



The impact of service worker personal resources on relationship quality in business solutions



Daniel D. Prior

School of Business, UNSW Canberra, University of New South Wales, Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 5 May 2014

Received in revised form 2 May 2015

Accepted 2 May 2015

Available online 2 July 2015

Keywords:

Job demands–resources theory

Frontline employee

Empathy, flexibility, reputation

Task alignment

Delivery team

Management team

ABSTRACT

Service workers are vital in business solution implementations due to their importance to customer outcomes. However, service workers face time and resource constraints that limit their ability to address the multiple requirements of individual customer firm members. Therefore, achieving relationship quality can be stressful. Surprisingly little research exists in this area, so it is, therefore, the focus of the present study. Drawing on the results of a survey of 220 members of customer firms, the study first explores the impacts of three types of personal resources (flexibility, reputation and empathy) on relationship quality. The results suggest all three personal resources have positive effects. The study also considers the mediating effects of task alignment (i.e. when personal resources are appropriate for specific job demands) and the moderating effects of team membership (customer delivery team versus customer management team). The results suggest task alignment dampens the effects of the three personal resources on relationship quality, which implies that specific tasks do not necessarily affect relationship quality as a whole. Team membership moderates all hypothesized effects, suggesting a more operational focus for customer delivery team members and a more strategic focus for customer management team members.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Incorporating services into a standard product mix or integrating them with other market offerings is an attractive option for many firms. If done well, firms can experience greater profitability and customer satisfaction (Brady, Davies, & Gann, 2005; Ulaga & Reinartz, 2011). One form of product–service hybrid is business solutions. These involve creating and implementing a blend of products and services to achieve specific customer requirements (Nordin & Kowalkowski, 2010; Tuli, Kohli, & Bharadwaj, 2007). However, achieving positive outcomes from business solutions is challenging. There is a need for relationships to develop productively between service workers and individual members of the customer firm during the course of implementation (Tuli et al., 2007). While these relationships are essential to a successful implementation process (Nordin & Kowalkowski, 2010; Tuli et al., 2007), little research currently exists as to how service workers contribute to relationship quality with members of the customer firm during business solutions implementations.

Achieving relationship quality with members of the customer firm involves a series of trade-offs. Service workers must reconcile between the demands of supervisors, customers and colleagues while also facing

time and resource constraints (Singh, 2000; Zablah, Franke, Brown, & Bartholomew, 2012). This process can be stressful (Zablah, Franke, et al., 2012). Therefore, service workers are likely to draw on their personal resources – physical, psychological, social and/or organizational job aspects (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004) – to cope with these circumstances (Yavas & Babakus, 2011; Zablah, Chonko, Bettencourt, Allen, & Haas, 2012). While previous studies consider the role of personal resources in coping with job stress as this faces sales personnel (e.g. Lewin & Sager, 2010; Nonis & Sager, 2003), little research exists beyond sales-related customer encounters.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the impact of service workers' personal resources on relationship quality with members of customer firms during business solutions implementations. The study focuses on three types of personal resources: flexibility, reputation and empathy. The study uncovers the relative impact of each personal resource type. This is an important new contribution to research in service worker coping and relationship quality as this relates to specific service worker relationships in business solutions. The study also considers the mediation effects of task alignment. Surprisingly, the study finds that task alignment dampens the positive effects of personal resources on relationship quality. Again, this is a novel contribution. Lastly, the study considers the moderating role of group membership. The study supports the notion that members of the customer delivery team consider their relationship with the service worker

E-mail address: d.prior@adfa.edu.au.

differently to members of the customer management team. This is evident across most of the study's hypotheses. This extends the notion of customer firm member heterogeneity from buying center research (e.g. Jackson, Keith, & Burdick, 1984; Moon & Tikoo, 2002) to an implementation context, rather than focusing on purchase decisions only.

This paper begins with a description of the theoretical background to the study before moving into hypothesis development. The following sections describe the methodology and the results. Next, the study includes a general discussion before offering a conclusion and future research directions.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Service worker stress and business solutions

A prevailing sentiment in the marketing literature is that service workers must prioritize customer needs. Previous studies suggest that this emphasis is likely to create customer satisfaction for both sales-related and implementation-related outcomes (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Stock & Hoyer, 2005). However, an excessive customer focus can increase service costs, with customer-facing service workers often experiencing the brunt of these costs (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011). The boundary-spanning nature of many service worker roles creates role conflict and role ambiguity, which are common sources of stress (Zablah, Franke, et al., 2012). Dealing with difficult customers and managing customer complaints are also key sources of stress for service workers (Lapr e, 2011; Rust & Oliver, 2000; Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998). Therefore, managing the tension between customer requirements and coping with stress is a major concern for service workers (Singh, 2000).

A common way that service workers cope with stress is by drawing on their personal resources. In broad terms, these represent the job aspects of value that can generate a positive effect (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2004). The skills, capabilities, attitudes and behaviors of individuals are the types of personal resources of central interest in the marketing literature (Miao & Evans, 2012; Stock & Hoyer, 2005; Zablah, Chonko, et al., 2012). To reduce the effects of job stress, it is necessary for the service worker's personal resources to enable some control over prevailing circumstances (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Miao & Evans, 2012). This generally requires an alignment between the service worker's perceptions of stressors, their attitude and their behavior (Stock & Hoyer, 2005). Most of the marketing-related research in this area focuses on sales personnel. This results in other important categories of service worker receiving less consideration.

This study focuses on service workers in business solutions environments. It is likely that service workers experience considerable role ambiguity and role conflict in these contexts. There are several reasons for this. First, there is a need to work with multiple actors that span the supplier firm, the customer firm and the broader network (Hakanen, 2014; Windahl & Lakemond, 2006). Second, business solutions implementations require high technical proficiency in many cases since they are typical in industries such as IT, telecommunications, construction, engineering and professional services (Biggemann, Kowalkowski, Maley, & Brege, 2013; Li, 2011; Prior, 2013). Third, business solutions generally involve capital projects and are, therefore, high in monetary value while also being high in risk (Scott-Young & Samson, 2008; T ollner, Blut, & Holzm uller, 2011). Overall, the combination of these factors can be stressful for service workers.

2.2. Service workers and relationship quality in business solutions

Achieving relationship quality with customers is attractive for supplier firms since it promotes lower conflict, higher loyalty and higher relationship value (Palmatier, 2008; Roy & Eshghi, 2013; Skarneas & Robson, 2008). However, most studies in this area do not consider

situations where supplier firms comprise diverse individuals. Indeed, current research in this area focuses on the relationship between sales personnel and customers (Palmatier, Scheer, Houston, Evans, & Gopalakrishna, 2007; Park & Deitz, 2006). Since inter-firm relationships rely on social exchanges between individuals, there is a need to also consider how individuals contribute to relationship quality more broadly. This need is particularly acute given the increasing shift towards service integration in many firms (Biggemann et al., 2013; Raddats & Easingwood, 2010).

3. Hypothesis development

3.1. Personal resources and relationship quality

The observations above suggest that service workers are likely to draw on their personal resources to deal with stress during business solutions implementations. Service workers are also likely to build relationships with members of customer firms. Therefore, this study asks how the personal resources of service workers affect relationship quality with members of the customer firm during business solutions implementations. The study focuses on three types of personal resource: flexibility, reputation and empathy. Each of these resources represents a different combination of service worker attitudes and behaviors.

3.1.1. Flexibility and relationship quality

Environmental uncertainty is a constant concern in business relationships. Shifts in circumstances can emerge due to economic, political, technological and social factors. Relationship partners may also take advantage of prevailing opportunities (Wang, Li, Ross, & Craighead, 2012; Wathne & Heide, 2000). The nature of the relationship itself may be unstable and incoherent due to poor information exchange and an absence of appropriate governance structures (Wang et al., 2012). Customer requirements may change during the course of implementation (Flint, Blocker, & Boutin, 2011; Flint, Woodruff, & Gardial, 2002). These factors can give rise to ambiguity, particularly in contexts where products are future-based, such in the case of business solutions implementations (Marquardt, 2013).

For service workers, the complexity of the business solutions environment is likely to amplify uncertainty. Business solutions involve multiple actors, are technically complex, are risky, have high financial value and are lengthy (Nordin & Kowalkowski, 2010; Tuli et al., 2007). These environmental conditions suggest that service workers often make decisions and engage in behaviors in ambiguous circumstances. Dealing with uncertainty is one of the key sources of stress for service workers. Uncertainty underpins the main sources of stress they face through either poor role definition or by creating conflict between prominent roles (Miao & Evans, 2012; Singh, 1993).

One form of personal resource that could be useful is flexibility. Flexibility is an important element of employee coping strategies (Cheng, Kogan, & Chio, 2012; Hyman, 2005). Flexibility involves recognition that different attitudes and behaviors are necessary for different circumstances (Franke & Park, 2006; Spiro & Weitz, 1990). This requires an awareness of circumstances and an understanding as to the most appropriate behaviors (Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994). It also requires confidence in the application of behaviors (Spiro & Weitz, 1990). While flexibility is essential to adaptive selling behaviors (Chakrabarty, Brown, & Widing, 2013; Franke & Park, 2006; Hughes, Bon, & Rapp, 2012), evidence also exists that it is essential for service workers when delivering highly customized outcomes (Gwinner, Bitner, Brown, & Kumar, 2005).

This study suggests that flexibility underpins service workers' ability to create and maintain positive customer relationships in business solutions. Flexible service workers are more likely to understand the prevailing situation despite its complexity. They are also more likely to adjust their behaviors appropriately. Since flexibility is central to

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1027368>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1027368>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)