



Why frontline employees engage as idea collectors: An assessment of underlying motives and critical success factors



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ABSTRACT

The importance of frontline employees for the success of organizations is recognized by researchers and practitioners alike. However, their importance for the innovativeness of companies resulting from their boundary spanning role is often underestimated and has received little attention in prior research. The present paper contributes to the literature by empirically investigating idea fishing behaviors, and, in particular, the relationship between idea gathering and idea dissemination behaviors, of frontline employees from different industrial and business services firms. Furthermore, the impact of motivators such as job satisfaction and desire for upward mobility and the effects of other important conditions such as role stress and internal network on idea gathering and dissemination are assessed. Results of our study show that the proposed chain of idea gathering leading to idea dissemination and resulting in innovation holds. Furthermore, the various effects of role stress underline the importance of differentiating between different forms of role conflict and ambiguity. Based on these findings, implications for management and research are derived.

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1. Introduction

The importance of frontline employees (FLEs) for the success and effectiveness of organizations is recognized by researchers and practitioners alike (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Singh, 2000). FLEs play a central role in building and developing customer relationships and have a significant influence on perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and loyalty (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Grönroos, 2007). Through this they also have a considerable impact on the overall performance of the firm (Capon, Farley, & Hoenig, 1990; Hays & Hill, 1997).

However, intra-organizational knowledge sharing of FLEs and their importance for the innovativeness of companies is often underestimated and has received little attention in prior research with some notable exceptions (Menguc, Auh, & Kim, 2011). Their boundary spanning position has them uniquely placed to listen to the voice of the customer and to make this voice heard in their organization (Griffin & Hauser, 1993; Van der Heijden, Schepers, Nijssen, & Ordanini, 2013).

Integrating customer information in innovation processes positively influences the success of new product and service development projects (Evanschitzky, Eisend, Calantone, & Jiang, 2012; Gruner & Homburg, 2000; Matthing, Sandén, & Edvardsson, 2004). This appears to be

particularly true for the early stages of the innovation process, the generation of ideas (Alam, 2002). While there are some concerns in the literature regarding the innovativeness and market success of innovations built on integrating customers and customer information (Christensen, 1997; Ulwick, 2002), there is strong evidence that integrating customers and customer information can lead to highly original ideas for innovation (Magnusson, Matthing, & Kristensson, 2003) and to more successful new products and services (Cooper, Edgett, & Kleinschmidt, 2004; Gruner & Homburg, 2000).

FLEs represent a unique and valuable source for this information (Grönroos, 2007; Pelham & Lieb, 2004) as they are the organization's closest link to their customers (Jong, Verbeke, & Nijssen, 2014; Singh, 2000). They interact with customers in formal and informal situations, receive customers' comments, praise and complaints and hear information on competitors' market activities (Le Bon & Merunka, 2006; Lorge & Brewer, 1998). New ideas, born from observation, direct suggestions or off-hand comments from customers, can arise as an unplanned by-product of these interactions and then made available to the company through their FLEs.

At the heart of our research interest lies the question of how companies can profit from the potential for innovation arising from the interactions between their FLEs and their customers. We look at how FLEs gather ideas, suggestions and innovative impulses from their customer contacts and then make these available to their company. We refer to this process as idea fishing — the FLEs fish for ideas in their customer contacts and then reel the ideas in for their company.

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Our central research question focuses on the identification of individual factors that explain variations in the behaviors of FLEs with regard to idea fishing. We develop and test a theoretical model linking antecedents to the idea fishing behaviors of FLEs. By doing so, we aim to provide companies with a better understanding on how to profit more effectively from the potential of innovation arising in customer interfaces.

We set the scene for our empirical investigation by first discussing the development of the idea fishing construct and its antecedents. In the subsequent sections, we detail the methodology and measurements used for our empirical study before presenting and discussing the results. Finally, we underline the theoretical and managerial implications of our study.

2. Development of the idea fishing concept

The concept of idea fishing is founded in the boundary spanning literature. Boundary spanners bridge the inner and outer boundaries of organizations, facilitating the flow of resources and information across these interfaces (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). Of particular relevance for innovation is informational boundary spanning (Hazy, Tivnan, & Schwandt, 2003; Tushman, 1977). This is a two-step process, in which relevant information is first gathered outside of the boundary and then disseminated within (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). In this way, boundary spanning employees can bring new information, ideas and suggestions into companies and so strengthen the company's innovativeness (Reid & de Brentani, 2004). The employees also act as filters (Leifer & Delbecq, 1978) or gatekeepers (Reid & de Brentani, 2004), as only information perceived and deemed relevant and interesting for the company by the boundary spanning employees is collected and passed on.

FLEs in customer contact positions, such as in services or sales, are also boundary spanners (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2008) and as such could use their customer contact as a source of innovation for their companies. However, research looking at the behaviors of FLEs tends to focus on sales or service delivery behaviors and the representational boundary spanning activities of FLEs (Aldrich & Herker, 1977). The information exchange here is geared not towards generating innovation, but to facilitate transactions (Walter & Gemünden, 2000) or to gain market information for strategic decision-making (Le Bon & Merunka, 2006; Lorge & Brewer, 1998). FLEs' potential for initiating innovation has so far been only little explored.

Research on new product and new service development points out the benefits of integrating FLEs from services (Lievens & Moenaert, 2000; Martin & Horne, 1995; Selden & MacMillan, 2006) and sales (Judson, Gordon, Ridnour, & Weilbaker, 2009; Judson, Schoenbachler, Gordon, Ridnour, & Weilbaker, 2006) into innovation processes. But the FLEs are seen as sources of information for existing development projects, often consulted only in the later stages of the innovation process (Judson et al., 2009; Malshe & Biemans, 2014). Their role as possible initiators of innovation, as a source for new ideas gained from their customer contacts, is marginalized.

The concept in the literature that comes closest to our definition of idea fishing is a construct developed by Bettencourt and Brown (2003) called internal influence. They define this as “taking individual initiative in communications to the firm and co-workers to improve service delivery by the organization, co-workers and oneself” (Bettencourt, Brown, & MacKenzie, 2005, p. 142). Based on both the conceptualization and the operationalization of the concept as defined by Bettencourt et al. (2005), internal influence is focused on disseminating information about creative solutions to customer problems and suggesting possible service improvements. It does not include the first step of informational boundary spanning (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981), FLEs identifying and gathering innovative ideas in their interactions with customers.

3. Conceptual model

Our conceptual model is based on two main approaches. Drawing on the literature on informational boundary spanning for innovation, we develop two hypotheses that explain the relationships between idea gathering, idea dissemination and innovation generation. For the remaining parts of our model, we draw on the concepts of social exchange and organizational citizenship-behavior (OCB). In this vein, we derive hypotheses on the direct and moderating effects of individual level work-related variables on idea gathering and idea dissemination (Fig. 1).

3.1. The relationships between idea gathering, idea dissemination and innovation generation

Innovation generation refers to radical or incremental changes in product, process, or service (Roy, Sivakumar, & Wilkinson, 2004). Ideas from various sources form the basis for future innovations. As idea generation is traditionally seen as the territory of firms' R&D departments, the relevance of FLEs in “fishing” ideas from customer contact situations has been largely ignored by academics and practitioners. We define the concept of idea fishing as follows: idea fishing refers to FLEs (1) gathering creative and innovative ideas and suggestions during interactions with customers and (2) disseminating these ideas in the company. Acknowledging that not every idea does not necessarily result in a successful implementation and thus to innovation (Baer, 2012; Kock, Heising, & Gemünden, 2014), the gathering of ideas and their dissemination represent two related, but separate concepts that may be influenced by different factors, such as individual motivations, barriers (e.g. access to internal networks), relationships to customers, and organizational factors. Since idea gathering represents a prerequisite of idea dissemination, idea gathering needs to be positively related to idea dissemination in order to impact innovation generation. Our first hypothesis can therefore be stated thus:

H1. Idea gathering has a positive impact on idea dissemination.

Resource-dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) states that external resources stemming from an organization's environment exert an important influence on the organization's survivability. Assuming that FLEs are able to collect valuable knowledge, using and sharing this knowledge could lead to better adaptation of the organization to new market developments and the creation of new innovations. Ideas fished from customer contact situations could lead to new or improved products and services, as well as new ways of doing things (i.e., incremental process-related innovations) and identifying potential new markets and customers for existing products.

Some of these ideas could be implemented directly by the FLEs and would not need to be disseminated; others would need to be distributed to various persons and departments, underlining the importance of idea dissemination. Thus:

H2. a) Idea gathering and b) idea dissemination have a positive relationship with generated innovation.

3.2. Antecedents of idea fishing behaviors

Idea fishing requires FLEs to invest time and effort. They must be attentive in customer contact situations, think about observations, develop ideas and then keep them in mind until they can be passed on. Dissemination, too, may be time consuming, with FLEs needing to address the right people and explain their ideas. So, why do FLEs engage in idea fishing behaviors that require personal involvement and time and may be seen as peripheral to their basic job tasks?

Measures of FLE performance discussed in the literature do not include aspects of developing and passing on ideas gained from customer

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