

Viewing Hotel Industry through Customer Oriented Bureaucracy

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Direct contact with the customer in any service interaction creates a unique set of challenges for both the employer as well as the front-line service worker. It occurs in the pursuit of dual, contradictory goals of efficiency and being customer-oriented. This paper, while using the example of the hotel industry explicates that efficiency is achieved at the cost of quality of service delivery. Howsoever unattainable the dual goals seem to be in the hotel industry, with proper investments in human resources organizations have thrived and excelled in their environments and proved that the goals might not be contradictory in nature after all.

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Introduction

Services industries which have been increasingly contributing to all the advanced economies call for further research and analysis on the employment relationship because of its unique characteristic i.e. “direct contact with the customer” (Korczynski, 2002:2). One may argue that not every employee in a service industry is directly interacting with the customer. However, the front-line worker in a service interaction faces challenges which are in stark contrast with the ones an assembly-line worker confronts in a manufacturing set-up. These challenges arise because of the variability in customer demands and expectations, simultaneity in production and consumption and the intangibility in the service delivered whose quality cannot be tested before consumption and can only be perceived by the customer.

Challenges for Organizations

The challenges are not limited to the front-line workers but also impact the organizations. Organizations in the face of heightened competition and globalization need to reduce costs, enhance pro-

ductivity, improve customer-service delivery and become more customer-oriented. Due to the greater extent of inseparability and simultaneity in production and consumption in front-line customer service work, production jobs cannot be relocated to countries with lower labor costs (Korczyński, 2002). Even if service organizations use Levitt's (1976) production-line approach to reduce costs and improve service delivery quality and subsequently replace human labor with machines and enhanced technology, competitors will erode the competitive advantage by utilizing superior machines and better technology (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991).

To create competitive advantage, service organizations need to satisfy and delight the customer. Satisfying the needs of the customer by characteristics like price or utility appeals to the formally rational aspect of the customer. On the other hand, delighting the customer by the fulfillment of desires or by pleasurable experiences enchants the formally irrational aspect of the customer (Korczyński, 2002). Achieving both the objectives in any service interaction requires the organization to create an environment where the customer feels he is in charge and is enchanted by his sovereignty, however in reality, his behavior

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is being directed or influenced by the organization. The dual purpose of achieving efficiency and being customer-oriented in a service interaction are contradictory in nature and delineates the customer-oriented bureaucracy model (Korczyński, 2002). The contradictory goals of achieving efficiency and delivering high-quality services can be attained by acquiring a committed workforce with customer-oriented attitudes and values, equipping them with support systems to effectively complete their tasks (without alienating customers), safeguarding the front-line workers from abusive customers and empowering them to exercise discretion.

Challenges for Front-line Service Workers

Front-line service workers are the face of a service organization for the customer, and the dual contradictory goals of customer-oriented bureaucracy are realized through their efforts and behaviors. In organizations where service work is designed on the principles of production-line, tasks tend to be routine; jobs are deskilled and tightly controlled through the usage of pre-defined service interaction scripts (Ritzer, 1998). Employees in such jobs tend to get dissatisfied and develop a poor service attitude or leave the firm (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991). In such companies, front-line workers are trained minimally, paid at minimum wage levels and provided very limited opportunities for career growth. Because of the standardized procedures and variability in customer demands and expectations, front-line workers often find

themselves unable to accommodate customer requests or achieve service recovery in case of failure. In such instances, the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty is shattered, and the disillusioned customer becomes irate and abusive creating a lot of stress and pain for the front-line workers (Korczyński, 2002).

Even if the task is not routine or not tightly controlled, front-line workers are supposed to manage feelings (Korczyński, 2002) and follow display rules (Grandey, 2003) during customer interactions which entail delivery of emotional labor. Hochschild (1983) claims that delivery of emotional labor necessitates commoditization of smiles, friendly gestures and feelings and would disconnect the front-line worker from his or her feelings or behaviors. The strict imposition of display rules by the management and the unfavorable power relationship with the customer (Korczyński, 2002) could be a source of significant stress and pain for the front-line workers. The display rules are not only restricted to feelings or behaviors of front-line workers but also to their outward appearance (Nickson et al., 2001). For example, front-line workers should have attractive faces, gendered bodies, sparkly-white teeth, neat and properly groomed hair, no facial hair, etc. termed as aesthetic labor.

Case of Hotel Industry

In an attempt to understand how the “direct contact with the customer” adds a new dimension to the employer-employee relationship in a service organization, the hotel industry is treated here

as an example to delve deeper into the interrelationships between the employer, employee and the customer.

The hotel industry is characterized as a low-pay, labor-intensive industry (Duncan, 2005) with high turnover and weak internal labor markets (Lucas, 1995). It is also infamous for its hazardous working conditions and anti-social working hours (Doherty & Stead, 1998). The requirement for the entry-level workforce is very high (on numbers) (Wong, 2004) with low levels of skill barrier (Davidson et al., 2006); however the demand fluctuates because of various reasons. The demand for hotel rooms and its services has three main constituents namely tourism, business purpose and local consumption (Bull & Church, 1996). The nature of demand generated by tourism is seasonal in nature with peak and off seasons. With slowdown or recession in economies, the disposable income reduces and businesses resort to cutting down of hospitality expenditures which negatively impacts the demand for the hotel industry. With the spurt in international tourism, the demand is not completely determined by the economic conditions in the host country. It is also important to note that the demand is also influenced by political crises, terrorist attacks (9/11 attacks), epidemics (SARS attack), natural calamities, etc.

Flexibility

As hotels continuously confront with unpredictable and fluctuating demand, they take refuge in numerical flexibility (Atkinson, 1985) and change employment levels according to de-

mand. Numerical flexibility in hotels is mostly achieved through part-time, temporary or casual workers (Bird et al., 2002) who are also referred as the flexible workforce. According to Atkinson's (1984) flexible firm model, the core in a hotel comprises managerial and supervision jobs (Bird et al., 2002) which are skilled in nature. The peripheral jobs are low-skilled (Bird et al., 2002) or unskilled in nature and are undertaken by full-time and flexible employees. Adopting numerical flexibility not only enables the hotels to reduce costs and achieve one of the objectives of the customer-oriented bureaucracy but also provides the flexibility of scheduling the workforce supply to meet changing demand (Bird et al., 2002).

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Though efficiency is enhanced through numerical flexibility the quality of service delivery becomes a concern due to the absence of organizational commitment (Yang & Fu, 2009). The contradictory logic of customer-oriented bureaucracy becomes starkly visible in this scenario. Flexible workforce is not eligible for retirement benefits and health insurances (Yang & Fu, 2009). Over and above, they occupy the lowest positions and paid the lowest wages in the hotels (Soltani & Wilkinson, 2010) in an already low-paying industry. They

are involved in unskilled jobs like laundry, cleaning of house-linen and cleaning of public areas in hotels etc. The jobs are tightly controlled with no empowerment and no training. Soltani and Wilkinson (2010) found out that those workers who are employed in hotels through agencies prefer flexible employment because they do not possess enough qualifications or skills to secure a full-time employment. Apart from that, employment through agencies provides them the flexibility to achieve work-life balance and higher job-security. It is interesting to note that flexible employees working through agencies perceive higher job security but the permanent employees feel insecure because of continuous rationalization of jobs (Lai et al., 2008) leading to downsizing, outsourcing or restructuring (McNamara et al., 2011). Insecurity about their jobs results in lower morale, lower levels of organizational commitment and job dissatisfaction which manifests in the form of high turnover and drop in quality levels of service delivery. High levels of employee turnover which is the most pervasive challenge for hotel industry (Yang & Fu, 2009) entails significant amount of direct and indirect costs. Especially for luxury hotels which have sophisticated operating systems and firm-specific standard operating procedures (Yang & Fu, 2009), it is necessary to train new recruits. A vicious cycle seems to exist in the hotel industry in an attempt to achieve efficiency and flexibility which finally defeats both goals of reduction in costs and higher quality levels of customer service.

Training & Skill Development

It would not be a surprise that the hotel industry in Europe has the lowest incidence of employer-sponsored training (Warhurst et al., 2008). The probable reasons for such an industry-wide practice could be high employee turnover, generic skills transferable to other hotels or industries, a dominance of low-skilled jobs in a hotel setting, etc. Employers in hotel industry seem to have accepted the 'turnover culture' and invest minimally in training with the apprehension of employees moving over to other hotels or sectors. The absence of opportunities to upgrade skills or acquire new skills would feed into the infinite loop of employee turnover. A study conducted in Australian luxury hotels (Davidson et al. 2006) asserted that employees acquire skills only by changing employers.

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A typical luxury hotel (four stars and five stars) comprises both front-office and back-office jobs namely reception, concierge, food & beverages, housekeeping and laundry, accounting, marketing, event planning, payroll, security, and maintenance. The popular notion of the dominance of low-skilled or unskilled jobs could be questioned when the various job descriptions in different departments in a typical luxury hotel are thor-

oughly scrutinized. Reception, the first point of contact for a customer needs good communication, language, marketing and selling, negotiation and interpersonal skills. Chefs in luxury hotels should not only be proficient in culinary skills but also be equipped with communication and marketing skills to be customer-oriented while establishing and maintaining the "enchanted myth of customer sovereignty" (Korczyński, 2002: 63). Stewards or waiters should possess knowledge about the various dishes prepared in the kitchen and have good communication and marketing skills. Because of the front-line nature of the mentioned jobs, employees should be provided with stress management training and equipped with strategies for emotional self-defense (Zemke, 1990).

The apprehension of employers in the hotel industry is valid considering the generic nature of the skills. Reduction or elimination of employee training does reduce costs. However, training is essential to improve or enhance customer service quality. Equipped with more variety of skills, an employee is more comfortable and confident in influencing the customer subtly, in accommodating customer requests and in achieving service recovery.

Apart from attaining higher quality levels of customer service, training and developing employees would also make employees eligible and well-qualified for higher levels of managerial positions for which there is a shortage of well-qualified staff (Yang & Fu, 2009). Providing career growth opportunities for the present employees would reduce costs

in the long run by circumvention of direct recruitment costs in hiring qualified managers and avoidance of indirect costs of mistakes committed by inept and incompetent managers. It would also motivate employees to stay in organizations and reduce turnover levels.

Perception versus Reality

Minimal training, limited career opportunities, inadequate compensation and low-status of hospitality profession in academic institutions (Zahari et al., 2010; Mustafa, 2012) create an unfavorable image of the hotel industry as an employer. Entry-level graduates consider jobs in hotels as a temporary occupation till they move on to better opportunities in other industries. They fail to get committed to the profession, and to the organization, and hence companies fail to elicit customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors from their employees. The ones who buy the image of luxurious, stimulating and exciting work environment in hotels get demotivated and disengaged once they are put into tedious entry-level dead-end jobs and fail to keep up with high-quality levels of service delivery. Again, in an attempt to curb costs hotels flounder in providing exceptional customer service which establishes the competitive advantage.

Empowerment

Hotels, despite their inability to engage their workforce and to make them committed to customer-oriented values and attitudes, try to elicit desired behaviors from their workforce. While trying to achieve their goals, they are faced with

three challenges i.e. variability in customer demands and expectations, difficulty in observing or monitoring the front-line employee directly and inability to measure the output of front-line employees due to the intangibility of service delivered and the perceptual nature of customer feedback (Korczyński, 2002).

Variability in customer demands and expectations makes it necessary at times for front-line employees to abstain from following standardized rules and procedures and act on their discretion to satisfy the customer. But the objective of efficiency limits the front-line employee's behavior which could lead to a dissatisfied customer and employee.

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Hotels are increasingly employing mystery customers and using surveillance cameras to monitor employee behaviors (Soltani & Wilkinson, 2010). Though the utilization of mystery customers and surveillance cameras provide useful information to improve customer-service quality and ensure the safety of customers' and their belongings but using such mechanisms to observe and control employee behaviors undermines the trust employees have on their employers and subsequently impact the levels of service-delivery in a negative way.

Empowering employees with some degree of decision-making leeway, au-

onomy and control over their tasks facilitates speedy and effective customer services. However, it comes with its costs of higher investments in selecting and training the right candidates and higher incidence of inconsistent delivery which might create wrong perceptions of fair-play violations among customers (Bowen & Lawler, 1992).

Emotional, Aesthetic & Physical Labor

Proximity and continued interaction with the customer creates an economic relationship between the hotel and customer and a social relationship between the front-line employee and the customer. The conflicting objectives of the hotel of reducing costs and delivering high-quality customer-service necessitate the delivery of rationalized emotional labor (Korczynski, 2002) from the front-line employees. Such conflicting demands create a tension-ridden situation for the front-line employee who needs to be empathetic, calm, patient and display positive emotions like a friendly smile. This tension becomes harmful for the front-line employee if feeling and display rules are imposed and if it is perceived by the employee that he or she has no control or flexibility to feel or act according to one's volition. It has been observed that front-line employees resort to surface acting or deep acting (Grandey, 2003) to follow display rules which lead to emotional exhaustion and breakdown (Grandey, 2003).

Due to the establishment of a social relationship between the customer and

the front-line employee a customer could act as a source of both pleasure and pain for the front-line employee (Benner & Wrubel, 1989). Helping a customer generates pleasure and satisfaction whereas interacting with an irate or abusive customer causes pain and stress for the front-line employee. To cope with such tensions and pains a comforting social and personal life is required which gets disrupted by the long working hours at uncomfortable times like late nights, early mornings or weekends.

In an attempt to enchant or enrapture the customer, recruiters from the hospitality industry are known to discriminate potential candidates during selection considering aesthetic factors like possessing "aesthetically gendered body, culturally accepted beautiful face, fair skin color" (Biswas, 2012:75). The industry discriminates and operates on the assumption that possessing desirable aesthetic features and exerting aesthetic labor (Nickson et al., 2001) on a daily basis at work would facilitate in persuading the customer and in delivering innovative solutions to customer requests or problems (Biswas, 2012). It is understood that in a service interaction it is imperative to attract and engage the customer and possessing such desirable features would catch the customer's attention. In the case that the front-line employee does not possess the required KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities) and does not possess a customer-oriented attitude, he or she would fail to deliver the service efficiently turning the enchanted customer into a disillusioned one.

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The troubling fact in the hotel industry is that the excessive, ever-increasing workload and poor working conditions make a hotel employee 48 percent more susceptible to occupational injuries compared to any other service sector employee (Liladrie, 2010). Working with harsh chemicals in laundry causes skin problems. Standing and bending for long hours in kitchen causes back, neck and leg ailments. Housekeeping jobs which are predominantly occupied by women suffer from a plethora of musculoskeletal disorders like a consistent pain in lower back, neck, wrist and hands, tendonitis, bursitis of the knee which is also known as housemaid's knee and carpal tunnel syndrome. In most of these jobs, human effort is yet to be replaced by machines. Unfortunately, most of the hazardous jobs are undertaken by the flexible workforce who is not entitled to retirement or health benefits which could take care of the various ailments or injuries in their working or retired lives.

Gendered Segregation

95 percent of the housekeeping jobs in the UK hotel industry are done by women (Warhurst et al., 2008), and yet they are mostly supervised by men (Doherty & Manfredi, 2001). Employers in hotel industry claim that women are

most efficient in housekeeping because of their domestic cleaning experience (Knox, 2007). The reality is that women with children and re-entering the workforce prefer flexible working hours and part-time arrangements and are willing to work at lower wages (Bird et al., 2002). Hotels which are looking for cheap labor utilize this workforce and keep paying them statutory minimum wages (Warhurst et al., 2008) in spite of the hardships involved.

Jobs in hotel receptions are mostly occupied by women (Bird et al., 2002; Knox, 2007), and yet the higher echelons of managerial positions like the general manager, executive chef, restaurant manager are occupied by men (Doherty & Manfredi, 2001). Lack of child-care facilities, role-models, mentors and propagation of patriarchy-prescribed female values and work-roles segregate women to jobs with lower status and lower pay and to locations where their visibility is minimal (Bird et al., 2002).

In domestic situations, women are the principal cooks, but in hotels, they tend to be kitchen hands (Knox, 2007) or assistant cooks (Doherty & Manfredi, 2001). Kitchens in the hotel industry are characterized by a strong masculine culture replete with abusive language (Doherty & Manfredi, 2001) which makes survival for women in the kitchen a herculean task. On the contrary bars in luxury hotels which are predominantly patronized by men have female bartenders (Knox, 2007) for stretching the duration of stay at bars and for acquiring more profits. Employers in the hospitality in-

dustry are actively segregating women into front-line roles where not only submissiveness and deference to the customer is required but also entails display of female sexuality and delivery of emotional labor. This sort of gendered segregation pushes women to low-status jobs and the lowest-paying jobs ensuring the continuance of male-dominance in the industry.

Discussion & Conclusion

It is quite evident that hotels are trapped in the vicious cycle of failure (Schlesinger & Heskett, 1991) and are unable to achieve the fine balance between the dual contradictory objectives of customer-oriented bureaucracy. In all the challenges which have been discussed, there is a significant inclination of employers in the hotel industry to increase efficiency by reducing costs wherever it is possible and hence affecting the quality levels of service delivery in a downward direction. The predicament of the front-line employee in a hotel set-up is much higher than the employee who is working on the back-end and not interacting directly with the customer. The front-line employee is entrusted with the objectives of customer-oriented bureaucracy and yet he/she neither has the necessary support systems to carry out the task efficiently and effectively nor does he/she has the discretion in decision-making. The situation gets far worse when the enchanted customer gets disillusioned and becomes a source of pain for the front-line employee. If the organization does not safeguard the employee from such harassing situations nor does it equip the employee

with mechanisms to cope with such situations, the employee is bound to get exhausted emotionally and quit.

The situation seems bleak, but there are employers in the hotel industry who have been able to break out from the vicious cycle of failure and have successfully created and sustained the fine balance between the contradictory goals of customer-oriented bureaucracy. A multinational hotel chain with properties in UK and China which strongly believes in the efficacy of internal labor markets implemented various practices encompassing training, career advancement and job security (Fisher & McPhail, 2011). All the mentioned dimensions had a significant positive impact on the outcomes of job satisfaction, organizational commitment and intention to leave (Fisher & McPhail, 2011).

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In another study (Chen & Wallace, 2011) conducted in luxury hotels in Taiwan, it was observed that through multi-skilling of front-line managers the service quality improved, high job satisfaction levels were attained accompanied with an increase in retention levels. Multi-skilling was achieved through various techniques like job rotation, job enlarge-

ment, cross-training and job enrichment (Chen & Wallace, 2011). Multi-skilling enables the organization to achieve functional flexibility (Atkinson, 1985) which is defined by the skill base of an organization which could be utilized for different purposes as the situation demands and provides a cost-effective solution for the utilization of workforce.

It may be argued that providing training, ensuring job security and multi-skilling drains the organization's resources and does not produce results in the short-term. Research exemplifies that the dual goals of a customer-oriented bureaucracy may not be always conflicting in nature and employers can reap benefits in the long run by investing in human resources and perpetuate the cycle of success.

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