

Front-line Service Personnel's Stress-level in Demanding Customer Encounters

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Abstract: This exploratory and cross-disciplinary article focuses on front-line service personnel's stress level in demanding customer encounters. There is strong evidence that an increasing number of service areas need to cope with challenging customer groups. However, the existing marketing literature does not really provide tools for coping with the challenging customer encounters. This study approaches the topic through a semi-medical research setting. 40 respondents from two service companies were recruited for the study. They completed a survey dealing with the perceived stress, perceptions about customer service in general, and coping strategies when confronting demanding customer encounters. The respondents' stress-level was medically measured by checking the Cortisol hormone ("stress hormone") levels. The major findings indicate that strongly structured duties at work increase the perceived stress but medically the hormone levels in those cases tend to be lower. Further, empowerment in service situations does not seem to be the way to decrease stress. Finally, getting quickly over a stressful situation seems to lower the perceived stress-level, but not the stress-hormone level. The authors suggest that a new critical look at empowerment as a concept should be taken. The study as a whole underlines the importance of analyzing demanding customer encounters both through perceptions and through medical analysis in order to capture short and long-term implications. Managerially the findings help us to develop new techniques to confront demanding customers. More research is needed and the authors suggest a before-after setting in order to find out the effectiveness of different interpersonal techniques as means of lowering the front-line service personnel stress-levels.

Key words: service; service personnel; stress; service encounter; demanding customers

JEL code: M30

1. Introduction

Service jobs are more demanding than we tend to think. There are several reasons for this. Boundaries for different tasks are constantly spanned, working with people always involves emotions and customers usually represent a wide variety of different participation styles. However, all service excellence, profitability in business and customer loyalty is primarily based on high performing and satisfied employees (Lovelock, Wirtz & Chew 2008, p. 280). High quality customer service has been widely determined as one of the key attributes for

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successful business operations of a service company. It is clear that high stress levels among front-line personnel have a negative impact on the service quality and stressed-out employees do not deliver a service as well as employees with lower levels of stress (Varga, 1999).

Services do differ from each other. Over the past 40 years several authors have made attempts to develop a coherent classification schemes for services (Olorunniwo & Hsu, 2006, p. 106). In spite of the shared understanding within service management and marketing research, there is no consensus on how to classify services (Baida, Akkermans & Gordijn, 2005). Services can be classified according to different attributes. Schmenner (1986) has divided the landscape of services into four quadrants framed by labour intensity and customer customization. Johnston & Clark (2005) classify the service encounter according to customers' experienced perceived risk and interaction. The reason for numerous classification approaches seems to be the high amount of service characteristics. Becker, Böttcher and Klingner (2011) identified as many as 36 different service characteristics used in literature, consisting of customer interface-related, process-related, outcome related and miscellaneous characteristics. However, to our knowledge, no classification so far has been formed based on explicit customer behaviour. From the service employee point of view, customers can be demanding (Kokko & Mäki, 2009) or even "directly from hell" (Harari, 1996). On the other hand customers can be extremely pleasant and nice. Price & Arnould (1999) have even found service encounters that are more similar to a meeting between friends than a merely economic transaction. In that case, the employees represent a natural source of friendship and social support to customers (Rosenbaum, 2009). Price & Arnould (1999) have named this phenomenon to "commercial friendship" and it represents one end of the continuum representing the "demandness" of customers.

It is quite obvious, that the service personnel have great challenges in operating in this crossfire of different customer participation styles. One way to approach this rather white area in the service research is to look at front-line personnel's stress-levels in demanding customer encounters. In stead of being an external observer, we look at the service encounter from the front-line service personnel's perspective indirectly through the reactions of their own body. This kind of semi-medical approach in services marketing research should provide us valid and reliable information about demanding customer encounters, which according to many researchers are unfortunate common (Heiskanen, 2004; Reynolds & Harris, 2006). One can also assume that the ever accelerating pace of life in general will increase the frequency of demanding customer encounters. That kind of development would have a direct impact on the working premises of the numerous persons in front-line duties.

2. Front-line Service Personnel and Stress

It is widely recognized that service work is stressful and a growing body of contemporary literature supports this fact (Varga, 2006, p. 290). According to Varga (2006), a theoretical framework for understanding stress among service workers is built largely around the idea of role stressors. Front-line employees are in a classic boundary spanning role, i.e. between the competing demands of customers and the service organisation. It is generally hypothesized that service workers will experience both role conflicts and ambiguity while carrying out their duties. Service employee roles play an important role in all service settings and one way to approach their situation is the use of role theory. It is based on a dramaturgical metaphor and emphasizes the nature of people as social actors, who learn behaviours appropriate to the positions they occupy in the society (Solomon, Supernaut, Czepiel & Gutman, 1985). In all, a service encounter can be seen as "a three-cornered fight" with the customer, the server and the service firm all vying for control (Weatherly & Tansik, 1993, p. 5).

In service settings, the roles service employees play can be significant causes of stress. A literature review of the role stress indicates that boundary spanning is highly correlated with both role conflicts and role ambiguity. Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that front-line workers experience high levels of role stress (Weatherly & Tansik, 1993, p. 5). In general, a pragmatic definition of a stressful environment is according to Varga (1999, p. 64); ...a gap between environmental demands and personal resources to meet those demands. This gap may be wide, especially if the service company's customer base is heterogenic in relation to the amount of demanding customers. The potential stressors can be narrowed down to three crucial influences: role conflicts, role ambiguity, and simply too much work. We also have to remember that a part of the total stress may be imported into the workplace from outside—an individual with personal problems is more likely to be stressed by work than a person with a harmonious life outside the work (Varga, 1999). There is also some evidence that less experienced workers are more likely to experience stress (Balloch, Pahl & McLean, 1998) and they should be supported by more experienced workers (Howard & Hegarty, 2003). In other words, stress seems to be present among front-line service personnel, but through experience one may be able to develop strategies to cope better with that stress. What we do not know, is if this needed experience refers to working experience or to general life experience together with increasing maturity.

All research indicates that front-line service personnel confront demanding customers regularly. The trend seems to be that an increasing number of service areas need to cope with challenging customer groups. In general, a customer encounter is considered demanding if either of both parties perceives it as not fulfilling its implicit or explicit expectations (Kokko & Mäki, 2009, p. 215). According to Reynolds and Harris (2006) the majority of research related to customer and company interactions is based on the assumption that customers act in both a functional and a good-mannered way. This approach is somewhat out of reality. Customers and their behaviours vary. Customers can be and act in a good-mannered way, or even be like friends (Goodwin & Gremler, 1996). On the other hand, customers can be very demanding, they can act aggressively, complain illegitimate or even be like "directly from hell" (Harari, 1996). Our study focuses on the latter type of customer behaviour and its consequences.

It is fair to argue that norm-breaking, deviant behaviour is relatively common. Reynold and Harris (2006) report that in the United Kingdom front-of-store assistants are subjected to verbal abuse once every 3.75 days, to threatening behaviour every 15 days, and to acts of violence every 31 days. In Finland, approximately 5% of all employees annually face threatening or violent work-related encounters (Heiskanen, 2004). The trend seems to be getting stronger and new service employee groups will most likely face a growing number of demanding customer situations.

3. Cortisol Hormone as an Indicator of Stress

Cortisol has been named as "the stress hormone", although stress isn't the only reason why cortisol is secreted into the bloodstream. There is very strong evidence, that it is secreted in higher levels during the body's "fight response" to stress, and is responsible for several stress-related changes in the body, such as higher blood pressure, blood sugar imbalance, lowered immunity and impaired cognitive performance (Scott, 2011; Moore, 2002).

While cortisol is an important and helpful part of the body's response to stress, it's important that the body's relaxation response is activated so that the body's functions can return to normal following a stressful event. Unfortunately, in our current high-stress culture, the body's stress response is activated so often that the body doesn't always have a chance to return to normal, resulting in a state of chronic stress. Cortisol hormone levels can

easily be measured from tongue with the help of a paper-slip but it should be kept in mind that cortisol secretion varies among individuals. People react biologically differently to stress. One person may secrete higher levels of cortisol than another in the same situation. Therefore, individual cortisol levels can not be measured in relation to each other but on an individual level they tend to vary within a certain range (Scott, 2011; Longo et al., 2011).

4. Methodology

Two different types of service companies participated at the present study. The company A operates in gas station and restaurant business and the company B's core business is travel and parcel delivery services. Additionally, the second company is engaged in cafeteria and kiosk operations. All together 40 front-line service employees were recruited for the study—30 from the company A and 10 from the company B. 62.5% of the participants were female and the average age of the participants was 39.3 years.

All in all, three different surveys were conducted. The stress surveys were carried out in order to find out the general stress-level of the service employees. A widely used and tested work stress-questionnaire from The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health was used. Customer Service survey focused on general topics related to customer service and a five-point Likert-scale was used to measure respondents' attitudes towards service quality, servicescape and service encounters. Also the perceived amount of demanding customer encounters and the respondent's behaviour when confronting difficult customer service situations was measured with the help of so called empathy measurement.

Additionally, a physiological measurement was carried out. Cortisol hormone levels can easily and non-invasively be assessed from saliva. The saliva samples in this study were collected during the period May-August in 2010. Due to the fluctuation of cortisol levels in humans, altogether five samples were collected from each person during three different days. Two of those days were working days and one was out of work period (in most cases weekend). The samples were collected at the following times: (1) On the wake-up; (2) 30 minutes later; (3) one hour later; (4) after work (around 16-18 hours) and (5) just before going to sleep. The participating front-line service employees mouthed cotton wads until they were wet. The cotton wades were placed in tubes and they were mailed to the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health's laboratory responsible for the salivary cortisol measurement. In the very beginning of the research project all the participants were invited to a half-day introduction session, where the practical research procedure was carefully explained. The role conflict and empowerment contents of the questionnaire were derived from Varga (2009), burnout from Singh (2000) and demanding customer variables from Reynolds and Harris (2006).

5. Findings

66% of the respondents in our study faced demanding customer encounters on a weekly basis. Service work was generally perceived as stressful. However, the respondents were not capable of dividing the stress-load into positive and negative stress. As we know, a certain stress-level is needed in order to perform, but too high stress-levels will lead into health threatening problems (Varga, 2006).

Based on the Cortisol hormone levels, only one service employee in our sample had an alarming stress-level (Figure 1). Therefore, service work cannot be categorized as very stressful and much of he perceived stress can not be medically verified.

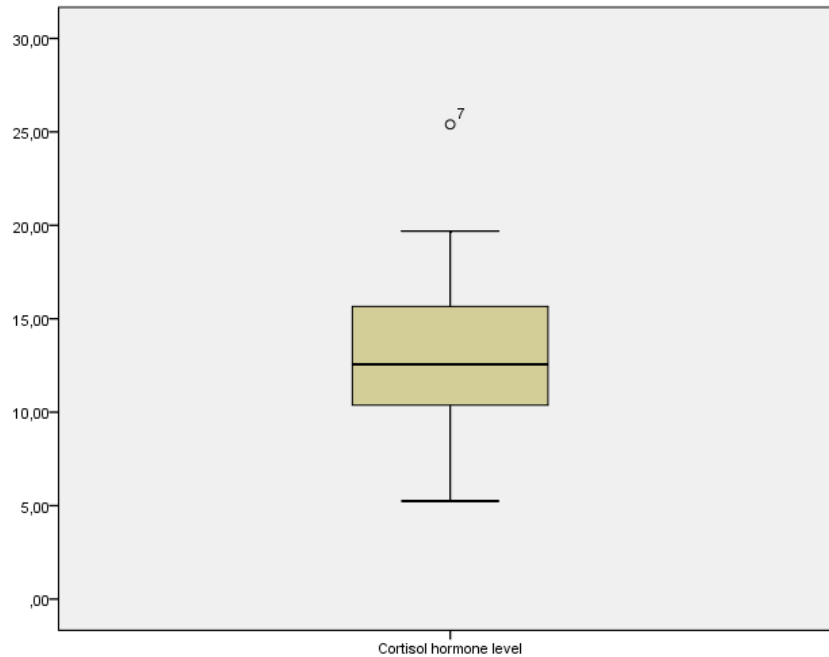


Figure 1 Front-line Service Employees Stress-Level (Cortisol hormone; nmol/l, n = 32)

The amount of demanding customer encounters the front-line service employees face seems to correlate with their hormone levels (0.367, $p = 005$). It is also obvious, that all service settings differ from each other depending on the customer base. However, a rough categorization of service settings based on customer behaviour highlights the need for different managerial actions to support and develop front-line service personnel's daily work. A gap between environmental demands and personal resources to meet those demands cannot be too wide and the front-line personnel seems to need a differentiated approach towards certain customers.

Empowerment means giving employees the discretion to take day-to-day decisions about their job-related activities. Although empowering typically means lowering the control over the employees' behaviours, various positive consequences are accredited to this instrument. The most typical examples are positive influence on overall job satisfaction and reduction of employee stress (Gill et al., 2012, p. 190). Rigid customer service process formats, in their turn, may be defined as an opposite strategy for empowerment. Generally, this approach to design customer service has not been popular in recent years. More independent type of decision making in service settings has been favoured by the scholars, although Czepiel (1985) argued that extreme individuality in customer service settings may lead to anarchy. Generally, "do as you please if customers are happy"—approach has been mentioned as an example of excellent customer service approach.

When the respondents of this study were asked about empowerment and stress, the outcome was that more structured and less independent the work is, more stressed the employees were (0.502, $p = 0.01$). When the same possible connection was measured through the Cortisol hormone levels, no such correlation was found. Again, there is a discrepancy between self-perception and medical facts. This finding emphasizes a more structured approach when designing service encounter processes. This may be the case especially if the front-line service employees face demanding customer encounters regularly. In general, there has been very little discussion about the suitability of empowerment to services in different contexts. If a service company has many difficult service encounters, employees seem to need clear and structured instructions and process descriptions to manage the

demanding situations.

There are several coping strategies employees may use in demanding customer encounters. Bailey & McCollough (2000) have determined seven coping strategies: emotional management, compensation and punishment, expediting, avoidance, discourteousness and referral. In our study those strategies were analyzed in order to determine if different coping strategies have an impact to the employee stress-levels. In general, we found very little connection between the different coping strategies and the stress-levels. In other words, whatever the coping strategies the front-line personnel choose, they seem to have very little to do with the stress-levels. This finding highlights the need for service training focusing on handling demanding customer encounters 'here and now.

Front-line service clerks may even fear the demanding customer encounters in advance. We found that "the fear factor" relates to stress (-0.48 , $p = 0.01$), hence the more fear about ill-behaving customers, the more stress the person perceives. The analysis of hormone levels supported this finding. In general, 28.1% of the respondents felt strong—or moderate levels of fear related to customer contacts in advance, while "the fearless"—segment consists of 46.9% of the respondents.

When dealing with ill-behaving customers, there seems to be an impact on the emotional state of the employee. The duration of such impact seems to vary. In some cases the whole day is spoiled, while others get over it in minutes (Kokko & Mäki, 2009, p. 225). It seems evident that those who can forget a negative incidence more rapidly feel less stress compared to those who keep on thinking about the demanding encounters. Our survey also supports this line of thinking; those who do not take the customer service related problems to home and can forget the negative incidence rapidly felt less stress than of the opposite group (-0.443 , $p = 0.05$). However, the cortisol hormone analysis showed no connection with these variables. We can conclude that the proper course of actions to handle the demanding customer encounter should be available at the time when negative service encounter takes place. The possible actions taken after the demanding incident will not have the same effect.

6. Conclusions and Managerial Implications

In our study no alarming stress-levels were found. Service work seems to be somewhat stressful, but not so stressful that it could be medically verified. Certain amount of stress has a positive impact on the employees' well-being and performance, while excess levels or chronic stress will lead to lower service quality and customer satisfaction and eventually to increased danger of employee health problems.

Front-line service work differs from case to case based on customer behaviour. When service clerks face demanding customers on a regular basis, it is a clear managerial and operational challenge. It would be beneficial to try to categorize different service settings by rough customer types in order to develop internal know-how and training practices for different customer categories. Our study highlights strongly the need of practical tools and capabilities, which help the employees to handle demanding customer encounters in a holistic, but pragmatic manner. More research is definitely needed and we suggest a before-after setting in order to find out the effectiveness of different interpersonal techniques as means of lowering the front-line service personnel stress-levels.

We conclude by stating that customer experiences have become more relevant constructs than just relationships (Palmer, 2010). The experience constructs have a strong relation to emotional elements. In all service settings the front-line personnel plays a key role in coping with heterogeneous customer groups and in that work all possible managerial and practical support should be allocated for the best of both parties—the company and its customers. Doing so will have positive effects both internally and externally.

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