



Customer-oriented behaviour of front-line service employees: The need to be both willing and able

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to empirically test and extend our knowledge of the determinants of customer-oriented behaviour of front-line employees across a range of service settings. We examine the need for front-line employees to be both 'willing' (engaged) and 'able' (confidence in their ability) in order to deliver high-quality customer service. Since the organisational environment in which workers operate is known to impact job performance, we include service climate as a third explanatory variable in our model. The research hypotheses are tested using self-report data collected from 878 front-line employees in four service industries, covering both medium and high-contact settings. The results support the notion that to deliver excellent customer service, employees must be both 'willing' (engaged, positive attitude) and 'able' (possess the capability, or at least the confidence, to do so). In addition, service climate (an organisation environment factor), employee demographics, and industry type were found to be significant. Finally, the interaction effects of being 'willing' and 'able' are significant in explaining customer-oriented behaviour of front-line employees.

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1. Introduction

From time to time, firms fail in service delivery because they must rely upon front-line employees to both manufacture and deliver the service, often in real time with no time for inspection of quality prior to delivery (Patterson et al., 2009). Hence it is being increasingly recognised that to consistently deliver excellent customer service, contact personnel must be both *willing* (engaged, possess a positive attitude) and *able* (possess the ability or at least confidence in their ability to achieve performance tasks). In fact, in many life endeavours, it is necessary to be both willing *and* able to successfully achieve goals. To illustrate, in the Australian Rugby League competition, coaches are often quoted as saying, after a defeat, that the team had the ability but took the field with the wrong attitude (not willing) or, alternatively, the team gave 100% (willing) that day but were simply not good enough (lack of ability). For some medical treatments to be effective, the patient must be both willing and able to undertake certain regimens. Or, as is taught in defence and terrorism studies, the threat equals intent (willing) plus capability (able), not just intent (Allard, 2007).

Scholarly research in both marketing and organisational psychology supports this view and suggests that three categories of factors affect the performance of service personnel – individuals'

attitudes (willingness) toward their job; their ability to effectively perform tasks (Liao and Chuang, 2004), and organisational factors, which can facilitate (or impede) performance. Organisational factors refer to characteristics of the organisation that reward and facilitate excellent customer service. These include organisational culture and climate (Cravens et al., 1993; Schneider et al., 2000), leadership (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004), job design (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003), empowerment (Bowen and Lawler, 1992), and management support and commitment (Reeves and Hoy, 1993). Most previous works fail to model all three antecedent groups simultaneously.

One contribution of this study is that we include in a parsimonious model – both 'willingness' (operationalised as employee engagement) and perceived 'ability' (self-efficacy) – while controlling for a key organisational variable (service climate) to model customer-oriented behaviour (COB) of front-line service employees. We also test for interaction effects between the 'willing' and 'able' variables. Finally, as service scholars (Bowen and Schneider, 1998; Lovelock et al., 1999) have long noted, not all services are the same. Different types of services possess unique characteristics. Hence, we study the antecedents of COB across four service types in an eastern collectivist culture (Thailand) and examine whether these antecedents of COB vary across service type.

Furthermore, most past research has focused on job satisfaction and/or organisational commitment when modeling job performance (e.g., see Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Lanjananda and

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Patterson, 2009). Little attention has been paid to employee involvement in their job or the enthusiasm they bring to their work. Employee attitudes and perceptions have been recognised as important predictors of employee behaviour and performance (Harter, 1999), and recent research suggests that employee engagement is a better predictor of performance (Macey et al., 2009). Employee engagement focuses on how the psychological experiences of work and work contexts shape the process of people presenting or absenting themselves during task performances. It encompasses an individual's involvement and satisfaction as well as enthusiasm and a positive attitude for his or her work (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Consequently, a further contribution is that this is one of only a few studies to examine the predictive power of the engagement construct as an antecedent of front-line employee performance.

The balance of the paper is structured as follows. First, we review the literature relating to modeling of customer-oriented behaviour of front-line service employees, and in doing so, we develop a parsimonious theoretical framework for empirical testing. We then describe the methodology used to collect data from employees in four service industries and explain how validity and reliability checks of measures were undertaken. We then present the results of a regression analysis and hypothesis testing, before finally discussing the managerial implications and study limitations.

2. Theoretical background

In the following sections we draw on the literature in social psychology, management, and marketing to firstly discuss in more detail the key constructs in the study and then present a series of hypotheses, which make up the theoretical model, for testing.

2.1. Customer-oriented behaviour (COB)

Various terms have been used in the marketing literature to reflect employees' behaviour in delivering excellent customer service, including prosocial behaviour, extra-role customer service, organisational citizenship behaviour, and COB (Lee et al., 2006; Winsted, 2000a) or to describe their customer orientation such as the customer mindset (Kennedy et al., 2002) or SOCO (sales orientation – customer orientation) (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). Customer orientation at the firm level is a set of beliefs that puts the customer's interests first, while not excluding those of all other stakeholders in order to develop a long-term profitable enterprise (Hartline et al., 2000). At an individual level, Saxe and Weitz (1982) and others defined *customer orientation* as the willingness of individual service providers to customise their service delivery according to the customer's situation (e.g., needs, problems, special circumstances). In this study, we take a lead from Winsted (2002a, b) and model customer-oriented behaviour rather than employees' orientation. The term *customer-oriented behaviour* (COB) refers to specific behaviours displayed by service personnel during service encounters – such behaviour that leads to satisfied customers (Winsted, 2000a,b).

In her study of U.S. and Japanese consumers, (Winsted, 2000a,b) found several common facets of COB in addition to some differences between the two countries. Three dimensions were common to both countries. First, the concern dimension combined elements of empathy, assurance, and responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1988), as well as authenticity, listening, and dedication. The second dimension, civility, included all behaviours that service personnel should avoid in order to provide adequate service (Parasuraman et al., 1991) and to protect against dissatisfaction (Winsted, 2000a,b). Example of such behaviours to avoid included acting

arrogantly and getting annoyed with or ignoring customers. The final dimension, congeniality, related to behaviours such as smiling and being happy, cheerful, and enthusiastic. More recent work in a medical setting found patient satisfaction was positively associated with physicians' and nurses' ability to consistently enact the following key behaviours: effective communication skills, courtesy, attentiveness to patient needs, personalisation, and sensitivity, as well as a capability (competency) dimension (Hasin et al., 2001).

2.2. Explanatory variables

2.2.1. Employee engagement

The emergence of the employee engagement concept has been attributed to recent interest in “positive psychology,” or the study of human strengths or optimal functioning. It is in part a response to Luthans' (2002) plea for “the study of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed, and effectively managed for performance improvement in today's workplace” (p. 698). One of these positive states is engagement, which is the opposite of employee burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2006).

Early job satisfaction and commitment literature (Meyer et al., 1993; Silverman, 2004) laid the foundation for understanding *employee engagement*, which is defined as “the harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). It has also been referred to as emotional and intellectual commitment to the organisation (Richman, 2006; Shaw, 2005) or the amount of discretionary effort exhibited by employees in their job (Frank et al., 2004). It encompasses an individual's involvement and satisfaction as well as enthusiasm for his or her work. Kahn (1990), p. 693 suggests that employee engagement means the psychological experiences of work and work contexts that shape the process of people presenting and absenting themselves during task performance. In the context of our study – service settings – it is argued that COB (*task performance*) takes on added importance because front-line employees' performance involves customising and personalising service delivery. It is not a straightforward backroom task. Furthermore, practitioners and academics have found across many employment settings a positive correlation between employee engagement and task performance (Gallup Organization, 2004; Ott, 2007; Saks, 2006). Thus, our first general hypothesis is:

H₁: *Employee engagement will be positively associated with customer-oriented behaviour (COB).*

2.2.2. Self-efficacy

Over the past two decades, self-efficacy has emerged as a major construct that helps explain and predict variations in employees' on-the-job performance. As a central component of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, self-efficacy refers to an individual's beliefs about his or her abilities to mobilise resources to successfully execute a specific task within a given context. Bandura (2001) suggests that social psychologists are beginning to understand that human agency plays a larger role in human behaviour than previously thought. Accordingly, if human decisions are based more on an individual's perceptions than on rewards and punishments, as previously considered (Kreitner and Luthans, 1984), self-efficacy can play a key role in determining how effectively and efficiently an employee completes his or her work tasks. Several previous studies have revealed a positive relationship between self-efficacy and job performance (e.g., Lin, 2008). Specifically, the higher the person's self-efficacy, the more likely it is that he or she will be to initiate tasks, sustain effort toward task accomplishment, and persist when problems are encountered or even in the face of

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