

The Service Orientation and Employee's Customer Orientation in Public Services Organizations

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationships between service orientation and employees' customer orientation in public services organizations. First, we will review the relevant literature on service orientation and employee's customer orientation. Based on this theory, the research hypothesis is formulated. The research results will be followed by conclusions, limitations and future directions. At the construct level, we found positive direct relationships between service orientation and employees' customer orientation. The regression model of the service orientation dimensions revealed significant positive effects of customer treatment and service standards communication on employees' customer orientation, as well as the negative effects of service rewards.

Keywords: service orientation, employee customer orientation, public services, customer interactions, customer treatment

Introduction

The importance of organisational service orientation and employee customer orientation is largely recognised in services sector.

Providing a good service to customers requires a focus on customers at organizational level, changing the culture, systems and procedures, as well as the attitudes, skills and behaviours of employees and managers. Consequently, in this paper we will explore the relationships between service orientation and employees' customer orientation in public services organisations. The paper is organised as follow. First, we will review the relevant literature on service orientation and employee's customer orientation. Based on this theory, the research hypothesis is formulated. The research results will be followed by conclusions, limitations and future directions.

The Service Orientation Construct

The service orientation concept began to be developed in the 1990s literature on services marketing. Schneider (1990) highlighted the importance of organisational service orientation. Some theoretical studies have explored various issues of service orientation (Berry, Conant, and Parasuraman, 1991; Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz, 1996; Schneider, Wheeler and Cox, 1992). Johnson (1996) described the nature of organizational service climate and Benoy (1996) explored the relationship between organizational service climate and organizational performance.

The service orientation could be approached at individual and organisational level. At individual level it is considered a measure of employee personality traits, some people within organization being more service oriented than others. Service orientation measurement at organizational level could take two approaches. In the first perspective, the organization is analyzed in terms of certain parameters of structure, organisational climate and culture. In a second approach, the focus is on organisational strategy, analyzing how important is the customer service for the company's marketing strategy.

Individual's service orientation was defined by Hogan et al (1984, p. 167) as "a set of attitudes and behaviours that affect the quality of interaction between employees of an organisation and its customers". They developed a 92-item scale called service-orientation index. Service-oriented people are available to be helpful, caring, polite and cooperative. Individual attitudes and behaviours directly affect the nature and quality of services, and any interaction between the organization and its customers.

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The organizational service orientation is based on a deep understanding of the very nature of the service. Be helpful require to take care of one's needs, involving helping, giving and sharing. Services can be delivered only if the organization's employees are at appropriate points in the service process, and are willing and able to take care of customer needs (Berry, Parasuraman and Zeithaml, 1994). Lytle, Hom and Mokwa (1998) adopted an organisational perspective in measurement of the service orientation. This orientation require an organisational climate, policies, practices and procedures that creates, nurtures and rewards excellent service practices and behaviours that are deemed to satisfy customer expectations. Service orientation scale has a wider scope of generalization, both in the business sector, and the public service and non-profit organisations (Perryer, 2007). Service-oriented organizations consider excellence in providing services as a strategic priority, creating superior value, customer satisfaction, competitive advantage and profitability (Lytle, Hom and Mokwa, 1998).

Organisational orientation is a key factor in creating superior value for customers. The results of previous research indicate that certain organizational outcomes (e.g. profits, growth, customer satisfaction and loyalty) are directly related to service orientation (Heskett, Sasser and Schlesinger, 1997; Johnson, 1996; Rust, Zahorik and Keiningham, 1996; Schneider and Bowen, 1995). Therefore, it is essential for organisations to measure service orientation and practices as drivers of excellent services delivery. These practices adopted by organizations provide the capability to deliver high quality services, leading to higher profits, higher customer satisfaction and loyalty. The lack of understanding and inability to measure and manage an organisational service orientation can inhibit long-term organisational performance.

Lynn et al (2000) and Lytle, Hom and Mokwa (1998) developed and validated relevant measurement scales of organizational service orientation (SERV*OR). The multidimensional conceptualisation of the service orientation construct comprises ten key dimensions in creating and delivering an excellent service: (1) service vision; (2) servant leadership; (3) customer treatment; (4) employees empowerment; (5) service training; (6) service rewards; (7) service failures prevention; (8) service failure recovery; (9) service technology; and (10) service standards communications. These ten dimensions reflect the four key components of organisational service orientation: (1) service

management practices, which include behaviours, management style and service vision spread throughout the organization; (2) practices in meetings with customers, referring to employee-customer interaction, customer treatment and employees empowerment; (3) the practices of service, which refers to creation and delivery of services, prevention and failure recovery, use of advanced technologies to provide superior customer value and service standards communications that lead to an effective service system; (4) human resources management practices that relate to service-oriented training and reward systems.

Employee's Customer Orientation in Public Services Organisations

Public administration reform initiatives have led to the creation of organisational systems for measuring customer satisfaction and customer orientation, linking employee evaluation, reward systems and organisational performance indicators system (Paalberg, 2007). In public services organisations, the employee customer orientation is influenced by the diversity of customers who may have conflicting requirements, the employee's position within the organisational structure and the managerial customer orientation. Front-line employee is highly motivated to adopt customer-oriented behaviours (Redman and Snape, 2005). Employees who have limited customer contact can perceive a lower level of importance given to satisfying customer needs by their organisations. High level of managerial customer orientation is a sign of the importance given to the customer by the organisation, and an important predictor of success in implementing customer-oriented strategies (Jaworski and Kohli, 1993).

Value is created in the public sector in the supplier-customer interaction, employee performance being dependent on customer participation in service production. Delivering public services is an experiential process and transformation (Lengnick-Hall, 1996) in which the interaction between customer and service provider is inherent. Based on the concept of co-production, Ostrom (1996) highlighted the active participation of citizens in the process of public services delivery.

Customer interactions allow employees to understand the relationship between their job and organisational mission (Donovan et al, 2004). Customer interactions affect how employees in public service organizations use working time, and the likelihood that they will engage in full use of it (Brehm and Gates, 1997). Employees of public services

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are motivated by affective and normative values to serve the public (Perry and Wise, 1990). Job commitment is the key factor explaining the efforts of employees in the public service sector (Lee and Olshfski, 2002), individuals being motivated by the opportunity to induce a significant difference in the lives of others or to influence a case that is committed (Grant, 2008).

Employee performance is dependent on the knowledge generated in their interactions with customers (Alford, 2002). The co-production of public services increases employee performance dependence of customer participation in this process and the sharing of knowledge during interactions (Paalberg, 2007). Employee will get customers information about their desires and preferences, as well as information about employee's own performance. Customers' allusions, facial expression, eye contact and verbal tone provide relevant information about the quality of public service experience (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992).

Customer orientation provides employee psychological, social and cognitive benefits (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990) which are positive related to employee performance. Lee, Cayer and Lan (2006) identified a positive relationship between customer orientation, job satisfaction and employee support in implementing organisational change programs. Employee customer orientation is positively correlated with organisational commitment, both in the business sector and in the public services (Redman and Snape, 2005). Improving the quality of public services is closely linked to the increasing importance on the quality of relationships with customers in designing a system for rewarding employees.

Research Hypothesis

Research on organizational climate revealed a positive impact on the employees' behaviour of a service climate (Schneider, 1990; Schneider and Bowen, 1985). The employee perceptions of customer satisfaction and service quality depend on the firm's concerns about the customer relations and the delivered service (Borucki and Burke, 1999; Johnson, 1996). Employees will adopt a customer orientation to the extent that they perceive that their work environment is focused on meeting customer needs. Motivating employees to adopt customer-oriented behaviours requires the development of an organisational

climate that stimulates such behaviours and generates appropriate employee attitudes (Schneider and Chung, 1996).

The service orientation construct capture the employees perceptions about the organization's policies and practices regarding the achievement of service (Beatson, Lings and Gudergan, 2008), being regarded as organisational service climate (Kelley, 1992) that drive organization's policies and practices toward providing exceptional customer service (Lytle et al., 1998).

These service-oriented policies affect the attitudes and behaviours that employees adopt in interactions with customers. The customer perceptions of the organisation's service orientation will influence customer ratings for quality of service they receive. Therefore, if an organization has a high degree of service orientation, it is likely to deliver an excellent service. The customer's perceptions of organisation's service orientation will increase the likelihood that they trust the organization, develop a positive attitude and be satisfied in relationship with that organisation. Based on these arguments, we propose the following research hypothesis:

H1: A high level of service orientation has a positive effect on the employee customer orientation.

H2: A high level of servant leadership has a positive effect on the employee customer orientation.

H3: A high level of customer treatment has a positive effect on the employee customer orientation.

H4: A high level of employee empowerment has a positive effect on the employee customer orientation.

H5: A high level of service rewards has a positive effect on the employee customer orientation.

H6: A high level of service training has a positive effect on the employee customer orientation.

H7: A high level of service failure recovery has a positive effect on the employee customer orientation.

H8: A high level of service standards communication has a positive effect on the employee customer orientation.

Data collection and sample

Data were obtained through a questionnaire-based survey and sampling method used was convenience sampling. The sample consisted of 230 employees in organizations based in Timiș and

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Hunedoara counties that provides tax management services, local government services, health, pension and social security services. The questionnaires were personally distributed to sample members to be completed and were retrieved directly from respondents. Of the 230 questionnaires distributed, we received 188 questionnaires, 174 being validated and used in data analysis. 112 respondents (64.36%) are from organizations offering tax administration services, 28 respondents (16.1%) from local government services organisations, 15 respondents (8.62%) from health care services and 19 respondents (10.92%) from pension and social security services. 153 respondents (87.9%) hold front-line positions, and the remaining 21 respondents (12.1%) positions in back-office. According to the latest studies completed, 85 respondents (48.85%) hold a bachelor degree, 61 respondents (35%) master degree and 28 (16.15%) had medium level education.

Results

Data processing was performed in SPSS 19. Each construct was analyzed in the following steps: reliability test of measurement scales (Cronbach's alpha); opportunity analysis of using factor analysis (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator and Bartlett test of sphericity); confirmatory factor analysis; test of the convergent and discriminant validity of each construct (Pearson correlation coefficient).

Employee customer orientation was measured using a 10-items scale adapted from Thomas, Soutar, and Ryan (2001) with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.748. No variable significantly reduces the overall scale reliability. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator is 0.656, and Bartlett test of sphericity value is 382,188.

Table no. 1. Employee customer orientation

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Positive attitude toward customer	2,00	5,00	4,2471	0,69003	0,712
Memorising customers' names	2,00	5,00	3,9360	0,87958	0,741
Satisfaction with the customers' happiness	1,00	5,00	3,9422	0,88732	0,712
Pleasure to serve customers	2,00	5,00	4,0523	0,78184	0,719
Pleasure to rapid response to customers' demands	1,00	5,00	4,0936	0,77650	0,736
Understanding customers' message	2,00	5,00	4,1105	0,81255	0,733

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Putting in customer's situation	1,00	5,00	4,1098	0,79575	0,725
Trying to help customers	1,00	5,00	4,1205	0,79996	0,722
Stimulating customers to present their needs	2,00	5,00	4,0756	0,74934	0,736
Problem-solving behaviour	2,00	5,00	4,1279	0,68904	0,748
Priority of customer's interest	1,00	5,00	4,2197	0,84789	0,729

To measure the service orientation construct we used the Lytle & Timmerman's (2006) conceptualisation in ten dimensions: service vision; servant leadership; customer treatment; employee empowerment; service reward; service training; service technology; service failure prevention; service recovery and standards communication. The scale used to measure the organisation's service vision has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.622.

Table no. 2. Service Vision

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Employees' commitment to service	2,00	5,00	4,2241	0,78372	0,560
Customer as opportunity to serve	2,00	5,00	3,9023	0,85118	0,443
Organization exists to serve customers	2,00	5,00	4,0231	0,88234	0,558

No variable does significantly reduce the scale reliability, KMO indicator value is 0.633, factor analysis being suitable, and Bartlett test value is 60,203 ($p=0.000$). Factor loadings of this variables were high enough (minimum 0.732), no variable being eliminated. All correlations are statistically significant, proving the convergent validity.

The Cronbach's alpha of the servant leadership scale was 0.843, no variable reducing the overall reliability.

Table no. 3. Servant leadership

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Top management communicate the importance of service	1,00	5,00	3,7267	0,99753	0,837
Management spends time with customers and employees	1,00	5,00	3,7035	0,96693	0,802
Management measure service quality	1,00	5,00	3,7151	0,90172	0,818

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Management show care in achieving customer service	1,00	5,00	3,6301	1,00673	0,825
Management provides the necessary resources to excellent service	1,00	5,00	3,7267	0,97380	0,813
Management give input and leadership in creating quality service	1,00	5,00	3,8023	0,96512	0,810

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator is 0.872, and Bartlett test value 350,696 ($p=0.000$). Item intercorrelations are statistically significant, factor analysis being suitable. The variables' factor loadings are high enough (> 0.5), and the Pearson correlations are statistically significant, indicating a high level of convergent validity.

The customer treatment scale's Cronbach's alpha is 0.631, no variable significantly reducing the overall reliability.

Table no. 4. Customer Treatment

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Employees take care of customers	1,00	5,00	3,8198	0,88328	0,557
Employees meet customer needs	2,00	5,00	3,8613	0,71800	0,551
Employees are friendly and courteous with customers	2,00	5,00	3,7427	0,90319	0,552
Employees reduce inconvenience for customers	1,00	5,00	3,9191	0,83828	0,588

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin is indicator 0.687 (>0.5), and Bartlett test value is 78,063 ($p=0.000$). The items' intercorrelations are statistically significant, the factor loadings were high enough (>0.640), and all correlations are statistically significant, the convergent validity being confirmed.

The employee empowerment scale's Cronbach's alpha is 0.677, the KMO indicator is 0.500, and Bartlett test value is 51.48 ($p=0.000$).

Table no. 5. Employee Empowerment

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Decisions made close to the customer	1,00	5,00	3,7299	0,93828	
Employees' freedom and authority in acting independently to provide excellent service	1,00	5,00	3,7558	0,94202	

The factor loadings were high enough (>0.5), the two variables being retained. The correlation being statistically significant, the scale has convergent validity.

The service rewards scale have a Cronbach's alpha of 0.787, KMO value of 0.500, and Bartlett test value of 92,915 (p=0.000).

Table no. 6. Service Rewards

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Incentives and rewards for service quality	1,00	5,00	3,6105	1,09465	
Organisational celebration of excellent service	1,00	5,00	3,7052	1,05093	

All factor loadings were >0.5, all correlations being statistically significant.

The service training scale have a Cronbach's alpha of 0.731, a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.500, and Bartlett's test of 68,318 (p=0.000).

Table no. 7. Service training

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Training in delivering high quality of service	1,00	5,00	3,8023	0,95904	
Customers encounters simulations	1,00	5,00	3,8092	0,92355	

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The factor loadings were high enough (> 0.5), and all correlations are statistically significant.

The service technology scale presents a level of Cronbach's alpha of 0.435, indicating a scale with unacceptable reliability (George & Mallory, 2003). This dimension was eliminated from analysis.

Table no. 8. Service Technology

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Using state-of-the-art technologies	2,00	5,00	4,0520	0,74915	0,363
Technology is used to build a high quality of service	2,00	5,00	4,1047	0,70136	0,215
Using high-level technology to support the efforts of front line employees	2,00	5,00	4,0988	0,64581	0,421

The service failure prevention scale presents a level of Cronbach's alpha of 0.571, no variable significantly reducing the overall reliability of the scale.

Table no. 9. Service Failure Prevention

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Going out of current way to prevent customer problems	2,00	5,00	4,0409	0,74642	0,558
Preference to prevent customer problems	2,00	5,00	3,9827	0,74298	0,338
Active listen customers about their needs and requirements	2,00	5,00	4,0867	0,74592	0,499

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator was 0.594, Bartlett's test of sphericity value was 48,209 ($p=0.000$). The factor loadings were high enough (>0.669), and all correlations are statistically significant.

The service failure recovery scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.667, no variable reducing significantly the scale reliability. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator is 0.618, and Bartlett's test of sphericity value is 148,427 ($p=0.000$). All factor loadings were high enough (the lowest value being 0.562).

Table no. 10. Service Failure Recovery

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Excellent customer complaint - handling system	1,00	5,00	3,9477	,81839	0,620
Problem-solving groups established to solve customer problems	1,00	5,00	3,9595	,87841	0,628
Follow-up service calls	1,00	5,00	3,8129	,85410	0,606
Giving each customer an explicit service guarantee	1,00	5,00	3,7919	,83704	0,559
Every employee knows what determines a good or bad service experience	1,00	5,00	3,9708	,87061	0,659

The Service standards communication scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.572.

Table no. 11. Service Standard Communications

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Using internal standards to pin-point failures before receiving complaints	2,00	5,00	4,1156	0,72211	0,642
Effort to explain customer research results to each employee	2,00	5,00	3,9422	0,69643	0,493
Every employee understands service standards	2,00	5,00	3,9649	0,76616	0,529
Objectives chain links every branch to corporate vision	2,00	5,00	4,1512	0,81675	0,455
Service performance measures are openly communicated with all employees	1,00	5,00	4,1337	0,87166	0,416

The first item was removed because it reduces the scale reliability, the Cronbach's alpha value becoming 0.642. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator has a value of 0.615, and Bartlett test of sphericity has a value of 94,419 ($p=0.000$). The factor loadings were high enough (> 0.5), and all correlations are statistically significant.

Of these ten dimensions of service orientation, the service technology has been removed because an unacceptable level of Cronbach's alpha (0.435). The scale 9-item service orientation scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.841.

Table no. 12. Service Orientation

Items	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Service Vision	0,842
Servant leadership	0,822
Customer Treatment	0,824
Employee Empowerment	0,815
Service Rewards	0,817
Service training	0,806
Service Failure Prevention	0,841
Service Failure Recovery	0,818
Service standard Communications	0,828

The service vision dimension reduces the overall reliability of the service orientation scale, being eliminated. The intercorrelations among the eight remaining dimensions are statistically significant. However, the factor loading of service failure prevention is 0.463 (<0.5), this dimension being removed. After removing this dimension, the value of KMO indicator become 0.861, and Bartlett test of sphericity is 445.284 (p=0.000). The factor loadings of the seven variables were high enough (>0.638), all correlations being statistically significant and indicating the construct convergent validity.

Table no. 13. Results of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Independent variables	Standardized coefficients	t statistics	Significance	Result
H1	Service orientation	0,257	3,485	0,001	Accepted
H2	Servant leadership	0.123	1.452	.148	Rejected
H3	Customer Treatment	0.193	2.256	.025	Accepted
H4	Employee Empowerment	0.121	1.312	.191	Rejected
H5	Service Rewards	-0.372	-3.749	.000	Accepted
H6	Service training	-.082	-.836	.405	Rejected
H7	Service Failure Recovery	.092	.983	.327	Rejected
H8	Service standard Communications	.316	3.740	.000	Accepted

Dependent Variable: Employee's customer orientation

We used the simple linear regression equation to test the first research hypothesis, and a multiple linear regression model to test the H2-H8 hypothesis. Table 13 presents the standardized coefficient of the regression function, the t-statistic and significance level for each hypothesis. The research hypothesis were accepted or rejected on the base of the significance level.

According to the first hypothesis, the service orientation have a positive and significant effect on employee customer orientation. Although this relationship was validated, the organisational service orientation explains only 6,66% of the variance of employee customer orientation. According to the H2-H8 hypothesis, between each service orientation dimension and employee customer orientation there are positive relationships. The regression model of the service orientation dimensions ($R^2=0,225$) revealed the significant and positive effects of customer treatment and service standards communication on employee customer orientation. While service rewards have a negative effect, the servant leadership, employee empowerment, service training and service failure recovery have no significant relationship with employee customer orientation.

Conclusion

The results of this research revealed a positive and direct relationship between organisational service orientation and employees' customer orientation. If public services employees perceive a high level of organisational service orientation, the likelihood of customer oriented behaviours adoption is higher, with positive effects on performance. Customer treatment and service standards communications are the most important components of service orientation because they have significant and positive effects on employees' customer orientation. An interesting finding relate to the negative effects of service rewards on customer orientation. In relation with behaviours of public services employees, this result is in line with previous research (Perry and Wise, 1990; Grant, 2008) that found the motivational role of the affective and normative values to serve the public and of the opportunity to induce a significant difference in the lives of others. This fact reconfirms the role of personality traits and self-motivation of employees in public services organisations.

The results of this research lead to several managerial recommendations. First, in recruitment and selection process a special

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attention must be done to potential employee's personality traits and self-motivation to serve. Because customer treatment is one of the most important components of the service orientation, employees have to take care of customers, meet their needs, and be friendly and courteous. Reducing customer inconvenient will generate high level of satisfaction and high quality interactions. Top management should to develop programmes that best communicate the service standards. Every employee must understand service standards, service performance measures, and the main results of customer research projects. Third, the service reward system development is recommended, but it is not enough to motivate employees to adopt customer-oriented behaviours. Possibly, the service reward acts as a hygienic factor that prevent deviant behaviours.

The main limitation of this research is generated by the sampling procedure that was not probabilistic. The sample structure is not comprehensive, being focused on tax administration, other public services not being represented. We analysed only the relationships between organisational service orientation and employee customer orientation, the consequences on individual and organisational performance not being considered. Future research could provide new evidence in other public services sectors, e.g. education, health and local public government. The direct and mediated relationships between organisational service orientation, employee customer-oriented behaviour, organisational and individual performance could be interesting for future research.

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