

How market orientation affects female service employees in Thailand

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Abstract

Past studies show that the implementation of market orientation has a positive effect on the job attitudes of male-dominant Western managers and salespersons. This study extends the knowledge in this area by attempting to empirically establish if market orientation can be implemented to service employees across culture and gender. Results show that none of the behavioral components of market orientation has a positive impact on job satisfaction of Thai female customer contact service employees, and that only customer orientation and interfunctional coordination have marginal effects on role ambiguity and organizational commitment. Managerial implications, limitations, and future research directions are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

The service sector plays a more critical role in the growth of developing economies, and both multinational and local service firms are exploring ways in which they can improve their service quality to create customer satisfaction and loyalty. Heskett et al. (1994) and Schneider and Bowen (1995) contend that the job attitudes of customer contact service employees and customer satisfaction and loyalty are directly related, and that managing these attitudes is critical to the success of service firms. Since its emergence in the 1990s, market orientation has been widely accepted as a potent way to enhance the performance at the firm's level (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Narver and Slater, 1990) as well as at the individual employee's level (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Selnes et al., 1996; Siguaw et al., 1994). At the individual employee's level, it has been found that market orientation, as a single construct, reduces the role stress of employees while increasing their job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993;

Selnes et al., 1996; Siguaw et al., 1994). These studies on the effect of market orientation on employees' job attitudes, however, used male-dominant Western subjects who were either managers (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Ruckert, 1992; Selnes et al., 1996) or salespersons (Siguaw et al., 1994). Because of the cultural and gender-based differences, the positive effect of market orientation on job attitudes may not be realized in female-dominant, non-Western customer contact service employees.

The objective of this study is to extend the knowledge by attempting to establish, empirically, if the behavioral components of market orientation (Narver and Slater, 1990) have a positive impact on the job attitudes (i.e., role ambiguity, role conflict, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment) of the female customer contact service employees of banks in a non-Western country (i.e., Thailand).

2. Background

2.1. The effect of market orientation on job attitudes of non-Western female customer contact service employees

Service firms depend heavily on the ability of customer contact employees to properly deliver their services (Chebat

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and Kollias, 2000). Customer contact service employees play the role of boundary spanners at the interface between the firm and the customer, and often experience a high level of role ambiguity (Johlke and Duhan, 2001; Singh et al., 1994) and role conflict (Hui et al., 2004; Singh et al., 1994). Role ambiguity and role conflict, in turn, significantly influence boundary spanner performance, satisfaction, commitment, and turnover (Singh et al., 1994).

Market orientation provides a unifying focus for the efforts and projects of individuals and departments within an organization, and thereby leads to superior performance (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990). Schneider et al. (1980) propose that the implementation of market orientation reduces the service employee's role stress, such as role ambiguity and role conflict, and increases job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Empirical evidence from studies that used subjects who were not service employees seems to support this proposition. Jaworski and Kohli (1993) report that market orientation relates positively to organizational commitment and esprit de corps of managers. Siguaw et al. (1994) report that the market orientation of a firm significantly influences the role ambiguity, role conflict, job satisfaction, customer orientation, and organizational commitment of its salespersons. However, the findings in these two studies are limited to male-dominant Western employees as subjects.

How much does a different culture affect management practices that have been used successfully in the home country? Cultural diversity influences management concepts and practices, and as such management practices must be evaluated in terms of local cultures (Cateora, 1997). Past empirical studies show that application of Western management practices might not be successful in non-Western countries because of the incongruence between Western management practices and non-Western cultural values. For example, Hui et al. (2004) report that empowerment did not have a positive effect on the job satisfaction of non-Western (Chinese) service employees. Incongruence between market orientation as a Western management practice and cultural values of non-Western countries may attenuate the positive effect of market orientation on job attitudes.

The majority of customer contact service employees in many service industries in non-Western countries especially Asian countries (e.g., Thailand) are predominantly female. Past studies show that gender moderates the relationship between role stress, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intention (Babin and Boles, 1998), and that male and female employees are different in the level of job attitudes (Siguaw and Honeycutt, 1995). The expectation in Asian countries (e.g., Thailand) is that women play the role of home makers (Barne, 2002). If they join the work force, they tend to get inferior treatment than their male counterpart. As such, the job attitudes and the response to new management practices of Asian female employees tend to be quite different from the job attitudes and the response to new management practice of the male counter-

part. The female majority and female role expectation in the non-Western service firms may also attenuate the positive effect of market orientation on job attitudes of the non-Western female customer contact service employees.

In this study, the conceptualization and the definition of market orientation by Narver and Slater (1990) were adopted. Narver and Slater (1990) define market orientation as the organizational culture that most effectively and efficiently creates the necessary behaviors for the creation of superior value for buyers, and thus superior performance for the business. They posit that market orientation consists of three behavioral components—customer orientation, competitor orientation, and interfunctional coordination. Customer orientation and competitor orientation include all of the activities that are involved in the acquisition of information about buyers and competitors in the target market, and the dissemination of this information throughout the business. Interfunctional coordination is based on the customer and competitor information, and comprises the organization-wide coordinated efforts of a business to create superior value for the buyers. Theoretically, each of these components of market orientation should negatively affect role ambiguity and role conflict, but positively affect job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In non-Western female customer contact service employees, however, it is quite likely that some or even all of these components of market orientation may not play an important role in influencing their job attitudes.

The relationships between the constructs of job attitudes have been tested and established in many past studies. Specifically, role ambiguity and role conflict have a direct negative impact on job satisfaction (e.g., Behrman et al., 1981; Chonko et al., 1986; Rhoads et al., 1994; Siguaw et al., 1994) and organizational commitment (e.g., MacKenzie et al., 1998; Menguc, 1996; Morris and Koch, 1979; Morris and Sherman, 1981; Siguaw et al., 1994). Job satisfaction has a direct positive impact on organizational commitment (e.g., Bedeian and Armenakis, 1981; Porter and Steers, 1973; Rizzo et al., 1970).

3. Method

3.1. Sample and data acquisition

The sample for this study was taken from customer contact service employees of two medium-sized banks in Thailand. Thai subjects were chosen because Thailand is a high power distance, collectivist country, which is culturally different from low power distance, individualistic Western countries such as the United States. Banks were chosen for this study because the service quality that is provided by their customer contact service employees directly influences customer satisfaction and loyalty and because the majority of the customer contact service employees of Thai banks are female. Some banks in Thailand are also pioneers in the

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