

## Compte rendu

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*Up in the Air: How Airlines Can Improve Performance by Engaging their Employees* By Greg J. Bamber, Jody H. Gittel, Thomas A. Kochan and Andrew Von Nordenflycht, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009, 224 pp., ISBN 978-0-8014-4747-1.

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d'organisation semble toujours nécessaire et les rapports entre les deux mouvements ne sont pas exempts de tensions.

David Rayside clôt le projet de l'ouvrage collectif par un travail de comparaison qui élève l'examen à l'échelle internationale et situe le mouvement ouvrier canadien sur l'échiquier de la lutte pour l'équité en milieu de travail. Les syndicats peuvent adopter une position défensive comme ils peuvent collaborer davantage avec les groupes non syndicaux de défense de droits, s'inscrivant ainsi plus ou moins dans la tendance du *social movement unionism*. Les forces à l'œuvre dans ce défi posé aux syndicats sont universelles et le mouvement ouvrier canadien y répond ni plus ni moins bien que les autres. L'auteur précise que les syndicats sont plus enclins à réagir devant la discrimination directe, comprennent mieux le langage du traitement formel égal pour tous, soit le langage de l'égalité, que celui de l'équité, qui requiert de considérer différemment des groupes au nom d'un déficit historique accumulé.

S'il y a un regret à ressentir en refermant cet ouvrage, c'est celui de n'avoir pas attaqué cet important objet d'opposition entre la pratique que commandent les chartes et la pensée syndicale, focalisée par tradition sur la notion juridique d'égalité formelle entre ses membres, selon laquelle chaque individu jouit d'une voix d'égale portée. Dans la pratique, il s'agit d'une égalité de traitement, qui s'obtient par une neutralité des décisions et des pratiques, soit lorsqu'on traite tous les individus rigoureusement de la même façon. Selon un raisonnement fondé sur l'équité, en revanche, le législateur reconnaît qu'il faut parfois, pour obtenir l'égalité des résultats, tenir compte de l'inégalité des positions de départ et traiter différemment les individus de différents groupes pour leur donner d'égales chances de parvenir à la ligne d'arrivée. Tant dans la population que dans les syndicats, on perçoit toujours les mesures de redressement temporaires comme des traitements de faveur, alors que la recherche démontre que sans de telles mesures, les forces contraïres au progrès contraignent à l'immobilisme.

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### **Up in the Air: How Airlines Can Improve Performance by Engaging their Employees**

By Greg J. Bamber, Jody H. Gittel, Thomas A. Kochan and Andrew Von Nordenflycht, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009, 224 pp., ISBN 978-0-8014-4747-1.

This book examines an important but perhaps overlooked aspect of modern global airline industry operations summed up on page three in the form of a question: do low fares inevitably mean low quality jobs? In examining this issue, the authors focus the bulk of their attention on the United States but also devote chapters to other countries and strategic and sector-specific issues including cost, productivity, service quality, industry structure, barriers to entry and exit, and threats and opportunities. The book's conclusion makes recommendations that go beyond being strategic management advice but rather have implications for multiple industry stakeholders. These suggestions flow easily from the preceding comparative and historical analyses.

In the book's first chapter, the authors succinctly describe two theoretical frameworks that are used to guide subsequent analysis. First, they propose an historical distinction as being between "before" versus "after" sector deregulation. In this context, the term deregulation refers to public policy which allows for unrestrained commercial competition, a dismantling of monopolistic industry structures, reduced government ownership and increased emphasis on market-determined outcomes. In the early 1970s, the United States was the first nation to embrace airline industry deregulation. Beginning in the 1980s with the United Kingdom, countries from other continents have followed the American lead, although with some differences that are well explained on page 29. Individual airlines may be thought of as having different characteristics and competitive strategies based on whether they are legacies, existing before, or new entrants, emerging after deregulation. Second, in the following section of Chapter One, the authors present a framework for understanding management orientation *vis-à-vis* labour relations which

establishes employer interaction with unions and employees as primary dimensions for understanding firm difference. Airline stakeholder outcomes may be viewed as caused by the two classes of consideration, namely historical positioning and employment relations orientation. I found the book's introduction especially well structured. I have recently recommended the chapter to students who are nearing completion of a thesis but unsure about how to lead in to a complex issue in an interesting way as a prelude to addressing theoretical and conceptual issues (some scholars suggest that the introduction of a thesis should be written following completion of other chapters).

In its middle chapters, the book provides sophisticated and farsighted commentary about the competitive strategies of airlines throughout the world and the changing regulatory and operational environments in which each country's industry has functioned. The work is replete with extensive historical and technical detail, good analysis, and insightful conclusions. Remarkably, the read remains interesting and accessible. Its narrative moves back and forth between discussion of strategic and competitive issues to consideration of employee morale and labour relations. The authors illustrate their points with statistics and findings from ethnographic and qualitative methods and anecdotes. They have an intuitive grasp of when to change style and direction in presenting material without compromising the logic or structure of the narrative. I remained impressed with how effectively the book's theoretical frameworks were able to accommodate data and observations. Indeed, I became convinced that the legacy/new entrant distinction is indispensable for understanding the nature of competitive strategy within the airline industry and that the employment relations orientation of individual firms are well reconciled using the model presented on page 12. From a scholarly perspective this point is instructive. It reminded me that it is possible to use deceptively simple analytic tools to make sense of complexity and ambiguity. A good example of this appears on page 95 where relations between firms from different coun-

tries are placed on the employment relations grid. The discussion here focuses on Southwest Airlines which is viewed as being able to achieve success whilst pursuing a union/management partnership orientation and an employee commitment orientation.

I like the book's clarity. Each chapter starts with a straightforward overview of where the reader is headed. The sentences are short, direct and devoid of adjectives or adverbs. Paragraphs are well ordered and integrated. In presenting airline-specific material, the authors convey a strong sense of national culture and priorities. Such context does not disrupt the flow of the narrative or shift attention from the principal object of analysis, airline industry strategy and its labour relations consequences. On the contrary, I think the authors strike entirely the right balance between consideration of necessary background and discussion of focal issues. This feature of the book, namely the way it manages critical and less relevant content, has widespread instructional value, particularly for doctoral students and early-career scholars.

The book is hard to characterize, a point which I don't intend to be a criticism. I think the work would have broad appeal to those interested in strategic management, labour relations, globalization and/or economic history. The authors made me consider how the experience of airlines would be helpful for understanding other industries such as telecommunications, the electronic and print media, and the freight and shipping transport sectors. In this sense, the book convincingly builds generic arguments about the new economy and globalization. Part of its contribution is to offer insights into the modern functioning of capitalist market economies in circumstances where the object of analysis becomes almost inconsequential. I found the book enjoyable. Upon reflection, I think this is due to the quality and sophistication of its scholarship and not because I am especially fascinated by airline industry strategy and the sector's labour relations. If my hypothesis is correct, *Up in the Air* can fairly be regarded as an exceptional work.

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