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Applying Attribution Theory to Perceptions of Maintenance Error

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Abstract

Before this study took place, the social psychology perspective of Attribution theory was yet to be fully utilised in South African research within the maintenance error landscape.

Attributional approaches see the person on the street operating like a scientist, obtaining information from his or her social surroundings and discerning the causes and consequences of ongoing behavioural and environmental events (Harvey et.al.,1976). It is very possible that due to the unique South African socio-political and economic landscape, strongly influenced by Apartheid, new combinations of known and unknown error attributions are at play, that are unique to this landscape and have not yet been studied or uncovered. Thus, a better understanding of the South African landscape, through a study such as this, could have serious cost benefits to maintenance companies, benefits to staff in terms of reduced risk of injury, as well as form the basis of improved policies, procedures and equipment.

Twenty-five team leaders and 125 minor maintenance staff at a South African Aircraft Maintenance Company formed the population group from which the sample for this study was drawn. Within each group, 5 individuals were interviewed on a personal basis. Further, for each group, one focus group was carried out consisting of two and four individuals respectively. The individuals who participated in the focus groups were different to those who participated in the interviews. In total 28 percent of team leaders participated in the study and 7 percent of maintenance staff, which calculates to just over 10 percent of minor maintenance employees at the organisation involved.

The Qualitative data acquired through this in-depth interview and focus group discussion process, and subsequent transcription was coded and analysed using Thematic Content Analysis. Content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context (Krippendorf, 1980).

The discussion of primary error attributions comparing maintenance staff and team leaders, focussed on the predominant primary error attribution theme and related attributions under the descriptor Organisational Culture which included both the dimensions of employee motivation and managerial culture. Finally, results of secondary error attributions comparing maintenance staff and team leaders raised the discussion around the theme, Tools and Equipment.

This research is an exploratory study that brings together the field of attribution theory and maintenance error. Its main strength is that it provides a theoretical framework, upon which is based a methodology that explores the primary and secondary error attributions made by employees for maintenance errors in their work environment. In other words, it is felt that this methodology can be implemented in a range of maintenance environments to unearth the error attributions of staff in that environment. Information such as this is very beneficial to companies and organisations in their planning, strategising, problem solving and general organisational development.