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# Intercultural communication at 30.000 feet: Multicultural personality and job outcomes of airline cabin crew

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## Abstract

*This study examines how multicultural personality traits predict stress, intercultural communication, and job outcomes among international airline cabin crew. Using survey data from 457 crew members, we explore the relationships between five traits from the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) and key job outcomes: job performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intention, mediated through stress and intercultural communication. Results show that emotional stability reduces stress and indirectly lowers turnover intent, while cultural empathy, social initiative, and open-mindedness enhance intercultural communication, leading to better job performance. Unexpectedly, open-mindedness was also associated with higher stress. Mediation analyses confirm stress and intercultural communication as key mechanisms linking personality to job outcomes. These findings highlight the role of personality in managing stress and delivering effective service in high-pressure, multicultural environments like aviation.*

**Key Words** *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), Intercultural Communication, Stress, Job Outcomes, Airline Industry*

## Track

**Focus of Paper** *Theoretical/Academic*

**Kind of submission:** *Paper*

## Introduction

The rise of globalization and increased international mobility has made interactions between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds more frequent. This is particularly the case in the hospitality industry, where intercultural interactions are very common and a key determinant for operational success. The airline industry offers a unique context to explore these dynamics. Cabin crews operate under high pressure, often working in changing team compositions, managing emotional labor, and ensuring passenger safety and comfort. Research into cabin crew operations has explored various facets such as team dynamics (Park & Park, 2019), health and safety (Van den Berg, Signal, & Gander, 2019), performance and well-being (Chen & Chen, 2012), and responses to disruptive passengers (Rhoden, Ralston, & Ineson, 2008). However, the role of intercultural interactions with passengers in these contexts remains underexplored.

Understanding how cabin crew members interact with passengers with a different cultural background can help design training and development programs designed to enhance intercultural effectiveness, improving job performance, passenger satisfaction and safety on board. Second, insights from this research can contribute to broader organizational strategies aimed at reducing turnover and increasing job satisfaction among employees working in intercultural environments, like the airline industry in this study.

Previous research has shown that an important predictor of an individuals' ability to successfully deal with cultural diversity in their social environment, is their personality (Ward, Leong & Low, 2004). In recent years,

several personality frameworks have emerged that specifically focus on the intercultural domain. The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2001) is the most prominent of these. Despite the vast amount of research on MPQ, there remains a notable gap in understanding how MPQ traits relate to behavior and performance in real-world intercultural engagements, such as within the aviation industry.

This study, utilizing the responses of 457 cabin crew members of various large international airlines, aims to bridge this gap by investigating the relationship between MPQ traits, stress, intercultural interactions with passengers, and job outcomes in airline cabin crews. Applying Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), we examined a structural model of the proposed relationships. Our research provides a rationale for how specific personality traits influence real-world outcomes (i.e., the hospitality and aviation industry).

## **Theoretical Framework**

This theoretical framework explores three key outcome variables, job performance, job satisfaction, and turnover intention, which are critical to understanding employee well-being and organizational success in the hospitality industry (Tsai, Cheng & Chang, 2010; Park & Min, 2020). The framework then examines how stress and intercultural interactions mediate the link between work experiences and outcomes, both key factors in the diverse, high-contact context of hospitality. Finally, MPQ traits are discussed to capture individual differences that influence how employees respond to job demands and work environments.

### ***Job outcomes***

Job performance in hospitality is crucial for organizational success, guest satisfaction, and employee well-being. It is influenced by factors like organizational support, employee engagement, job design, and leadership, and is defined by task accomplishment, role commitment, and discretionary behaviors (Prentice, Ma & Wong, 2019). Similarly, job satisfaction in the hospitality industry is crucial as well, given its impact on employee retention, service quality, and organizational performance. Locke (1969) defines job satisfaction as a "pleasurable emotional state" resulting from one's job, influenced by the alignment between employees' job values and the work environment (Locke, 1969). The hospitality work environment, in particular, is considered one of the most volatile and demanding in the labor market. Job satisfaction among employees is therefore under constant pressure. In hospitality, high levels of stress, long hours, and work overload are common causes of dissatisfaction (O'Neill & Davis, 2011). Finally, employee turnover is a constant and major challenge in the hospitality industry, where high turnover rates bring about substantial direct and indirect costs. Extensive research has been conducted to understand turnover and turnover intention within hospitality (e.g., Hinkin & Tracey, 2000; Ro & Lee, 2017; Cho, Johanson, & Guchait, 2009). Turnover intention, or the thought process leading up to the decision to leave, not only precedes actual turnover, but also affects job attitudes and behaviors. Employees experiencing high turnover intention often exhibit reduced engagement and commitment even before formally exiting (Chen, 2006; Akgunduz & Eryilmaz, 2018; Chung & Jeon, 2020).

### ***Predictors of job outcomes among cabin crew members***

In high-contact, diverse environments like the hospitality industry, understanding the predictors of job outcomes is essential. In this paper, we focus on two constructs that have been shown to be important in hospitality in general, but specifically in the context of cabin crew. Firstly, work-related stress serves as a key factor in dealing with high job demands, like intercultural interactions with passengers. High levels of stress can lead to burnout, which reduces performance and increases turnover intention (Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke, 2004; Salama et., al, 2022). Role ambiguity, overload, and conflicts at work have been identified as significant sources of stress, impacting employees' mental health and engagement (Prentice, Ma & Wong, 2019). Secondly, a key characteristic of working in the airline industry, is the high level of cultural intercultural interactions that take place with passengers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Successfully managing the challenges of intercultural communication is essential for cabin crew members to provide smooth interactions with passengers, positively impacting their job outcomes (Suthatorn, & Charoensukmongkol, 2018).

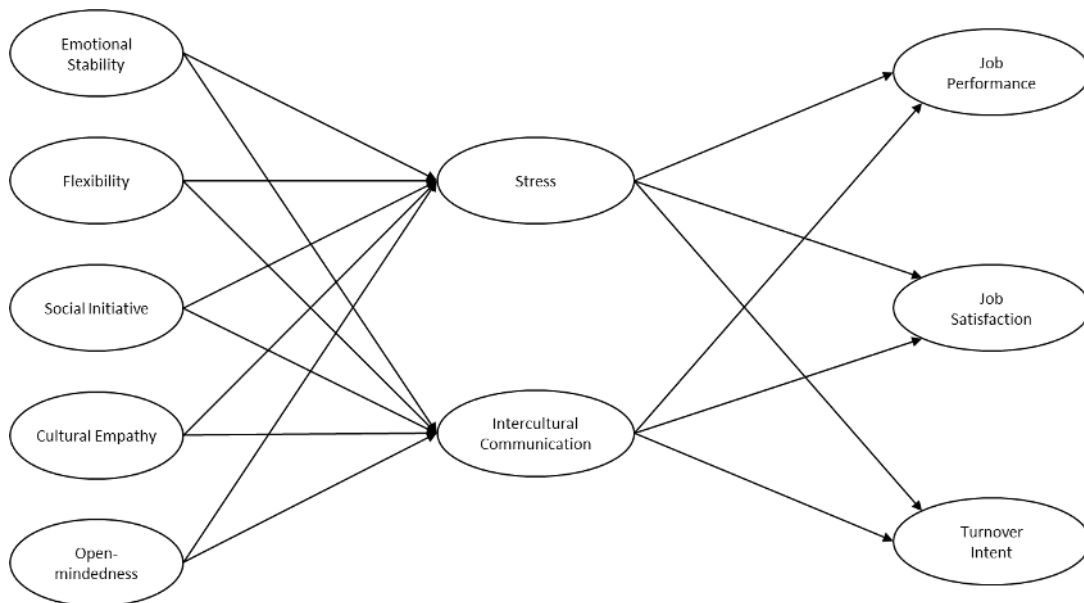
### ***The role of Multicultural Personality***

This study aims to examine how intercultural competence may enhance job outcomes of cabin crew members, and whether these effects may be mediated through stress and intercultural communication. The Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), developed by Van der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2001), is one of the most widely recognized frameworks for assessing intercultural competence. The MPQ measures five key traits: Emotional Stability, Flexibility, Open-mindedness, Cultural Empathy, and Social Initiative. These traits are designed to capture context-specific qualities essential for effective intercultural interactions and have been validated as reliable indicators of multicultural personality and intercultural competence (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). Among these traits, Emotional Stability and Flexibility are particularly relevant to stress management. Research has shown that these traits can influence stress levels, job satisfaction, and overall performance in multicultural settings (see e.g., Hofhuis, Schilderman, & Verdooren, 2020). Moreover, The socio-perceptual traits identified in the MPQ (cultural empathy, open-mindedness, social initiative), have emerged as key predictors of job satisfaction, performance, and longevity in multicultural and high-stress environments (see e.g., Cieślak et. al., 2024).

### ***Hypotheses***

First, relations between the key outcome variables the mediators, stress and intercultural communication, are hypothesized. Next, we hypothesize the relationships between the MPQ traits and our mediators, and finally we hypothesize our mediation effects. All hypothesized relationships are visualized in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**



*Hypothesis 1: Stress is negatively related to (a) Job Performance and (b) Job Satisfaction, and positively related to (c) Turnover Intent.*

Cabin crew face high emotional demands and operational pressures that contribute to stress, which undermines job performance and satisfaction while increasing turnover intentions. Stress impairs cognitive and emotional functioning (Prentice, Ma & Wong, 2019), reduces service quality (O’Neill & Davis, 2011), and fosters emotional exhaustion, which is a key predictor of turnover (Hobfoll, 1989; Kim, 2008). These effects are amplified in high-contact, volatile settings like aviation (Van den Berg et al., 2019; Wen et al., 2021).

*Hypothesis 2: Intercultural Communication is positively related to (a) Job Performance and (b) Job Satisfaction, and negatively related to (c) Turnover Intent.*

Effective intercultural communication helps cabin crew manage diverse passenger expectations, improving service delivery and reducing interpersonal conflict (Grobelna, 2015). This enhances job performance and satisfaction while lowering frustration and emotional strain, two key contributors to turnover intention (Tsai et al., 2010).

*Hypothesis 3: The Stress-related traits of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire, (a) Emotional Stability and (b) Flexibility, are negatively related to Stress.*

Emotional Stability and Flexibility help individuals manage pressure and ambiguity in multicultural work contexts. Emotionally stable employees experience less anxiety and better regulate stress (Herrera & Owens, 2014), while flexible individuals adapt more easily to unpredictable environments, reducing stress from role conflict and change (Hofhuis et al., 2020).

*Hypothesis 4: Stress mediates the effects of stress-related traits on job outcomes.*

Employees high in Emotional Stability and Flexibility report lower stress, which in turn supports higher performance and satisfaction while reducing turnover intention. Stress thus acts as a mechanism linking these traits to job outcomes (Chaudhry, 2017; Almeida & Davis, 2011; Hobfoll, 1989).

*Hypothesis 5: The Socio-perceptual traits of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire, (a) Social Initiative, (b) Cultural Empathy, and (c) Open-mindedness, are positively related to Intercultural Communication.*

These traits facilitate successful intercultural interactions. Cultural Empathy fosters understanding, Open-mindedness reduces bias, and Social Initiative promotes proactive engagement, all contributing to more effective communication with culturally diverse passengers (Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2013; Cieślak et al., 2024).

*Hypothesis 6: Intercultural Communication mediates the effects of socio-perceptual traits on job outcomes.*

Crew members high in socio-perceptual traits are more effective intercultural communicators, which improves job performance and satisfaction and reduces turnover intent. Intercultural communication thus functions as the pathway through which personality influences key job outcomes (Grobelna, 2015; Tsai et al., 2010).

## **Data and methods**

### ***Procedure and Sample***

The sample for this study consisted of cabin crew members employed by an international airline. Respondents were invited to complete an online survey, which was distributed through private Facebook groups for cabin crew members of a large German airline. The invitation to participate was posted by providing an anonymous survey link, accompanied by a brief introduction of the study. Reminders were posted in the second and third weeks after the initial invitation to enhance participation rates. Next, popular Instagram aviation accounts and influencers were asked to share the anonymous link and invitation through their profiles, which helped us reach cabin crew members of different airlines in different countries. Thirdly, the researchers reached cabin crew members through their own private (online) networks. Finally, to reach a wider audience, respondents who were reached through the above methods were also asked to forward the questionnaire to other individuals of the same occupational group. To increase participation, respondents who completed the survey were given a chance to win a 50€ gift voucher. By clicking on the anonymous link, respondents were led to the survey's introduction page, which provided general information about the study and a statement of informed consent.

After removing respondents who did not meet the criteria for inclusion (e.g. not being employed as cabin crew at an international airline) or who did not complete at least 50% of the survey, the final sample for this study consisted of 457 respondents, of whom 56.1% reported to be female and 12.0% reported to be male (the remainder did not disclose their gender). Respondents' ages ranged from 19 to 67 ( $M = 36.95$ ;  $S.D. = 13.96$ ). A total of 26

different countries were represented as a country of birth, with the majority of participants born in Germany (51.9%), followed by Austria (3.9%) and the Netherlands (3.3%). At the time of the study, respondents resided in 21 countries, with Germany being the most common (53.9%), followed by the Austria (3.5%), the Netherlands (2.6%), Switzerland (1.7%), and Italy (1.1%).

The majority of the sample indicated to be working as a cabin attendant (58.7%), others reported to work as a short-haul purser (5.7%) or long-haul purser (3.1%). The remaining respondents did not indicate their current position. The sample's average job tenure was 12.96 years (S.D. = 11.75), ranging from several months to up to 43 years.

### Measures

Multicultural Personality was measured using the short form of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ-SF; Hofhuis et al., 2020; Van der Zee et al., 2013), which consists of five subscales (8 items each) which ask respondents to self-report whether certain personality characteristics are applicable to themselves, on a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = not at all applicable; 7 = completely applicable). Cultural Empathy (CE) was measured using 8 items, such as 'Pays attention to the emotions of others'; Emotional Stability (ES) was measured using 8 items, such as 'Keeps calm when things don't go well'; Flexibility (FX) was measured using 8 items, such as 'Looks for regularity in life' (Reversed); Openmindedness (OP) was measured using 8 items, such as 'Seeks people from different backgrounds'; Social Initiative (SI) was measured using 8 items, such as 'Is inclined to speak out'.

Stress ( $\alpha = .88$ ) was measured using the Job Stress Scale (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983), and Intercultural Communication ( $\alpha = .77$ ) was measured using the Cabin Crew Anxiety Scale (Suthatorn & Charoensukmongkol, 2018), which in turn is a modified version of the Occupational Anxiety Scale (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001) adjusted to the specific case of flight crew. The original scale consists of 11 items referring to feelings experienced when interacting with foreign passengers.

Finally, the job outcomes variables. Job Performance ( $\alpha = .84$ ) was measured using the SERVQUAL scale intended to measure service quality in hospitality jobs (Parasuraman, Berry, & Zeithaml, 1991), Job Satisfaction ( $\alpha = .77$ ) was measured using the adjusted version of the Generic Job Satisfaction Scale (Macdonald & MacIntyre, 1997), and Turnover Intent ( $\alpha = .90$ ) was measured using an adjusted version of the Job Withdrawal Intention Scale (Cohen, 1993).

### Descriptives, Analysis, and Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics of all variables, and table 2 provides the intercorrelations between all model variables. The total number of cabin crew members in our sample is 457.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

Measure	M	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Cronbach's $\alpha$
Cultural Empathy	5.80	0.76	1.00	7.00	.71
Openmindedness	5.16	0.76	2.25	7.00	.66
Social Initiative	5.00	0.91	1.75	7.00	.75
Emotional Stability	4.50	1.15	1.00	7.00	.80
Flexibility	3.13	0.93	1.00	7.00	.76
Job Performance	5.78	0.61	1.00	7.00	.84
Job Satisfaction	4.96	0.97	1.17	6.83	.77

Turnover intent	1.78	1.01	1.00	5.00	.90
Intercultural Communication	5.51	0.68	3.20	7.00	.77
Job-related Stress	2.95	1.10	1.00	6.60	.88

**Table 2: Correlation Matrix**

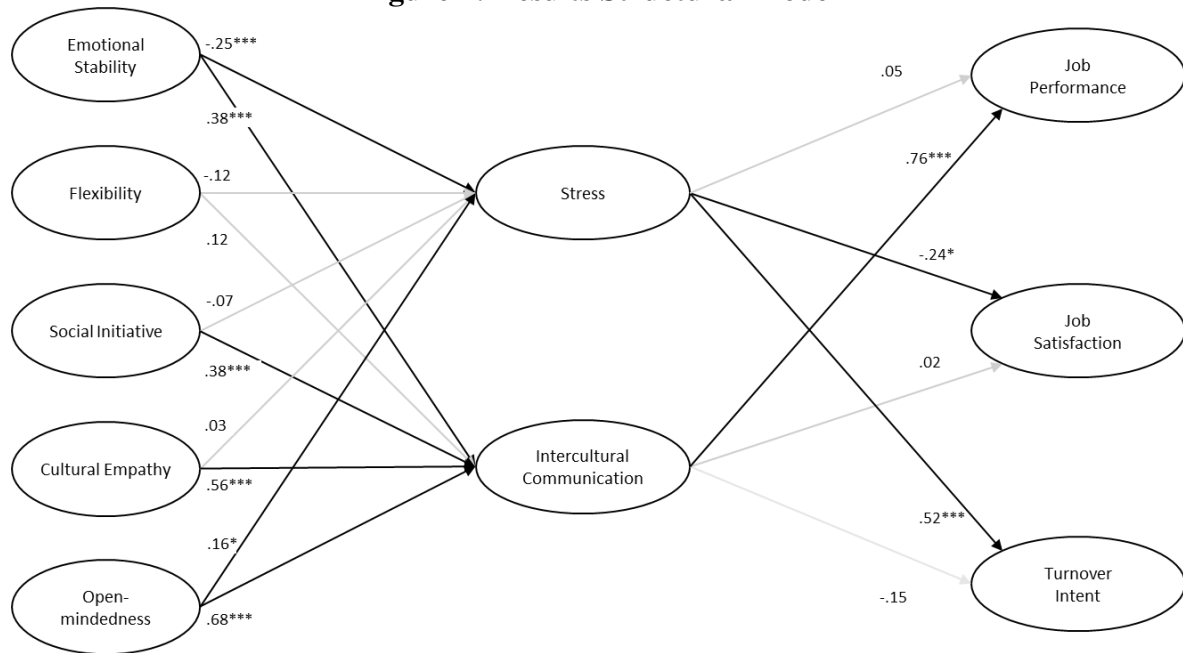
Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Cultural Empathy	--									
2. Openmindedness	.52**	--								
3. Social Initiative	.26**	.39**	--							
4. Emotional Stability	.09	.09	.31**	--						
5. Flexibility	-.29**	-.07	.12*	.24**	--					
6. Job Performance	.46**	.42**	.22**	.18**	-.07	--				
7. Job Satisfaction	.20**	.14**	.16**	.14*	-.14*	.41**	--			
8. Turnover intent	-.13*	-.04	-.09	-.14*	.07	-.16**	-.40**	--		
9. Intercultural Comm.	.26**	.30**	.32**	.39**	.15**	.38**	.12*	-.06	--	
10. Job-related stress	-.08	-.01	-.13*	-.30**	-.13*	-.06	-.22**	.40**	-.25**	--

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

### **Analyses**

In Mplus 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2015) we examined a structural model of the hypothesized relationships. Specifically, we examined the effects of the five MPQ traits on the mediators Stress and Intercultural Communication, and the effects of the mediators on the three outcomes, Job Performance, Job Satisfaction, and Turnover Intent. The model displayed good fit:  $\chi^2(2556) = 9690.269$ ;  $p < .001$ ; CFI = .934; TLI = .924; RMSEA = .035; SRMR = .072). Next, we examined direct and indirect effects of MPQ on job outcomes, using Bootstrapping (1000 iterations), to investigate whether stress and intercultural communication mediate the hypothesized relationships. The results are shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2: Results Structural Model**



### Results

The results highlight that intercultural communication is positively associated with job performance, while stress shows significant associations with job satisfaction and turnover intention. Furthermore, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) traits play a critical role in predicting both stress and intercultural communication among cabin crew. All MPQ traits, except for Flexibility, demonstrated significant effects. Notably, Emotional Stability was unexpectedly found to have a positive relationship with intercultural communication, while Open-mindedness showed an unanticipated positive relationship with stress.

Hypothesis 5, which proposed that stress mediates the relationship between stress-related MPQ traits and job outcomes, was partially supported. Specifically, stress mediated the effect of Emotional Stability on turnover intention, but no mediating effect was observed for job satisfaction. Hypothesis 6, positing that intercultural communication mediates the effects of socio-perceptual MPQ traits on job outcomes, was confirmed. Cultural Empathy, Social Initiative, and Open-mindedness all had significant indirect effects on job performance via intercultural communication.

### Discussion

This study explored how multicultural personality traits influence stress and intercultural communication, and how these factors relate to job outcomes among international cabin crew. All MPQ traits except Flexibility showed significant effects on stress and intercultural communication. This study specifically showed that stress partially mediated the link with Emotional Stability and turnover intent, while intercultural communication fully mediated the effects of socio-perceptual traits on job performance. Thus, the results underscore the importance of MPQ traits in the high job demand airline industry, with MPQ traits positively influencing stress and intercultural communication, hereby strengthening job outcomes among cabin crew.

### Theoretical contributions

This study extends prior research on multicultural competence and occupational stress by demonstrating how MPQ traits relate to stress, intercultural communication, and key job outcomes in a high-pressure, diverse work context. We confirm that intercultural communication enhances job performance and mediates the effects of

Cultural Empathy, Social Initiative, and Open-mindedness, supporting earlier findings (e.g., Grobelna, 2015; Van der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2013). Notably, the unexpected positive relationships between Emotional Stability and intercultural communication, and between Open-mindedness and stress, offer new insights into the complex role of personality traits in dynamic service environments. The study contributes to the understanding of how multicultural personality impacts behavior and outcomes in intercultural work environments, providing additional support to the applicability of the constructs included in the MPQ for use in multinational and intercultural contexts.

### ***Practical implications***

The findings have clear implications for airline HR practices and beyond. First, airlines can incorporate the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) into their recruitment and performance evaluation processes to identify candidates better suited for intercultural, high-pressure roles, prioritizing traits such as Emotional Stability, Cultural Empathy, Open-mindedness, and Social Initiative. Second, customer service and intercultural training programs could integrate modules that develop these competencies, as they are directly linked to job performance and satisfaction. Third, emotional stability can be enhanced through interventions such as mindfulness training or resilience-building exercises, helping crew members better manage stress. Finally, these insights are not limited to aviation. They can be applied in other multicultural service contexts, such as hospitality, international business, and healthcare, where employees face similar emotional labor and communication challenges.

### ***Limitations and further research***

This study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation. Second, reliance on self-report and single-source data may introduce bias and inflate relationships. Third, the sample is restricted to international cabin crew but mainly from Germany (51.9%), limiting generalizability to other roles or sectors. Fourth, unexpected findings, such as Emotional Stability positively relating to intercultural communication and Open-mindedness to stress, warrant further investigation. Finally, organizational and company policy differences between airlines were not accounted for, which may have influenced the results.

### ***Overall conclusion***

Emotional stability, social initiative, cultural empathy, and open-mindedness are key personality traits that support positive job outcomes among cabin crew. Emotional stability helps reduce stress, indirectly lowering turnover intent, while the other traits strengthen intercultural communication skills, leading to improved job performance. These findings highlight the value of both stress-resilience and intercultural competence in high-pressure, hospitality, and service-oriented environments, like the aviation industry.

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