Why is Empowerment Important in Big Data Analytics?

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Abstract

Big data analytics with its intricate insights is enabling service providers to better gauge customer needs. It is equally delivering information about the competitive landscape of services to customers. The frontline employees (FLEs) responsible for managing the diversified needs of these ‘informed customers’ face multiple challenges. The FLEs need not only information about their products/services but also about markets and customers. A systematic review of the extant literature of big data and FLEs has helped to understand that FLEs need empowerment to adapt their services in high contact big data driven services. Empowerment as a concept is well known in management and psychology literature. The empowerment construct has predominantly remained to consisting of a single, and in a few cases, of multiple items. To facilitate effective service delivery in high contact big data driven services, FLEs need empowerment on multiple levels and there exists a significant gap in the literature about these constituent dimensions. This paper, synthesizing the relevant scholarly work, proposes a conceptual model for the empowerment construct. In doing so, this paper makes an important theoretical and managerial contribution towards the understanding of FLEs’ empowerment and its relevance in high contact data driven services.

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1. Introduction

Empowerment is the ‘downward movement of authority and relaxing the boundaries of vertical control’\(^1\)\(^1\).\(^2\)\(^3\). Empowerment of frontlines is critical in high contact data driven services as it demonstrates the provider’s preparedness to manage customer expectations in (near) real time. The service delivery is increasingly being challenged with the vast pool of data streams or big data (BD) that are possibly available for both providers and customers alike. The positive impact of frontline employees (FLEs)’ empowerment on service quality, customer satisfaction and firm performance has been well established in the extant literature\(^2\)\(^4\)\(^9\).

The authors did an exploratory search on the challenges to FLEs in big data analytics (BDA) driven services\(^10\). In the changing landscape of the competitive globalized services market, FLEs job performance may be impacted and become stressful due to inadequate empowerment, information, training, resources, tools, recognition and pressure to exceed targets and perform the jobs meeting or exceeding quality expectations\(^11\)\(^-\)\(^20\). Over the last few years, both practitioners and academics have placed enormous emphasis on BD as one of the avenues to help the frontlines\(^12\)\(^,\)\(^16\)\(^,\)\(^21\).

BDA is poised to help FLEs with its intricate extraction of insights about market and customer information\(^22\). Traditionally, leveraging of information is confined to the top of the hierarchy in organisations. Analytically matured organisations are applying similar techniques to selection and deployment of staff at the front desks and service touch points\(^23\)\(^,\)\(^24\). Thus, executives have also started to think that there shall be better information support for frontline staff\(^12\). To gain fruitful outcomes from the investments on BDA, organisations need to articulate their business drivers and cascade down insights to frontlines to achieve effective service to the customers\(^25\). While extracting actionable insights from internal and external data is a significant challenge, to effectively utilise those insights for the benefit of serving a customer while he is in the provider’s premises is even more complex organisational and behavioural issue.

Our systematic review of literature pointed out that empowerment of FLEs differentiates mature vs. transforming organisations\(^10\)\(^,\)\(^23\)\(^,\)\(^26\)\(^,\)\(^27\). Despite this valuable knowledge, the impact of FLEs’ empowerment on service adaptation in high contact big data driven services environments is poorly understood\(^12\)\(^,\)\(^15\)\(^,\)\(^17\)\(^,\)\(^19\)\(^,\)\(^20\)\(^,\)\(^28\)\(^,\)\(^29\). Furthermore, empowerment as a construct needs more meticulous examination, considering there is not a standardized empowerment program for organizations that are characterized by the new challenges such as BD\(^23\)\(^,\)\(^27\). An analytical framework based upon a number of key dimensions may well be needed before implementing an empowerment program\(^30\).

While empowerment as such is a well debated concept in the disciplines of psychology and management, its relevance is not well articulated for high contact data driven services\(^23\)\(^,\)\(^24\). Furthermore, empowerment construct is not well explored for high contact services. Thus, this paper explores an essential element, i.e., the role of empowerment for services marketing in the context of BDA.

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<th>Nomenclature</th>
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<td>External Marketing Capabilities</td>
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<td>FLEs</td>
<td>Frontline employees</td>
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<td>IMO</td>
<td>Internal Market Orientation</td>
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1.1. Structure

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides study background, and reviews relevant literature on empowerment and service adaptation. Section 3 provides discussion and proposes dimensions of empowerment based on the extant literature review. Section 4 provides implications for theory and practice. Finally, section 5 presents conclusions of the study and the agenda for future research.
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