

What Makes Good Frontline Employees? How They Look, Think and/or Serve?

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Introduction

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, 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.

Literature review

Ahearne et al. (1999) show that salesperson characteristics such as communication ability, likeability and trustworthiness (but not expertise) mediate the positive effect of perceived attractiveness on their performance and this effect fades away as the salesperson–customer relationship progresses. In contrast, Söderlund and Julander (2009) find a direct positive effect of a service worker's physical attractiveness on customer satisfaction. More recently, Jin and Merkebu (2015) show positive correlations between employees' physical attractiveness and customer gratitude, trust and favorable reciprocal behaviors, whereas Wan and Wyer (2015) find that the physical attractiveness of a service provider may have either a positive or negative effect on consumers, based on the context and self-presentation concerns. From these findings it is clear that there is no consensus on the underlying process by which personal characteristics of FLEs may influence their customers' perceptions and evaluations.

Prior research also explores the challenges faced by frontline employees in performing their duties, such as emotional labor (Morris and Feldman 1996), emotional exhaustion (Grandey 2003), emotional dissonance (Pugh et al. 2011), emotional competence (Delcourt et al. 2016), employee withdrawal (Deery et al. 2002), burnout (Babakus et al. 2009), compliance with special customer requests (Beatty et al. 2016), as well as their creativity and attention to detail (Sok et al. 2018). However, most of these studies focus only the employees' point of view and ignore the customers' perspective (Groth et al. 2009). Thus, there is hardly any research that explores the combined dyadic influence of employees' personal characteristics, role stressors and work-related attitudes on their service behaviors as perceived by the customers and other outcomes such as perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

Frontline employees' performance is influenced by a wide variety of factors, including personal characteristics, such as communication ability, likeability and trustworthiness (Ahearne et al. 1999), and customer orientation (Brown et al. 2002); role stressors, such as role ambiguity and role conflict (Singh 2000); organizational support, such as management commitment (Babakus et al. 2003) and empowerment (Ahearne et al. 2005); and work-related attitudes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Becker et al. 1996; Hunt et

al. 1985), person-job fit and person-organization fit (Lauver and Kristof-Brown 2001). However, there is little research on how the employees' service-role behaviors (in-role and extra-role) perceived by the customers may affect their performance (Ahearne et al. 2007).

Method/Approach

We test our dyadic model using data from a field-study of 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).

Results/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.

Discussion and implications

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, to predict and improve their performance, as assessed by their customers and supervisors. In other words, communication ability, likeability, expertise and trustworthiness may drive employee performance besides physical attractiveness. We also find negative effects of role ambiguity on job satisfaction, in-role behaviors, organizational commitment and citizenship behaviors; and of role conflict on job satisfaction, organizational commitment as well as in-role and extra-role behaviors. Similarly, 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 shows that in an 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 to 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 to instill trust among their customers through appropriate in-role and extra-role behaviors.

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