarify its intricacies to provide justification for the research (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). A thorough review of the literature regarding diverse workforce management strategies in international corporate partnerships is essential to situate the study in the broader context of research about diversity management. The literature review for this research involved, using the landmark publication of Burns (1978) on transformational leadership to serve as a theoretical lens, in underpinning the study. The literature on diverse workforce management is replete with indications of the advantages diverse workforce brings to an organization, namely in terms of competitive advantage, innovation, cultural fit to stakeholders, and sustainability (Castaneda & Bateh, 2013; Gwal, 2014; Karadjova-Stoev & Mujtaba, 2016). Levitt (2015), however, noted that while a diverse workforce may have the benefits listed herein, it could also bring about process losses, increased conflict, decreased social integration, and barriers to decision-making, and change process. The need to manage a diverse workforce efficiently is, therefore, a business imperative.

Transition

In Section 1, the relevance of diverse workforce management strategies in international airline alliance has been outlined with brief explanations of the background, problem, and purpose statements, along with the nature of the study. Section 1 also includes the research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, as well as the significance of the study. Another component of Section 1 is the Review of Professional and Academic

Literature, in which there is an overview of issues related to globalization, diverse workforce management, airline deregulation, international corporate alliance, strategic HR management, and cultural awareness.

Section 2 includes details on the role of the researcher, data collection instruments, and techniques, data organization and analysis, participants, research method, design, and sampling techniques. Each of these topics was developed to seek in-depth knowledge to answer the overarching research question through the invocation of a qualitative method with a single case study design. Other necessary elements of Section 2 to ensure successful research, are details covering ethical research, and the measures taken to ensure reliability, and validity of this study.

Section 2: The Project

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies U.S.-based airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability. The target population consisted of five airline alliance leaders located in the state of Georgia, who had, after verification, achieved success and who held experience in using strategies to manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability. The implications for positive social change from the findings of this study may include the possibility that the research findings can constitute a resource and a contribution to this discipline, which may encourage equitable management practices and knowledge that could serve to potentially reduce discrimination based on race, gender, and other human differences. Leaders and managers of organizations with a workforce composed of a diverse and multinational workforce could use the findings of the study to increase the organizational performance of operations. The effort to explore practical strategies to manage a diverse workforce has the potential to promote a management approach that could bring the best out of a workforce composed of a diverse group of employees.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher plays a vital role in a qualitative research study. Yin (2018) referred to a qualitative researcher as the primary data collection instrument and the interpreter of findings. In conducting a study, the researcher has a responsibility to avoid personal and participant bias, ensure accuracy in data collection, and cross-validate data to enhance the quality and the integrity of the findings. Marshall and Rossman (2016) underscored the need to set a strong ethical standard that translates into clear rules to guide the various stages of the research. The Belmont ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice constitute critical guiding principles set an ethical standard for research (Brothers et al., 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miracle, 2016). The vital role of the researcher involves selecting a suitable research methodology and design to undertake the study, taking measures to minimize bias, triangulating data sources, engaging in transcript review and member checking, as well as using an interview protocol and demonstrating effective interpersonal relations with participants (Karagiozis, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018).

One of the ethical challenges in qualitative research is that of possible personal bias of the researcher affecting a study. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that a researcher’s identity, experience, and values might hold some biases. Minimizing researcher bias requires engagement in personal reflection on self-identity, a sense of voice, and introspectively examining perspectives, assumptions, and sensitivities (Cumyn et al., 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). Personal reflection may clarify the researcher’s position regarding the subject under study and facilitates bracketing by recognizing where personal insight is kept separate and rendered potentially of less significant consequence from the data collected and analyzed (Johnson et al., 2020; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, efforts were made to minimize researcher bias through bracketing as a strategy to describe my lens in a preface and in other parts of the dissertation in the form of using narrative footnotes and parenthetical remarks. The revelation of the reflexive-self constitutes a quality control measure (Reid et al., 2018; Woods, 2019; Yin, 2016).

As an African immigrant living in the United States, the depth of personal experience is that I have worked with a leading U.S. airline involved in strategic alliance arrangements with various airlines in Europe, South America, Africa, and Asia. Working with this multinational corporation has enabled me to understand how useful a workforce composed of cultural, linguistic, gender, religious, and other human differences could be in international partnerships. Using diverse workforce management strategies in providing leadership to employees of an international carrier involved in strategic alliances may be a way of ensuring profitability and sustainability.

Data source triangulation is useful to cross-validate research data from multiple sources to curb researcher bias (Agide & Shakibazadeh, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Data were primarily collected by interviewing participants using open-ended interview questions. Open-ended interview questions are often useful in gaining in-depth knowledge because they offer the participant the opportunity to address the questions in a broad manner (Agide & Shakibazadeh, 2018; Yin, 2018). A semistructured interview format was adopted to create room for asking follow-up questions to collect adequate data and to attain data saturation. Interviews were recorded using a computer-mediated virtual conferencing platform for accuracy, then transcribed, and thereafter uploaded into NVivo software for conducting thematic analysis.

Notes were used in the research to document certain salient moments of interviews, observation, or document analysis to enhance the integrity of the study.

Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018) noted that field notes facilitate constructing thick, rich descriptions of the study context, encounter, interview, focus group, and document's valuable contextual data. Official documents such as company policies, standard operating procedures, HR, aviation, and industry reports constituted other sources of data that were accessed for perusal and scrutiny to triangulate and analyze the primary findings against secondary data for holistic analysis**.** The use of various sources of data helps to cross-validate information and reduce researcher and participant bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018)

Transcript review is the practice of making available transcribed interview data to participants for authentication, review, and validation as an accurate representation of views expressed in interviews to limit researcher bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). The interview transcripts were sent participants by email for feedback to ensure validation and, thus, an accurate representation of the views expressed. In addition to transcript review, member checking is a strategy to improve the accuracy of the study and is also found to be effective in reinforcing collaborative and ethical relationships between the researcher and respondents (Johnson et al., 2020; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In the research study, first the transcribed interviews and then the interpretations were discussed with the participants to give the opportunity through a transcript review and final study member checking respectively to validate the data as an accurate representation of the views expressed during the interview and after the interpretation.

An interview protocol was used in the study to ensure orderliness in the research project. The interview protocol was also useful to ensure efficiency in managing time. An interview protocol is a detailed set of activities and research procedural prompts to follow for ensuring ethical research compliance (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Yeong et al., 2018). An interview protocol is useful in documenting the data collection process and in aligning the interview questions with the research question (Heydon & Powell, 2018; Yin, 2018). The use of the interview protocol also facilitates time management and planning an effective exit strategy from the interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yeong et al., 2018).

An important role of the researcher is effective interpersonal relations (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). Qualitative researchers interact with many people during a study, namely research grounds gatekeepers, research participants, and research assistants (Johnson et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). During the activities of this study, the Belmont ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, justice, and reciprocity was the focus and was ensured as the aim was to build trusting relations for effective data collection. Communication with the stakeholders was devoid of excessive formal expression to encourage relationship building. The objective of the research and the rights of participants were clearly communicated to participants with the assurance of confidentiality and informed consent and explicit portrayal of the measures in place to ensure this.

Participants

Qualitative research often serves to gain an in-depth knowledge of a phenomenon by collecting and analyzing data through interviews and other sources (Johnson et al., 2020; Mohajan, 2018). Accessing reliable data requires participants with the relevant knowledge and experience with the phenomenon under study (Khatamian Far, 2018; Yin, 2018). Participants were purposively selected from a population of 20 diverse workforce managers. The purposive selection method was used to draw a sample of five managers from the population for the study. The justification for purposive selection is that it is a nonrandom sampling method that presents the researcher the opportunity to select participants with the knowledge and lived experiences that are relevant to the subject under study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016).

Determining the sample size in a research study depends on various factors, namely research method and design, the size of the pool of participants, and the need to collect rich data (Johnson et al., 2020; Mohajan, 2018). As the research was a qualitative single case study, the purposive sampling method was used to select five managers from a small population for the study. In qualitative studies, the emphasis in selecting study participants must be on gaining insight into the depth of experience, knowledge, and perspectives of the individuals chosen, in relation to the study phenomenon, rather than many participants (Khatamian Far, 2018). For this study, the selection of five participants was specifically contemplated, and thereafter the research undertaken, as the aim was to collect depth and quality in information from a limited population. The richness in the perspectives and the quality of data desired were reached and supplemented with measures to reach data saturation and acquire in-depth information. Several researchers have subscribed to the quality of participants over a large number in qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2016).

Recruitment of participants was conducted in compliance with Institutional Review Board (IRB) ethical and legal requirements as set by Walden University. The search for respondents began after IRB approved the proposal. Marshall and Rossman (2016) argued that the IRB protects participants against the risks involved in research. After obtaining authorization from the IRB, efforts were made to contact business leaders of the international airline partnership selected for the study. Appropriate steps were taken to clarify the objectives and procedures involved in the study with the participants to create the necessary rapport to facilitate execution and completion of the study.

Five management staff of the selected international airline partnership in the United States were recruited for the study. The inclusionary criteria for selecting participants in this study were: (a) The participant was required to be an employee of the targeted organization, (b) the participant was required to have a minimum of 2 years' experience in managing a diverse workforce, and (c) the participant was required to be affiliated with the organization's employee excellence recognition program (The Chairman's Club). The professional social network, LinkedIn, was used to gain access to participants. Emails with attachments explaining the background and focus of the study were sent along with consent forms to candidates to create the opportunity to make informed decisions.

Yin (2018) underscored the need for effective communication with participants for the purpose of fostering a working relationship that could promote the success of the research. Various avenues exist for communication, namely emails, phone calls, and postal mail. Regular communication with participants often serves in determining a convenient time and location for the interview sessions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). For privacy and confidentiality, participants were identified with alphanumerical codes (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5) instead of using names. Data collected are stored in secure repositories and will be warehoused for 5 years, following the completion date of the study. After 5 years, hard copies of data will be shredded, and electronic ones erased.

Research Method

The choice of a research method depends on the intent of a research study and the phenomenon to be studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Meloncon & St. Amant, 2019; Yin, 2018). The three research methods that are used in undertaking studies are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Meloncon & St. Amant, 2019; Mukhopadhyay & Gupta, 2014; Yin, 2018). The focus of this study was to understand the diverse workforce management strategies that international airline partnership managers adopt for effective ground staff operations to achieve profitability and sustainability. The qualitative research method was appropriate to conduct this research successfully because of its suitability for exploratory research (see House, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018).

Quantitative researchers commonly use numerical data to measure and examine relationships between variables, while qualitative researchers investigate or explore the research problem to gain an in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Alase, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Mohajan, 2018). In the pursuit of research objectives, quantitative researchers use close-ended questions and statistical data to test a hypothesis (House, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). A hypothesis is a test to seek explanation and examination of a phenomenon based on limited evidence, requiring additional information for confirmation or otherwise. The use of a hypothesis partly explains the differences in the focus of qualitative and quantitative research methods. While qualitative researchers endeavor to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject matter, quantitative researchers seek to determine relationships between variables, to test a hypothesis, and to use descriptive and inferential approaches relying on analysis of numerical data (House, 2018; Meloncon & St. Amant, 2019). A numerically oriented quantitative approach was considered infeasible to gaining deep insights into the diverse workforce management strategies in an international airline partnership, and, therefore, was not deemed suitable to fulfill the objectives of the study and relevant as a qualitative method. Adopting a quantitative method for this study would have eliminated the possibility of gaining an in-depth understanding using open-ended questions and semistructured face-to-face interviews with participants (see House, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

The flexibility of the qualitative research method and the use of open-ended questions make it possible to answer *what, why, and how* questions to collect abundant data (Davis et al., 2016; Mukhopadhyay & Gupta, 2014; Yin, 2018). By using the semistructured interview method for data collection, the researcher engages the participant in a relaxed communication situation that facilitates asking follow-up questions and exploring new themes for a better understanding of the subject (House, 2018; Meloncon, & St. Amant, 2019). An imperative of the qualitative research method is the need to achieve data saturation to ensure that adequate data have been collected to support the study (Davis et al., 2016; McDermid et al., 2014; Yin, 2018).

Qualitative research with a case study design may also involve triangulation, the practice of collecting and analyzing data from various sources namely interviews, observation, archival documents, and official publications (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). The use of archival documents provides an official context to corroborate or offer other perspectives on the ideas and information collected during the interviews and observation sessions (Alase, 2017; House, 2018; Yin, 2018). Triangulation entails leveraging primary and secondary data, which may serve to facilitate a holistic review and analysis and thereby minimize researcher and participant bias (House, 2018; Meloncon & St. Amant, 2019).

Mixed research methods involve the invocation of qualitative and quantitative methods in a research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). To adopt a mixed research method for this study would imply examining relationships between variables that would have no place in this study and therefore was considered infeasible. Exploring diverse workforce management strategies in an international airline partnership environment does not require testing a hypothesis, which is part of a quantitative study, or the quantitative component of mixed methods study (see House, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The focus of this research was to explore the HR management strategies from the insights of a purposive sample that were found effective in providing leadership in the management of a diverse workforce in an international airline partnership environment.

Research Design

Various qualitative research designs are commonly used namely case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative research, and ethnography (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Mohajan, 2018; Sarma, 2015). The case study design was a suitable approach for this study because it is appropriate for exploratory research and may enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under study (Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). Researchers apply the case study design for an inquiry into phenomena in various disciplines, including business (McDermid et al., 2014; Sarma, 2015; Yin, 2018). The choice of the case study design was appropriate for this study due to its suitability for an exploratory research focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of the diverse workforce management strategies in the combined ground staff operations of the international airline partnership environment.

Phenomenological researchers frequently describe the lived and firsthand experiences of individuals with a phenomenon (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Meister, 2018; Yin, 2018). The phenomenological design was not suitable for this study because the focus was not on individual experiences. The grounded theory design is used to develop theory from data (McDermid et al., 2014; Mohajan, 2018; Sarma, 2015) and, therefore, unsuitable for this study because the objective was to gain a deep insight into management strategies and not develop a theory. The narrative design is useful to describe the lived experiences of participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; McDermid et al., 2014; Sarma, 2015) but did not serve the research interest of this study, which was to explore the management strategies at the organizational level.

The ethnographic design serves in researching the shared values and patterns of a group in its natural setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; McDermid et al., 2014; Sarma, 2015;) did not fit the goal of the current research, given that the intent here was not to identify the shared values of a particular group. However, the case study design is a more flexible approach that has more significant potential for gaining in-depth knowledge (Yin, 2014). Considering the complexity of researching diverse workforce strategies in international airline partnerships and the suitability of the case study design for researching complex phenomena in business, the choice of the case study design was appropriate for this research.

The flexibility and the potential of the case study design in facilitating access to in-depth information enhanced the attainment of data saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) referred to data saturation as a point in research when no new information emerges from further data collection to what is already known from the data gathering process in place. The purposive sampling method that was used in selecting participants, was effective to find respondents with relevant lived experiences and innate knowledge about the phenomenon under study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Saunders et al., 2016). Participant responses were, therefore, pertinent to provide relevant data. Interview transcripts were analyzed and compared to facilitate the emergence of themes, representing the data analysis undertaken in this study, and such steps also helped to determine when data saturation was reached.

Population and Sampling

The population for this single case study consisted of 20 departmental managers of the ground staff operations of a leading US and international partner airlines in the State of Georgia. The purposive sampling method was used to select five participants for the study. As a non-random method of sampling, purposive selection depends on the judgment of the researcher to institute measures that are likely to enhance the reliability of the participant as a source of information and consequently favors a small number of participants with the required knowledge and depth of experience to fulfill the research objectives (Mohajan, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Another advantage of purposive selection is that researchers can select participants based on significant lived experiences associated with the phenomenon under study (House, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016).

Sample sizes of participants in qualitative research are relatively smaller than in quantitative research because the emphasis is on gaining deep, meaningful insight, and understanding a phenomenon, which may not be possible with numerical oriented quantitative studies, while a quantitatively oriented hypothesis is used to investigate relationships between variables (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017; House, 2018). The sample for this study was five purposively selected departmental managers of ground staff operations of US and international partner airlines in the state of Georgia (USA) who are affiliated with the organization’s excellence recognition program. As participants are individuals with lived experiences relevant to the subject under study, it was not necessary to recruit many interviewees to achieve data saturation (Shahgholian & Yousefi, 2015; Given, 2016).

Data saturation is a point in data collection when additional research interviews do not yield any new themes (Given, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). It is imperative to achieve data saturation in qualitative research to ensure a full and thorough understanding of the phenomenon being researched (Saunders et al., 2018; Mohajan, 2018). Various strategies were adopted in this study to achieve data saturation. The use of semi-structured interviews facilitated asking follow-up questions to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). An interview protocol was used for consistency to ensure that all participants were asked the same questions and within approximately the same time frame. Fusch and Ness (2015) argued that asking all participants the same questions facilitate consistency, a structured process, as well as achieving data saturation. Data was also triangulated from various credible industry and alliance partner sources, to cross-validate and ensure that adequate information was gathered to provide an answer to the overarching research question.

In view of the social distancing requirements during the COVID 19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted using computer-mediated conferencing tools and scheduled at the convenience of participants (CDC, 2020). The effectiveness and the cost saving qualities of virtual conferencing tools during the COVID 19 pandemic era are significant (Bridenbaugh, 2019). Research participants in this study, were full-time airline managers of international ground staff operations. The participants were managers with a minimum of two years' experience managing a culturally diverse department. The interviews were scheduled and held to ensure confidentiality and to avoid disruptions. The interviews took the form of virtual conferencing sessions. Data collection ended upon the attainment of data saturation, which is the point at which no new information emerges (Given, 2016; Roy et al., 2015).

Ethical Research

Ethical conduct is imperative in qualitative research as it may involve interviews with human subjects due to the sensitive nature of some issues discussed during interviews (Alase, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Doody & Noonan, 2013). The primary ethical considerations relate to the need for informed consent, beneficence, respect for anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy (Cumyn et al., 2019: Gordon, 2020). The legal and ethical requirements of an Institutional Review Board (IRB) are explicit about these ethical concerns to protect the interests of research participants (Gordon, 2020; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers must make the right ethical decisions to ensure the integrity of the research community (Cumyn et al., 2019: Gordon, 2020). The Walden IRB approval number for this study is 04-14-21-0507285 and it expires April 13, 2022.

In this study, research participants were recruited using a non-coercive approach by providing adequate information to facilitate informed decision making on participation in the study. The need to ensure ethical considerations in research involving human subjects requires that researchers solicit informed consent from research participants (Yin, 2018; Alase, 2017). Consent forms were sent out by email to selected participants along with the research topic and purpose of the research to facilitate informed decision-making. Each participant kept a copy of the email and responded with the words "I consent" to indicate that the respondent understood the study well enough to participate. Consent does not, however, constitute continued participation throughout the research period. Ross (2019) noted that participants must be able to withdraw at any time with a verbal notice, for any reason, without facing any negative repercussions. The participants in this research were, therefore, were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time with just a verbal notice and not face any negative implications of opting out of the study. To avoid conflict of interest and comply with scholarly research guidelines, incentives, and compensation for participants were not offered. A $ 20.00 Barnes & Noble gift card was, however, offered to each participant as an expression of appreciation for contribution to scholarly research.

All hard and electronic data collected during the interviews are stored in password-controlled repositories and will be for five years from the completion date of the study to protect the confidentiality of the participants. After the five years, all hard copies will be shredded, and electronic copies erased. In keeping with institutional IRB guidelines, every effort was made to guarantee the privacy and confidentiality of participants and organizations. Gordon (2020) recommended the use of codes to ensure the confidentiality of participants. Instead of using the names of participants in interview transcripts, alphanumerical codes (P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5) were used.

Data Collection Instruments

There are various data collection instruments in qualitative research. The researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Yin, 2018; Stewart et al., 2017). Other data collection instruments that were used in this study were an interview protocol, research notes, official documents, and observation. Data source triangulation is useful in cross-validating information to ensure the quality of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Gordon, 2020). In the effort to ensure data integrity, transcript review and member checking were used to reinforce collaborative and ethical relationships with interview participants.

Qualitative researchers interact with participants using the interview as a data collection method to understand the phenomenon under study. Although various interview formats exist, a semistructured interview is more often used due to its flexibility, making it possible for the researcher to ask open-ended questions with follow-up questions to get a better understanding of the subject matter (Daniele et al., 2020; Drew, 2014). In this study, virtual semistructured interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants. Holding interviews one at a time, as agreed upon with participants are likely to be devoid of disruptions and could have the full collaboration of participants (Van Puyvelde, 2018; Yin 2018; Johnson et al., 2020). Each participant was interviewed, and data saturation was reached.

The interview protocol is another data collection instrument in qualitative research. The importance of the interview protocol is that it helps guide the researcher to maintain focus during the interview (Yin, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The use of the interview protocol enables the researcher to ensure consistency by asking the participants the same questions within the allocated time frame and, thereby, providing for the replicability and reliability of the study (Yin, 2018; Given, 2016; Alase, 2017). The interview protocol for this study included the basic guidelines for interview, interview questions, time frame, as well as brief information about the research. Please refer to Appendix B (listed on the Table of Contents) for a copy of the interview protocol.

Data source triangulation, which included the use of multiple data collection methods, facilitated leveraging primary and secondary data to obtain a holistic review and analysis. Marshall and Rossman (2016) argued that triangulation enhances data quality, validity, and reliability. In this study, data was triangulated from other sources, namely research notes, official documents, and airline industry reports. Company policies, standard operating procedures, HR policies, aviation and industry reports are other sources of data that were scrutinized to triangulate and analyze the primary findings against secondary data for holistic analysis**.** Triangulating the primary and secondary data from various sources is useful to cross-validate information and to reduce researcher and participant bias (Yin, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Research notes were kept in this study to document certain important moments of interviews, to record observations, and aid in document review. Research notes are essential in assembling detailed descriptions of the study context, encounters, interviews, and document valuable contextual data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Mohajan; 2018).

Transcribed interview data was made available to participants for review and validation as accurate documentation of views expressed in interviews. Transcript review often enables the researcher to introduce the ethics of collaborative practice to ensure the integrity, validity, and reliability of the study (Saunders et al., 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checking, the procedure of sharing the interview data interpretations with participants to improve the study accuracy may be useful in ensuring the trustworthiness of the research as well as reinforcing collaborative and ethical relationships (Johnson et al., 2020; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, the transcribed data and the interpretations were sent by email to the participants for feedback.

Data Collection Technique

In the quest to collect data to fulfill the research goals and objectives, qualitative researchers often conduct semi-structured interviews to gather data. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews facilitated asking follow-up questions to gain clarity and an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Gordon, 2020; House, 2018). The qualitative research method and the case study design are compatible with data triangulation, and, therefore, useful in ensuring accuracy and validity in research (Mohajan, 2018; Walby & Luscombe, 2017). With data triangulation, it was possible to use various sources, such as company HR policy documents, industry reports, and government records, which were reviewed and analyzed against the primary data**.** The use of a variety of data sources helped to demonstrate the rigor and may enhance the validity of research findings (Alase, 2017; Morse, 2015). Apart from being a process of cross-validating research information**,** data source triangulation enhances the credibility of research findings (Yin, 2018; Gordon, 2020; Sarma, 2015).

There are some advantages and disadvantages of the semistructured interview as a data collection method. Researchers are often able to leverage the semistructured interview technique to interrogate participants with open-ended questions to gain a deep insight into the phenomenon under study (Johnson et al., 2020; House, 2018, Alase, 2017). The semi-structured interview is effective to engage the participant in a relaxed communication situation that could facilitate asking follow-up questions and to explore new themes for a better understanding of the subject under study (Davis et al., 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

As semistructured interviews are usually synchronous, the researcher benefits from such social cues as voice, intonation, and body language, to probe further for an in-depth understanding of the subject matter (Saunders et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2018; Mohajan, 2018). With the permission of the interviewees, I was able to undertake an audio recording of the interview as way of collecting accurate data and, thereby, creating conditions to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. With the use of an interview protocol, the researcher can usually manage time and end the interview on schedule (Johnson et al., 2020; Yin, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). While semistructured interviews may have advantages, there could be disadvantages too.

The flexibility **of** semistructured interviews could create grounds for concerns regarding reliability and dependability, especially concerning the possibility of collecting similar data in a replicated study (Saunders et al., 2016; Alase, 2017). A semistructured interview being synchronous in time and place may require focus and attention, where note taking may constitute a distraction and, thereby, constrain the data collection process of salient details that could not be audio-recorded (House, 2018; Yin, 2018). Conducting a semistructured interview at a distant location may involve traveling and entail miscellaneous costs, as well as devoting much time for the interview (Saunders et al., Alase, 2017).

To ensure the integrity, validity, and reliability of the study, transcribed interview data and its interpretations were made available to participants for review and validation as an accurate representation of views expressed in interviews. Researchers often use a transcript review to ensure data accuracy and the ethics of collaborative practice with participants (Saunders et al., 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Member checking, denoting the procedure of sharing the interview data interpretations with participants for validation is a technique that has the potential to enhance the trustworthiness and accuracy of the study (Birt et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2020; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Data Organization Technique

The organization of data is an essential part of the research process because it helps set the stage for successful data storage, retrieval, and analysis (Saunders et al., 2016; Yin, 2018). Researchers use various strategies to organize data to facilitate analysis. Yin (2018) noted that the creation of a database to store all the data collected in a study might enhance the quality of research results. Qualitative researchers frequently use diaries and reflective journals to document specific research experiences and responses from participants (Mohajan, 2018; Birt et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2020). The use of reflective journals and diaries could be useful in curbing researcher bias and enhance objectivity (Reid et al., 2018; Johnson, 2020). With the development of technology, there are various tools such as NVivo qualitative data analysis software were leveraged in this study, to ensure effective data organization and storage.

To keep track, process, and organize research data, in this study, an electronic folder was created to store participants' data regarding (a) consent forms and emails, (b) audio recording of interview, (c) transcripts, (d) participant's response summary, (e) interview notes, and personal logs. A list was created on note cards to facilitate the retrieval of the data collected**.** The types of data were logged, specifying the dates, times, and places of collection along with the codes of participants from whom the data was collected. A company folder is maintained, which contains such information as annual reports, diversity management reports, and HR policy documents as secondary data to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon studied. Various technology tools such as Microsoft Office Suite, NVivo, and TranscribeMe TM software were used for appropriate data processing and filing. All documents were labeled and filed appropriately, which facilitated retrieval and analysis of the study data.

The transcribed data was uploaded into NVivo qualitative data analytical software, which helped to identify themes, patterns, and categories. The output from the NVivo is stored in a password-protected personal computer with a backed-up copy on an external hard drive, and the Cloud. The data in this study will be stored for five years from the completion of the study. After the expiration of the five years, all hard copies will be shredded, and electronic copies erased using Blancco data erasure software. Organizing the research data in the manner described in this section facilitated analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an effort to bring order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data (Belotto, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). Various qualitative data analysis procedures exist for research, notably content and thematic analysis. The various tasks involved in qualitative data analysis are usually in organizing the data, immersion in the data, generating case summaries and possible categories, coding the data, and identifying themes, providing interpretations using analytic memos, and identifying alternative meaning (Yin, 2018; Percy et al., 2015). For a thorough analysis of qualitative research data, it is essential to first organize the data into a comprehensive and retrievable system (Saunders et al., 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, a content analysis approach was used to analyze the primary research data.

Data triangulation could be useful to add depth to qualitative research data (Fusch et al., 2018). The primary data for this study was collected using semistructured interviews with business leaders managing diverse workforce departments. Relevant company documents such as human resource management policy documents, diverse workforce management policies, and airline annual reports were analyzed as secondary data to triangulate against primary research data. The use of multiple sources of evidence in research facilitated the gathering of rich and thick data to answer the research question (Yin, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By cross-validating information from various sources along with interview data made it possible to achieve data saturation, mitigate researcher/participant bias, and ensure the credibility, validity, and reliability of the research findings (Belotto, 2018; Yin, 2018). Using the case study design in this research study, data triangulation made it possible to fulfill the primary case study goal of gaining an in-depth knowledge of the subject under study.

The interview data was uploaded into the NVivo computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for transcription. The intuitive transcription editor feature of the NVivo software facilitated formatting, corrections, and changes as well as tagging speakers (Jin Xiu, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 2016, Yin, 2018). Data uploaded into the software is encrypted and securely stored to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The NVivo software has improved over the years to develop many functionalities such as the possibility to explore data, code and retrieve, search and interrogate data, write memos, notes, and comments as well as generate reports (Saunders et al., 2016; Jin Xiu, 2019).

Practical analysis of qualitative data requires that the researcher becomes familiar with the large mass of data by perusing it (Kaye, 2019; Belotto, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using the content analysis approach, the data will be categorized, tabulated, and recombined. It was necessary to review the data in search of patterns, insights, and concepts (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Yin, 2018). Familiarizing oneself with the data involved reading, rereading, and manipulating it (Firmin et al., 2017; Silverman, 2016). The primary and secondary data in the study were read and reread for gleaning detailed perspectives and insights from the information collected. Patterns, concepts, and themes were sought by juxtaposing transcripts from different interviewees and using a process of constant comparison to facilitate the emergence of common themes evident in participant responses.

Coding in qualitative research refers to the assignment of words or phrases to label parts of textual data (Kaye et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). Theme categories may be derived from the literature review, especially in the conceptual framework, while *in vivo* codes are generated during research data review and manipulation (Belotto, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Correlating themes identified in data to the conceptual framework was critical in research. The codes and themes may be helpful in the analysis of various interview transcripts to determine patterns for understanding the research phenomenon. In this study, a matrix of codes was generated from the primary and secondary data and correlated with the conceptual framework to facilitate the interpretation of the data. Considering the laborious nature of manual qualitative data analysis, the NVivo software was used to undertake the data analysis process.

For accuracy, efforts were made to ensure participant validation through member checking and transcript review. The transcribed interview data and interpretations were made available to participants for the validation of the views expressed in the interview. Beyond the need to ensure accuracy and credibility, member checking, the technique of providing participants with the interview data interpretations for feedback, is useful to ensure trustworthiness in research and to reinforce the collaborative and ethical relationship with participants (Kaye et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). Collaboration between the researcher and the participants could enhance communication and consequently help in eliciting detailed and relevant information pertinent to the research aims of the study.

Reliability and Validity

The need for research integrity requires that researchers take measures to demonstrate ethical mindfulness in a study (Spiers et al., 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Reliability, validity, objectivity, and generalizability are ordinarily, quantitative research method concepts that have often been used to measure the soundness of a qualitative study (Cypress, 2017; Yin, 2018). Striving for reliability and validity in a qualitative study may, however, need a different approach to ensure quality standards are met with a focus on the corresponding qualitative analogs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Symon et al., 2018; Onen, 2016). The quantitative approach entails a positivist paradigm according to which the world can be interpreted as a set of observable and measurable facts. Many qualitative researchers, on the other hand, endeavor to understand or explore a phenomenon in a particular context using the human perspective at the starting point and deemphasizing statistical procedures (Cypress, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research lies in achieving consistency in the study, to facilitate the replicability of the research (Symon et al., 2018). The assumption is that if a researcher goes through the same processes followed in earlier research to repeat the same study, the later researcher will arrive at the same findings (Yin, 2018; Cypress, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The purpose of reliability in research is to reduce the incidence of errors and biases. The qualitative research analog of reliability, dependability, can be achieved through a focus on achieving consistency, stability, and repeatability of the processes for data collection and the researcher's ability to accurately record and interpret this information (Cypress, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2015).

In this study, the data gathered during interviews were recorded verbatim and transcribed from the audio files into text exactly as was expressed by each interviewee, to ensure an accurate understanding of the visions and experiences shared during the interviews. NVivo, the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was used in transcribing, organizing, and analyzing unstructured text and audio data from interviews. Yin (2018) noted that transcripts should be checked to ensure that there are no obvious errors made during transcription. To facilitate the consistency and the replicability of the study, an interview protocol was used to guide the interview questions and process. Detailed notes were taken during the research to facilitate replicability. Secondary data from official company documents, HR policy documents, and annual reports were triangulated against the primary data, for holistic analysis, and to potentially also minimize errors and reduce researcher and participant biases. The utilization of transcript review and member checking served as validation techniques to evaluate the personal understanding of what has been said or meant by interview participants and to ensure accurate interpretation of data.

Validity

Validity is a quantitative research concept that was applied to ensure rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative studies. Validity refers to the ability to measure what is supposed to be measured in a study, and its usefulness is to enhance both the accuracy and truthfulness of research findings (Amankwaa, 2016; Spiers et al., 2018). The qualitative method analogs of validity are credibility (internal validity) transferability (external validity/generalizability), and confirmability (objectivity) (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Various procedures were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative research findings. Mohajan (2018) noted that data source triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and the use of detailed and extensive description to convey the findings help to ensure validity.

In this study, various measures were implemented to ensure credibility, transferability, and confirmability. The primary data from the semi-structured interviews were triangulated against secondary data from company policies, standard operating procedures, HR, airline, and industry reports to ensure credibility and confirmability. Marshall and Rossman (2016) argued that the use of various sources of data helps to cross-validate information and to reduce researcher and participant bias. For accuracy, credibility, and confirmability, transcript review in this study entailed sharing the transcribed interviews with the participants of the study for validation. Member checking, a measure to share the interpretations of the interview data with participants for feedback was another strategy enacted in this study, which served to ensure credibility and confirmability. Mohajan (2018) opined that consulting the participants regarding the accuracy of transcripts and the final report reinforces collaborative and ethical relationships and ultimately enhances the validity of the research findings.

Using techniques such as bracketing and clarifying the researcher’s bias, often plays a vital role in ensuring the credibility and confirmability of a qualitative study. A researcher's identity, experience, and values may carry some biases and the self-reflection on these by the researcher can aid in creating an open and honest presentation in the final report to ensure trustworthiness (Cumyn et al., 2018; Spiers et al., 2018). Efforts were made in this study to describe the researcher's lens in parts of the report to ensure credibility and confirmability**.** Yin (2018) noted that the revelation of the reflexive self, constitutes a quality control measure.

When using purposive sampling to represent a population in a qualitative study, it could be challenging for a researcher to generalize the research findings (Yin, 2018). A researcher may, however, make specific recommendations that may be applicable to other research contexts. It may, therefore, be more realistic to refer to applicability in qualitative research instead of transferability (Prion & Adamson, 2014). It could be possible for a researcher to take specific measures to enable other researchers to determine the applicability or transferability of the research procedure and method to other studies (Noble & Smith, 2015). In this study, an interview protocol was used to render the data collection process consistent and to facilitate data saturation. Detailed notes were taken of salient moments during the data collection. Adequate measures were in place to ensure that all documentation regarding the data collection process and analysis were personally maintained in a password protected repository.

The duration of the researcher's time during the research is relevant to the validity of the study. Marshall and Rossman (2016) argued that spending prolonged time in the field enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Clear perspectives on the subject matter under study is useful in conveying details about the study. As qualitative data collection depends significantly on relationship building with participants, prolonged time spent in the field could be helpful in gathering adequate data. In this study, the researcher endeavored to spend enough time in the research to fully understand the complexities of the phenomenon being studied.

Transition

In Section 2, the purpose of the study, was to explore the strategies U.S. based airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability**.** Details on the role of the researcher, data collection instruments, and techniques, data organization and analysis, participants, research method, design, and sampling techniques were presented in this section and discussed. Each of these topics was developed to seek in-depth knowledge to answer the overarching research question through the invocation of a qualitative method with a single case study design. Other required constituents of Section 2 that are necessary to ensure successful research, ethical research, reliability, and validity, were also explained.

Section 3 represents a portrayal of the relevant details of the final components and elements of this study. The information in this section includes the findings and conclusions of the research study, application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action and for further research, along with reflections.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The objective of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability. Five international airline alliance leaders with full time employment for at least 2 years were selected and recruited to participate in the study. I used the interview protocol to conduct semistructured interviews with the five airline managers of diverse workforce departments. The interview data were transcribed and uploaded into the NVivo qualitative research software for analysis, using a systematic process of data reduction and constant comparison, resulting in the emergence of three major themes conveyed in the most frequent perspectives expressed during the interviews. The data collected were initially analyzed and later triangulated against secondary data such as airline industry reports and peer-reviewed publications, leading to the three emergent themes, namely (a) diversity and inclusion, (b) SHRM, and (c) proactive leadership. The data analysis process involved a comprehensive process of comparing interview notes, interview transcripts, and triangulation against airline industry reports and other sources of credible information to ensure an enhanced level of validity and reliability.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for the study was as follows: “What strategies do international airline alliance leaders use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure sustainability and profitability?” The views of five U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations regarding strategies to manage a diverse workforce included diversity and inclusion, SHRM, and leadership. The interviews were semistructured with open-ended questions to enable the participants to provide in-depth information about diverse workforce management.

The analysis of the interview data resulted in the identification of themes that were frequent in the perspectives expressed by the participants in the semistructured interviews. The overarching research question was a point of reference in identifying relevant themes during the data analysis, and I used the conceptual framework to conduct a more comprehensive analysis of the research data. Using the overarching research question as a lens, three main themes emerged, namely diversity and inclusion, SHRM, and leadership. Table 2 shows the emergent themes from the analysis of the interview data.

Table 2

Emergent Themes

Themes	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Diversity and inclusion	12	24	48	34	18
Strategic human resource management	8	40	36	48	32
Leadership	25	6	40	15	40

Theme 1: Diversity and Inclusion

The most frequent theme that emerged from the research data analysis was diversity and inclusion. P1 intimated that

> diverse workforce in an international airline partnership environment brings about mutual respect, accommodation, and creates the need to include culturally sensitive oral and non-verbal communication to the workplace. Ensuring inclusion in an international airline alliance workplace generates cohesion in the workforce that could enhance sustainability and profitability.

P3 affirmed that

> diversity initiatives should encourage a broader approach to policy formulation. We have people with diverse cultural backgrounds, in multinational organizations. So, you see that in policy formulations, it will be broad-based to cater for all interests, very inclusive policy formulation processes, leading to a policy that would cater for the interests

P4 said, “So you have to make sure that you are creating an intentional pipeline that will consistently supply fresh diverse talent into your pool.” P5 noted,

> I think it starts at the very beginning with recruitment. Recruiting an ever more diverse group of people in a workforce. And so, I think the more diversity we can have in the staff and the more that we can address some of those expanded ways in which people are different will be helpful.

The NVivo generated word cloud below shows the dominant views participants expressed during the research interviews (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Word Density Cloud Depicting Participants' Responses to Questions 1 Through 10

The views expressed during the interviews regarding diversity and inclusion involved perspectives on cultural awareness, cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, understanding, familiarity, cultural sensitivity, and variation of traditional roles. All participants were of the view that diversity training programs involving encouraging employees to work on their biases and blinders are helpful in developing cultural sensitivity. The participants emphasized the need to diversify corporate boards, management teams, and recruitment committees to show commitment to diversity and inclusion. Socialization through company sponsored programs to showcase cultural and group specific programs could be helpful in creating cultural awareness. Participants recommended the use of workplace diversity and inclusion of reporting metrics such as diversity scorecards, dashboards, and annual culture surveys.

Theme 2: SHRM

SHRM emerged as an enhanced form of HRM to facilitate the retention of trained and experienced staff, alignment of HRM to corporate strategy, and organizational culture (Lim et al., 2017). The theme that came up in second place in the interview data analysis was SHRM. Study participant P1 asserted that “the multinational corporation work environment requires employees who have a variety of linguistic, technical, managerial, and cultural skills. Hiring staff to map to these manpower needs is crucial to facilitate the performance of job responsibilities.” P5 indicated, “Turnover is extremely expensive when you consider what it takes to train and get someone on board and of course the experience they leave behind if and when they leave the company.” P4 noted, “So, HR must look at job functions in relation to the overall strategic mission of the organization.” P3 stated that “the focus should be on strategies. Strategy requires, of course, that you have your mission and vision clear, and everybody must be part of it. Everybody must be part of your mission, vision formulation and strategy.”

SHRM is thus an important corporate function that could bring synergy to the workforce in international airline alliance ground staff operations. The research data analysis revealed hiring, training, career planning and development, succession planning, mentoring, advocacy, compensation, and benefits management as key issues in SHRM. The NVivo generated word cloud below shows the dominant views participants expressed during the research interviews (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Thematic Derivation from Participants' Responses Regarding SHRM

Theme 3: Proactive Leadership

Leadership is a key corporate ingredient provides direction and influence in the operations of an organization (Or & Tziner, 2020). P3 noted,

> So, the manager must consider a participatory style of leadership so that everybody becomes part. He must understand emotional intelligence to be able to deal on an individual basis with his staff, and a manager must develop his staff through delegating and assigning them responsibilities for them to achieve something. That is in itself motivating to the employee.

P4 stated,

> So, one of the most important ingredients for managing a diverse workforce is that there has to be what we call institutional buy-in or buy-in from leadership. So there has to be an institutional commitment to ensuring that diversity is not just a

> buzzword within the workspace and it’s something that is actually actualized. So, that is no.1, you start from the top— leadership matters in issues of diversity. So, that is a crucial strategy to have.

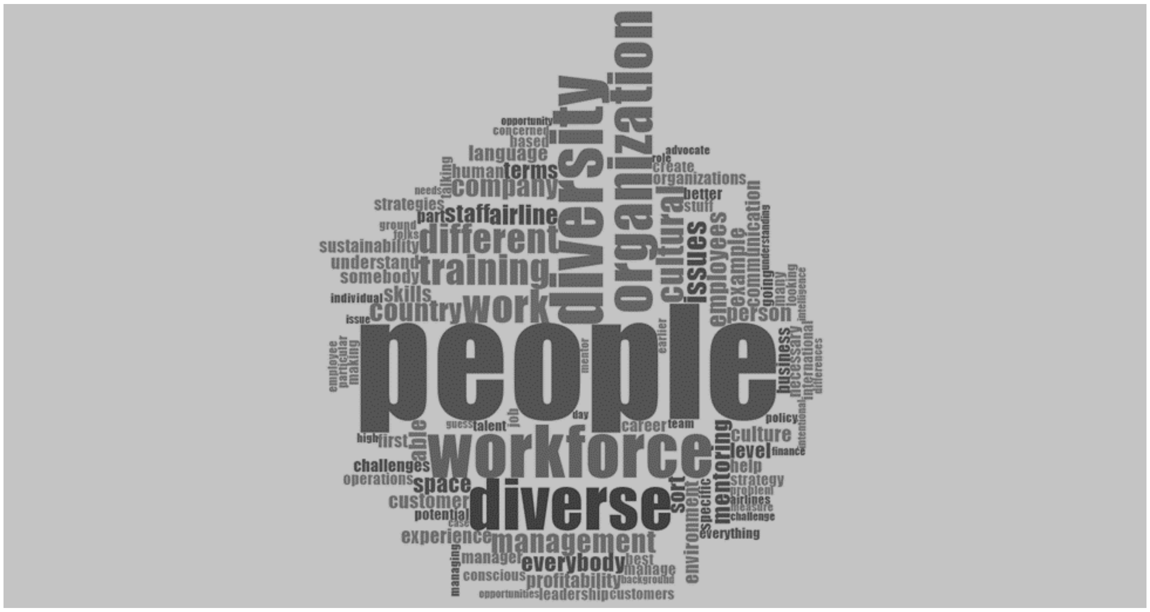
P5 affirmed,

> I think we sometimes have to be a little more proactive than we traditionally have been in terms of leadership, whether it’s just a supervisor of a department or the leadership of a corporation. I think it has to always be looking at their team members that they are overseeing to help to identify what their strengths are to help them. And you know, sometimes they are not really aware of, to help develop those skills and to help them become aware of how those skills could be used in the positions within the company.

The NVivo generated word density cloud in Figure 3 shows the dominant views participants expressed during the research interviews.

Figure 3

Word Density Cloud Depicting Participants' Responses Regarding Leadership



Participants' views have summed up the tenets of TFL, namely idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (see Frazier, 2018). Idealized influence represents the position of the leader as a role model and leveraging that position to influence the workforce to adopt the high moral standards of the leader. Inspirational motivation refers to the high expectations that transformational leaders convey to the staff through motivation so that the organization human capital could share in the corporate mission and vision (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018). Intellectual stimulation constitutes the reassurance that the transformational leader inspires in the workforce to be creative and innovative to review beliefs and values in ways that bring practical solutions to challenges at work (Crede et al., 2019). The individualized consideration is about the open-door policy in the transformational leadership style that creates room to provide forum for segments of the staff with peculiar needs such as minorities to seek assistance in the organization (Bonsu & Twum-Danso, 2018).

Supplemental research information accessed from Data USA (USA Data, 2020) for triangulation showed that the U.S. airline industry is grappling with ways to improve on diversity and inclusion; 92.3% of U.S. airline pilots and flight engineers are White and 93% are male. Women involved in the global airline industry are less than 5% as CEOs and fewer than 13% as top executives. The low level of minority representation is not limited to airlines, but technology and financial institutions are also making efforts to address the issue of diversity in the workforce (Brodock & Massam, 2016). The study findings could be leveraged to cultivate diversity and a culture of inclusion to improve on the representation of the various segments of the U.S. population in these organizations. The Wall Street Journal for checking on the diversity status of the top 10 technology companies could also be adapted to the needs of other industries.

As multinational corporations, U.S.-based international airline alliance partners often constitute global teams to collaborate on projects involving partner airlines. Global teams experience uncertainty and complexity due to differences in time, distance, and culture (Browne et al., 2016). Remotely coordinating multicultural virtual teams may require skills in diversity and inclusion as well as project management and cultural intelligence. The business case for diversity is that it brings the hope of greater innovation, enhanced engagement, workforce retention, extended customer, and market connection. Research on effective leadership and talent practices have consistently found that a commitment to diversity is one of the key differentiators of companies that both build talent and perform well (Burns & Ulrich, 2016).

A comprehensive literature review of more than 115 peer-reviewed sources was undertaken, which helped garner detailed perspectives on transformational leadership, diverse workforce management, strategic alliances, and business sustainability. The primary research data were collected from semistructured interviews with five management staff of U.S.-based international airline alliance. The study participants met the study inclusionary requirements for partaking in the research and signed the informed consent form. Interview data were transcribed and uploaded into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software for coding and analysis.

Study Findings Through the Lens of the TFL Theory

The research data analysis revealed that participants emphasized the importance for U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations to be intentional and proactive in the execution of strategies to ensure organizational performance, profitability, and sustainability. The themes that emerged in the data analysis were related to literature and contextualized in the TFL theory and diverse workforce management framework as the lens guiding the study. TFL is considered as a critical success factor in the global supply chain environment because transformational leaders are likely to leverage strong empowering influence on their teams, secure stakeholders' engagement, and deliver performance beyond expectations (Zaman, 2020).

Business leaders in a diverse workforce environment are relatively more successful in executing diverse workforce management strategies in a TFL framework due to the recognition given to individual circumstances of employees, the open-door policy for minorities, and employees with unique circumstances (Amina & Singh, 2017).

The TFL tenets of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration were, thus, relevant in the identification of the three major strategies for diverse workforce management. The usefulness of TFL to diverse workforce management was clearly established in the review of the professional and academic literature in terms high-performance work systems, increased cohesion, commitment, motivation, and trust. Pursuant to holistic analysis, I identified and discussed the themes within the framework of TFL and kept diverse workforce management in perspective as an organizational imperative within an international airline strategic alliance.

Leveraging diversity management strategies in the globalized economy is vital for economic and organizational justice reasons, and the study findings confirm the current literature on the subject matter. Wells et al. (2021) noted that employer branding of a positive diversity status of an organization demonstrates an excellent corporate image and a workplace where employees are likely to enjoy job satisfaction. Indeed, inclusionary practices in a diverse workforce may often generate synergy and cohesion, creating a pathway to improved organizational performance. Diversity and inclusion (DEI) may also be justified because it could facilitate a better understanding of the market and promote creativity, innovation, and alternative solutions to problems (Wawryszuk-Misztal, 2021). The global demographic changes in the 21st century render diversity and inclusion as a business imperative in organizational management.

Ensuring workforce cohesion and synergy is a campaign being pursued all over the world. In November 2012, the European Commission (EC) initiated recommendations for gender balance in companies listed on European-based stock exchanges (Wawryszuk-Misztal, 2021). The groundbreaking initiative of the EC has tremendous human resources management implications that underpin organizational performance. Firms listed on the Warsaw Stock exchange are, therefore, required to publish a statement on the organization’s compliance with corporate governance recommendations and principles relative to diversity and inclusion. In Brazil, Senate bills No. 112/2010 and 398/2016 were passed to ensure diversity and inclusion in-state companies and mixed capital entities (Prudêncio et al., 2021). The business rationale for diversity is that it brings the prospect of greater innovation, enhanced engagement, employee retention, expanded customer base, and market connection.

The essential role of Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) in organizing a diverse workforce is replete in current literature. Wawryszuk-Misztal (2021) argued that there is a relationship between DEI and meaningful individual and organizational outcomes. Both employees and companies could benefit from diverse workforce management strategies in terms of organizational climate and organizational performance. Stazyk et al. (2021) noted that diversity management may bear on organizational goal clarity, employee job satisfaction, and organizational competitive advantage. Career planning and career advancement of women and other minorities are likely to thrive in a workplace where SHRM promotes DEI (Brown et al., 2021). In the globalized business environment, instituting SHRM measures to ensure diversity and inclusion could often play a significant role in gaining a competitive advantage.

An effective DEI practice in a workplace begins with leadership, especially at the board level. A substantial body of research has thus been dedicated to board diversity. Rania et al. (2021) argued that board gender and age diversity positively correlate to corporate governance, human resources, human rights, and environmental activities. Diversifying the board and the management team is thus an expression of support for corporate diversity policy and, therefore, likely to reflect positively on the pursuit of this policy throughout the organization. The underrepresentation of women on the corporate boards of Brazilian firms prompted the senate in Brazil to pass bills to mandate adequate women representation on boards (Prudêncio et al., 2021). As board composition could have symbolic significance, board characteristics may be associated with corporate social responsibility (Rania et al., 2021). The role of leadership in organizing the workforce to develop corporate vision and mission with emphasis on DEI is critical in executing diversity management strategies.

Applications to Professional Practice

The study findings could be beneficial to international corporate partnerships, as would expectedly be useful to corporate leaders, training professionals, and international partnership managers, in advancing the understanding that diverse workforce management strategies in international partnership environments may contribute to business sustainability and competitive advantage. A personal view, I that business leaders may gain new and better perspectives regarding the role of diverse workforce management in business profitability and sustainability. U.S. based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations in addition may be able to determine strategies that could cohere the strategic alliance workforce into high performance work practices leading to business profitability and sustainability. Burns and Ulrich (2016) noted that organizations that have diverse, inclusive, and talent management strategies appear to gain competitive advantage over competitors on both talent and financial outcomes. The importance of ensuring cohesion among employees with diversity strategies is underscored by Ardakani (2016) in suggesting that diverse workforce management is an issue of organizational justice.

The globalized economy of the 21st century with its attendant demographic changes, proliferation of business enhancing technology tools, international expansion, airline deregulation, and international airline strategic alliances, have rendered diverse workforce management as a business imperative, especially in the global airline industry. Pore (2018) argued that the resources of a business organization constitute a source of competitive advantage. Adopting SHRM approach to manage the human capital of an international airline strategic alliance is, thus, an SCA initiative to ensure that the organization achieves success through the employees by matching human capital policies to organizational strategy. Human capital and talent management arguably plays a vital role in boosting employee morale and job satisfaction while ensuring retention, and business reputation (Borges, 2018).

The research findings from this study could be useful for airline alliance managers to formulate inclusion policies. Business practitioners, policymakers, and academics are unanimous on the cohesive importance of inclusiveness in an organization. Haldar et al. (2020) underscore the need to extend diversity and inclusion to leadership and board levels of corporate entities for effectiveness. Gender, age, and cultural diversity and inclusion on the boards and management teams of organizations will likely lend credence to the diversity policies pursued by the organization. While the focus in diversity management is usually on the numerical representation of segments of the greater community within the organization, inclusion emphasizes the experiences of individual employees in terms of opportunities for career development and a sense of being valued as a member of the corporate community (Sarah, et al., 2019).

Implications for Positive Social Change

The findings of the study have the potential to increase knowledge and awareness of management strategies to ensure diversity and inclusion in U.S. based international airline alliance ground staff operations. By contributing to existing body of knowledge on diversity and inclusion at the workplace, the results of the research may facilitate the creation of a workplace atmosphere that is conducive to enhancing job satisfaction, job security, productivity, business growth, and sustainability. As business growth, productivity, and sustainability are enhanced, the research information may lead to more satisfied and motivated employees with healthy work-life balance, and thereby, to positive social change.

A diverse workforce is considered an asset for competitive advantage (Nickerson & Valerie, 2018), so the research findings are likely to contribute to advancing market share expansion and a greater commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR). An organization's CSR is an expression of responsibility to stakeholders, contribution to society, protection of corporate reputation and identity as well as long term profitability

(Okumus et al. 2020). A company’s CSR has, therefore, significant public relations implications that could translate into patronage and revenue. The billions of airlines dollars in partnering with national social justice campaigns and to mitigate carbon emissions are compelling CSR endeavors that have positive social change implications.

Recommendations for Action

In the 21st-century globalized world, international business has brought about demographic changes and collaborations across national boundaries resulting in a diverse workforce for MNEs, especially international airlines (Tanwar & Kumar, 2019). There is a compelling case for hiring culturally diverse, gender diverse, age-diverse, and linguistically diverse staff in international airline strategic alliances. The study findings and the knowledge presented, may serve to create awareness on the importance of diversity in the ground staff operations of a global airline strategic alliance. The understanding of organizational performance and business sustainability will require some specific actions, and recommendations which are presented herewith.

Institutional Buy-In

Implementing diverse workforce management strategies is likely to be more effective in an organization where there is institutional buy-in into pursuing diversity and inclusion. This buy-in ostensibly means the company's leadership, including the board and management team, would have discussed this issue, and based on the stakes in the business operations, decided firmly, that adopting diversity and inclusion policies could create the synergy that is likely to enhance profitability and sustainability. The institutional buy-in will need to filter into consensus-building regarding vision and mission statements as well as other relevant policies. Essentially, it may be beneficial if the institutional buy-in results in diversifying the composition of the corporate board and the management teams.

Diversity Hiring and Inclusion Measures

Management would need to institute talent sourcing, interviewing, and hiring processes devoid of conscious and unconscious biases. Men and women need to have equal chances in these processes, and the wording of job descriptions would need to be less discriminatory. The machine intelligence tools used to link developers and data scientists to hiring companies will need to be changed to avoid weighted features and controls. Determining hiring criteria beforehand and diversifying the hiring committee will contribute to scaling down monochromatic tendencies. The use of workplace diversity and inclusion reporting metrics such diversity scorecard, dashboard, and annual culture surveys could enhance the pursuit and assessment of workplace diversity.

Align HR Policies with Corporate Strategy

This recommendation connotes, that the organization may benefit from an HR management initiative to harmonize human capital policies and objectives with corporate business strategy. This strategic management action has the potential to enhance organizational performance by adopting goal-aligned and performance-based HR practices that may lead to competitive advantage, profitability, and sustainability. As HR programs and job designs are in sync with corporate strategy, there is a greater likelihood of ensuring staff retention, which creates stability for the organization and employees to engage in career and succession planning effectively.

Socialization

Regular social programs organized by the U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations to enable various workforce segments to showcase cultural or group-specific performances could be educative, resulting in creating familiarity with the cultural heritage of the various groups. The cultural heritage familiarity could likely engender cultural awareness that is likely to develop into cultural intelligence. The social programs referred to, could potentially facilitate the recognition of the national days, symbols, and artifacts of the constituent groups of the workforce to overcome biases.

The research findings and information from this study may be beneficial to U.S.-based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations and diversity practitioners in leveraging diverse workforce management strategies to ensure business profitability and sustainability. The summary of the research findings will be shared with study participants. I intend to also undertake to make presentations at diversity conferences and symposia, and also engage in exchange of ideas with colleagues, business leaders, and other diversity advocates. The study findings will be published in academic journals and other research databases such as ProQuest.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies U.S. based international airline alliance leaders in ground staff operations use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure organizational sustainability and profitability**.** As diversity has cultural significance, it may be helpful to conduct a similar study from a different cultural milieu such as European-based international airline alliance context. Such a study may unearth some nuances that may expand the knowledge regarding diverse workforce management strategies in the international airline strategic alliance environment. Secondly, I recommend conducting a quantitative study on the same topic. A quantitative study may have a far greater sample and, therefore, may yield additional findings to those in this study.

Reflections

During my doctoral journey, I have had the opportunity to acquire substantial knowledge in international business involving multinational corporations, information and communication technology, strategic management, and diversity and inclusion. In addition, I have developed skills in scholarly writing, critical thinking, data collection and analysis. It has been an experience of juggling academic, career, and social challenges. The challenges have enabled me to develop a sense of commitment, especially to complete the DBA program. Although it has been a period of great challenges. I also relish the progress towards the completion of the DBA program.

The study focus was on diverse workforce management strategies. It was my expectation that the research will go smoothly so I could recruit and interview participants about the subject matter in the US-based international airline strategic alliance ground staff operations. The wealth of information processed during literature review stage and the research methodology concepts of ethical research, reliability, validity, and data saturation were important milestones during the journey. Recruiting participants for the study was not easy because the term diversity all of a sudden became a delicate public relations issue due to the Black Lives Matter campaign and the attacks on Asians.

As a former employee of an international airline involved in strategic alliance, my decision to conduct a study into diverse workforce management was to identify the strategies airline alliance managers leverage to provide leadership to employees. This is so important in my view because a diverse workforce could be a great asset for a multinational corporation and, therefore, if managed very well could facilitate profitability, sustainability, and competitive advantage.

The demographic changes in the 21st century have made workforce diversity a business imperative for most organizations, especially in MNCs. However, hiring a diverse workforce is not enough; it is vital to institute policies and take measures to ensure equity and inclusiveness within the enterprise. A workplace where employees exhibit cultural and emotional intelligence can present a workforce whose cohesion could generate the synergy to gain a competitive advantage. While diversity management has its challenges, the COVID 19 pandemic came with new problems for International Human Resources Management (IHRM) practitioners in leadership, hiring and training, work from home, support, health, and safety.

Leadership is vital to determine the vision and mission in a corporate environment. Business leaders are making difficult decisions to balance workforce population and reduced volume of business, leading to workforce downsizing through severance packages, layoffs, and rehires. Amid the uncertainty, panic, fear, and stress of the COVID 19 pandemic, corporate leaders have been called upon to provide adequate protective equipment and deal with the fears of a multicultural workforce carrying out job responsibilities with inadequate protective equipment. Leadership styles and behaviors have had to leverage and adapt to the changed environment innovatively with interventions to bring about improved outcomes from these situations of high uncertainty. As fears and uncertainty with the raging pandemic are experienced in different ways across cultures, responses to anxiety, fear, and stress could also vary culturally. The pandemic era leadership communication to resolve diverse workforce stress has often been adapted to be culturally effective.

Hiring and training during the COVID 19 pandemic have reduced significantly and tend to be conducted to be compliant with CDC protocols and to ensure that new hires can withstand the stresses of the era. With regards to the protocols, hiring interviews are often conducted virtually to fulfill the social distancing requirements of the CDC. COVID 19 era hiring managers are more likely to employ candidates who show signs of resilience, curiosity, and a higher tolerance for ambiguity because they could withstand the stress of uncertainty and fear. In-person training has been discouraged during the pandemic leaving the only option for online training, which is often challenging to business leaders and employees who are not accustomed to virtual training.

To promote good health for employees by reducing physical interaction, work from home has become the new normal for many organizations. The merit of this work format for employees is reducing the stress and costs of commute. Some organizations consider this an opportunity to make savings on expenses on providing workspace for employees. As employees are working from home, work supervision has become a challenge because it is easier to manage the workforce in person. Consequently, performance management and evaluation are no more as effectively done as during the pre-pandemic era.

During the COVID 19 era, human resources practice has been impacted by the need to reduce business operational costs and, consequently, the downsizing of workforce size, hiring, and training. The low-key hiring and training in most firms are currently done virtually. To be compliant with CDC protocols, work from home has become the new normal, from 2020 to the 2022 period, affecting workforce supervision and performance management and evaluation.

Conclusion

International airlines operating in strategic alliances could benefit from economies of scale, access to international markets, and globally integrated transportation services. Other perks of airline international alliance include joint sales and marketing coordination, co-location of airport facilities, reciprocal code sharing, reciprocal loyalty programs participation, airport lounge access, airport ground handling arrangements, aircraft maintenance insourcing, and joint procurement scale. To support global air transport operations requires adequate staffing to map to the diverse workforce requirements of multinational corporations. While diverse workforce is a business imperative in the 21st century international business, there is the need to adopt effective workforce management strategies to ensure profitability and sustainability. The three strategies that emerged in this study are diversity and inclusion, strategic human resources management, and leadership. These strategies need to be pursued intentionally and proactively for effectiveness.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Guidelines

1. The interview will be conducted in a professional setting to avoid disruptions.
2. Each interview session will take 60 minutes.
3. I will demonstrate care, concern, and interest in the research participants.
4. I will leverage interviewing aptitude and communication skills to encourage participants to share experiences.
5. I will take notes of salient points during the interview.
6. I will seek the approval of the participants to record the interviews.

Opening Script

My name is Francis Kofi Kumaka, a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I have received your response to my invitation to participate in this research study and would like to thank you for accepting to take part in this research study. Please note that participation in the research is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without any negative consequence. The information that you will share during the interview will be recorded and kept confidential. The purpose of the study is to explore the strategies airline alliance leaders use to manage a diverse workforce to ensure sustainability and profitability.

Interview Questions

1. What challenges have you encountered to ensure sustainability and profitability in managing an international ground staff operations?

2. What are the managerial strategies necessary for managing the ground staff operations of an international airline partnership to ensure sustainability and profitability?
3. What specific sustainability and profitability strategies have you implemented to retain a diverse workforce?
4. What role does a diverse workforce play in ensuring the sustainability and profitability of an international airline partnership?
5. What training did you receive to prepare you for managing a diverse workforce to ensure sustainability and profitability?
6. What kind of accountability do you have for customer service quality by the staff?
7. What kind of mentoring and training are necessary in this environment?
8. How are staff guided on flyer/customers in relation to airline partnership goals?
9. What other issues are important regarding diverse workforce management and business sustainability, which we have not discussed?

Closing Script

Thank you, Mr./Ms./Mrs. …………for sharing your experiences. The interview transcripts and the research findings will be made available to you for review and validation.

Appendix B: Invitation Letter to Participants

Dear ……….

My name is Francis Kofi Kumaka, a doctoral candidate at Walden University seeking successful business leaders from international airlines strategic alliances to participate in a research study. I am conducting this academic research study to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of diverse workforce management strategies in the international airlines' strategic alliances environment.

The primary data collection method for this study will be semistructured virtual interviews, and I request your participation in the research. Your participation in the study, consisting of 60 minutes interview and 30 minutes time commitment after the interview for data verification, will be helpful in gaining insights into diverse workforce management strategies in the international airlines' strategic alliance environment.

Please note that participation in the research is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without any negative repercussions. All information shared during the interviews will be kept confidential. On completion of the study, interview transcripts and the research findings will be made available to you for validation. Attached to this letter is a consent form with additional information regarding the research, and your rights as a participant.

In case you decide to participate in the study, please sign the consent form and attach it to your reply to this letter. I shall be available to address any questions or concerns you may have. My contact information is as follows:

Telephone: XXX XXX XXXX
Email: XXXa@waldenu.edu

Hoping in anticipation.

Sincerely,
Francis Kofi Kumaka