

**WHAT MAKES GOOD FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES?
HOW THEY LOOK, HOW THEY THINK OR HOW THEY SERVE?**

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Research Questions

Frontline employees (FLEs) play a crucial role in face-to-face sales and service encounters as they not only sell products and services (Levy and Sharma 1993) as well as deliver service quality, satisfaction and value to their customers (Brady and Cronin 2001) but also act as a buffer between the customers and the organization (Singh 2000), help customize the service experience (Bettencourt and Gwinner 1996) and implement service innovations (Cadwallader et al. 2010) and improvements (Lages and Piercy 2012). However, despite the growing importance of the complex role played by frontline employees in face-to-face sales and service encounters, there are many research gaps in this area, which we address in this paper.

First, we investigate the combined influence of personal characteristics and service behaviors (perceived by the customers) and their role stressors and work-related attitudes (perceived by them) on their performance and customer outcomes. Second, we explore the combined dyadic influence of employees' personal characteristics, role stressors and work-related attitudes on their service behaviors, service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. Third, we examine how the employees' service-role behaviors (in-role and extra-role) as perceived by the customers, may affect their formal performance evaluations by their supervisors.

Method and Data

We develop a dyadic conceptual model with five employee characteristics (physical attractiveness, communication ability, likeability, expertise, trustworthiness), two types of service behaviors (in-role and extra-role), three role stressors (ambiguity, conflict and overload), three work-related attitudes (person-job fit, job satisfaction and organizational commitment), three customer outcomes (perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions), and three employee performance measures (task, contextual and overall).

We test our model using dyadic data from a field-study based on actual one-to-one interactions between matched samples of frontline employees (N=480) and their customers (N=1440) in 60 retail outlets of a telecom services company in Australia. We adapted existing scales to measure physical attractiveness, communication ability, likeability, expertise and trustworthiness (Ahearne et al. 1999), in-role service manner and need identification behaviors (Lloyd and Luk 2011), extra-role service behavior (Bettencourt and Brown 1997), service quality and customer satisfaction (Sharma, Tam, and Kim 2015) and behavioral intentions (Ramsey and Sohi 1997),

role ambiguity (House, Schuler, and Levanoni 1983), role conflict (Singh 1998), role overload (Harris and Bladen 1994), person-job fit (Donavan et al. 2004), job satisfaction (Johnson and Sohi 2014), organizational commitment (McDonald and Makin 2000), task performance (Mattila et al. 2003), contextual performance (Van Scotter and Motowidlo 1996) and overall performance (Wright and Cropanzano 1998).

Summary of Findings

All employee characteristics except physical attractiveness have a positive effect on their perceived service (in-role and extra-role) behaviors (H1). Next, two out of three employee role stressors (i.e., ambiguity and conflict but not overload) have significant negative effects on both the service behaviors (H2) and the three work-related attitudes, namely person-job fit, job satisfaction and organizational commitment (H3). Similarly, most employee work-related attitudes have positive effects on service behaviors (H4), which in turn have positive effects on customer outcomes (H5) and employee performance (H6). Finally, only one out of three work-related attitudes (job satisfaction) has a positive effect on one of the three employee performance measures (task performance) (H7). Thus, all our hypotheses are partially supported, with 41 out of the 69 hypothesized relationships as significant. None of the demographics have any significant effect on any other variable or relationship in our model.

Key Contributions

Our results highlight the importance of looking beyond frontline employees' personal characteristics and taking into account their role stressors, work-related attitudes and service behaviors, in order to predict and improve their performance, as assessed by their customers and

supervisors. For example, communication ability, likeability, expertise and trustworthiness may drive employee performance besides physical attractiveness. Similarly, we find negative effects of role ambiguity on job satisfaction, in-role behaviors, organizational commitment and citizenship behaviors; and negative effects of role conflict on job satisfaction, organizational commitment as well as in-role and extra-role behaviors. In contrast, role overload has negative effects on organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and it leads to higher levels of job stress, while its impact on extra-role behaviors is inconclusive.

Overall, our research highlights that in today's increasingly complex and competitive marketplace, it may not be enough for frontline employees to have excellent personal attributes but they should also have positive work-related attitudes and know how to manage their role stressors and perform appropriate service behaviors. All this would help them generate positive outcomes for the customers that in turn would make their supervisors evaluate them more favorably. Similarly, managers need to understand that it is not enough to hire good looking, talkative and pushy frontline employees but they should also train their employees to develop the expertise for their jobs in order to instill trust among their customers and to demonstrate the appropriate in-role and extra-role service behaviors.

Note: References are available upon request.