

Service climate and organizational commitment: The importance of customer linkages

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Abstract

Service employees are simultaneously concerned with their own and their customers' well-being. Managing these dual concerns is of strategic importance in a customer-oriented service firm. This research tests a model comparing overall and customer-linked antecedents and consequences of employee affective organizational commitment. The study determines (a) how service climate variables influence both overall and customer-linked job satisfaction, (b) the contribution of both job satisfaction measures to commitment, (c) the relationship between commitment and both overall citizenship behaviors and customer-linked behaviors, and (d) the influence of commitment with regard to employee intentions to recommend the organization to prospective employees and customers. Co-worker support and the perception of fair treatment are precursors of customer-linked job satisfaction (not overall job satisfaction). Customer-linked job satisfaction is more related to organizational commitment than is overall job satisfaction. Organizational commitment influences both overall citizenship behaviors and customer-linked behaviors as well as intentions to recommend the organization.

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1. Introduction

Customer-linkage research (Schneider and Bowen, 1985) has recently received increasing attention in both the management and marketing literatures (Bansal et al., 2004; Pugh et al., 2002). Implicit with this customer-focused approach is the assumption that the organization can design and manage workplace conditions (a service climate) that creates employee satisfaction, commitment to the organization and subsequent behaviors that facilitate the creation of customer satisfaction, perceived service quality and loyalty (Borucki and Burke, 1999; Dietz et al., 2004; Heskett et al., 1994). The concept of

employee organizational commitment is both theoretically and managerially central to customer-linkage research. In this paper, we first focus on employee perceptions of the service climate as antecedents of job satisfaction and organizational commitment and second, on employee behaviors as consequences of organizational commitment. In the present study we compare these overall associations to those that are specific to customer-linked job satisfaction and customer-linked employee behaviors.

We address four key questions. How are different service climate variables related to overall and customer-linked job satisfaction? How do these two measures of job satisfaction compare as antecedents of affective organizational commitment? How is affective organizational commitment related to both organizational citizenship and to customer-linked behaviors? Finally, how is employee commitment related to word-of-mouth behaviors leading to the attraction of new customers and new employees? We first describe a research model (Fig. 1) of the antecedents and consequences of affective organizational commitment from an overall and a customer-linked perspective.

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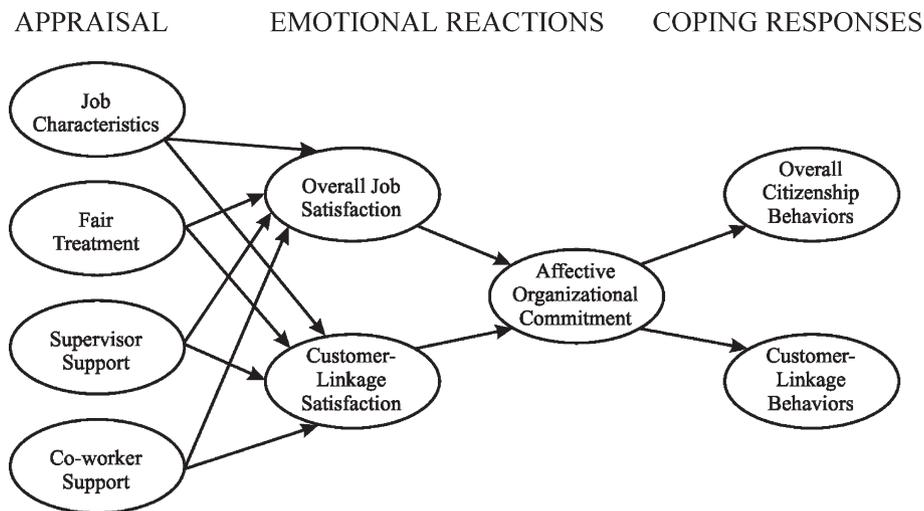


Fig. 1. Conceptual model drawing on framework of Bagozzi (1992).

Second, we develop the conceptual framework leading to the research hypotheses derived from the model. Third, using structural equation modeling (SEM), we test the proposed model. Fourth, with additional data from outside the model, we use analyses of variance (ANOVA) to evaluate the influence of employee commitment on word-of-mouth (WOM) behaviors related to the willingness to recommend the hospital to potential patients and influencers of potential patients as well as to prospective employees. Fifth, the results are presented in the light of the proposed hypotheses. Finally, the discussion treats the theoretical and managerial importance of the findings as well as the limitations and future research opportunities.

2. Conceptual framework for the model

2.1. The model

Our model (Fig. 1) is an expression of Bagozzi's (1992) attitudes-intentions-behavior framework that has been applied to explain both customer (Gotlieb et al., 1994) and service employee behavioral intentions (Babakus et al., 2003; Schmit and Allscheid, 1995). This framework proposes that individual behavior is determined by a sequence involving appraisal processes, emotional reactions and coping responses. In the model, job characteristics, fair treatment, supervisor support and co-worker support are the service climate variables of the appraisal phase. These are considered to be antecedents of employee emotional reactions of satisfaction and subsequently affective organizational commitment. Employee behaviors are the coping responses. In line with the purposes of this research, both overall job satisfaction and a facet of job satisfaction specific to customer-linkage are evaluated. Similarly, both overall organizational citizenship and customer-linkage behaviors are assessed.

2.2. Service climate variables and job satisfaction

We are first interested in the relationship between service climate and job satisfaction. The variables in the appraisal stage of

our model are reflections of the service climate (Schneider and Bowen, 1985; Schneider et al., 1998). A service climate depends on foundation issues present in the work context (quality of services received from co-workers and other departments) and on general facilitative conditions (supervisory support and human resources practices). Similar variables can also be found within the concepts of internal service quality (Berry, 1995), the Job Description Index (JDI) of job satisfaction (Smith, 1992) and employee intrinsic motivation (Eby et al., 1999). The concepts of Job Characteristics Model (JCM), positive organizational support and justice-based theories are important theoretical foundations for job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Eby et al., 1999).

Service climate variables relate to intrinsic motivation that creates the psychological states of meaningfulness, responsibility, knowledge of results, empowerment and justice. In the JCM, the first three of these states are determined by five *job characteristics*—skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. The fourth psychological state, empowerment and justice, relates to the employee's perception of support, participation and fairness in the workplace. Positive organizational support is the employee's global belief that the organization values her/his contributions and cares about her/his well-being (Hutchison et al., 1986). Perceived organizational support has often been measured with items that solely assess upper management level support (Hutchison et al., 1986). However, organizational support can also be viewed as both vertical support from supervisors and management, and as horizontal support from co-workers, other departments and teams. Justice-related beliefs arise from perceptions of equitable rewards. Employee perception of fair treatment can be positively correlated with affective commitment through both distributive and procedural justice (Meyer and Smith, 2000).

Job satisfaction can be defined as a set of employee attitudes about their work. It can be assessed as overall satisfaction or with individual facets of job satisfaction (Johns and Saks, 2005). The Job Description Index of job satisfaction includes the facets of: the work itself, supervision, pay, promotion and co-workers (Smith, 1992). Surprisingly, a facet satisfaction related to how the

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