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## Frontline employees' attitudes towards self-service technologies: Threats or opportunity for job performance?

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#### ABSTRACT

Increasing diffusion of self-service technologies (SSTs) on the points of sale impacts on traditional retailing from several perspectives. For instance, SSTs have direct effect on front-line employees. Indeed, they may cause a potential reduction in personal contacts with clients, reduction of workers, modifying the job conditions and so on. To date, the effect of SSTs on the points of sale has been mainly investigated from a consumers' perspective, by mainly focusing on consumers' acceptance and usage of these systems. The aim of this paper is to make employees' point of view clearly emerge, through a qualitative approach focusing on the investigation of employees' perception of the consequences of these technologies on job performance. The content analysis based on exploratory in-depth interviews involves 250 frontline employees. Authors examine the success of technology from employee's standpoint by evaluating their attitude and considering the impact on their job performance perception. In this way, the analysis allows defining new variables which are not previously investigated, such as the perception of speed for task completion, which emerged as the most important factor for employees' self-evaluation. Hence, this study offers support for evaluating job performance considering the specific case of SSTs in the frontline employees as initial insights rather than definitive understandings.

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#### 1. Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of advanced technologies have been introduced on the points of sale, such as applications for mobile phones, 3D virtual reality tools, touch screen kiosks, mobile RFID readers and writers, automatic cask desks, etc. (Wu and Hisa, 2008; Yoon and Zhou, 2011; Pantano and Di Pietro, 2012; Walter et al., 2012; Pantano and Viassone, 2014; Pantano and Servidio, 2012). On one hand these innovative systems support consumers' shopping experience; on the other hand they impact the role of retailer/ employee in the stores. Since in some cases they do not require the direct employees' assistance, they may even substitute the employees, especially when adopting the self-service technologies (SSTs) (Pantano and Di Pietro, 2012; Zhu et al., 2013). In fact, these technologies are based on automated and interactive interfaces soliciting consumers to achieve a service without the direct support of the seller, with benefits for cost and time saving, which seems to be one of the most influencing factors for influencing consumers' usage

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2014.02.014 0969-6989 © 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved. intention (Kokkinou and Cranage, 2013). Meaningful examples emerge in the sector of tourism and banking, where consumers make an extensive use of self-service check-in kiosks (for check-in into airports) and Automated Teller Machines—ATM (for accessing direct financial services) respectively (Cunnincham et al., 2008; Gelderman et al., 2011; Lee et al., 2012a). Due to the high benefits for companies emerging from this adoption, many companies are trying to persuade clients to use these automatic kiosks services more, by developing incentive strategies (Lu et al., 2009; Gelderman et al., 2011). More recently, retail industry has also started supporting the widespread diffusion of the innovative system based on self-service technologies for enhancing the retail process (Elliott et al., 2012).

The preliminary studies on SSTs were focused on the main factors influencing consumers' adoption of these systems; while during the maturity phase of these technologies, research is mainly based on the consumers' control and managing of principal functions of the technology and on their impact on their satisfaction and continuance intention, by considering also the technology failure analysis and subsequent behaviors (Lee et al., 2012b). Some current studies recognize the new evolution of SSTs as the self-service 3.0 technologies, by identifying the consumers role of "value co-creators", which may represent a further step for corporate advantages (Eastlick et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2012b).

Form a corporate point of view, the SSTs allow reducing labor costs, enhancing service efficiency, improving productivity and

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increasing firm's performance (Lee et al., 2012a, 2012b; Lin and Hsieh, 2011). For instance, with self-service check-out kiosks, just one cashier can serve more consumers at the same time from a command center that take cares of all the activities (Lee et al., 2012b), whereas in other cases (e.g. applications for consumer's own mobile phone), the technology can totally substitute the human job. As a consequence, retailers are forced to redeploy or fire their employees to other areas that need a direct client–vendor interaction (Lee et al., 2012b). Hence, the introduction of these technologies promotes the elimination of the service (physical) provider and the consumers active involvement in the service creation (Eastlick et al., 2012), by keeping cost efficiency, time saving, higher service quality, and more appealing environments for consumers (Elliott et al., 2012).

Furthermore, employees' intention to use these technologies may support consumers' usage and retailers' adoption. Despite the huge number of studies on consumers' evaluation SSTs and on their effect on employees' and retailers' roles, there is still a lack of research on retailers' and employees' points of view. The aim of this research is to deeply understand the employees evaluation of these technologies in terms of attitude, by considering the impact on the job performance. To achieve this goal, a qualitative analysis on 273 frontline employees has been conducted.

In particular, the first part of the paper is based on the analysis of the past studies concerning employees' performance evaluation, whereas the second one is devoted to a qualitative research focusing on the content analysis of employees' personal evaluations of the current self-service technologies.

#### 2. Theoretical background

Considering the entity of the investments involved in the design, implementation and management of self-service technologies (SSTs), retailers should apply a strategic approach to the introduction of the innovative systems by being "prepared" to the consequences on management strategies (Bennet and Savani, 2011). Hence, the strategic orientation implies an intention to long-term investments, which are compulsory for successfully introducing these new technologies. As a consequence, both the top managers support the successfully introduction (Bennet and Savani, 2011), and the frontline employees who are the adopters with the consumers of the introduced system. In fact, on one hand frontline employees need to satisfy consumers, who require attention and service of high quality, and on the other hand they need to satisfy retailers, who demand efficiency and productivity (Singh, 2000). These considerations suggest the following hypotheses:

- H1: Employees attitude towards the self-service technologies influences their successful usage.
- H2: Employees positive perception of self-service technologies influences their attitude.

#### 2.1. Job performance measures

The literature provides a huge number of studies on the evaluation of job performance, including several prominent meta-analyses (laffaldano and Muchinsky, 1985; Judge et al., 2000; Petty et al., 1984), by defining this topic also as the *Holy Grail* of industrial and organizational science (Landy, 1989). Few past studies measured the job performance by investigating the global or overall performance through subjective ratings such as the supervisory performance rating or through perceptions of individual performance (Meyer et al., 1989, 1993; Steers, 1977), whereas others focused on some specific dimensions of the

performance, by using statistical modelling, such as the Balanced Scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1993, 1996, 2001), Performance Prism (Neely et al., 2002), the Cambridge Performance Measurement Process (Neely et al., 1995, 1996), the approaches of the TPM Process (Jones and Schilling, 2000), 7-step TPM Process (Leflar, 2001), and Total Measurement Development Method (TMDM) (Gomes et al., 2006). In addition, a great deal of research studied job performance from three main perspectives (Iaffaldano and Muchinsky, 1985; Judge et al., 2000; Petty et al., 1984): (i) business perspective, (ii) customer perspective, and (iii) employee perspective. The (i) business perspective has a different interpretation in the public sector if compared to the private one and involves two separate sets of measures (the outcomes, or social/political impacts), which define the role of the public administrations, and the business processes needed for organizational efficiency and effectiveness. The (ii) customer perspective considers organization's performance through the viewpoint of its customers; thus the organization retains a strong emphasis on customer' needs and satisfaction. To achieve the top level in business performance, organizations must incorporate customers' needs and preferences and must respond to them as part of their performance planning. The (iii) employee perspective takes into account the performance of the key internal processes that drives the organization, including employees' development and retention. This perspective is devoted to the definition of the basis of all future success, as well as to the organization's people and infrastructure. Employee's performance has been defined as an individual's overall performance proficiency or as performance on specific dimensions, such as the quality and quantity of work (Meyer et al., 1989; Steers, 1977). It has been further theorized as the set of actions and behaviors that are controlled by the individual and contribute to the goals of the whole organization (Rotundo and Sackett, 2002).

Employees' job performance is a multidimensional construction, which can be evaluated considering a large set of parameters. For instance, according to Campbell et al. (1990) and Murphy (1989), a taxonomy of job performance has been developed by considering only four dimensions: i) task-oriented behaviors, which include those behaviors that an individual undertakes as part of a job; they are the core substantive tasks that delineate one job from another; ii) interpersonally oriented behaviors, which are represented by any interaction the focal employee has with other employees and can be task related or non-task related; iii) downtime behaviors, which include those behaviors that employees engage in during their free time either at work or off-site; and iv) destructive/hazardous behaviors. Moreover, Campbell et al. (1990) proposed also another model of performance based on eight factors aimed at capturing the several dimensions of job performance existent across all jobs: task specific behaviors (those behaviors that an individual undertakes as part of a job), nontask specific behaviors (those behaviors which an individual is required to undertake which do not pertain only to a particular job), communication tasks (those activities undertaken for communicating, including the adeptness of employees delivering the communication), effort (the degree to which people commit themselves to job tasks), personal discipline (including the position towards alcohol and drugs consumption), help to others (the degree to which an employee helps out the groups and his or her colleagues, including acting as a reference model, coaching, advising, guide for achieving common goals, etc.), supervisory or leadership component, and managerial and administrative performances (those aspects of a job which serve the group or organization without involving direct supervision).

In addition to these models, Borman and Motowidlo (1993) identified two broad classes of employee performance: task performance and contextual performance. Both types of performances are presumed to contribute to organizational effectiveness, even in

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