The impact of customer-directed resources on front line employee’s customer service self efficacy: An exploratory study

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Abstract
While considerable research has been devoted to identifying what organizational resources can enhance employee self efficacy, this has invariably examined how employee-directed resources, such as training, rewards and supervisory support are related to increased performance and employee self efficacy. No research to our knowledge, has examined how organizational efforts directed at customers can enhance employee self-efficacy. This is most salient to front line service employees. Our research therefore seeks to identify a range of organizational human resource practices directed towards customers, and their role in the customer-employee interaction that may enhance the service role of employees who are in direct contact with customers. We call these front line service employees. This research aims to address this gap. Four focus groups were conducted with service employees from a wide spectrum of the service sector in Singapore, who had boundary-spanning roles and spend time directly interacting with customers. Based on content analysis, three core themes relating to organizational efforts directed at customers were identified: customer education, customer organizational socialization and encouraging customer feedback on the service. Future research areas are addressed.

Introduction
Service firms seek to optimize the performance of their human resources in order to achieve productivity, efficiency and effectiveness (Appelbaum and Hare 1996; Lovelock et al. 2005; Zeithaml et al. 2008). This is important because service employees’ attitudes and behaviors significantly influence the quality of service (Bitner et al. 1994). Yet, it is suggested that many firms are not effectively utilizing their scare human resource optimally (Dean 2004; Lovelock 1992; Schneider and Bowen 1993; Zeithaml et al. 1996). Although many service employees possess the requisite level of knowledge and skills to perform the service tasks, few perform at an optimum level. Ozer and Bandura (1990, p. 473) further clarify “people often fail to perform optimally even though they know what to do and possess the requisite skills. This is because self-referent thought mediates the translation of knowledge and abilities into proficient performance”. Considering the crucial role frontline service employees play in linking a firm with its customers, there is great interest in understanding factors that affect their beliefs about their abilities to deliver service (Hartline and Wit 2004, Schneider et al. 2005).

Self-efficacy has been shown to be a reliable factor in determining levels of motivation with specific application to task performance (Bandura and Cervone 1983, Gist 1987, Stajkovic and Luthans 1998). The original definition of self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura, is “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura 1997, p3). In an attempt to understand the motivations of frontline service employees in delivering quality service, this research explores the concept of task-specific customer service self-efficacy “CSSE”, as the extent to which service employees feel confident about their service job skills and abilities to organize and execute courses of actions in the servuction system to deliver quality service (Bandura 1982, 1997, Hartline and Ferrell 1996).

Bandura (1982) identified four principal sources of information that influence self-efficacy: enactive mastery (performance accomplishments), vicarious experience (modeling), verbal persuasion, and physiological arousal (e.g. anxiety). Gist and Mitchell (1992) expanded on Bandura’s model and included individual’s cognitive appraisal of these experiences in determining self-efficacy. The cognitive appraisal aspects include: (i) assessment of personal
resources and constraints, (ii) assessment of situational resources and constraints, (iii) analysis of task requirements and (iv) attributional analysis of experience. They classify these antecedents as either internal (i.e. individual attributes of knowledge, skills and abilities, performance-related strategies, personality factors and mood states) or external (i.e. situational). The external category includes influences such as task attributes (e.g. difficulty, complexity), distractions, normative information (e.g. persuasion) and situational constraints in the environment that interfere with employees’ performance. Gist and Mitchell (1992, p. 207) recommended that research regarding the methods to enhance self-efficacy, and the understanding of how and why these situational interventions improve employee performance should be pursued.

Our particular interest is in the second category above, that is, the assessment of situational resources and how this impact customer service self efficacy (CSSE). Considerable work has addressed the link between various human resource management practices directed at employees, such as training, rewards and supervisory support on employee self efficacy (e.g. Babakus et al. 2003, Boshoff and Allen 2000, Gist 1989, Maurer et al. 2002, Sergeant and Frenkel 2000) demonstrating that these employee-directed resources are related to increased employee self-efficacy and performance. However, the increasingly important role of the customer in enhancing service outcomes (e.g., Bendapudi and Leone 2003), raises the question as to how the customer’s role can enhance not only consumer perceptions and organizational outcomes such as loyalty but also the employee’s perception of the service process specifically front line employee service employee’s perception of their ability to deliver quality service. While scholars have established that the increasing involvement of customers in service delivery (i.e. opportunities for co-creation, co-production and participation) enhances the customer’s perceptions of the outcome (Bendapudi and Leone 2003; Bitner et al. 1997; Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, 2004), the effect of the customer role on employee’s level of self efficacy in delivering quality service has not been established. Specifically this exploratory study aims to identify the organizational practices that support the customer’s role in this customer-employee interaction and how this customer-directed resources affect the frontline service employees’ perception of their abilities to deliver quality service to their customer i.e. CSSE. The suggested model is conceptualized in Figure 1:

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**: A suggested model of organizational resources that support the customer’s role and their impact on the service employees’ CSSE

*Note: solid arrow represents the relationship examined in this research*

**Research Methodology**

The purpose of the focus groups was to explore service employees’ views as to how customers can participate in delivering service quality and how the organisation can support this role. Focus groups were used, because they enable a facilitator to enter respondents’ realities and collect their interpretations (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990), which are crucial to developing our understanding of organizational practices that support the customer’s role in this
customer-employee interaction. Focus groups also offer insights that cannot be gathered through personal interviews (Yin, 1994).

Four focus groups were conducted with service employees who had boundary-spanning roles and spent time directly interacting with customers for transactions as well as responding to their requests and problems. Groups ranged in size from five to seven and were conducted during weekend mornings and lasted for an hour and a half on average. The participants represented a wide spectrum of the service sector in Singapore, for example airlines, banking, community service, education, electronics, government, healthcare, hospitality, information technology and retail. Prior to the start of the focus group, the moderator explained the procedures and the purpose of the session. A semi-structured approach was used, in which the moderator followed a topic guide that allowed an exploration of specific issues at the moderator’s discretion as they arose. Questions addressed the employee’s perception of the customer’s role in delivering quality service and how they felt that the organization can support the customer’s role. Projective techniques such as sentence completion were used to fully explore the range of possible responses.

The four focus group sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed into a word processing package. The transcriptions were analyzed, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994) and Goulding (2005). First, the researchers read the transcripts to acquire a feel for the data. Second, recurring themes that related to the study’s research objectives were identified to distinguish relevant organizational practices that support the customer’s role in this customer-employee interaction. The transcripts were examined, and codes or labels were assigned to each paragraph. (Goulding, 2005; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Finally, the themes, which are discussed in the following section, were substantiated and refined by re-checking the raw data and confirming interpretations.

**Results**

Through an iterative process of data analysis described previously, several different themes of customer-directed resources emerged. The first theme represented organizational practices aimed at informing customers of their services. Through the organizational practices of informing and educating the customers of their services, a sense of confidence by service employees was also evident. The following comments represented this theme:

*Note: { } denotes phrase edited for clarification*

We need to try to get the youth {customers} into doing the things with you...You ask questions, get the youths to think and they realize they need to get involved. When you involve the youths, they get very confident. This will boost confidence {my confidence in service delivery} too. From not interested to being so excited and involved by having the youth wanting to do it. You will know you have done the right thing in getting the youths involved [Participant works in a nature and parks association, interacting with youth].

I expect the caregivers and family members of the dementia patients {customers} to have a good understanding of dementia. To promote this understanding, we encourage the caregivers to attend talks, training and support groups. All these will boost the caregivers’ confidence in handling dementia patients [Participant works in a voluntary welfare organization for elderly folks].

Sometimes, we have to share with the caregivers and family members of the dementia patients {customers} our experiences in handling dementia patients. To educate, encourage the caregivers by talks, support groups on ways to handle the dementia folks [Participant works in a voluntary welfare organization for elderly folks].
This theme is termed “customer education”. When customers were educated by the organisation on service-related offerings, service employees believed that they could better match the customer needs to the right services or goods. Educating customers was also said to reduce mistakes, delay and additional steps to obtain special approval of the required tasks. Supportive customers i.e. customers who respond to education in terms of their role/customer participation, were thought to provide the boundary-spanning service employees with feelings of greater control and thereby enabling the belief that they are capable of meeting the customers’ expectations. They will work harder, display more effort and perform better to meet customers’ expectations (Hartline et al. 2000).

A second theme of organizational practices that support the customer’s role in the customer-employee interaction was to communication of the values and appropriate behavior with respect to the organisation and organisational procedures, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

We require visitors to the hospital {customers} to provide identity card and details for visiting. They also have a sign to promote courtesy and respect 'If you are abusive to our staff...” in their posters [Participant works in a hospital].

From an organizational stand point, we can communicate to the passengers {customers} desirable behaviors through posters [Participant works in an airline].

We have a briefing to give the public and other agencies {customers} our framework, roadmap and the outcomes we want to achieve. We give customers information and knowledge so that the customers work with us. The results will be more aligned to what we want. It saves a lot of time, clarification and mistakes [Participant works in a government agency – information system department].

We need the other agencies {customers} to cooperate and provide correct information to avoid delay in processing. If the customer misinterprets the required information on the procurement forms, and therefore he provides the wrong information, there will be delay and additional approval is required [Participant works in a government agency – procurement department].

We need to give the public {customers} information if there is a new protocol. The organization needs to provide some media coverage and write-up. Some news, over the radio so that the public are aware... When the {service} staff member arrives at the scene, he/she can explain to the public some key steps before they proceed [Participant works government agency interacting with the public on civil defence matters].

Our company sends letters to the passengers {customers} as a follow-up to challenging service situations. Their job is to highlight to the passengers what are the boundaries i.e. what the customer can or cannot do and the extent of our effort [effort put in by the service employee] [Participant works in an airline].

Our company can also communicate the terms and conditions, policies and guidelines. When the customers open a banking account, they have signed the terms and conditions. They know what are their entitlements and rights. They will think twice of their behaviors as they have signed on the forms. It actually modifies behaviors {according to the organisation’s norms} [Participant works in a bank].

This theme is termed “customer organizational socialization”, the “process by which an individual adapts to and comes to appreciate the values, norms, and required behavior patterns of an organization” (Kelly et al. p.198). Customer organizational socialization provides customers with organizationally specific behavioral guidelines. For example, a participant working in a healthcare service firm explained how they communicate the organization’s policies, values and expectations of desirable customer behaviors through posters and signs. Through all these organizational practices, customers gain an appreciation of specific
organizational values, gain knowledge necessary to interact with employees and other customers (Kelley et al. 1990). The respondents believed that when there is customer “cooperation and involvement” and the customer treats the service employees with “respect”, then service employees’ confidence in service delivery is enhanced.

A third theme represented encouraging customer feedback on the service. Encouraging customers to make constructive feedback on how to improve the service better allowed service employees to identify customers’ unmet needs and expectations. Some related comments include the following:

*We solicit feedback from the public {customers} after service that will help us improve our service delivery. This is one way we engage them in our value chain [Participant works in a government agency interacting with the public].*

*For customer feedback, there are external agencies such as mystery shoppers who we engage. They give us independent feedback. We do not take customer feedback without a pinch of salt. There should be a balance data from external observers as well [Participant works in a retail outlet].*

*Learners in training events are my customers. We obtained their feedback through feedback forms at the end of every learner’s event. The customer’s needs to give me feedback if what I am giving is not meeting or already meeting his expectations [Participant works in an airline].*

*I always tell them that they are my customers; I also need to know what their real needs are. I think hearing from them, listening to them is very important [Participant working in an electronic firm].*

*If they {customers} give us credit, they reaffirm the positive actions displayed by us {the service staff} and reinforce our confidence by telling us that we are doing the right thing to serve them [Participant works in a government agency interacting with the public].*

Customers typically have considerable experience with the service and are a valuable source of feedback about the service (Bettencourt 1997). Customers’ feedback on our service also allows service employees to identify customers’ unmet needs and expectations. Respondents claimed that participative customers who give constructive feedback to help improve the service, will provide the service employees with feelings of greater control of the service thereby enabling the belief that they are capable of meeting the customers’ expectations.

**Conclusion and Proposed Future Research**

This qualitative research study sought to identify the organizational practices that support the customer’s role in the customer-employee interaction and how these customer-directed resources enhance the service employees’ customer service self-efficacy (CSSE). Three core themes relating to organizational efforts directed at customers were identified: customer education, customer organizational socialization and encouraging customer feedback on the service. Results suggested that organizations can support the customer’s role in this customer-employee interaction by providing these customer-directed resources. Findings also suggest that these customer-directed resources in turn enhance the service employees’ perception of their abilities to deliver quality service to their customer.

Although it offers rich findings, qualitative research of this type has some limitations, such as a lack of representativeness and the subjectivity of its findings (Malhotra 2004). Thus, the present findings and study model need to be validated through a quantitative research study of front line service employees. Such a research direction would enhance understanding of antecedents of frontline service employees’ CSSE.
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