

**Frontline Employees' Views on Organizational Factors that affect the Delivery of
Service Quality in Call Centers**

Alison M Dean
Faculty of Business and Law
The University of Newcastle
Callaghan NSW 2308
Australia
ph +61 2 4921 7393
alison.dean@newcastle.edu.au

Al Rainnie
Center for Labour Market Studies
University of Leicester
7-9 Salisbury Road
Leicester LE1 7QR
ph +44 116 252 5995
al.rainnie@le.ac.uk

Biographical notes

Alison M Dean PhD is Associate Professor of Marketing, and Assistant Dean (Teaching and Learning) in the Faculty of Business and Law, the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research interests include service delivery, service quality, customer loyalty, call centers and seniors. Her work spans management and marketing, and has been published in a variety of journals including the *Journal of Service Research*, *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, the *Journal of Services Marketing*, *Services Marketing Quarterly*, *Managing Service Quality*, and *Total Quality Management*. Additionally, she has served as a guest editor of *Managing Service Quality*.

Professor Al Rainnie is Director of Research at the Center for Labour Market Studies (CLMS), and formerly professor and founding Director of the Monash Institute for Regional Studies, at Monash University, Australia. Al has also been Director of the Low Pay Unit in the North of England, as well as working at the University of Hertfordshire. Al has researched and written widely in the fields of work, employment, regional and community development. Current research interests include small firms, trade unionism and community engagement, and creative workers and regional development (in particular Richard Florida and the Theory of the Creative Class).

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper reports on a study that investigated employees' views on the organizational factors that affect their ability to deliver service quality to customers. The study is important because call centers represent unique work environments and they have not been used in the development of service quality theory.

Methodology

Ten focus groups of frontline employees who work in a telecommunications call center in Australia were conducted. Data were subjected to content analysis.

Findings

Nine major themes were identified. Some of these themes are evident in theory arising from service quality gaps, service climate, and service profit chain studies. Other themes include whether managers emphasise sales or efficiency, rather than service quality; approaches to performance monitoring and feedback, role and productivity demands, quality assurance regimes, and employees' experiences of service encounter stress.

Research limitations/implications

The findings suggest that various factors from prior work need to be integrated and extended to enhance service quality in call centers. However, data were collected from only one call center.

Practical implications

The present study suggests that, to deliver high levels of service quality, call center managers need to rethink their approaches to productivity and performance management, and hiring and supporting the ‘right’ service staff.

Originality/value

This paper re-examines service quality in the specific context of call centers. It provides an organizational focus and complements recent work which has tested the role of employee attitudes in service quality studies. The paper concludes with a model for testing.

Keywords

service quality, call centers, frontline employees, role stress, productivity

Classification

Research paper

Introduction

Call centers are strategically important to many organizations because they are often the major customer interface, and they can provide a service-based competitive edge using high volume, low cost delivery via telephones (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001). To address both budgetary and service priorities, managers are concerned with customization of their products and standardization of their processes (Frenkel et al., 1998). Customization is necessary to meet the ever increasing expectations of consumers (Hamer et al., 1999) and to provide high levels of service quality and subsequent customer loyalty (Dean, 2007). Standardization enables employee training, consistent responses to customer enquiries, and the ability to cater to a mass market (Frenkel et al., 1998). In meeting both cost and service goals, frontline employees are usually expected to adhere to strict efficiency targets, and to accept high levels of monitoring and control while managing customer service interactions (Brown and Maxwell, 2002; Houlihan, 2002). This presents a unique and contradictory service environment.

The environment is contradictory because many call centers appear to be managed in a way that does not assist employees to deliver high quality service to customers. Scholars have shown that call center work requires emotional labor (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Sturdy, 1998), and that frontline staff are under pressure to meet their productivity goals at the same time as delivering quality customer service (Deery et al., 2002; Kinnie et al., 2000; Singh, 2000). Consequently, call center work results in high levels of employee stress (Knights and McCabe, 1998; Taylor and Bain, 1999; Wallace et al., 2000). Despite the recognition of call center work pressures, the perceptions of their frontline employees have rarely been used to develop or test the theoretical frameworks concerned with customer service (Armistead et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2000). This study aims to address that gap. More specifically, it responds to the call for more investigation into the factors that assist frontline employees to manage the

call center environment and simultaneously deliver high levels of service quality (de Ruyter et al., 2001; Singh, 2000). We aim to build a holistic picture based on frontline employees' views about how their work environment influences their ability to serve customers. Hence, the overall research question guiding our study is: What organizational factors affect the delivery of service quality in call centers?

The paper commences by discussing the variables that have been used in prior studies, in order to demonstrate the factors that contribute to service quality delivery in contexts other than call centers. It then considers two specific issues relating to service quality in call centers, the potential conflict between quality and productivity, and performance monitoring. In considering different perspectives, the discussion identifies the questions to be asked of frontline employees. Following the introduction, details of the method are outlined, and the results are provided and discussed. We then highlight the practical implications of the findings and conclude with limitations and potential future research.

Organizational factors that affect service quality delivery

The main frameworks that have been used in previous studies to explore service quality delivery include customer service climate (Schneider et al., 1998), the service quality gaps model (Zeithaml et al., 1988) and the service profit chain (Heskett et al., 1997). These are considered in turn.

Service climate is a general orientation to service, that emphasises human resource practices, managerial priorities and customer orientation. Service climate studies have identified factors such as 'concern for customers' and 'concern for employees' (Borucki and Burke, 1999), incorporated dimensions of customer orientation (Rogg et al., 2001; Schneider et al., 1998) or resulted in customer oriented behaviours by employees (Peccei and Rosenthal,

2000). Service climate studies have found a direct link between a positive service climate for employees, and customers' evaluations of service quality (Borucki and Burke, 1999; Schneider et al., 1998). Other studies have shown that service climate is related to employee attitudes which subsequently affect service quality for customers (Yagil and Gal, 2002; Yoon et al., 2001). Hence, service climate appears to be important to service quality delivery. However, few service climate studies have been reported in call centers or contexts other than face-to-face encounters between employees and customers. An exception is the study by Little and Dean (2006) which found that service climate affects employees' self-reported service quality capability. Schneider et al. (1998, p. 151) defined service climate in terms of "employee perceptions of the practices, procedures and behaviours that get rewarded, supported, and expected with regard to customer service and customer service quality". This definition was used in to formulate the first question for frontline staff:

In your work, what is expected and rewarded with respect to service quality?

The service quality 'gaps model' assumes that high levels of customer perceived service quality depend on minimising various gaps (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Zeithaml et al, 1988). Gap 3, the service performance gap, is the discrepancy between specifications for the service and its actual delivery by frontline employees to customers (Zeithaml et al., 1988). Based on focus group data from several industries, Zeithaml et al. proposed that the size of Gap 3 can be explained by teamwork, employee-job fit, technology-job fit, perceived control, supervisory control systems, role conflict and role ambiguity. However, in a later empirical study, Parasuraman et al. (1992) found positive associations only between teamwork, horizontal communication and service quality. In their more recent study of Gap 3 in the airline industry, Chenet et al. (2000) found that only employee-job fit and perceived control

directly affected service quality. Hence, findings from the studies have demonstrated considerable inconsistencies.

The service profit chain places the delivery of service quality at the center of a sequence which commences with organizational activity related to ‘internal service quality’, such as workplace and job design, and human resources policies and practices. These practices contribute to employee behaviours which produce results for customers, measured in terms of service quality and customer perceived value (Heskett et al., 1994). Internal service quality was one of Schneider et al.’s (1998) foundation issues for service climate and shows considerable overlap with Borucki and Burke’s (1999) ‘concern for employees’. It may be of particular importance in call centers because Edvardsson et al.’s (1997) study demonstrated an inverse relationship between service worker stress and perceptions of internal quality. Additionally Varca (1999) showed that stress can decrease service quality. However, factors important to internal service quality have varied in empirical studies. For example, findings have emphasized managing customer expectations (Caruana and Pitt, 1997), service orientation to excellence (Lytle et al., 1998) and organizational structures and processes (Gilbert and Parhizgari, 2000; Lewis and Gabrielson, 1998). The studies have generated more than 20 measures, which are very comprehensive and untested in call centers. Hence, it is unclear which elements are likely to apply for call center employees.

The uncertainty in the literature about the organizational factors that ultimately lead to high levels of customer-perceived service quality is increased in the under researched area of voice-to-voice encounters in a telephony environment (de Ruyter and Wetzels, 2000). For example, using a sample from a telecommunications call center, Singh (2000) found that greater task control and boss support shielded frontline employees from burnout and built their commitment, but the effects on service quality were not significant. Overall, most call center studies have not sought employees’ views on the delivery of service quality despite the

importance of employee performance during service encounters. Hence, we sought employees' opinions viz:

What helps you to deliver high quality service to customers?

What hinders you from delivering high quality service to customers?

Frontline work in call centers

Previous work has shown that service quality theory may be different in call centers. For example, Dean (2004) found that different types of expectations of service quality did not demonstrate the dynamism and interdependence that was predicted from previous studies; and Yoon et al. (2001) found that employees' work effort plays a central role in customers' perceptions of service quality. Further, as noted previously, call center employees work in special circumstances. They deliver service 'in isolation' over the telephone and have to manage their service encounter problems alone, although under considerable electronic surveillance (Houlihan, 2002). Managers emphasise productivity targets which may conflict with the delivery of customer service, and to achieve targets, they subject employees to high levels of control (Brown and Maxwell, 2002).

The relationship between service quality delivery and employee productivity is a continuing debate in the services literature (Parasuraman, 2002; Singh, 2000). In call centers, authors discuss conflicts such as 'hard versus soft goals' (Taylor and Tyler, 2000), tangible and intangible measures of service quality (Gilmore and Moreland, 2000) and 'Taylorism versus tailorism' (Korczynski, 2001). These authors, and others (e.g., Houlihan, 2002; Kinnie et al., 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999) have contended that an emphasis on quantitative targets takes priority over customer service goals. Several empirical studies have demonstrated the precedence that employees place on targets when compared to service quality (Batt, 1999;

Singh, 2000). Similarly, Knights and McCabe (1998) found that employees, in a telephone banking call center, sacrificed customer service to manage the stress associated with work intensity. Parasuraman (2002) outlined potential conflicts and synergy between service quality and productivity, and called for research in this area. Overall, the literature suggests that employees are likely to experience conflicts between productivity demands and service quality in call centers but it gives little guidance about what managers might do to assist employees to manage these conflicts. Consequently, employees were asked:

Do your productivity targets make it difficult for you to deliver service quality to customers? How do you manage this conflict?

In call centers, studies have shown that, to achieve targets and ensure quality, managers closely monitor employees, and provide little opportunity for worker initiative or control (e.g., Callaghan and Thompson; 2001; Gilmore, 2001; Taylor and Bain, 1999). However, theory about the relationship between control and quality in services is unclear. Edwards et al. (1998) found that favorable views of quality, as expressed by employees, were strongest where the monitoring of workers was most intense. In contrast, and in call center studies, Gilmore (2001) found that frontline employees were aware of service quality problems and felt that the environment did not allow them to answer customer queries effectively and efficiently, while Varca (2006) found that the strain associated with telephone surveillance could be explained by a loss of perceived control. Overall, scholars note that the technology of call centers is used to heavily monitor employee performance during customer interactions, but the studies are inconclusive in establishing in what way high levels of monitoring affect employees' ability to deliver service quality. Hence, we sought insights about the quality management regimes:

How do the quality management processes in the call center help you?

In summary, previous work suggests, but does not agree on, many potential factors that could affect service quality in call centers. In explaining the overall aim of the research to participants, organizational factors were defined as ‘the structures, processes and practices that exist in the call center’. Consistent with the approach adopted by Schneider et al. (1992), participants were asked to concentrate on the features of their work and the organisation rather than how they were feeling about the work. That is, they were asked about the factors that assisted or inhibited them in delivering service quality to customers, not whether they were satisfied with the conditions of their work. We acknowledge that employee attitudes and feelings have an important influence on service quality as shown in recent studies (e.g., Malhotra and Mukherjee, 2004). However, our aim was to revisit and establish the organizational factors that should be included in comprehensive models and thus, we focussed on this aspect.

Method

Research design

The questions identified above seek responses to ‘what’ and ‘how’ and therefore an exploratory design was adopted (Creswell, 1994). Focus groups were considered well suited to the study because they stimulate discussion and as participants engage with one another, opinions emerge (Wilkinson and Birmingham, 2003). More structured methods, such as surveys may have omitted or obscured factors important in the present context.

The research setting

The call center used in the study meets the definition of Taylor and Bain (1999), in that it is a dedicated customer service operation and frontline employees perform integrated telephone and computer work. Employees take incoming calls for service enquiries in the

telecommunications industry (such as billing questions, product information and contract options) and, in finding customer ‘solutions’, they are expected to make sales (transfers to higher value or new contracts, and additional products). Thus, the call center reflects an extension of the concept of ‘customer service’ into ‘customer solutions’ (Armistead et al., 2002; Sturdy, 2000). Employees are organised into teams on the floor and each team has a leader who is responsible for supporting and mentoring team members.

Employees are measured individually, daily, according to their performance on ‘sales’, ‘talk time’, ‘wrap time’ and ‘adherence’ targets. They are expected to average no more than 300 seconds total handling time per call (talk time plus ‘wrap’ or follow up time). The quality of service they provide is anonymously assessed, twice weekly, by a quality assurance (QA) officer who records and evaluates their interactions with customers. Employees receive feedback by email and sometimes it is discussed with them. Team performance is also assessed daily and results for all teams are displayed on a white board on the call center floor.

Sample and procedure

The sample consisted of 58 participants, interviewed in ten focus groups. Overall, the participants were predominantly female (37; 64%) and had an average age of 29.3 years. More than three quarters (45; 78%) of the participants had no call center experience before taking on their current roles. Of these participants, three quarters (34; 76%) had worked in clerical and service positions, predominantly in retail trade, government and community services, and business services. The Human Resource Manager of the call center felt that the sample was representative of the staff profile but did not provide data to enable a rigorous comparison.

Focus groups ranged in size from 3 to 9 participants, and were conducted over a two week period, at times designed to capture a balance of morning and afternoon shifts (five

groups from each type) and day of the week (two groups each day, Monday to Friday).

Discussions ranged in length from one, to one and a half, hours. All discussions were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. To ensure that groups were as close as possible to being replicable, the procedure outlined by Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) was adopted.

All questions were considered in response to the overall research question because the factors affecting service quality could be mentioned anywhere during the discussions, not just in response to the specific questions. Hence, consistent with the analytical approach adopted by Bateman et al. (2002), the transcripts were used in their entirety for the analysis.

Method of analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data consisted of the three major steps outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994): data reduction, data displays, and conclusion drawing/verification. The data reduction step involved two researchers who coded the text 'blind', calculated their agreement statistically, explored reasons for disagreements, and decided on an adjusted coding. This process was repeated until inter-rater reliability was increased to a minimum of 90% for all topics. Topics and themes were produced, showing what was talked *about*. To complete the data reduction a count of the total number of times a topic was mentioned (absolute frequency) was performed to obtain a sense of the relative strength of the themes. The next steps, data display and data interpretation focused on what was actually *said* about the topics, and what the discussion meant in relation to the overall research question.

Results and discussion

Nine major themes were identified from 36 topics. Table I shows the themes, arranged according to how often they were discussed, commencing with the most frequently mentioned. This section reports the themes, and the next section interprets them and explains their links to previous theory.

Take in Table I

Theme 1, Management's emphasis on sales, was mentioned by every group, and more than any other single topic. Employees are required to respond to the customer's telephone call for service and simultaneously offer alternative, higher value, telecommunications products. Many employees saw the focus on sales as opportunistic and "mutually exclusive from service quality".

The second theme, performance monitoring and feedback, encapsulates QA processes and surveillance. The QA processes were considered necessary and helpful, but too regimented and lacking a procedure to provide positive feedback and encouragement to employees. Authors have found that electronic surveillance causes role stress and can have negative effects on quality because of the quantifiable nature of productivity (Aiello and Kolb, 1995; Brown and Maxwell, 2002). This effect appeared to be confirmed in the current study.

The third theme, efficiency demands of call center work is linked to performance and was expressed most often in terms of time pressures associated with workload, and the nexus created between productivity demands and service quality delivery. Time pressures associated with Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) contribute to feelings of stress and exhaustion, and make employees less able to deal with customer interactions. Additionally, employees reported feeling compelled to give productivity targets precedence over customer service because they are more tangible and visible, measured in several ways every day, and tied to job security.

The structures and support processes in the call center, theme 4, were seen to facilitate service quality, where they exist, and provided they are not too slow. However, most focus groups mentioned that customer inputs are not used to improve service delivery because no systems exist for reporting customer ideas, complaints and positive responses to the service. Similarly, employees noted the need for mechanisms for two-way communication with frontline staff.

The importance of employee-job fit was highlighted by all focus groups. Participants noted that if employee-job fit is good, they love their work because they can deliver good service and help customers. In contrast, if fit is poor, withdrawal from customers occurs and service levels decline markedly. The ‘right people’ for call center work were described as those who are “courteous, polite people – people who are sort of trying to be helpful by nature” and “self-assured, confident people who can handle it and don’t take anything personally”. Employee-job fit was also used with respect to service quality ‘skills’, including a ‘natural sales orientation’, the ability to multi-task, to solve problems, and to develop solutions and act positively, even when feeling very negative and flat.

Theme 6, human resource management issues, has the potential to either enhance or hinder service quality delivery, because of its effects on employee attitudes and skills. Findings highlight the need for recognition and rewards for performance, as a stimulus for accepting work pressures; the effects that rosters can have on service quality via emotional exhaustion; and the lack of perceived job security in the call center of the study. Training was found to have positive effects on frontline employees’ abilities to meet customer needs but they agreed that it must emphasise more than product knowledge, and include analytical and process skills for problem solving, managing customer interactions, and sustaining a positive attitude under stress. Employees require more opportunity to practice their skills, especially

when dealing with difficult customers, and more opportunity to observe and learn from their colleagues.

The next theme concerns teams. No group or individual dissented about the role and importance of teams in facilitating the delivery of service quality. The team provides the operational framework for the call center but, more importantly, it provides the basis for social and emotional support that employees need to manage their frontline work. The team structure is critical because it addresses two issues of particular importance in call centers: employee isolation and access to immediate support. Employees in call centers work individually on telephones, and have to take their own initiative to get help. They may need support but do not get it because what happens during calls is not seen or heard by others. Team leaders have an assigned role in supporting their team members to achieve highly on efficiency targets and quality assurance measures, and the relationship with the team leader was reported as the most important factor that facilitates work with customers.

The theme labeled ‘service encounter stress’ arises from the difficulty in repeatedly managing customer interactions. Studies have shown that call center work leads to stress and emotional exhaustion (e.g., Deery et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2000). However, call center stress is complex and experienced differently by frontline staff (Armistead et al. 2002). The main topics identified here were concerned with issues around the emotional demands of the job, employees having little flexibility in dealing with customers, and no scope to manage their own time. Dealing with customers who are angry or upset, or who are rude and threatening, requires a calm and positive approach, and considerable discussion focused on what organizational factors might help employees to maintain their equilibrium. Focus groups highlighted the need for managers to recognize the taxing nature of their work, and to provide avenues to assist them, such as flexibility with respect to breaks, the opportunity to de-brief, and greater control over the service process.

The final theme relates to managerial attitudes in general. Negative comments were generally concerned with the approach adopted by management, their inaccessibility to frontline staff and how high quality service behaviors are not modeled. Some employees felt that the lack of value placed on customer feedback was reflected in the lack of emphasis on managers taking the time to gather employee feedback about customer interactions.

In summary, nine major themes provide insights into the overall research question, that is, the organizational factors that affect the delivery of service quality. These themes do not align neatly with the questions used to stimulate discussion in the focus groups because most of the themes apply to more than one of the questions that were used to stimulate discussion, and many of them had positive and negative impacts, depending on the employee's perspective and circumstances. For example, some employees found the emphasis on sales challenging and motivating, while others considered that it conflicts ideologically with the idea of customer service, and thereby created tension for them.

Comparison of findings to previous theory

The discussion below shows that the findings support most key aspects of established service quality theory and previous call center studies that have involved service quality. However, the current results provide a different emphasis and suggest that an integration of factors from prior work is necessary when assessing service quality in call centers. These factors include management practices, frontline roles, employee job fit and service encounter stress. Table II provides an overview of the match between the findings and previous theory. The subsequent section provides more detail and the potential implications of the differences.

Take in Table II

Table II shows that service quality gaps theory was essentially supported by the study but that several factors have a different meaning. Six of the seven original elements of Gap 3 proposed by Zeithaml et al. (1988) were identified as follows. Employee-job fit and teamwork emerged directly but teamwork applied only in a horizontal sense within teams and did not include upper management or other teams. Role ambiguity existed in that customer service is an espoused major objective of the call center but management's emphasis on sales emerged as the organizational factor having most effect on service quality. Similarly, role conflict was present but its major source was management priorities with respect to productivity and quality, not conflict caused by customer expectations. Zeithaml et al. (1988) explained supervisory control systems in terms of employees being evaluated on behaviours rather than outputs. In the present study, the emphasis on outputs was identified in both performance monitoring and efficiency demands. Finally, a lack of perceived control was present as part of service encounter stress. Technology-job fit was not identified in the current study.

The findings are also consistent with service quality gaps theory in that a lack of management commitment to service quality, a Gap 2 element, appeared to be evident. When Gap 2 is present, service quality specifications are not well developed (Zeithaml et al., 1988). Specifications existed in the call center of the study, but they were strictly quantitative and employees questioned their validity. Further, employees felt that, despite QA processes and a focus on finding customer 'solutions', a commitment to service quality was subsumed by sales and efficiency targets.

Table II shows that service climate studies, in which employee-perceived service climate leads directly to customer-perceived service quality or related measures, were partially supported. These include Schneider et al.'s (1998) foundation issues and the emphasis on HRM in Borucki and Burke's (1999) and Rogg et al.'s (2001) studies. However, Schneider et al.'s (1998) emphasis on interdepartment service and customer feedback was not

identified. Similarly, the findings are consistent with the overall premises of the service profit chain in that employees noted that the way they feel is transmitted to customers, and that internal service quality affected their feelings and behaviours (Heskett et al., 1997). The study identified specific elements of internal service quality (structures and support, HRM) that applied in the call center. These findings are consistent with parts of previous studies (Gilbert and Parhizgari, 2000; Lewis and Gabrielson, 1998). However, many factors important in other internal service quality studies were not identified, for example, managing customer expectations (Caruana and Pitt, 1997).

The final area of theory shown in Table II concerns the potential conflict between employee productivity and the delivery of service quality to customers. Researchers of call centers agree that employees face this conflict (de Ruyter et al., 2001; Knights and McCabe, 1998) and studies have found that employees sacrifice quality to maintain productivity (Brown and Maxwell, 2002; Singh, 2000) and sales (Batt, 1999). This study supported previous findings.

An integrated model of organizational factors that affect service quality delivery in call centers

Nine themes identifying organizational factors that affect the delivery of service quality are reported in Table I. When these themes are interpreted in light of previous studies, four key areas emerge: frontline employees' roles, service encounters, call center management, and employees' abilities to manage call center work. While the final area reflects employees' skills and aptitudes, rather than organizational factors, it is included here because it was mentioned frequently in relation to the other factors. Figure 1 provides a model summarising the major areas.

Take in Figure 1

The three factors most frequently mentioned by focus group participants were management's emphasis on sales, elements of performance monitoring and feedback and the efficiency demands of call center work. These factors are primarily concerned with frontline employees' roles. In the past, elements of them have been captured by role stress and measured in call center studies using scales for role conflict and role ambiguity (de Ruyter et al., 2001; Singh, 2000). In the current study, the management focus on sales appears comparable to Singh's (2000) role ambiguity because of employees' perceptions of themselves as customer service workers and their debate about sales as a form of customer service 'solutions'. Therefore this is shown as the first factor in frontline roles.

Efficiency demands of call center work encompass role conflict (the clash of operational efficiency with customer demands) as used by both de Ruyter et al. (2001) and Singh (2000). The current study suggests that two more variables are necessary to describe frontline roles and the associated role stress in call centers. These variables are role demands (or role overload) and performance monitoring.

Figure 1 includes elements arising from service encounters stress. This stress is related to role stress but specifically addresses customer interactions, issues arising from QA processes, and perceived control. Focus group participants noted that managing customers can be very emotionally draining, and is often made more difficult because of inadequate organizational support and the inflexibility of the quality assurance processes to which they must adhere. Previous service quality studies in call centers have identified control issues, and tested for effects due to task control (Singh, 2000) and empowerment autonomy (de Ruyter et al., 2001). Other studies have found that worker control is related to service quality (Yagil and

Gal, 2002; Zeithaml et al., 1988) and stress and control are related (Varca, 2006). The present study confirms the importance of control.

The four factors, call center structures and support, human resource management, teams (relationships with leaders and members), and managerial attitudes are outside Zeithaml et al.'s (1988) Gap 3, and represent the main components of management. Employees in the current study frequently noted the necessity of these factors to support the delivery of service quality to customers. The factors closely resemble Schneider et al.'s (1998) 'foundation issues' and encompass Borucki and Burke's (1999) 'concern for employees' and Zeithaml et al.'s (1988) Gap 2. Schneider et al. (1998) noted that the facilitative conditions are necessary, but not sufficient, to generate a positive customer service climate. In this study, the factors involving call center management were found to be essential to foster service work and simultaneously meet employees' personal and work needs. Hence, they are placed as potential antecedents in Figure 1.

Finally, employees' apparent suitability for a frontline position in a call center (employee-job fit) affected their ability to deliver service quality, consistent with Zeithaml et al.'s (1988) original model. While this factor is not 'organizational', 'fit' may take on greater importance in call center work when compared to other contexts, and it is influenced by organizational processes. The findings indicate that employee-job fit needs to incorporate a number of dimensions that constitute "the ability of the employee to perform the job" (Zeithaml et al., 1988, p. 414). Other call center researchers have noted the importance of employee characteristics to service performance, for example, emotional resilience (Armistead et al., 2002; Wallace et al., 2000) but previous studies of service quality delivery do not seem to have measured or tested them. Frontline employees in the current study considered that selecting staff with appropriate attitudes was the basis of 'customer orientation' and fundamental to the delivery of service quality to customers. Hence this factor

is included in the model but whether it is an antecedent or moderating variable is yet to be established.

Practical applications

A major managerial implication of this study concerns efficiency targets and the associated high levels of monitoring. Employees stated that current KPIs do not reflect service. Perhaps less emphasis should be placed on absolute numbers and more on achieving a balance between all desirable outcomes, namely sales targets, productivity measures, and service quality measures. For example, motivation for employees to pursue targets more vigorously may be achieved by provision of systems to gather customer feedback about service and to provide employees with positive reinforcement. This approach has the potential to deliver other benefits as well because a recent study in call centers found that actions to obtain customer feedback are positively related to customer commitment (Dean, 2007). Alternatively, this study suggests that a better balance between productivity and service quality would result from engaging employees in establishing and implementing strategies for dealing with the pressures of the call center environment.

Employees said that the emphasis on KPIs causes them stress, which reduces the likelihood of them being friendly and welcoming to customers. Further, role stress has been linked to employee satisfaction in call centers (de Ruyter et al., 2001) and the employee satisfaction to customer satisfaction link is a basic premise of the service profit chain (Heskett et al., 1997). Managers may wish to give priority to reviewing measurement systems to reduce their perceived preoccupation with KPIs, to enhance customer service and satisfaction, and to provide employees with more control over their work.

The quality assurance (QA) processes were seen positively but with considerable scope for improvement. First, employees noted that the inflexibility of the QA system adds

stress to customer interactions and restricts employee initiative. Second, they suggested that the QA processes be extended to include an employee self assessment component, an indication of the breadth (number of services provided) and depth (difficult situations versus routine enquiries) of customer services provided, and a customer satisfaction component. Finally, employees said that delayed feedback from QA monitoring was meaningless when they could not listen to the service encounter because they could not remember the call. Hence side-by-side monitoring or the use of audio tapes is preferable. Fewer QA assessments might be done but they are likely to be more effective in enhancing employee performance and quality outcomes.

Human resource management in call centers can facilitate service quality in several ways. First, recruitment and selection processes are important in ensuring employee-job fit. Second, systems need to be developed to provide employees with recognition and rewards for achievements, especially in dealing with difficult customers. Participants in this study stated that the only rewards were for sales, not service. Further, they felt that external parity with respect to remuneration would help them to manage the demands of their work, and remain customer focussed, because they would feel that they were being paid to do so. Appropriate rosters can assist employees to recover from the potential burnout arising from emotional labour, especially breaks of two consecutive days at regular intervals. Finally, human resource managers should provide training that addresses analytical skills such as information processing and problem-solving, and skills for managing customers. Training regimes would benefit from variety in techniques because employees noted that analytical and customer skills are harder to acquire than product knowledge, and are not available via online delivery.

Practical applications with respect to call center structures and processes emerge in several ways. First, employees suggested that the benefits of the team structure could be enhanced by regular team meetings to discuss service delivery issues, to seek employee input

and feedback, and to provide opportunities for collaborative problem solving. Second, relief time from telephone encounters is important. Managers need to acknowledge the intensity of frontline work and provide employees with structures that facilitate formal personal support. Focus group participants repeatedly emphasised their need for the flexibility to take short breaks when they feel such breaks are essential to retain their emotional stability. As noted above, mechanisms for improving customer feedback could be instigated, for example, structures to gather and disseminate customers' responses to service delivery and their suggestions for service improvements. Employees noted that they find positive customer feedback very motivating but there are no processes to facilitate it. Similarly, employees expressed frustration at the lack of communication systems whereby they are unable to contribute to innovative or alternative options for service delivery.

Finally, the reality of call center work is that employees work in isolation, have to manage customer interactions constantly, and their day is driven by targets which are monitored electronically. Each of these features contributes to employee stress and there was consensus amongst participants in the study that stress decreases service quality for customers. Hence, institutionalising systems that reduce employee stress is likely to result in a better working environment for employees and better quality outcomes for customers.

Limitations and future research

The major limitations of the study arise from its qualitative methodology, and the methods used for data collection and analysis. It is based on one telecommunications call center, in which employees are expected to make sales as well as providing customer service. Thus, it is highly context specific and does not claim to be representative of the wider call center population. Rather, it sought analytical insights for further development and testing in other types of call centers and in other industries.

Another limitation arises from the use of focus groups. Participants were recruited by the organisation and the researcher had no control over selection. Hence, theoretical sampling in order to minimise identifiable forms of bias, arising from factors such as age, gender or previous call center experience, was not possible (Lee, 1999). Similarly, groups did not always consist of participants who were strangers to one another and they may have shared tacit assumptions, which can lead to difficulties in interpretation (Lee, 1999). As for all qualitative data, the evidence collected during the focus groups was not objective, but based on employees' opinions about their workplace. It could have been biased because of employee-related factors, unknown to the researcher. Finally, while data coding was performed independently by two researchers, it is possible that other researchers may have used different codes and thereby reduced the data to sets with different labels. Hence, the focus group results require validation, such as content analysis of additional focus group data, or with other methods and measures such as survey research (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).

Despite the limitations, specific aspects of the findings present potential areas for further studies of service quality and related constructs in call centers. In particular, the study calls for an emphasis on role demands and stress. Figure 1 shows that role demands incorporate aspects of service which are not captured by role ambiguity and role conflict (e.g., as in studies by de Ruyter et al., 2001; and Singh, 2000). In association with role demands, the study suggests that stress that arises specifically from service encounters with customers should be measured. In discussing emotional labour, authors have identified the effects of sustained customer contact, and requirements to display only certain feelings (Hochschild, 1979). Recently, Houlihan (2002) suggested that the emotional labour and discretionary work effort demanded of customer service representatives is disguised by the production type models of call centers. However, services researchers have been slow to incorporate such variables in wider models.

The inclusion of the variable concerned with the extent of employee control is of particular interest. Low levels of worker discretion were found to act counter to customer orientation and service delivery, and to cause employee stress. Findings from previous call center studies suggest that investigating and incorporating task control (Singh, 2000) and empowerment autonomy (de Ruyter et al., 2001) may contribute to understanding stress (Varca, 2006). However, the studies by de Ruyter et al. (2001) and Singh (2000) used role stress scales from other sources, and the scales had not been developed nor tested in call centers.

The study identifies some specific areas, indirectly related to service quality delivery, that seem worthy of future investigation. For example, future call center studies may wish to pursue the antecedents and effects of employees' feelings of identity and isolation, and of electronic surveillance. Frontline employees noted that these features contribute to their discomfort with the work environment. Other potential areas for investigation include the problems and issues associated with restricted levels of social interaction in call centers, which minimises group learning and problem solving. Additionally, in the current study, questions arose about whether sales and customer service are complimentary or contradictory, and what a sales focus means for service quality.

The changed role and significance of teams, team leaders and team relationships in call centers presents areas for further investigation. de Ruyter et al. (2001) called for research into the relationship between team variables and role stress in call centers, but this does not yet appear to have been comprehensively answered. Hence, a research priority emerges to explicate the role of team leaders in theory about service delivery in call centers.

Finally, this study investigated organizational factors contributing to service quality, not employee attitudes. However, in analysing employees' responses to certain factors, it appears that employee attitudes may mediate some of the relationships between the

organizational factors and service quality. For example, employees stated that management's emphasis on sales, and performance monitoring techniques and feedback, affected their feelings of satisfaction, which affected their ability to provide service to customers. Recent call center studies reinforce the importance of employee attitudes to customer orientation (Kantsperger and Kunz, 2005) and service quality (Malhotra and Mukherjee, 2004; Mukherjee and Malhotra, 2006). Consequently, there is scope for much research that incorporates both organizational factors concerned with delivering service quality, as in the current project, and their relationships with employee outcomes.

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Table I Themes resulting from the content analysis

Theme (topics)	Freq* (percent)	Interpretation of meaning	Illustrative quote
1. Management emphasis on sales (focus on selling, profit orientation rather than service)	69 (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sales perceived as a higher priority than SQ ▪ Employees have to compromise service for sales ▪ Sales seen as customer ‘solutions’, which <i>may</i> contribute to SQ 	“Quite often if the pressure’s on because your sales are down, quite often it can interfere with the sort of customer care that you can give... because you’ve got to try and push, help the customer out the best you can... but on the other hand you’ve got no sales, and then they get on you because you spent too much time with the customers helping them out and not making sales.” (Group 3)
2. Performance monitoring and feedback (QA processes, targets and feedback)	65 (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ QA provides specific goals ▪ QA process seen as too restrictive for individual service needs ▪ Customer call-backs motivating (but under utilised) ▪ Feedback discouraging because of the focus on what is ‘not’ achieved 	“...you think ‘oh God, my talk time is going to be so high I’ve got to get this customer off the phone as soon as I can because I had a really long call before’. You’ve got to sort of think like that and it really stresses you out.” (Group 2)
3. Efficiency demands of call center work (KPIs, time pressures, quality/productivity conflict, insufficient breaks)	65 (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Demands cause employee stress and weaken their ability to manage calls ▪ Productivity takes precedence over SQ ▪ Time pressures mean calls are closed early and SQ initiatives are decreased 	<p>“QA really helps you to be helpful to customers.”</p> <p>“But with QA the way it is, [you need] to be a recording, an absolute recording.” “A robot.”</p> <p>“Because they like to measure numbers... there’s no intangibles in there, only what can be measured.” (Group 1)</p>
4. Call center structures and support (processes, communication, technical/product support, resources)	60 (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Technical support procedures clear and helpful ▪ Processes are sometimes slow and inflexible ▪ No systems for customer input ▪ Inadequate systems for employee communication 	<p>“In relation to records of complaints, there is no specific area to pass them to; we don’t have time to record them; they’re [management] not interested anyway.”</p> <p>“Customers sometimes have really good ideas but there is nowhere to send them to – well, there probably is, but we’re not made aware of it.” (Group 2)</p>
5. Employee-job fit (customer service orientation, ability to cope with stress,	51 (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Employees love giving good service, like their work ▪ Employee stress leads to inability to think clearly, withdrawal from customers 	“We’re looking for flexible people. Flexible emotionally, flexible intellectually, and flexible with their time. So, someone who’s generally flexible and who’s able to go with the flow, and, you know, adapt!” (Group 4)

positive, flexible attitude)			
6. Human resource management issues (recognition, rewards incentives; rosters, shift times; training)	49 (9) 34 (6) 21 (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training helps employees but quantity and style require attention ▪ Imbalance between work demands and rewards considered de-motivating ▪ Inadequate rosters can cause negative attitudes to customer care 	“Basically on that pay thing, you must have your workforce happy otherwise if we’re not happy, then we’re not going to make it sound like we are... We get fed up and we don’t want to speak to customers.” (Group 8)
7. Teams (team leader - technical, emotional support; team members - social, technical, emotional support)	44 (8) 31 (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Primary source of social interaction and practical support ▪ Team leaders seen as encouraging, motivating ▪ Effectiveness depends on employee relationships with team leaders 	“In an office situation – I worked for customer services before – if an irate customer come in, everybody knew about it, and when that customer left you got the support from everybody else who was in that store.” (Group 5)
8. Service encounter stress (customer interactions, QA imposed scripts, lack of control)	40 (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some encounters very de-motivating ▪ Positive encounters are motivating (though invisible to management) ▪ Employees need more breaks, flexibility and counselling 	“It should be, this is the customer, this is the problem, OK, next customer, Ok different issue, we’ll handle it a different way. We’ll use the verbatim a different way. We’ll use our opening and closing a different way, depending on..” (Group 7)
9. Managerial attitudes (approach, accessibility, modelling service quality)	31 (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Very little modelling of SQ behaviours ▪ Employees not given any opportunity to influence decisions that affect them ▪ Inadequate time for preparation each day 	“Every time we deal with management, we should be treated as though we’re a customer of that management... they always tell us to treat them [customers] with respect, value what they have to say.” (Group 4)

Note. *Freq=total number of times topics in this theme were initiated in focus groups, percent values are based on the fraction of the total number of topics (560); Themes 6 and 7 had several large components which are shown separately; SQ=service quality; QA=quality assurance; KPIs=key performance indicators

Table II Comparison of findings with previous service quality theories

Relevant theory	Comments
Service quality gaps (factors that contribute to employee delivery of service quality)	Teamwork, employee-job fit, role ambiguity, role conflict, supervisory control systems and perceived control were identified, consistent with Zeithaml et al.'s (1988) Gap 3. Technology-job fit did not emerge. Gap 2 also existed in that service quality was considered to be less important to management than sales and efficiency targets.
Service climate studies (service climate leading to customer-perceived service quality)	Schneider et al.'s (1998) foundation issues (HRM and supervisory behaviours) and the emphasis on HRM in Borucki and Burke's (1999) and Rogg et al.'s (2001) studies were reinforced.
Service profit chain theory (internal and external quality)	The overall premise of internal service quality (structures, job design, HRM) contributing to employees' ability to deliver external service quality (to customers) was supported (Heskett et al., 1997; Schlesinger and Heskett, 1991).
Conflicts between service quality and productivity in call center studies	The conflict identified and tested in previous studies was confirmed (Batt, 1999; Knights and McCabe, 1998; Singh, 2000). The relationship between role conflict and service quality, mediated by job satisfaction (de Ruyter et al., 2001) and burnout (Singh, 2000) also appeared to be present.

Note. HRM=Human resource management

Figure 1 Proposed model for further development and testing

