Identification of interventions to improve employee morale in physically demanding, repetitive motion work tasks: A pilot case study

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Abstract: Employee morale is a determinant of productivity and retention. This study explores relationships and morale levels between employees and supervisors in a large service industry. An open-ended questionnaire developed based on literature was created to assess morale and motivation, support, incentive, workplace environment, way of motivation, and job satisfaction. This survey was then piloted to managers of hourly product handlers working in a large North American distribution company. Data on existing status of employee morale and the factors influencing morale were collected from managers of three different departments responsible for supervising product handlers. The survey was administered using an online survey tool and answered by a sample of 44 respondents. Poor employee morale and negative attitudes toward their jobs were reported. Influencing factors included minimal pay and hours, lack of motivation, understaffed and unskilled labor, high physical workload, and poor supervision. Manager feedback indicated employees had a lack of understand of company mission and vision but also demonstrated a potential disconnect at the worker and manager.
levels. Potential interventions such as increasing employee-supervisor interaction, promoting good behavior, offering non-monetary benefits, training, wage rate and employee selection consistency, job redesign, etc. were recommended to management for implementation to improve existing conditions.

**Subjects:** Work Design - Ergonomics; Communications - Ergonomics; Manufacturing & Processing; Supply Chain Management

**Keywords:** employee morale; employee dissatisfaction; employee-supervisor relationship; morale interventions; employee retention

### 1. Introduction

Employee morale can be defined by a person’s job satisfaction and the degree to which the individual receives satisfaction from the job situation (Bhasin, 2018), motivated job-engagement (Verma & Kesari, 2017), feelings of well-being toward the company (Muskita & Kazimoto, 2017), and the emotional connection employees have during their time within a workplace environment based on the risk, policies, and management (Webster, 2018). Per Bhasin (2018), “Morale is generally referred to as high morale or low morale.” Employees who are satisfied with their job and have a positive attitude at work are said to have positive or high employee morale. Byproducts of high employee morale generally include: willing cooperation, organizational and leadership loyalty, disciplinary compliance, reasonable to high degrees of initiative and job interest respectively, and organizational pride (Bhasin, 2018). On the other hand, employees who are dissatisfied and show negative attitudes at work are said to have negative or low employee morale. According to Bhasin (2018), byproducts of low morale include: apathy towards the company and customers, in-fighting, distrust, jealousy amongst employees, disloyalty, and noncompliant actions toward the company and management. The negative repercussions stemming from low morale impact productivity and outcome quality (Aiken et al., 2002; Bakotic & Babic, 2013; Leblebici, 2012; Muskita & Kazimoto, 2017).

A large, global company is investigating possible interventions that could be used to improve the employee morale of workers at their largest distribution facility. As a part of their efforts, this company contacted the research consultants in this study to help in the identification of some key causes of what they suspect is a low morale problem. This global company wanted to learn about what measures could be taken to improve employee morale based on methods proven in literature. Based on the captured measures, this company requested recommendations on possible interventions that could be implemented to improve morale. Therefore, the makings of this case study were heavily dependent on past research of morale and contains a supporting literature review. Also, the names of the company and any engineers involved have been changed.

#### 1.1. Company overview and problem statement

Stark Logistical Process Company (SLPC) is a multi-billion-dollar, service-based organization with a workforce of several hundred-thousand employees at over 2000 locations (R. F. Burch et al., 2016). In peak times of the year, SLPC can experience the movement of over a quarter of a billion units of product within the logistical pipeline during a only a few days (R. Burch et al., 2019). SLPC has stated that their largest distribution center is currently combating a high turnover rate which is impacting their product throughput, especially during peak distribution times of year. SLPC has determined that this high turnover rate may be associated with low morale among their line-level workers at this large facility.

#### 1.2. Objective and scope

The objectives for the research consultants in this study were to identify intervention strategies that SLPC could implement to improve employee morale of the workers in the large distribution center’s Automated Culling and Routing System (ACARS). To this end, the research consultants first performed a literature review to identify any factors that influence employee morale and to also investigate previously used methods of improving morale. After the literature review was
completed, the consultants used these factors to create an open-ended survey for the managers involved with ACARS. The responses given by the managers allowed the research consultants to better understand and identify the causes for the low morale. Using these results, appropriate interventions identified from the literature review were presented to SLPC to improve ACARS worker morale. The main contribution of this case study involves a real-world assessment of morale in a large industrial facility where turnover at the repetitive-task, low-skill positions is common. While not all industries, tasks, and workforces are created equally, the authors confirm using an autoethnographic frame (Nur et al., 2021) that the ability to openly discuss and investigate the potential of low morale can be challenging for all facilities that house an output/productivity-based operation. This study provides a beginning point of assessment for companies largely dependent upon repetitive motion tasks while also struggling to address morale (R. Burch et al., 2019) but recognize the need to do something and initiate change. Regardless of reasoning—be it human resource departments, legal concerns, or social media visibility—the assessment of morale when confronted with high turnover can be a challenge and even discouraged by upper-level management for fear of what may be discovered internally or revealed externally. The intent of this pilot case study is to show other companies facing similar challenges how to engage in the morale conversation while identifying some common ground regarding interventions that may be shared with their company as demonstrated by SLPC.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definition of morale

Employee morale can have a large effect on any work system. According to the 142-country study reported in the Gallup Business Journal, 70% of American workers do not work to their full potential. A total of 52% of these employees do not get engaged at their job and 18% remain actively disengaged (Sorensen & Garman, 2013). A survey, conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), found that the two factors that lead to deteriorated productivity at a workplace the most are “poor management” and “lack of employee motivation” (SHRM, 2005). These two factors were agreed upon by both the employees and their HR (Human Resource) representatives, and are linked in other studies to be related directly with low employee morale (Baehr & Renck, 1958; Giese & Ruter, 1949; McKnight et al., 2001). Besides poor management and lack of motivation, another factor, workplace incivility, was recently found to be very important in controlling employee morale in an organization (Bar-David, 2015). According to Bar-David (2015) Consulting polling, 47% of the people who had experienced workplace incivility at least once intentionally lowered their performance. Also, 80% did not care about time limits or deadlines anymore, and for 78%, the level of commitment to the organization decreased.

2.2. Dimensions affecting morale

Numerous studies have been performed to identify key dimensions which affect employee morale. Because studies have recognized that there is an important association between employee morale and productivity, Giese and Ruter (1949) recommended that various objective measures used for gauging productivity (e.g., production efficiency, error efficiency, labor turnover, tardiness, and absences) should be used as determinants for employee morale in the workplace. From a research investigation study, Baehr and Renck (1958) explored the structure of employee morale and concluded it consisted of five basic subjective factors: (a) employee-management relationship, (b) immediate supervision from managers, (c) incentives, (d) friendliness from fellow employees, and (e) job satisfaction in terms of self-actualization. In another study, McKnight et al. (2001) revealed that the closeness of the employee-management relationship affects morale directly and positively influences the effects management controls have on morale.

2.3. Measuring employee morale

While there are many different methods that can be used to measure employee morale, all methods have their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, a company must choose the method which best serves their needs. Some methods used to measure employee morale are conducting
employee surveys (Baehr & Renck, 1958; Linz et al., 2006; Minor et al., 2014), performing interviews (Brayfield & Crockett, 1955; Redfern et al., 2002), and performing task analysis through observations of specific work tasks (Davies, 1973). Although measuring employee morale through observations is primarily subjective, it can be used in conjunction with other methods to further enhance the study of a situation. To obtain a more accurate depiction of employee morale, using this mixed-method approach is particularly useful. By using both a quantitative and a qualitative approach of collecting data, researchers and practitioners both can better understand and analyze the correlations between data results. Table 1 presents a summary of previous research interested in finding factors that influence employee morale. Also, the cause and effect diagram in Figure 1 shows all the probable causes of poor morale among employees that were found in literature.

Table 1. Summary of research on employee morale

| Method                | Dimensions to measure employee morale                                                                 | References         |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Survey/questionnaire  | 1. Organization and Management  
2. Immediate Supervision  
3. Material Rewards  
4. Fellow Employees  
5. Job Satisfaction  
1. Monetary Rewards  
2. Performance  
3. Positive Work Attitude  
4. Experience  
5. Informal Rewards  
1. Input in Decision Making  
2. Organizational Fairness  
3. Job Stress  
4. Perception of Coworkers  
5. Workplace Cooperation  
6. Worker Individuality | Baehr & Renck, 1958  
Linz et al., 2006  
Minor et al., 2014 |
| Field Study           | Pay Difference with Co-workers  
Pay cut                 | Breza et al., 2017  
Kube et al., 2013 |
| Experimental Study    | Monitoring and Supervision (recognition, education, acknowledgment)                                  | Ariely et al., 2008 |

Figure 1. Causes of poor employee morale according to literature.
2.4. Application of morale studies in industry

To understand the direction taken by other morale studies while also comparing previous research to the novelty of this case study, the literature review was expanded to identify applied morale studies occurring within the last decade of completing this study. Studies that specifically addressed the understanding of employee morale and spoke of interventions between the years 2010 and 2020 were considered. Of such studies where “employee morale” was mentioned in the abstract and “interventions” were discussed in the narrative, 183 were found using the EBSCO search engine in the online library. The EBSCO for Academic Libraries search engine is offered at research institutions and enables the researcher to search for keywords across all academic literature-based databases at once. EBSCO includes 539 databases that range from PubMed, to IEEE, to Google Scholar and all the well and lesser known scholarly search databases. Searching within EBSCO ensures inclusion of most all scholarly research and exclusion of predatory journals. Inclusion criteria for reviewing and contrasting against this study included research taking place in (a) industrial environments (i.e. service- and production-based facilities), (b) low-wage employees, as well as an emphasis on (c) workers performing repetitive or deskilled tasks like those found in the SLPC ACARS work environment. While this was not an exhaustive search—as was not the intent of this manuscript, Table 2 summarizes these studies findings from recent and applied studies where industry practitioners are the target audience as with this study.

From the 11 studies found with comparable inclusion and exclusion criteria to this study, none were found that specifically address concerns in the warehousing and materials handling industry. Also, only two studies were found that occurred within the United States. Of the 11 studies, six contained outcomes and intervention recommendations that utilized survey-based methods during data collection. This study fills a critical gap in the understanding of employee morale in critical sectors as material handling, product distribution, and supply chain within the United States as the present need for delivery grows as does the need for de-risking distribution networks (Van Hoek, 2020).

3. Method

The method followed by the research consultants in this pilot case study consisted of distributing an online survey to the managers involved in ACARS operations at SLPC. For this study, SLPC provided historical data from the administration regarding their beliefs of the cause(s) of the low morale. The survey questions were created based on key factors affecting morale which were identified from the literature review. The survey was created and issued using Survey Monkey, a common online survey tool. Data was coded and analyzed based on predicted answers from questions. Finally, important factors that influence employee morale were identified.

3.1. Location

The location of this study was SLPC’s largest distribution facility which serves as the primary distribution facility for all operations within the North American continent. This facility is one of the largest distribution centers in the world (R. F. Burch et al., 2016). On average, the primary distribution facility processes about 1.5 million units of product during their largest shift (R. Burch et al., 2019). While most of the product culling processes are automated (especially in the ACARS work area), human hands-on interaction is still a critical aspect of the facility’s operations (Beckham et al., 2020).

3.2. Participants

The survey was issued electronically through an email to all managers with a Survey Monkey link. The managers involved in ACARS operations are: (a) Input managers who manage the operations of product-handling teams responsible for unloading inbound containerized and palletized product in order to send them to ACARS, (b) Output Managers who receive culled product from ACARS for individual distribution markets (such as one manager for Atlanta, another for Cleveland, and so on), and (c) ACARS System Managers who supervise the product-handling teams at ACARS responsible for keeping the product on the conveyor belt with proper positioning for automated imagers. An invitation to complete the survey was distributed to 156 employees (based on both day and night shift and
Table 2. Previous employee morale studies and interventions based industrial, low-wage, and repetitive task environments

| Industry Sector/Collection Method | Application of Morale Studies (Country of Research Origin) | References |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Manufacturing                    | Ergonomic interventions and lean implementation in semiconductor manufacturing lines that improved working conditions by minimizing task risk, job dangers, and body stress linked to enhancement of employee morale and work effectiveness (Malaysia) | Wong & Richardson, 2010 |
| • Survey/questionnaire           |                                                          |             |
|                                  | Formal lean production implementation led to increased job involvement and morale as a bi-product of reduced employee turnover in export-apparel manufacturing (Sri Lanka) | Wickramasinghe & Wickramasinghe, 2011 |
| • Case study                     | A multi-criteria genetic algorithm matching employee adequacy and competencies to job rotation schedules based on musculoskeletal disorder risk mitigation using ergonomic criteria increased morale, employee satisfaction, and product quality in an automobile parts supplier assembly plant (Spain) | Asensio-Cuesta et al., 2012 |
| • Survey/questionnaire           | A framework to assist managers in identifying and evaluating human factors was created to aid in the adoption of new technology and the selection decision-making process as to mitigate resistance to change and negative employee morale (Brazil) | Borges & Tan, 2017 |
| Transport & Logistics            | Psychological strain, sleep disturbances, and employee morale stressors were investigated in road transport and logistics workers; job dissatisfaction and turnover intentions remained whenever high role ambiguity and role conflict were high regardless of role overload (Australia) | Tucker et al., 2018 |
| • Survey/questionnaire           |                                                          |             |
| Construction                     | An investigation into workers injured at the workplace returning to construction tasks with a disability found that implementing a disability management program was critical for retaining valued, experienced personnel and maintaining employee morale (Canada) | Winter et al., 2016 |
| • Survey/questionnaire           |                                                          |             |
| Low-wage, repetitive-task, and service industries | Workplace health and promotion was investigated in low-wage industries regarding correlation between employer involvement versus employee concern; higher employer involvement led to minimal concern and higher morale tied to awareness of concern (United States) | Hammerback et al., 2015 |
| • Interviews                     |                                                          |             |

(Continued)
| Industry Sector/Collection Method | Application of Morale Studies (Country of Research Origin) | References |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| • Survey/questionnaire            | A framework was developed for leadership training based on findings in the service industry that supervisors’ power distance orientation can be connected to abusive behavior which in turn has negative impacts on employee motivational factors such as morale (Pakistan) | Fatima & Bashir, 2017 |
|                                   | Workplace bullying was found to have a positive relationship with job burnout and a negative one with relationship hardiness; management interventions should be used to prevent increased anxiety, depression, exhaustion, absenteeism, and turnover as well as decreased productivity, morale, and organizational commitment (India) | Srivastava & Dey, 2020 |
| Public, private, and non-profit work sectors | General Social Survey data was used to assess pay increases (or lack thereof) on employee work morale across different working sectors; small payment increases were found to improve employee work effort but at the cost of compromising employee work attitudes (United States) | Chen, 2018 |
| • Practitioner perspective        | Numerous non-monetary incentive “levers” such as growth, renewal, enabling, aspirational, and transparency can be utilized to enhance employee motivation to improve workforce morale during the Covid–19 crisis (India) | Mani & Mishra, 2020 |

the number of input stations of 78 per shift). The participants of this study who responded to the survey were a combination of six Input Managers, 31 Output Managers, and seven ACARS System or sorting Managers, totaling to 44 participants, a response rate of 28.2%. Table 3 provides are the results of the demographic survey questions.

3.3. Research hypotheses
To further understand the perspective of managers in the SLPC, and to develop meaningful interventions for employee morale, the following hypotheses were developed:

Hypothesis 1: Manager perception in the SLPC is that of low employee morale and poor employee attitude. The SLPC had a reputation of lower than average levels of employee morale, along with poor employee attitude. However, no data had previously been collected to investigate the reputation. With this hypothesis, the preconceived notion about low morale and poor attitude will be quantified and tested.

Hypothesis 2: Manager perceptions will not vary significantly based on manager area. Within the ACARS operation, three areas were studied: input, output, and sorting (e.g., within the ACARS System).
Table 3. Manager demographics

| Demographics          | Percentages (N = 44) |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Gender                |                      |
| Male                  | 77.27                |
| Female                | 22.73                |
| Age                   |                      |
| 20–29 years           | 6.82                 |
| 30–39 years           | 18.18                |
| 40–49 years           | 34.09                |
| 50–59 years           | 36.36                |
| 60 years and above    | 4.55                 |
| Designation           |                      |
| ACARS Manager         | 15.91                |
| Input Manager         | 13.64                |
| Output Manager        | 70.45                |
| Experience at SLPC    |                      |
| 0–5 years             | 4.55                 |
| 6–10 years            | 11.36                |
| 11–15 years           | 13.64                |
| 1620 years            | 20.45                |
| 21 years or above     | 50.00                |
| Sort                  |                      |
| Day Shift             | 18.18                |
| Night Shift           | 81.82                |
| Experience at Product-Handling |       |
| Yes                   | 29.55                |
| No                    | 70.45                |

The second hypothesis will allow SLPC to determine if low morale is isolated in one work area, or if it is prevalent across multiple areas.

3.4. Survey data analysis

The survey instrument used for this study consisted of two parts: (a) six demographic questions about the managers (gender, age, designation, work experience at SLPC, working shift, and experience as a product-handling employee) and (b) eight open-ended questions about the employees regarding the level of morale and motivation, support, incentive, workplace environment, way of motivation, job satisfaction, etc. Examples of these open-ended questions include: “How would you describe the morale or enthusiasm of the product handling employees in ACARS?” and “Do you think the product handling employees are satisfied with their job? Please explain your answer.” Each of the open-ended questions were designed to understand the status of factors which were key influencers for employee morale in the literature.

The data were individuals’ responses to eight open-ended questions. The advantages of having open-ended survey questions are that respondents are not limited to a predetermined set of predicted answers. However, coding all these unique responses becomes challenging. Therefore, a system had to be established for response analysis. The four basic steps used to analyze open-ended responses were (Fink, 2003; Sarah, 2014):

1. **Reading through responses carefully to get a sense of what participants are saying**: The research consultants read a question and related answers from all the participants. The objective was to understand the common themes emerging from those answers with respect to each question. The same process was continued for all eight questions.

2. **Developing general categories to assign to each group of responses**: For most of the responses, the participants were divided into three groups. For example, answering to the survey item “How would you describe the morale or enthusiasm of the product handling employees in ACARS?”, some people responded positively (“morale is good”, “great!” etc.),
some of them remained neutral (“moderate”, “sometimes good-sometimes bad”, “not very good”, etc.), and some others were extremely negative (“poor”, “very poor”, etc.). Therefore, three categories were created: positive opinions, neutral opinions, and negative opinions. Based on the questions, responses were categorized as agree, neutral, and disagree. Responses were assigned to the relevant category.

(3) Creating sub-categories underneath general categories to provide details: Besides general categories in the responses, some other important issues, related to the question, may persist in the responses. For example, along with generally categorized answers to the survey item “Do you think the product handling employees are satisfied with their job?” managers also responded with some factors that may cause the dissatisfaction among the employees. This extra information was optional but relevant and very important toward the pilot study. For this project, this extra information was very important in understanding the influencing factors behind poor morale. Sub-categories were created based on the root of the causes, such as high workload, poor supervision, low pay, lack of benefits, and so on.

(4) Identifying patterns and trends: After categorization and coding (negative: 1, neutral: 2, and positive: 3), proportions were estimated to have an idea about the trend in the responses. For example, for the question “What do you think the overall employee attitude or opinions of the product handling employees towards their job are?”, most of the responses exhibited workers’ negative attitude toward the job. Similar analysis was conducted with the sub-categorized responses as well.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Given SLPC’s management interest in understanding the underlying cause for poor employee retention, staff at their largest facility were very open and responsive to this pilot case study. Therefore, managers of different categories were open and responded to most open-ended questions. The summaries of the six, open-ended survey questions are shown in Table 4. According to 45.46 percent of the managers’ responses, the employee morale was perceived to be good but about 62.5 percent of the managers believed that employees possess negative attitude towards their job. The research consultants believed these responses to be contradictory statements. This can only be explained as a lack of understanding on the managers’ part of the direct correlation between low morale and negative attitude. Only a few managers (6.06 Percent) noticed that there is a lack of positive morale among employees. Further, most of the managers (63.34 percent) mentioned that employees receive

| Survey Items                                      | Percentages of Responses (N = 44) |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Employee shows poor morale                       | Agree   | Neutral | Disagree |
| Immediate support is provided to the employee    | 63.34   | 33.33   | 3.33     |
| Employees show positive attitude towards the job | 10.00   | 27.5    | 62.5     |
| Productivity increases with increased morale     | 79.49   | 7.69    | 12.82    |
| Job expectation matches employee ability         | 62.5    | 20.00   | 17.5     |
| Employee are satisfied with the job              | 25.64   | 35.90   | 38.46    |
immediate support when needed. Other information revealed through manager perceptions identified that an increase in employee morale raises worker productivity. Almost 62.5 percent of the participating managers believed that, employees are capable or well qualified for doing their job. Table 4 also depicts that employee satisfaction is less (25.64 percent) compared to the percentage of dissatisfaction (38.46 percent). The last question in the survey was about employee’s job environment. The managers were asked whether the job environment more closely resembled a cooperative work environment or a competitive environment. However, this question was excluded in further analysis due to confusing responses obtained from the managers.

4.1.1 Morale among product handling employees
The current situation of morale among package handlers can be described through Figure 2. Managers of all categories (ACARS System (or sorting), Input, and Output) complied that there is low a morale level among product handling employees. Most of the ACARS managers (66.67 percent in total) and Input managers (60.00 percent) said that the morale is good or average. The output managers, on the other hand, observed more negative morale (50 percent) among the ACARS employees. Overall, the results show that 45.46 percent of managers (Input, Output and ACARS managers) observed poor morale among workers.

4.1.2 Employee attitude towards job
Employee attitudes toward their jobs is described by Figure 3. According to most of the ACARS managers (83.33 percent), employees possess a negative attitude towards their product handling job. None of the ACARS System or sorting managers had observed their subordinates possessing positive work attitudes. Comparably, only a few Input managers and Output managers (ranging from 10.71 to 16.67 percent) experienced employees possessing positive attitudes towards their job. The majority of all of manager types agreed that employees possess negative attitudes towards their jobs. The overall view of the managers is shown in Figure 3.

4.1.3 Employee job satisfaction
Employee morale is a combination of job satisfaction and commitment (Bhasin, 2018; Viteles, 1953). Therefore, both the attachment to the organization as well as the job satisfaction itself are critical for retaining a high level of morale. Figure 4 visualizes the different causes leading to worker dissatisfaction. According to ACARS managers, low pay, lack of hours, lack of motivation, under skilled staff, and high physical workload are the main causes of employee dissatisfaction. In the second bar chart, most of the Input managers (40.00 percent) viewed the lack of motivation as the leading reason for employee dissatisfaction followed by under-skilled & unskilled staff (30.00 percent) and high physical workload (20.00 percent). Additionally, Output managers identified poor supervision as a cause for employee dissatisfaction.

![Figure 2. The overall view of employee morale according to managers.](image)

![Morale of Product Handlers in ACARS](image)
4.2. Hypothesis testing

Ratings of employee morale were significantly more negative than expected ($\chi^2(2, N = 44) = 11.091, p = .004$). Similarly, ratings of employee attitude were significantly more negative than expected ($\chi^2(2, N = 44) = 17.150, p < 0.001$).

While responses were expected to spread across all three categories (33.33% negative, 33.33% average, 33.33% positive), the responses were skewed towards the negative for both morale (45.46% negative, 48.48% average, 6.06% positive) and attitude (62.50% negative, 27.50% average, 10.00% positive). Hypothesis one was confirmed in that manager perception is of low employee morale and poor employee attitude.

Perceptions of employee morale were not significantly different based on work area ($\chi^2(4, N = 44) = .734, p = 0.734$). The manager ratings of employee attitude were also not significantly different based on work area ($\chi^2(4, N = 44) = 1.804, p = 0.772$). Hypothesis two was confirmed. The perceptions of low morale and poor attitude were not isolated to one work area, but were prevalent throughout the ACARS operation.
5. Discussion and recommendation

In this paper, a pilot survey was conducted by research consultants to investigate the reason behind low morale among ACARS employees of SLPC. The summery of survey results regarding the probable causes of poor employee morale is shown in the cause and effect diagram (Figure 5). Based on the data analysis and in conjunction with similar studies outlined in Table 2, the research consultants agree that lack of motivation and poor supervision decreased employee morale (Hammerback et al., 2015). Manager feedback indicates that employees are not aware of SLPC’s purpose and promise to the end customer. Lack of communication of the company’s Mission and Vision (M&V) to employees can trigger this lack of motivation and low supervision. Furthermore, unity among the company and employees is very difficult to establish when the end goals of the company’s M&V are not being properly communicated to all employees from upper management to line-level workers (Mani & Mishra, 2020). From the top-down of the SLPC’s organizational hierarchy, the culture of the company needs to be an extension of the corporate M&V.

Regarding the change in culture, the research consultants recommended an increase in human interaction. A recommendation was given to ACARS managers and supervisors (who supervise the activities of product handlers) that they need to make adjustments to their schedule in order to allow for more quality time to be spent with the people they oversee. The research consultants believe that this will initiate the creation of trust between managers and product handling employees, thereby reducing the perception gap between the different hierarchical levels (Mani & Mishra, 2020). In addition, ACARS managers need to promote good behavior throughout the work environment and encourage employees to embody a more positive work ethic for avoiding motivation deficiency among ACARS employees. One technique provided to the SLPC managers was to simply approach a new employee at the end of the shift and asking how their shift went and if there was anything the new employee thought could be improved. Assuming the feedback from the new employees are addressed in some way, this should make the employee feel valued and acknowledged as well as allow them to be an active part of making their work life better (Hammerback et al., 2015; Winter et al., 2016).

Fear should not be used as a motivator as this type of motivation is only temporary (Makawatsakul & Kleiner, 2003). Employees will soon rebel and leave their job or cause problems within the work environment if managers use fear as the primary means of motivation (Fatima & Bashir, 2017; Srivastava & Dey, 2020). Instead, managers could work side-by-side with employees if a higher-intensity situation demands extra staff during a workday (such as holiday and peak season product demands). This is a good way to build respect and admiration from employees as

![Figure 5. Reasons behind poor employee morale at SLPC.](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311916.2021.1914287)
they know that their managers are willing to help them succeed thereby creating a sense of unity. ACARS managers should apprise the ways to receive rewards, compensation, potential promotion, etc. to employees (Chen, 2018). Employees should be encouraged to give their input at the end of the day on what they saw and what they think could be improved (Hammerback et al., 2015). This will give them the feeling that their opinions matter and that they are being heard. Line-level employees should be notified that, without their contribution, the company goals would never be achieved. Moreover, researchers recommended the offering of non-monetary benefits within the company such as a group lunch, team building outings, company sports, etc. to motivate employees (R. Burch et al., 2019). This last recommendation was addressed mainly to the ACARS managers surveyed but would require collaborative planning efforts and resource allocations from the accounting and finance department as well as the human resource (HR) department for actual implementation.

Research consultants also found low pay and lack of shift hours as one of the leading factors of low employee morale (Chen, 2018). Lower payment rate, the pay difference between employees, and pay cuts can significantly affect employees' level of morale (Kube et al., 2013). To outperform the influence of wage related factors on employee morale, the research consultants recommended the HR department ensure the same wage rate for each ACARS worker (assuming similar work loads and experience level). Additionally, the wage rate should be reviewed to adjust with the job type and the physical demands while performing the jobs (Chen, 2018). Pay cuts are discouraged by the consultants but if necessary, workers should be notified prior to any negative financial change.

Under-skilled and unskilled staff are other problems that seem to be contributing to low employee morale. Generally, under-skilled and unskilled staff cannot perform the jobs they are doing better than the skilled employees. Poor performance by these low-skilled employees may lead to frustration, drastically affecting their morale level (Tucker et al., 2018). These unskilled employees may even develop negative attitudes towards their job and their overall job satisfaction will decline. To rectify this issue, the research consultants suggested that the HR department conduct relevant training sessions to help new employees learn the right methods for performing the task they will be assigned. These training sessions should be provided at the start of the employee’s tenure with the company and the employee should be paid their standard wage during the time they spend in training. Additionally, periodic training sessions should be arranged for all employees.

Performance oriented reward systems can be introduced (barring approval from upper management) and ACARS managers should encourage workers to work to achieve these notable awards (Mani & Mishra, 2020). Informal rewards such as basic appreciation and recognition in another proven technique for encouraging people to work (Danish & Usman, 2010; Mani & Mishra, 2020). Furthermore, ACARS managers or supervisors should work with the unskilled and under-skilled employees to teach them the ways in which their performance can be improved. With this more informative yet personal approach, employees will feel more valued and their motivation will increase thereby increasing their morale (Danish & Usman, 2010; Hammerback et al., 2015). Moreover, the employee recruitment process could offer a paid work simulation practice session which will ask candidates to do the task related to the job position for a short period of time (Asensio-Cuesta et al., 2012). This recruitment process arranged by the HR department may help management to select employees ideal for that task.

The survey conducted by the research consultants clarified that the product handlers’ job within the ACARS is associated with high physical labor. For addressing the effects of this issue, researchers recommended redesigning the product handlers’ job using a job rotation technique (Asensio-Cuesta et al., 2012; Borges & Tan, 2017). In job rotations, workers are moved between jobs in order to reduce boredom (Azizi et al., 2010; Michalos et al., 2010) and to enable skill variation to improve experience (Azizi et al., 2010). This technique can also be used to balance workload distributions
for employees performing high physical labor jobs for long shifts (Michalos et al., 2010). This can also prevent the employees from performing monotonous, repetitive tasks for long durations (Michalos et al., 2010). The ACARS managers, the engineering quality department, and research and development (R&D) should work together to find an optimal combination of tasks to redesign the job of product handlers (Borges & Tan, 2017; Wong & Richardson, 2010).

At present, the ACARS area of SPLC’s largest distribution center is struggling to keep employees happy and working. SLPS has difficulty attracting top-tier candidates and often must settle for whomever is available and willing to work consistently. The research consultants encouraged SLPC to make the suggested changes so that the managers over the ACARS employee team can hire from a larger, more qualified pool of candidates. All the interventions that were recommended to SLPC executive management can be seen in Table 5.

5.1. Limitations
The limitations of this study include the inability to collect responses directly from the product handlers in the ACARS environment due to HR restrictions. Additionally, the number of ACARS

| Table 5. Recommended interventions to SLPC | Causes of Poor Morale | Recommended Interventions |
|------------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Lack of motivation and poor supervision  | • Increase employee interaction by supervisors and managers  
|                                          | • Promote good behaviour throughout all workgroups with an emphasis placed on the areas struggling with morale and retention  
|                                          | • Encourage employees to adopt a culture positive work ethic and attitudes  
|                                          | • Work side-by-side with employees especially new employees or those with low skill or lack of skill  
|                                          | • Provide notification regarding the ways to receive rewards, compensation, potential promotion, etc. to employees  
|                                          | • Offer non-monetary based benefits  |
| Low pay and lack of shift hours          | • Ensure the same wage rate for each employee (remove large gaps in pay rate between employees performing similar tasks with comparable skill)  
|                                          | • Review wage rate to adjust pay with the job type and physical demands  
|                                          | • Cease pay cuts or provide more open conversation and warning when pay cuts must occur  |
| Under-skilled and unskilled staff        | • Administer paid training sessions to train new employees  
|                                          | • Introduce periodic training sessions for all employees  
|                                          | • Introduce performance-oriented reward systems  
|                                          | • Practice informal rewards such as appreciation and recognition  
|                                          | • Teach ways showing how to achieve performance improvement  
|                                          | • Administer paid work simulations and practice sessions of task performance during new employee recruitment process  |
| High physical workload                   | • Redesign product handlers’ jobs using a job rotation technique  |
managers who responded to the survey represents most of the managers in these respective areas at the SLPC location but is relatively low for a survey response. For more representative data, the feedback from all ACARS managers and employees at multiple SLPS locations for both day and night shifts should be considered.

5.2. Future research
Future research into the problem of low morale should include additional surveys of the product handlers and their managers. Special consideration should be taken to gather data on the employee-manager relationship as well as the employee-company relationship as these were both found to have a strong effect on the morale of the employees as indicated in precious studies in Table 2.

6. Conclusion
This case study was aimed at identifying the root causes of poor morale which is accelerating the employee turnover rate in the ACARS area of SLPC’s largest distribution facility. To learn more about this issue, research consultants administered a pilot survey including ACARS System (or sorting) managers, Input managers, and Output managers. Results revealed interaction opportunities that are affecting morale of the ACARS employees leading to recommendations for increased interaction and communication with employees, non-monetary benefits, positive work ethic, and more to be practiced in order to improve the work culture at SLPC. These recommendations can motivate employees and improve their morale when performing their job function. Additionally, maintaining consistency in employees’ wage rate, adjustment of wage rate to the job demand, arranging different training sessions for employees, modifying the reward system, job redesign, and updating the recruitment process can help in reducing the poor morale issue at SLPC’s largest distribution facility. Many of these countermeasures require little to no additional resources to be implemented. Hence, the research consultants prescribed SLPC’s different departments to take the necessary measures as appropriate to implement those above-mentioned interventions. Practitioners responsible for directing employees in industrial facilities that (1) house output/productivity-based operations and (2) frequently employ repetitive motion tasks should be able to utilize this real-world pilot case study to investigate the state of their own worker morale and open the conversation about organizational improvements. Open lines of communication, promoting the positive, and giving immediate and actionable feedback on the negative, consistently, is a starting point for changing work culture outlined in this study for practitioners who already have an existing morale problem or are working to get in front of future issues.

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