INVESTIGATING AIRPORT SERVICE QUALITY: THE CASE OF KING ABDULAZIZ INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to evaluate airport quality service and to identify the most significant factors that would have the highest impact on departing passengers' satisfaction. The case of King Abdul- Aziz International airport, which has a reputation of unsatisfactory service level, was considered in this study. This study is an exploratory research. An online questionnaire was used in order to collect departing passengers' perceptions of the airport service quality. After that, an interview was held with the airport's service operations manager in order to discuss the questionnaire findings. Responses from 100 traveling passengers as well as the outcomes of the interview suggested that the main factors that influence the passengers' service quality perceptions are furnishings, airport employees' performance and attitude as well as the availability of leisure activities and maintenance activities of the passengers' bodies and possessions. Airport mangers' proper awareness of the value of airport service quality appeared also to be one of the key components that impacts airport service quality. The obtained results reflect that respondents were most of the time not satisfied with the quality level of the surveyed dimension and suggested several recommendations and valuable advice to help improve ASQ and provide travellers with a better traveling experience.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of service is a key performance indicator for the operations of an airport. The quality of an airport's overall service as perceived by passengers may have an important impact on enhancing or discouraging future tourism and business activities [1]. Consequently, the evaluation of the quality of airport service has become an important issue for airport management [2].

Besides, the airport industry is changing rapidly due to the increase of travellers' awareness of SQ. Therefore, today's air passengers can choose amongst a number of airports to stop at. There is an increasing insistency among airport marketers to differentiate themselves by meeting the requirements of customers better than the competition. Accordingly, passengers' perception of ASQ is considered as one of the essential variables that contribute to overall airport attractiveness due to the increasing importance of customer guidance to competitive advantages in this industry [3]. Similarly, the main driver for advancing airport services is centered on raising the demand of air travellers. As a result, there will be an increase in airport revenues, achievement of steady profit growth and expansion the current average profit [4].

Chen [5] concentrated on the SQ of airport operations and airport operators that influence the SQ and promote its reputation, which leads to raise traveller satisfaction and traveller loyalty. Moreover, the departure system of Taiwan International Airport was selected in this research due to its fundamental position in Asia-Pacific air transportations in order to establish airport operations performance indices. Also, he clarified that the dimensions considered and the research methods were not satisfying [5].

Correia and Wirasinghe [6] analysed the level of service at departure lounges in airports based on customers' perceptions. About 120 travellers were interviewed at Sao Paulo International Airport in Brazil. Moreover, techniques were employed to transform qualitative passenger responses into quantitative level of service scores and provide a relationship between these scores and the characteristics of the facility. As a result, the level of service standards was beneficial for Brazilian airports for planning, designing and managing. It can also be used at any airport, if local data are collected in order to readjust the models [6].

Widrasyah [4] tested the relationship amongst seven airport service dimensions, namely airport access, services and facilities, dining, shopping, service personnel and security, environment and immigration and customs. He collected data from 304 travellers at four major international airports in the United States. He found that airport access; environment, dining, and immigration were the most important dimensions to travellers. According to the author, the results of his research would assist airport administrators understand important airport service dimensions and the influence of each one on customers' perceptions of overall ASQ [4].

Park and Jung [7] investigated travellers' perception of ASQ and its influence on service value, satisfaction, airport image and passenger behavior. Their research results were based on a survey of 331 travellers at Incheon International Airport, which is considered the international gateway to South Korea. Results showed that ASQ had a direct impact on the level of transfer passengers' satisfaction, value perceptions and the airport's image. They also found that ASQ has an indirect influence on traveller's behavior [7].

Badawi [8] clarifies the achievements of different management tools, which used in Austin-Bergstrom International Airport (ABIA) in U.S.A such as ASQ survey, strategic management, enterprise risk management and incentive program. In her research, Badawi [8] explained how these tools were used to focus, plan, execute and empower staff at all levels in order to keep them focused, hold them accountable and encourage them in improving SQ. She highlighted that ABIA continued to grow by providing passengers with exceptional facilities and services and by improving workflow processes. Besides, she determines a set of key factors, which led ABIA to succeed and to become the best airport in USA. Those factors are ambience of the airport, cleanliness of the terminal, comfort of the waiting areas, availability of washrooms, cleanliness of washrooms, courtesy of staff and good shopping facilities [8]. Therefore, this study identifies the airport service quality at the King Abdulaziz International Airport.

Case Study: King Abdul-Aziz International Airport (Kaia)

KAIA, known by airport code JED, operates for the Jeddah and Makkah regions of Saudi Arabia. It began operations in 1981 after a seven-year construction and testing period. KAIA also serves as a base for the Royal Saudi Air Force. It handles about 18 million passengers and 150,000 take-offs and landing annually through two terminals (the north and south terminal). The north terminal is one of the largest airports in the world with approximately 100 acres of floor space. Many international flights and domestic flights set off from this structure. On the other hand, the South terminal handles passengers for regional and budget air carriers. Since KAIA is the closest large commercial airport to Makkah, it was built to accommodate large numbers of travellers and is considered the busiest airport in Saudi Arabia (Jeddah International Airport).

This airport is experiencing great competition nowadays due to the increase of passengers' awareness of SQ [2]. Subsequently, projects for airport development have been established (Jeddah International Airport) for advancing airport services, as they are critical for maintaining airport profits [4]. Thus, implementing an exploratory research study about important ASQ dimensions and applying experimental investigation would be beneficial to airport administrators for better ASQ; especially through using the conceptual model, as it will support the empirical research with different elements for better traveling experience.

METHODOLOGY
This study used exploratory research methodology to investigate various elements and facts related to ASQ. The study focuses on discovering significant quality dimensions at the departure lounges in airports. This will provide an explanation of important characteristics in airport service management and highlight the main aspects that could have an impact on travellers' satisfaction.

Primary and Secondary Data

The primary data of this study were collected using a self-administered questionnaire that was posted online by e-mail and sent to all Effat community, who experienced SQ at KAIA. Also, the survey questions were based on all ASQ elements [3]. All primary data is genuine and was exclusively collected for the purpose of this study.

The secondary data were also made use of and gathered from academic journals, other dissertations and findings. These sources were used as references to support research question at hand and provide it with beneficial information about essential SQ dimensions in satisfying customers' needs.

Research Type

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative data using closed and open-ended questions. Quantitative data was used to evaluate all the services at the departure lounge through presenting numerical values of customers' ratings upon service elements. Qualitative data was gained through customers' expressions, which played an important role in learning new things and enjoying new experiences for more innovative and creative services. Also, the qualitative data contributed to provide recommendations and solutions for better services.

Sample and Population

A total number of 100 respondents were participated in this study. The target population was airport customers, who were chosen from Effat community randomly and entirely by chance to give everyone an equal opportunity of being chosen, which results in acquiring variety recommendations that came from different, ages, genders, cultures and backgrounds.

An interview with the airport's central services manager, Mr. Mohammed Shurur, was held in order to obtain valuable information about airport services and discuss all the findings of survey questionnaire.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Factors Affecting the Services Cape Dimension

Figure 1, Q1 shows that great majority of the respondents about 92% rated the airport furniture between average, poor and not acceptable. Those findings imply that respondents are not satisfied with the airport furniture. KAIA's service manager acknowledged the inadequacy of the airport furniture and assured that all of the improvement projects including the interior furnishing would be implemented in the new airport of Jeddah city, which is planned to open in the last quarter of 2014. In spite of those plans, KAIA management still needs to invest in the passengers' comfort by providing comfortable seating for instance and waiting areas especially with the risks of delayed flights and the need of passengers to wait for a long time. Presently most of the seating areas have not been renewed since the airport was furnished.

Figure 1, Q2 shows that about 50% of the respondents rated the airport atmosphere average to good. The remaining 50% were not satisfied with the ambient conditions and considered them to be poor or not acceptable. The results ensure that the airport atmosphere is not highly satisfactory suggesting that KAIA needs to improve its ambient conditions related to the airport's temperature, lighting and smell. The KAIA's service manager clarified that concerning cleanliness, KAIA subcontracts the cleaning and housekeeping services to a private agency. Therefore, the airport administration has limited control over them. He argues, however, that the airport should have chosen the most appropriate agency with an adequate administration. He adds that the contribution of travellers in maintaining the airport's environment clean and unpolluted should not be ignored. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the travellers, the cleaning agencies as well as the airport management to collaborate in keeping the place clean.
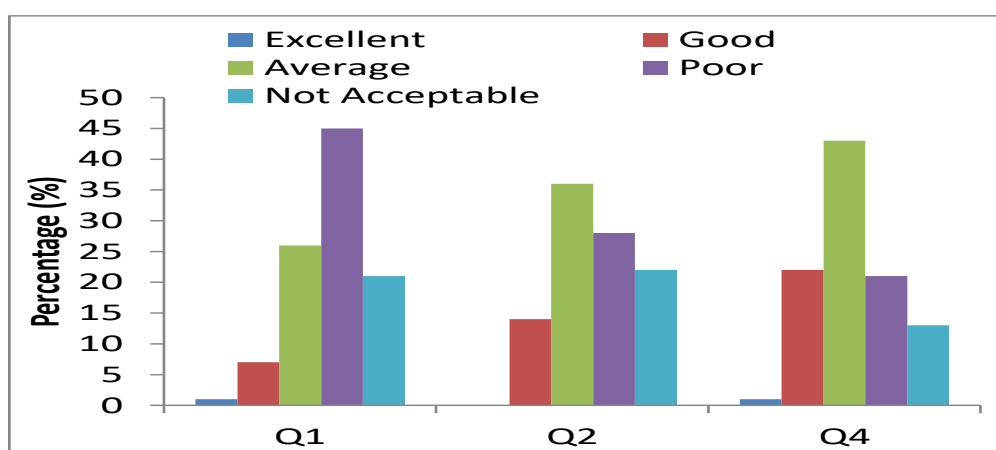

Figure 1: Q1: Respondent's Satisfaction with Airport Furnishings, Q2: Respondent's Satisfaction with The Level of Airport Atmosphere, Q4: Respondent's Satisfaction with The Performance of The Security Check Employees At KAIA

Figure 2, Q3 shows 23% agreed that the airport signs were clear and helpful versus 15% who disagree. The remaining respondents 62%, however, found that even though KAIA uses signs to direct the passengers in the airport, it is still lacking several facilities. According to the KAIA's services manager, providing airport with extra direction signs need approval and authorization from the senior management, which is a long and time-consuming process. However, he thinks that there is no need for a lot of signs due to the culture of asking rather than following signs. In spite of this, the administration should take into consideration this point as it will save the passenger's time and prevent a wide range of risks such as missing flights or going into wrong areas.

Aspects Based on The Service Providers

Figure 1, Q4 shows only 1% of the respondents said that the performance of security check staff at the airport was excellent. 22 % said it was good, with most of the respondents 43% rating the performance of the security check

employees as average. The airport's central services manager insisted that prior recruiting; airport employees go under several training courses including a training course on how to deal with passengers. However, the fact that some managers neglect these job requirements and recruit people that have not fulfilled them, the result is that some employees lack the skill of dealing with passengers. Therefore, having untrained employees on the job is a concern that airport administration should address immediately and weigh the risks of such actions, which can hurt the airports and country's image.

Figure 2, Q5 shows 13% of the respondents believed that the airport's employees give individual attention and willingness to serve customer needs. 52% of the respondents, on the other hand, find that this is not always the case, while 35% believe that the airport staffs do not give any individual attention to serve their needs. The airport's central services manager explained that even though there are exceptions, many airport employees do their job faithfully and seriously. However, he stresses that very often the effect of the local culture, discriminating people based on region and nationality, does have an impact on how some employees deal with foreign passengers. In spite of this, he again highlights that there will be more supervision in the new airport to adjust those problems. Still, the change does not come within one day; change requires time to get in effect and the employees need to be familiarized with the proper communication skills.
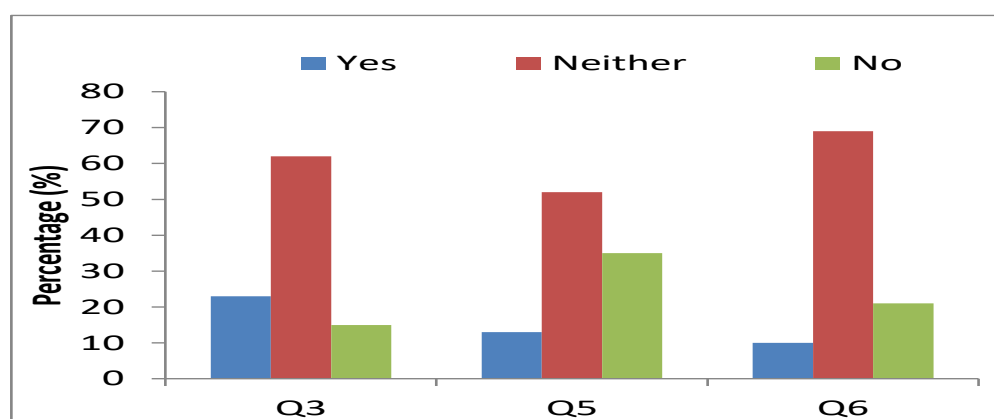

Figure 2: Q3: Respondent's Agreement on The Existence of Obvious Signs to Direct Customers Inside the Airport, Q5: Respondent's Agreement on The Airport Employee's Individual Attention and Willingness to Serve Others, Q6: Respondent's Satisfaction with The Knowledge and Expertise of Airport Employees

Figure 2, Q6 shows that 69% of the respondents think that only some of employees have enough knowledge and expertise that meet their job descriptions. Just 10%, however think that employees have the necessary knowledge to do their jobs. According to the service manager, the airport administration offers also other training courses for English terminology, related to the traveling procedures. However, the fact that some officials at the airport are still recruiting unqualified people causes problems with passengers and harms the airport quality of service. In spite of its difficulty, nepotism (or "wasta") is a major issue that airport management recognizes and sees its direct negative impact on the airport's SQ. The fact that the airport

management recognizes the problem is already a good sign towards a radical solution. It would greatly serve the purpose if all employees, experienced or inexperienced, undergo intensive training courses that could help overcome the problems that customers are facing due to the staff's lack of proficiency.

Availability of Services During Customer's Waiting Time

Figure 3 illustrates about 8% of respondents chose job-related work or education related study as an activity to do during the waiting time in the departure lounge, while the great majority selected eating, resting and shopping as interesting activities to spend their waiting time doing about 47%. Also, a fair number of respondents selected watching television, listening to music or reading as favorite activities to do during that time about 39%. Only 6% of respondents chose to do other activities such as playing electronic games, browsing the Internet, praying and performing other religious activities. The findings suggest that most of the airport's customers prefer to spend their waiting time in eating, resting and shopping, which highlights the need of maintenance activities. In fact, presently KAIA does not have enough restaurants and stores. Also, the necessity of leisure facilities can be shown as an important issue as a fair number of travellers prefer spending their time watching television, listening to music, reading or playing games. Thus, the airport administration can further provide more areas for maintenance activities that is resting, eating and doing shopping as well as for leisure activities that includes televisions and Internet stations.
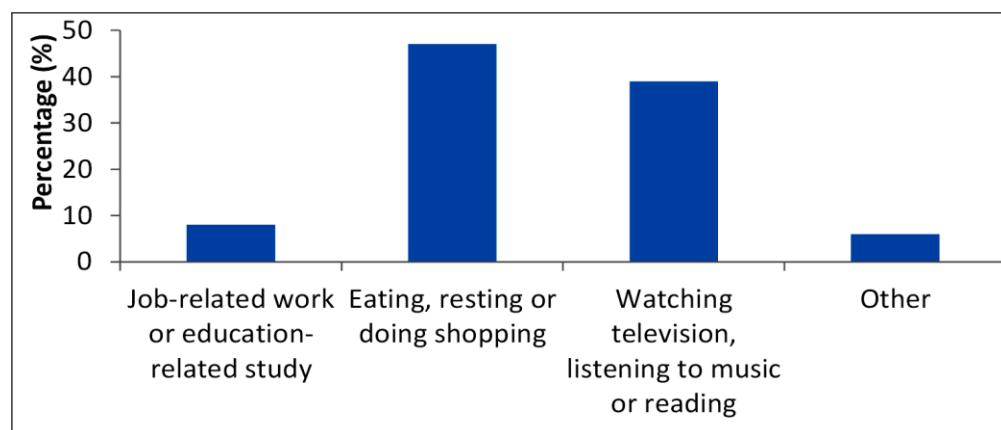

Figure 3: Respondent's Preferences of Activities During Waiting Time in The Departure Lounge

Figure 4 shows about 84% of the respondents found that KAIA doesn't provide travellers with a variety of food and shopping options while few of respondents approved on the presence of different restaurants, coffee shops and shops. Indeed, the airport has only few coffee shops with low quality and limited choice of food. The findings imply that the majority of the respondents consider that the airport lacks food variety and shopping options. According to the airport's central services manager, the current airport was built 33 years ago and it does not have adequate space to accommodate shops and restaurants

inside the departure lounge. He assured, however, that the new airport would include many shops and restaurants that will satisfy various desires. Again, considering improving the quality of food and having food stands will be an alternative to serve the customers' needs without a heavy burden for the airport.
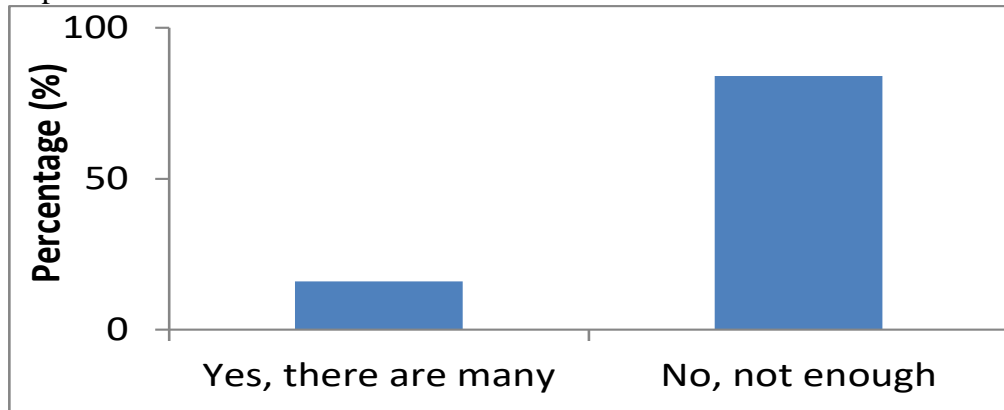

Figure 4: Respondent's Agreement with The Variety Of Food And Shopping Options Inside The Airport

Figure 5 illustrates the great majority of the respondents about 67% think that having some entertainment facilities would definitely improve their traveling experience, especially with the current lack of proper maintenance facilities and risks of long waiting time. 33% of the respondents think, however, that factors other than entertainment facilities, such as quite rooms, business rooms and shops, are very likely have an impact on their traveling experience. In fact KAIA does not provide a wide variety of entertainment facilities and limits passengers to their own creativity in coming up with what entertains them. When discussing this issue with the service manager, he mentioned that the airport administration is presently moving towards privatization, which leads to evolve KAIA facilities to reach a world-class standard of the ASQ model. Therefore, the new airport will be set up with numerous entertainment facilities that suit different customers. Such facilities would add value to passengers as they enjoy their time during their wait for delayed flights.
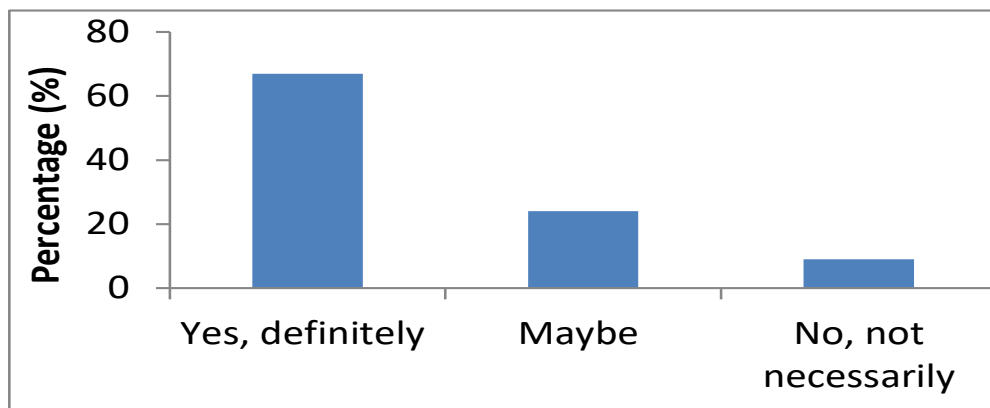
Figure 5: Respondent's Views Upon Having Some Entertainment Facilities Inside the Airport

Respondents Recommendations for Better KAIA Services

The last question of the survey is aimed to collect suggestions and recommendations from the respondents about how the KAIA services can be improved. It gathered valuable information about customers' requests, wants and needs for better traveling experience. Recommendations fell under three sections. Each section is referred to one of the major dimensions of ASQ model (i.e. servicecapes, Service personnel and Services).

The first section provides suggestions under the servicecapes dimension. It includes different views, which are directed towards the layout and functionality, ambient condition, and signs and symbols factors. Based on Table 1, most suggestions are about layout and functionality while some respondents are more interested in decorations and designs. Also, some respondents give attention to the cleanliness and internal atmosphere. The second section provides advices under the service provider dimension. Respondents' suggestions were divided between employees' attitude, behavior and expertise factors.

Table 1: Respondents' Suggestions for The Servicecapes Dimension

Dimension 1: Servicecapes		
Layout and functionality	Ambient condition	Signs and symbols
➢ Expand the waiting area ➢ Provide comfortable furniture ➢ Facilitate check-in processes ➢ Provide electric plugs ➢ Construct Jet way ➢ Upgrade airport technology ➢ Provide separate lounges for women	➢ Provide a cleaner environment ➢ Introduce natural light in the airport ➢ Prevent bad odor ➢ Reduce noise ➢ Provide better air-conditions	➢ Install obvious direction signs ➢ Modernize architectural designs ➢ Install Saudi's culture decoration

In Table 2, respondents focus on the employees' behavior. Also, some respondents' suggestions were concentrated on the employees' skills and experience. However, hiring professional employees with multi skills would be strongly recommended for quicker services. Also, more training courses on employee's behavior would satisfy travellers.

Table 2: Recommendations of Service Personnel Dimension

Dimension 2: Service personnel		
Layout and functionality	Ambient condition	Signs and symbols
➢ Avoid discrimination based on region and nationality ➢ Be more courteous ➢ Respect travellers	➢ Have willingness to serve travellers ➢ Set "Ask Me" employees ➢ Provide a speedy service ➢ Avoid angry looks ➢ Portray a friendlier atmosphere	➢ Hire more Professional employees ➢ Improve employees' skills ➢ Recruit well educated staff

The third section provides suggestions about the services dimension. Observations were focused on productive, maintenance and leisure activities. In Table 3, respondents' suggestions focus on the availability of private sections with different facilities for praying, using computers, reading, resting and playing. Other suggestions focus on food and beverage places. In addition, some respondents suggest looking over other airports, such as European or American airports as well as Dubai Airport, to be an example for better travelling experience. Others suggest letting a private company manage the service inside the airport instead of the government, which gives an opportunity for strong competition in providing better services.

Table 3: Recommendations of Services Dimension

Dimension 3: Services		
Productive	Maintenance	Leisure
➢ Free wireless ➢ Internet ➢ Library ➢ Provide a quiet area ➢ Business rooms ➢ Personal computers ➢ Mosque	➢ International restaurants ➢ Coffee shops ➢ Snack, drink and coffee machines ➢ Different relaxation lounges ➢ Drinking water fountain	➢ Gym ➢ Massage seats ➢ Electronic games ➢ Playground ➢ Salons ➢ Cinema ➢ Garden

CONCLUSION

The obtained results reflect that respondents were most of the time not satisfied with the quality level of the surveyed dimension and suggested several recommendations and valuable advice to help improve ASQ and provide travellers with a better traveling experience. The KAIA's service manager said that the airport should consider all these factors and he clarified that they are implementing them in the new airport. However, a number of these issues need radical solutions that should be tackled instantly otherwise the new airport will face the same problems. Also, since it is confirmed that managers are aware of those problems, a simple benchmarking with other airports in the region would clearly map the difference in quality.

Accordingly, a real root cause of all of those problems is the fact that managers do not care or rather lack awareness of the importance of good ASQ. This is due to the fact that with the current situation the airport management is fully dependent on the revenues from the Hajj season, and therefore is indifferent of improving facilities for the mere reason of profitability. They just focus on the fact that passengers get onto the plane and fly regardless the consideration of the new airport, which will be dealt with the same mentality and will end up like the old one. As a conclusion, managers, and not just employees, need to be more aware of the importance of quality and the fact that improving some factors would strongly affect the ASQ and, on a bigger scale, the country's image.

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