



# Service sabotage: The dark side of service dynamics

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**Abstract** While many aspects of services research assume that employees are largely compliant to management prescribed service standards, a number of recent studies have highlighted the deliberate sabotage by service workers as a key issue. We contend that service sabotage is important not simply because of the pervasiveness of such behaviors, but also because of the impact that such acts can have on firm growth and profitability. Consequently, we seek to achieve three inter-linked objectives in this article. First, we highlight how service saboteurs harm customers' service experiences and negatively affect the performance of the firm. Second, in order to assist managers in recognizing these behaviors, we identify the most common types of service saboteurs and forms of sabotage. Specifically, we classify and describe four main types of service saboteurs: Thrill Seekers, Apathetics, Customer Revengers, and Money Grabbers. Finally, and most importantly, we provide a series of suggestions regarding how managers might effectively address service sabotage in their firms. These include gathering information and exploiting existing data to establish the extent and nature of sabotage, recruiting the right quality of service staff, training and rewarding employees, enriching and empowering employees, developing a service culture, and initiating better monitoring systems and procedures.

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## 1. What is service sabotage?

Ever since *sabots* (wooden clogs) were first thrown into machinery by disgruntled French peasant workers, coining the term *sabotage*, commentators have noted the need to control the dysfunctional tendencies of employees. The industrial and manufacturing roots of sabotage have contributed to the prevailing

contemporary assumption that sabotage is limited to the clandestine actions of a small number of alienated assembly-line workers. As such, sabotage is colloquially synonymous with industrial sabotage.

In 2002, we published an article exploring a phenomenon we dubbed "service sabotage." In that article, we argued that while many services theorists typically assumed that service workers were largely malleable and compliant, practitioners acknowledged that the behaviors of service employees often contrast markedly with this idealized view.

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We highlighted a growing body of labor process theory within HRM research which argues that management attempts to control workers leads employees to feel subjugated, and this leads them to resist. In adopting this perspective, we found that service workers routinely undertook acts which they knew negatively affected service standards; in short, they sabotaged service encounters. Service workers altered the speed of service to match their personal needs, played pranks, took out their frustrations on customers, and showed off in front of coworkers. These behaviors were not limited to the disgruntled few or the disaffected minority, but also included the majority of employees who commonly perceived their behaviors as entirely normal and rational (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002).

Our view is that service sabotage occurs when a customer-contact employee knowingly acts in a manner that disrupts an otherwise satisfactory service encounter. In this regard, employee intent is of pivotal importance. Employees make mistakes, get things wrong, and occasionally do silly things. This is not necessarily sabotage, even if service is negatively affected. The line between sabotage and simple error is clearly demarked by intent. Thus, sabotage encompasses deliberate actions by employees that knowingly negatively disrupt or harm otherwise functional service encounters.

In our original and subsequent articles, our focus was on identifying the drivers and consequences of service sabotage. This time, our aims are threefold. First, we want to highlight how service saboteurs harm customers' service experiences and negatively affect the performance of the firm. Second, in order to assist managers in recognizing these behaviors, we intend to identify the most common types of service saboteurs and forms of sabotage. Finally, and most importantly, we aim to provide a series of suggestions regarding how managers might effectively address service sabotage in their firms. In doing so, we hope to further highlight the need for companies to acknowledge and manage the dark side of service dynamics.

## 2. Why does service sabotage matter?

Prior to identifying the most common types of service saboteurs and discussing how managers might deal with such misbehaviors, we believe that it is worthwhile explaining why service sabotage matters to managers. Our contention is that addressing service sabotage in firms is important for two interlinked reasons: (1) the commonness of such behaviors, and (2) the impact of such acts on firm growth and profitability.

First, we believe that service sabotage is far from rare. Our position is based on our previous work, which indicates that service sabotage is alarmingly commonplace (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002, 2006). Our view on this is far from radical; for example, Slora (1991) argues that 96% of workers commonly act in deliberately dysfunctional ways, while Harper (1990) suggests a somewhat lower figure of 75%. In our original study of the hospitality industry (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002) we found that 85% of customer-contact employees admitted to undertaking some form of service sabotage behavior within the week leading up to the interview, and that all the frontline employees we spoke to accepted that service sabotage was an everyday occurrence in their outlet. The pervasiveness of service sabotage is linked to the extent to which service employees view service sabotage as potentially financially, socially, and psychologically beneficial—at least, to the employee. For example, if a service employee works four shifts of four hours and earns a wage of \$7 per hour, they can expect a weekly paycheck of roughly \$112. However, deliberately prolonging his or her shifts twice a week for an hour can bring in \$14 extra. The outcome for the employee is profound: an increase in their weekly income of 12.5%. In addition, these acts may also benefit coworkers whose praise can enhance feelings of self esteem and self worth. Indeed, labor process theorists have long noted that employees' feelings of self esteem need not necessarily be derived from prosocial behaviors (Casey, 1999; Gabriel, 1999).

Our second reason for stressing the importance of service sabotage centers on the harm such acts cause to both firms and customers. The impact of these episodes on customers varies considerably, but is always negative. While sabotage in industrial settings most often hurts the firm exclusively, the impact of service sabotage is doubled. Acts of service sabotage are commonly immediate, and it is the customer who is first affected; the impact on the firm accrues from the subsequent actions of the wronged customer. While earlier studies have found that mistakes during service affect perceptions of service quality, rapport, and loyalty intentions (Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Stewart & Chase, 1999), their focus has been on unintentional errors. In our research we broadened this to encompass the deliberate acts of service saboteurs. We found that disruptions to service commonly lead to reductions in the levels of customer satisfaction, perceived service quality, and value. Such effects erode elusive customer loyalty and can destroy the rapport between employees and customers (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002, 2006). In essence, most acts of service sabotage harm customers' service experiences.

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