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Exploring frontline conflicts at higher education institutions – experiments

This work-in-progress paper deals with human factor of the frontline (teachers and administrative staff) in higher education. Students are active participants who shape the service experience. The customers who do not behave according to standard (so-called jaycustomers), we define with the following typology: model students, agitators, violators, roleplayers, arguers and idea originators. Using complex methodology, we examine the frontline with special focus on misbehaviours. This latter is the most advanced in testing the methodology. As a preliminary conclusion we can state that it is a fundamental aim to achieve cooperation between the frontline employee and the students in jaycustomer conflicts.

1. INTRODUCTION

The servuction model contains those factors that need to be known and influenced to develop services marketing strategy (EIGLIER and LANGEARD 1991). The system is made up of four elements: backoffice, frontline, the customer of the service and other customers who are also present, simultaneously. In customer-oriented service processes, such as higher education, it is possible to identify several critical aspects, any of which can put the relationship between the provider and the user in danger. Frontline processes take place with the customer's passive and active involvement. In this process the provider and the customer of the service as well as all the other customers present interact with each other. Ideally, it takes place in accordance with expectations and standards, but very often conflicts arise. These may result from interactions between the provider (teacher and administrative staff) and students which can affect the quality perceived by other customers (student group members). A conflict or a difficult interaction can be caused by the provider's improper behaviour or by irregular customer attitude or behaviour (so-called jaycustomer misbehaviour). For the sake of customer satisfaction, particular stress has to be placed on handling disturbing factors, since this is an area with real competition among different services.

This research program deals with *frontline audit* (VERES and JÄCKEL 2008). Using complex methodology, we examine the frontline and its processes and test our research design with different methods. Our aim is to explore service interactions, model and measure mechanisms of action as well as to identify how bilateral performance risk can be reduced in services that may involve pre-transaction, transaction and post-transaction risks. Our investigation focuses on higher education but will also touch upon other frontline-intensive services to make our findings useful for a number of areas.

2. FRONTLINE MANAGEMENT

An immediate message of the provider's values and culture is conveyed to the customer by the behaviour perceived in the frontline; thus we can assume that there is

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a close relationship between judging the quality of a service and judging frontline. Problems in interactions can be controlled through frontline management.

Frontline management is a systematic management of material and personal factors (frontline staff plus active customers) of service frontline. It is possible to exactly define the frontline of a service from the interactions between customers and the provider. During the interaction, customer activity can be expressed in terms of the various distances measured from the provider:

- a) Face-to-face encounter where there is a direct relationship with one or more frontline employees.
- b) Phone encounter where the customer solves a current problem by contacting one or more frontline employees by phone.
- c) Remote encounter which refers to a customer's active and a provider's passive (mostly mechanical) role within an interaction.

In the case of higher education services a direct encounter is a constant teacher-student relationship and occasional encounters with the administrative division of frontline when e.g. signing up an academic year or solving study-related administrative matters. The people involved in the encounter are given, so a student has no possibility to choose who to contact. A phone encounter is a common and simpler way to get an answer to urgent questions. Of course, provided that the call is taken. Remote encounters in education play an ever increasing role. With good management, all information is available through a computer system making it possible to sign up for exams, check results and download exercises through a well functioning network. Mass education seeks to operate this system in a more efficient manner. An important place for remote encounters is the university homepage. In today's fierce competition among higher education institutions, it can have a significant part in attracting students.

In an educational context, the frontline is usually divided into teachers and administrative staff. It is necessary to regulate the work of administrative staff, as setting standards makes the process more transparent and easy to follow. Such regulations are only reasonable for teachers' administrative tasks, since regulations imposed on teaching would bring more harm than benefits. Also, regulating frontline processes is only expedient in certain areas e.g. operation of the registrar's department.

3. JAYCUSTOMERS

Interaction is an important element of the servuction model. There is a sort of interaction between the provider and the customer. Students are an integrated part of the service, active participants who shape the service experience. In our model, we described customer group "A" as a group of average students who take part in the process according to the expected standards of an educational service. Customer group "B" includes students who do not behave according to standards. They are part of the process but their behaviour may disturb it in some way; they may cause conflicts, affect the provider's behaviour and influence the satisfaction and the opinion of customer group "A" of the service. The success of education is largely dependent on the mentality of its customers. Motivated students can facilitate the success of the teaching process with their attitude, whereas less motivated students can adversely affect the success and atmosphere of this process through their behaviour.

LOVELOCK (1994) and more recently HARRIS and REYNOLDS (2003) termed members of customer group "B" as jaycustomers. According to LOVELOCK's definition of

this type of behaviour, an individual's tactless, negligent or undisciplined, offensive behaviour disturbs the provider and the other customers in the service process. In a more subtle form, FULLERTON and PUNJ (1997) note: "*Aberrant consumer behaviour is behaviour [...] which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct.*" Consequently, jaycustomers disturb the service process in some way, thereby influencing its quality, but they also affect the quality perceived by other customers who are present.

If we accept, and in educational services we have to accept (see e.g. the difficulties in selecting frontline employees), that the behaviour of teachers and the administrative staff does not in all cases meet expected standards, then we need to think of certain jaycustomer types as not only individuals with aberrant conduct but, on the contrary, also as people who demand higher quality service through their behaviour. In fact, non-standard behaviour may even have benefits. SCHNEIDER, BOWEN (1985) as well as SCHNEIDER, PARKINGTON and BUXTON (1980) assume a strong link between customer and provider behaviour. This confirms our view concerning jaycustomer typology. Their conduct can influence the service quality in either a negative or a positive manner. For this reason, our research considers jaycustomers as not only negative characters.

In an educational service setting, we define jaycustomer (jaystudent) types as follows: "*Jaycustomers are individuals who through their unplanned behaviour interrupt or disturb standard processes taking place in the frontline of a service. They affect the perceived quality of the service by influencing the provider's or the other customers' conduct or opinion in either a positive or a negative manner. In general, we can distinguish the following jaycustomer types.*"

- *Model students*: They are the ones who read and study every written information/regulation letter by letter. They constantly remind the provider that according to the written regulations... s/he should have acted in a particular manner at a given moment. They demand that written codes of conduct and rules be obeyed. They create a conflict by slowing down, or disrupting the process. Their excessively positive attitude disturbs both the provider and the other customers. (Advantages: they pay meticulous attention and their remarks may shed light on erroneous performance, deviating from standards).
- *Agitators*: They are constantly dissatisfied with everything and complain to everybody everywhere. They wish to turn the other customers against the provider and create a conflict. (Advantages: their complaints might agree with similar dissatisfaction of other customers and the service process can be improved based on their feedback).
- *Violators*, the skilful: They have a behaviour that bypasses standards. They tend to push their own interests the most e.g. they arrive 30 seconds before closing time/the end of working hours and make an angry scene explaining why they could not arrive earlier and expect full service. (Advantages: they help to identify different jaycustomers and help to prepare/harden the provider for how to handle such customers)
- *Roleplayers*, self-styled actors: These are people who constantly position themselves in any situation. They go to great lengths to get a better or more attentive service e.g. when standing in a queue they complain about terrible pains or sickness and expect exceptional, immediate service. They disturb both the provider and the other customers. (Advantages: their obvious behaviour may lighten the atmosphere.)

- *Arguers*: They know everything, even better than the provider. They say what the provider should do, say etc. and when. They do not agitate but cause intellectual disturbance. (Advantages: they might be right or have a creative idea).
- *Idea originators*: They are able to come up with a much better idea in any situation. They always have suggestions or revolutionary innovations. (Advantages: they might have ideas which could be utilized by everybody.)

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

One particular deficiency of satisfaction surveys in an educational setting is that the applied research models are descriptive rather than explanatory, i.e. they do not look behind the reasons of dissatisfaction. Consequently, result-based developments do not occur where needed, thus they do not achieve the desired effect (VERES and MIHÁLY 2007). Education as a transaction is an area of services that limitedly tangible. Also, institutional regulations and general belief – in fact, because customer orientation of students has become a key issue – increasingly emphasize the service provider character of educational institutions. Therefore, research into the satisfaction of actors can greatly rely on related findings of services marketing. Another important argument of our research approach is that handling extraordinary situations or problems is much more important than the correctness of standard processes. Customers are namely more sensitive to the former, since they consider the observance of standards as a kind of “must be” expectation. Extraordinary situations (like the ones brought about by jaycustomers) are dangerous because solid satisfaction, which has been present, can be changed into an instable, transient state that then needs to be stabilized by the service recovery process.

The questions are: How does frontline judge its position? How does it rate its own activity and what do students think of these? How satisfied are they with the quality of the educational service and the job of frontline staff based on frontline experience? Which are the critical areas and which are the well functioning ones? Where is a change absolutely necessary?

4.1. Methods

Providers and customers may judge frontline performance differently. Our study is conducted based on the elements of the frontline audit methodology (VERES and JÄCKEL 2003). Frontline audit in education wants to find out how the provider’s administrative division and the teachers see their own performance as well as how customers, i.e. students perceive the quality of this activity. Frontline audit, being a complex research methodology, is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Our research focused on how frontline interactions influence satisfaction paying special attention to the moderating effect of different jaycustomer types. From the point of view of a provider, jaycustomers entail risks, because their disturbing behaviour makes frontline interactions more difficult and may also influence the behaviour of and the quality perceived by customers who are present on the scene of the service.

4.2 Research project modules

According to our time-schedule we are going to carry out the research program by June 2009. The project consists of the following five modules:

I. Exploratory research involving frontline employees and customers

- 1) Interview on the quality of frontline work:
 - Frontline employees (teachers and administrative staff) – How do they see their own performance?
 - Customers (students) – How do they find the work of the frontline employees?
- 2) In this module, we wish to explore frontline procedures and psychological mechanisms of action with the help of surveys and qualitative methods.

II. Questionnaire surveys

- 1) Satisfaction research among students
- 2) Assessment of conflicts based on evaluations from frontline staff and students.

The research aims to explore conflicts in an educational service. In the interview phase, one questionnaire each is compiled for teachers, other members of frontline staff and for students. We describe hypothetical conflicts that have to be evaluated on a scale. In the second part of the questionnaire, similarly to the method of critical incident analysis (CIT/CIA), we ask the respondents to describe further conflicts, from the point of view of all three groups. The statistical apparatus is used to confront conflicts on two different sides (student – administrative employee and student – teacher). The question of our study is to what extent the same situation viewed from the various sides is identical or different. How do students and employees of the frontline see and judge the same problem?

III. Multidimensional scaling (MDS)

This is a process that shows the perceptions and preferences of respondents on a diagram. We suppose that the axes of the spatial map make reference to the psychological basis or the dimensions based on which respondents form their perceptions and preferences of stimuli in frontline conflict situations (MALHOTRA and SIMON 2008).

IV. Observations

Observations of frontline processes by participants during lectures or seminar classes and observation of the registrar's department or information centre, while paying particular attention to the behaviour of and response from jaycustomers.

V. Experiments

- 1) Frontline testing. When developing a mystery calling test, in addition to a routine performance test, we also study how unusual situations are solved e.g. tolerance level of frontline employees (BOUTBOUL 1996).
- 2) Jaycustomer tests by creating conflicts in the educational process. We aim to test reactions. With the help of a few jaycustomer type students involved in the experiment, we create conflicts with relation to certain educational situations. We wish to find out whether students judge the depth of the conflict equally, what conflict management strategies they employ, whether they adapt to the framework determined by the teacher, or they even want to influence the framework to solve the conflict. After the experiment, a follow-up study is conducted with a questionnaire survey.

5. EXPERIENCES OF THE JAYCUSTOMER TESTS

By early February 2009 the first exploratory module has been completed. Based upon its findings the quantitative surveys and the experimental research module have been launched. Considering that module V/2 is most advanced in testing the methodology, its experience can be summarized in this phase. The experiments were designed to show if the behaviour of students is driven by cooperation to mitigate or enhance the conflict, i.e. to what extent are they active and concerned about settling a conflict. To this end, we use the BALES socio-psychological system of observation with the following dimensions of evaluation (BALES 1950, 1999):

- socio-affective behaviour (positive): demonstrate solidarity, release tension, agree
- task behaviour: makes suggestions, expresses an opinion, gives guidance
- exchange of information: asks for guidance, opinion, suggestions
- socio-affective behaviour (negative): disagrees, demonstrates tension, contradicts

We model the difference between two situations where the teacher is collaborating or aggressive. In addition, we investigate what groups are formed among students and what factors drive the interests of each group. A further research question is how much it changes the opinion about a provider if the customer is the observer or if s/he is among the active participants of the conflict.

In addition, we use a follow-up questionnaire to discover what groups are formed among students and what factors drive the interests of each group. The main objective of the research is to find out if cooperation is established in such situations.

Our first hypothesis is that it is a fundamental aim to achieve cooperation between the teacher (frontline employee) and the students.

We study what interests motivate the participants in a conflict.

- solution;
- to create further conflicts;
- to show up the other party;
- what interest groups are formed among the students (motivated students who give priority to acquiring knowledge, the group of those who “choose the easy way”, and the indifferent).

Our second assumption is that most students remain passive and think: “let’s see what happens and I’d better not get involved”.

We had great difficulty in applying the method in terms of providing both the people and the technical recording: voluntary technical staff, technical settings, to select and train suitable people who were informed of the aims (it only turned out on the spot if they were suitable) and persuading teachers. Findings were interpreted in a qualitative manner using appropriate structuring models. In this case, college colleagues and students volunteered to take part in organizing and carrying out the experiments. The participants complied with preliminary instructions and stood the test. This was confirmed by the results of the questionnaire, so no repetitions were needed. A further problem is that the experiments can only be performed in a limited number, because spread of information about “unusual” conditions (e.g. there is a video camera on the lecture) inevitably causes the members of the group to become suspicious. Participation in the experiment was positively judged by the people involved. They found it interesting and took part even in its evaluation voluntarily.

Another time-consuming part of the experiments was to record in writing what had been said. This is crucial for examining the behaviour of frontline employees. The Bales interaction analysis required the analyses of two independent experts.

These were compared and a joint result was developed. This quantified different forms of communication in cooperation and/or self-actualization. Therefore, if during research a real frontline interaction needs to be analysed, the Bales system makes it possible to structurally analyse and evaluate the participants' attitudes towards the conflict.

Conflicts call our attention to the fact that in education students mostly accept the requirements imposed by the institution. In the test situations, the outcome can be interpreted in such a way that the teacher personifying this set of rules received support from the students. This means that they expect fellow students to "play by the rules" in order to ensure the peace of the service. As long as they are not affected by a conflict, they usually do not take sides.

6. POSSIBILITIES OF APPLICATION

In the Bologna Process, one of the central goals is quality assurance of higher education. Quality assurance is responsible for identifying and correcting any quality defects in a specific service. The results obtained with the applied research methodology in a higher education context can yield new aspects in service quality management. *The findings can be used in practice* in quality assurance of higher education and can be extended to research into other frontline-related services. In addition to the above, as a by-product of research, it will provide new insights into the human resource management of services in coordinating frontline and back office staff as well as in selecting and supervising frontline employees.

This research will be practically applicable, because it can help to develop proactive provider behaviour. If conflicts are defined in an inappropriate manner, it may cause further conflicts. Exploring conflicts will make it possible to focus quality development procedure there where defects occur.

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