

Does the employee–customer satisfaction link hold for all employee groups?

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Abstract

Increasingly, retailers nowadays have to focus on service marketing strategies and tactics to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Delivering high levels of service quality becomes crucial for long-term success. Since customers' perception of service quality depends very much on the interaction between the customer and the employee, this study analyzes the link between employee and customer satisfaction in more detail. Moreover, based on three different theories that prior research has used, it investigates whether or not the level of customer contact is a determinant of the existence or the intensity of the employee–customer satisfaction link. Analysis of dyadic data from 53,645 customers and 1659 employees across 99 outlets of a large German Do-It-Yourself (DIY)-retailer shows that employee job satisfaction affects customer satisfaction even for employee groups that are not in direct interaction with customers, although effects seem to be slightly stronger for high interaction groups. Implications for research and management are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A substantial body of research confirms the positive association between employee and customer satisfaction (e.g., Bernhardt et al., 2000; Harter et al., 2002; Koys, 2001; Ryan et al., 1996; Tornow and Wiley, 1991). A common characteristic of all previous research is that present available dyadic studies have mainly focused on service employees who are in *direct and intense customer contact*, such as salespeople (Homburg and Stock, 2004, 2005), financial service consultants (Ryan et al., 1996), or service personnel from a restaurant chain (Koys, 2001). Likewise, managerial practice frequently acknowledges the

importance of this group for achieving customer satisfaction by using customer satisfaction scores as indicators of employee performance, as well as a basis for employee bonus payments. Due to the implicit limitation of both research and managerial practice the link has never been researched for employee groups that are *not or very rarely in direct contact* with customers. Typically, firms evaluate and compensate such employees according to standard productivity and efficiency measures. In retail settings, for example, employees working in the storeroom and as cashiers are normally evaluated based on “hard” data, such as the number of items stored or the number of items processed per work day. However, organization theories (e.g., Schneider and Goldstein, 1995) suggest that all employee groups contribute to the organizational climate, which in turn affects employee satisfaction, customer orientation and customer satisfaction. Hence, the research questions underlying the present study are as follows: Can the employee–customer satisfaction link be confirmed for diverse employee groups? In particular, is the link present for groups with little or no customer interaction, and if so, is the link stronger for employee groups with more intensive and qualitatively higher-level customer contact?

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An answer to these questions is important for both researchers and practitioners. For service marketing theory, the question whether the impact of employee job satisfaction on customer satisfaction is restricted to direct interaction settings is an interesting question, and an integration of related theories seems important given the plethora of potential explanations. From a managerial perspective, understanding whether employee job satisfaction is an important marketing goal in areas or for employee groups that have no or only limited customer interaction. Further, if such a link existed for groups with little or no interaction, customer satisfaction should also be added to their list of performance indicators.

2. Theoretical background

It is generally acknowledged that customer satisfaction and employee job satisfaction are positively correlated. A comprehensive meta-analysis of 7939 business units in 36 companies conducted by Harter et al. (2002: 273, Table 2 for details) found support for such a positive link between employee job satisfaction and customer satisfaction. However, as Homburg and Stock (2004) point out, although both employee and customer satisfaction are important constructs that have received considerable attention in both marketing and human resources literature, studies using data from employees and customers that allow analysis of the dyadic link between the two constructs are still rare. Among those using dyadic data, Tornow and Wiley (1991), and Bernhardt et al. (2000) report a strong correlation between employee attitudes such as satisfaction and customer satisfaction. Ryan et al. (1996), and Koys (2001) both confirm this positive correlation for longitudinal data in an automobile finance and a restaurant chain setting, respectively. Homburg and Stock (2004, 2005) investigate mediating and moderating factors of the link between employee job satisfaction and customer satisfaction and show that, especially, personality factors play a role in determining the strength of the relationship. In sum, convincing evidence for a statistically significant relationship between customer satisfaction and employee job satisfaction exists. (The only study reporting a non-significant relationship between customer satisfaction and employee job satisfaction is Loveman (1998). The author explains this finding by a potentially sub-optimal measure of employee loyalty and recognizes the need for further research that investigates this link in the SPC.)

At the same time, however, the theoretical mechanism suspected to underlie the relationship between employee job satisfaction and customer satisfaction is far from clear. Below, these theories are briefly reviewed and their implications for the central research question are discussed.

2.1. Attraction-selection-model

The ASA model is based on the assumption that, over time, people within an organization become more similar in their dispositions and, consequently, more homogenous in attitudes (Schneider and Goldstein, 1995). This is because the individuals in a group or organization share certain experiences: an intolerable supervisor and poor working conditions, or a very respectful

supervisor and positive working conditions. Further, members of the same organizational unit are affected by the same situational influences, and thus their attitudes should converge (Ryan et al., 1996). Organizational behavior research supports this homogeneity hypothesis (Schneider and Goldstein, 1995). Therefore, organizational units will develop a homogenous affective tone (Ryan et al., 1996).

According to Schneider and Bowen (1995), the development of a positive and satisfactory organizational climate enables employees to be better aware of and responsive to organizational and customer goals, while negative organizational climates hinder high-level customer service and satisfaction. Thus, job satisfaction should be related to customer satisfaction due to the homogeneity of the working climate within a group of employees. Positive working climates increase employee job satisfaction, and thus customer satisfaction, while negative climates will ultimately decrease both groups' satisfaction.

Empirical studies have lent support to this assumption of the ASA model. Both Ryan et al. (1996) and Schneider, White, and Paul (1998) base their hypotheses on the ASA model. They find empirical support for a positive relationship between work climate and service quality perceptions. Koys (2001), building on the ASA, shows a positive relationship between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction.

2.2. Balance theory

Based on the assumption that a system of triadic relationships between two persons and an object can be either balanced or unbalanced, balance theory predicts a tendency toward a balanced state over time, i.e., attitude consistency of the two interrelated individuals. Thus, a relationship system is called balanced if the two persons have the same attitude toward an object. In an unbalanced state the two individuals differ in their attitudes toward the object.

According to balance theory the unbalanced situation results in cognitive tension leading to activities to balance the state. Thus, the individual experiences psychological tension, a state of cognitive dissonance, and therefore tries to resolve the situation by, e.g., changing his/her attitude (Brehm and Cohen, 1962; Festinger, 1957).

Research on attitude change suggests that stronger attitudes are more stable and hence less likely to change than weaker attitudes (e.g., Fishbein and Ajzen, 1972). Attributes that predict attitude stability are knowledge and importance (see Erber et al., 1995; Krosnick et al., 1993; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986 for comprehensive reviews). Against this background, imbalance in the relationship between employee and customer leads the employee to influence the customer, since the employee's attitude is stronger—specifically, more stable and resistant (Krosnick and Petty, 1995). The employee has more knowledge about the services and products offered by the retailer and attaches great personal relevance to his job. The customer, on the other hand, is usually less knowledgeable about the products and only engages in short-term transactions (e.g., buying something) with the retailer. Therefore, unsatisfied customers can be assumed to adapt their negative attitudes to the

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