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The Impact of Empowerment on Customer Contact Employees' Roles in Service Organizations

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A pilot study was conducted to test a hierarchical model in which empowerment of contact personnel is presented as an antecedent condition to role conflict, role ambiguity, adaptability, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. The latter are, in turn, presented as antecedents to helping behaviors directed at customers. The model is structured on three interfaces: employee-manager, employee-role, and employee-customer. The data were collected in six branches of the same bank in a major North American city. Results reveal that empowerment is a very efficacious managerial control tool in that it significantly affects the behavior and attitudinal dispositions of boundary-spanning service employees. Specifically, role ambiguity emerges as the most influential variable in the employee-role interface, and employee adaptability is a highly determining factor for the delivery of effective role-prescribed and extra-role performances. Implications for the management of customer-contact service employees and directions for further research are discussed.

SERVICE HETEROGENEITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF CONTACT EMPLOYEES

The empowerment of contact or boundary-spanning employees in service organizations has often been pre-

scribed as an efficient strategy (e.g., Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1988). It is presented as a way of enhancing flexibility of behaviors that would be otherwise scripted and normative. Empowerment is advocated as especially relevant and important to the delivery of heterogeneous services. In such situations, flexible scripts may become clearly necessary. Consequently, contact or boundary-spanning employees should be given the power or latitude to adapt their behaviors to the demands of each and every service encounter. Empowerment is also supposed to be important when dealing in heterogeneous markets. Some authors suggest that heterogeneity reflects market diversity, which, in turn, should be reflected in the behavioral adaptability of contact employees. Moreover, trends toward empowerment seem also to be motivated by the apparent flattening of organizational charts, whereby middle management positions are increasingly being eliminated. Accordingly, empowerment is presented not only as recommendable but as almost inevitable. For instance, Tatikonda and Tatikonda (1995) suggest that “flat organizations, empowerment, cross-disciplinary and cross-departmental efforts are essential for TQM [total quality management] success. Quality improvements gained through empowered cross-functional teams can be 200% to 600% more effective than improvements obtained through functional teams” (pp. 7-8).

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On the other hand, some have argued that empowerment is inappropriate or even counterproductive in situations of low service heterogeneity because flexible behaviors will disrupt the quasi-industrialized service delivery operations. Lee (1989) suggested that "a firm with a high heterogeneity of services should industrialize services and put special emphasis on quality control" (p. 9). Similarly, Edgett and Parkinson (1993) reviewed the literature on the effects of services heterogeneity and also emphasized that it has to be controlled.

This lack of homogeneity in services creates difficulties throughout the entire product development process, including the design, production and delivery stages. . . . This makes it harder to control the output of service organisations than it is to control the output of those producing tangible products. (p. 21)

Consequently, the empowerment of service employees is advocated by some and discouraged by others. Both positions are defended quite convincingly. Nevertheless, some skepticism has emerged with respect to this largely prescriptive literature.

In the world of global competition, flat organizations, continuous change, and customer-focused efforts, empowerment has become almost sacred. Most organizations automatically subscribe to the rhetoric of empowerment. . . . The benefits described in the popular business press are extensive, but not well documented. (Quinn and Spreitzer 1997, p. 42)

The empirical evidence is therefore not yet so preponderant that one side may be clearly deemed more correct than the other. Nevertheless, as a whole, these arguments clearly provide a methodological warning. Specifically, it becomes quite evident that to isolate the effects of empowerment on employee attitudes and behaviors, the heterogeneity of services should be controlled for.

The research presented here rests on a pilot study, a major objective of which was to assess the impact of empowerment per se. In an effort to control for sources of heterogeneity, the study was purposefully limited to one industry (banking), one organization (a single major Canadian bank), and one relatively homogeneous geographical area of a major Canadian metropolitan area. Consequently, the observed effects of empowerment, if any, may hardly be attributed to sources other than contact employees (e.g., varying types of customers or service settings). Such an approach allows for an understanding of the impact of empowerment on role ambiguity and role conflict, which, in turn, may have an impact on various job-related individ-

ual-level variables (i.e., job satisfaction, adaptability to the job, and self-efficacy) and on employee performance. The model developed and tested here opens new research and managerial avenues even if the limited sample size precludes the generalization of findings. Finally, this study differs significantly from previous studies in the domain of economic efficiency that stress the capacity and will to go beyond the call of duty or to do more than what is expected of them, quantitatively speaking. Instead, we examine empowerment as a way of adapting employee behaviors to specific customers and specific situational demands. It is argued that empowered employees are inclined to do so because they interpret organizational goals and policies in an idiosyncratic manner that reflects their own orientations toward the service.

WHEN THE SERVICE FAILS: THE ROLE OF EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT

Service firms depend heavily on the ability of customer contact employees to properly deliver their services. The attitudes and behaviors of contact employees can significantly affect customers' perceptions of the service because service delivery occurs during the interaction between employees and customers (the service encounter). Because of the importance of the service encounter, service firms must find ways by which they can effectively manage their customer contact employees so as to help ensure that their attitudes and behaviors are conducive to the delivery of high-quality service.

A review of the literature on customer contact or boundary-spanning employees leads to two major conclusions: (a) Managers and/or organizational policies and procedures can influence the responses of customer contact employees so as to enhance service quality, and (b) the responses of customer contact employees heavily influence customer perceptions of service quality and the service encounter. In a branch-level study, Schneider (1980) emphatically argued that

management concentration on easily countable, relatively short-term indices of human effectiveness may be shortsighted in the manufacturing sector; in the service sector, it's positively myopic. . . . Management emphasis in a service organization cannot be hidden from those who are served: climate shows in service organizations. When branch employees perceive a strong service orientation in their branch, the customers of those branches report not only that they receive generally superior service, but that specific facets of service are handled in a superior manner. (p. 55)

In the present study, we examine three interfaces: that of the employee and manager (employee-manager), that of the employee and his or her role prescriptions (employee-role), and that of the employee and customer (employee-customer). More precisely, in the sequential model proposed here, the relations between customers and employees are hypothesized to depend on employee job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and adaptability, which, in turn, depend on the degree to which the employees are empowered. The main emphasis of the model is on the so-called prosocial behaviors that employees exhibit while in contact with customers. The term *prosocial behaviors* has been defined as helpful employee behaviors directed toward customers. More specifically, two types of prosocial behaviors are distinguished: role-prescribed performance and extra-role performance (Organ 1988).

The management of customer contact employees has been extensively discussed in the services marketing literature. However, few research efforts have attempted to link the three interfaces of the employee-management process. A notable exception was the study by Hartline and Ferrell (1996) in the hospitality services setting.

An additional contribution of this study lies in the fact that it shows the sequential effects of the three phases of the service delivery process. We propose to test the strength of the sequential impact of managerial control through empowerment on employee role conflict and ambiguity, on the relation between employees and their jobs, and on their prosocial behaviors. Specifically, it is argued that the display of prosocial behaviors by employees is heavily dependent on several attitudinal and behavioral responses of contact employees. Within the employee-role interface, we therefore examine the relationships among these responses, that is, the relationships among role stress (i.e., role conflict and role ambiguity), adaptability, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction. Finally, within the organization-employee interface, we examine employee perceptions regarding empowerment, a major managerial control mechanism that can significantly influence their responses on the job.

The fact that this study empirically tests the effects of empowerment on variables related to contact employees must also be stressed because very few studies have verified the effects of empowerment on employees that have been proposed in prescriptive papers (Germain and Dröge 1998).

In the following section, the relevant services literature on which we build our hypothesized relationships is presented. The research method chosen to carry out the study is then described. After the presentation of our findings, we elaborate on the theoretical and managerial implications of our analysis and suggest future research avenues.

THE EMPLOYEE-ORGANIZATION INTERFACE: A THREE-DIMENSIONAL MODEL

The Employee-Manager Interface: Empowerment

Bowen and Schneider (1985) have argued that in service organizations human resources should be managed differently than in the goods sector. Their recommendations include (a) involving employees in planning and organizing service activities, (b) recognizing that the work environment of service employees has strong influence on how customers experience the service, and (c) understanding that human resource practices can ultimately influence the service experiences of customers. The underlying premise of these recommendations is that if managers treat their employees well, the employees will then reciprocate by treating customers well (Grönroos 1983). So far, this proposition has not been tested empirically.

Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1988) have identified several communication and control processes that managers may implement to manage service employees. These processes include managerial activities and employee responses that are hypothesized to affect service quality. Singh (1993) examined several managerial determinants and employee response outcomes to role ambiguity and provided empirical evidence that indicated that managerial actions did in fact influence contact employee response.

Boundary spanners' perceptions of role ambiguity vary dramatically with variations in organizational factors; thus, though it may be difficult to reduce (objective) ambiguity in boundary-spanning roles, it is certainly feasible to design jobs so as to help boundary spanners cope with role ambiguity. This designing involves provision of consideration, feedback, and autonomy. . . . Managers may find it rewarding to put their efforts behind programs that reduce and/or help boundary spanners cope with ambiguity in specific facets of their role. (p. 27)

EMPOWERMENT AND ROLE TAKING

Empowerment refers to a situation in which a manager gives employees the discretion to make day-to-day decisions about job-related activities (Conger and Kanungo 1988). Bowen and Lawler (1992) have suggested that empowerment is most recommended when service delivery involves managing a relationship as opposed to simply performing a transaction, or in other words, when more adaptability is required from employees. The service firm may want to establish relationships with customers to

build loyalty or to get new ideas geared toward improving the service delivery system or toward offering new services. A flexible and customized approach can help establish the relationship and get ideas flowing. The relationship itself can be the most valued commodity that is delivered in many services. When no tangibles are delivered (e.g., in estate planning or in management consulting), the service provider often *is* the service, from the customer's perspective, and empowerment allows the employee to customize the service she or he is to provide to fit the customer's particular needs.

Clearly, the case for empowerment is all the stronger when the relationship is more enduring and its importance is greater to the service package. This contention is further supported when the service encounter is regarded as a theatrical play between two parties—the actors and the audience (Grove and Fisk 1992)—or from a dramaturgic perspective (Goffman 1956). The service actors (performers of the service) are often perceived by the audience (customers) as being the service itself (Grönroos 1985). Their actions are therefore central to the audience's service experience. Hence, in an effort to foster the desired impression before the audience, the service actors must subscribe to a variety of concerns, such as their ability to enact their service role properly and their overall dedication to the performance of the service.

An actor's skill may be reflected in knowledge, courtesy, competence, and communication abilities, which, in turn, represent aspects of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). The various dimensions of an actor's service performance are most critical in service encounters that rely on high levels of personal contact with the customer. In such situations, there exists the opportunity to create a competitive advantage through the performances of service employees (actors). Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml (1988) refer to this as the "people factor." Even if the script is rigid, as it is likely to be in service organizations characterized by low heterogeneity, some employees may perform better than others because they are more experienced or more talented. Furthermore, they may also be more committed to their organization and provide customers with something that is not required within the boundaries of a rigid script as long as it is not in contradiction to the script (e.g., a warm smile). Accordingly, the so-called service enthusiasts have a tendency to go beyond the call of duty by providing more than that required by their roles and scripts.

However, the essence of empowerment consists of granting contact employees the possibility of adapting a script or, even better, inventing a new script. Such a malleability may be very demanding on contact employees: the more flexible the script, the more ambiguous the role, and consequently, the more anxious one can become. The key

element of such flexibility in behavior is role taking: the greater flexibility employees have vis-à-vis the script, the less they will tend to behave as theater actors whose every word and attitude is dictated from the outside by the playwright and the director. Rather, they behave as comedians of the old Italian acting form, *commedia dell'arte*, to whom no script was traditionally made available but only a global idea of the plot and the characters. In the latter case, the play may change from one performance to the next. Just as regular comedians, some employees feel better with rigid scripts, whereas others prefer flexible ones. This analogy to the two types of theatrical representations (i.e., classical plays vs. *commedia dell'arte*) reflects the distinction made by Organ (1988) between two types of prosocial behaviors. On one hand, we have what is formally required by the organization (i.e., the role-prescribed performance), and on the other, we have what does not constitute part of the organizational requirements (i.e., the extra-role performance). The first type of performance requires that one mostly follows rules, whereas the latter may require a redefinition of the script.

Role taking is defined as entering the perspective of the other (Schwalbe 1988), that is, understanding the other's imagery of the external world. This cognitive process of role taking is related to mutual understanding. In other words, if one understands how another person sees an event, one is more likely to understand that person's communications about that event (Mohr and Bitner 1991). Schwalbe (1988) asserts that role taking is essential for establishing stable patterns of interaction. Furthermore, when programmed interaction is not working, role taking is necessary for realigning behavior. Some of the research on role taking shows that this factor leads to building positive counseling relationships between psychologists and patients (Gladstein 1983).

The scripts that constitute a contact employee's role are defined by Abelson (1981) as cognitive structures that, when activated, organize one's comprehension of event-based situations. Scripts without sequential information are called *weak scripts*, whereas those that include learned associations between prior and consequent events are called *strong scripts*. A strong script, then, is a structure that describes appropriate sequences of role behaviors in a particular context (Schank and Abelson 1977). Scripts are assumed to define expectations that function both as behavioral guides and as norms for the evaluation of people's performances (Smith and Houston 1983). According to Mohr and Bitner (1991), occupational role members generally need elaborate scripts to successfully perform their roles. Because customers add variability, the service provider who interacts with them frequently needs particularly elaborate and flexible scripts to effectively respond to that variability. As long as a customer's expectations in

an encounter are not met due to rigidly defined scripts, the customer is likely to view the service as a failure.

Due to the fact that a script is a cognitive structure, there will inevitably be some differences between scripts as understood by employees and their supervisors. An example of script incongruity would be a situation whereby management rewards employees on the basis of how many customers they processed (rigid script), whereas the environmental context requires contact employees to spend more time and attention to each particular customer (flexible script). This is typical of such contexts as overcrowded hospitals. Some firms emphasize cost reduction and short-term profit over customer service setup systems. For example, some firms assess employee performance in terms of the number of customers served. In these cases, employee and customer goals will surely conflict. In situations where competition between the participants is likely, one would expect misunderstandings and miscommunication to occur between contact employees and customers.

Management commitment to service quality is often regarded as a major factor influencing customer perceptions of service quality (Berry, Parasuraman, and Zeithaml 1988); such a commitment may reduce conflicts by encouraging adequate behaviors on the part of employees. Schneider (1980) has elaborated on such managerial commitments: Managers that qualify as service enthusiasts establish flexible policies and procedures that result in the promulgation of elaborate and malleable (nonrigid) service scripts. They engage in behaviors that show concern for the organization's clients and in activities designed to satisfy the clients. Conversely, service bureaucrats promote compliance to rigid service scripts based on system maintenance, routine, and adherence to uniform operating guidelines and procedures. The most important differences between the two managerial orientations is the service enthusiast's (a) emphasis on the importance of interpersonal relationships at work, (b) concern for the customer, and (c) flexible application of rules, as opposed to the bureaucrat's avoidance of interpersonal issues and attention to rules, procedures, and system maintenance.

OUTCOMES OF EMPOWERMENT: POTENTIALLY STRONG BUT NOT STRONGLY EVIDENCED

In his work on transformational leadership, Bass (1985) contends that managers can attempt to inspire performance beyond mere compliance by delegating to employees some degree of responsibility and influence at the job level. This is achieved by (a) articulating and modeling a vision for the organization, (b) stimulating new ideas from followers, (c) demonstrating concern for individual

development through support and recognition, and (d) delegating responsibility to followers for job-level decisions.

By allowing contact employees to make these decisions, the manager relinquishes control over many aspects of the service delivery process and, thus, empowers contact employees to make customized decisions on the spot in order to completely satisfy customers. Allowing contact employees to use their discretion in serving customers has many positive influences on their responses and on the service encounter. Bowen and Lawler (1992) suggest (but do not demonstrate it empirically) that empowered employees feel better about their jobs and more enthusiastic about serving customers and that this results in quicker responses to customer needs and increased customer satisfaction. Increases in employee job satisfaction and decreases in employee role stress have been associated with employees' decision-making influence (Niehoff, Enz, and Grover 1990), task autonomy (Brown and Peterson 1993), and decision-making latitude (Westman 1992). Similarly, Singh (1993) reports that boundary-spanning employees who are given job autonomy experience significantly less role ambiguity. However, as noted by Bunce and West (1996), "there is an urgent need to assess interventions at the organizational level which empower individuals to target the stressful environments themselves" (p. 211). So far, it does seem that such a need remains to be fulfilled.

A primary outcome of empowerment is increased employee self-efficacy (Conger and Kanungo 1988). As employees gain more discretion over how their jobs are performed, their levels of self-efficacy increase because they decide the best way to perform a given task (Gist and Mitchell 1992). Empowered employees also are likely to be more adaptive because of the increased flexibility that accompanies empowerment (Scott and Bruce 1994). Empowerment removes the constraints imposed on customer contact employees and gives them room to maneuver as they attempt to serve customers' needs (Reardon and Enis 1990). The empowerment-adaptability relationship has received tentative empirical support in that adaptability has been associated with autonomy and decision-making influence (Niehoff, Enz, and Grover 1990; Scott and Bruce 1994) as well as with freedom of employee action (Spiro and Weitz 1990).

Empowerment contributes to the making of so-called learning organizations. Compared to their nonempowered counterparts, empowered employees are likely to be cognitively more active and are more likely to modify their own behaviors and attitudes toward customers in order to reach both personal and organizational goals. They internalize customer feedback into their personal conduct and analyze the effects of the different behaviors they develop

in regard to their outcomes. All this cognitive activity triggered by empowerment is likely to improve the organization's adaptability. As pointed out by Winter, Sarros, and Tanewski (1997) in their literature review,

In adaptive learning organizations, managers can help create cultural norms of learning and personal development by demonstrating a concern for people and their individual ideas, initiatives and innovations. For example, humanistic core values are evident in management practices that utilize participative, empowerment techniques such as quality circles, self-managing work groups, and multi-skilling. (p. 16)

On the contrary, "in an alienating work environment there is little employee interest in learning new ways of working when existing demands for autonomy and participation are not being fulfilled" (p. 16).

Despite the convincing nature of their literature review and of their proposed model, Winter, Sarros, and Tanewski (1997) stress the evident need for empirical evidence. They point out that "consultants could encourage managers to accept the ethical, . . . moral, . . . and motivational . . . justifications for empowering employees," but they stress that "subsequent empirical research of the effects of management control orientations and practices needs to clearly explain the construction of operational definitions and choice of measuring instruments" (p. 23). In other words, although they are often described in the management literature, the effects of empowerment remain to be demonstrated empirically. This is one of the contributions of this study. The need for such empirical evidence is also stressed by a recent, now famous article by Argyris (1998), "Empowerment: The Emperor's New Clothes," which explores why so many change programs have achieved such disappointing results. He suggests that we would be better off with a healthy dose of honesty about the practical limits of empowerment and the programs championed by change professionals.

Empowerment should have a positive influence on the attitudinal and behavioral responses of contact employees. The increased discretion and flexibility experienced by empowered contact employees is likely to make them feel better about their jobs, reduce the stress they feel in performing their jobs, increase their confidence in performing job-related tasks, and increase their ability to adapt to changing conditions within the service encounter. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: An increase in the manager's use of empowerment leads to higher levels of customer contact employee (a) adaptability, (b) self-efficacy, and (c) job satisfaction and lower levels of customer con-

tact employee (d) role conflict and (e) role ambiguity.

Employee-Role Interface: Role Stress

Certain roles in organizations are more exposed than others to situations of conflict. This is particularly evident in boundary-spanning roles. Boundary-spanning roles were defined by Thompson (1962) as those roles that link the organization with its environment through the interaction of an organizational member with a nonmember. In the case of such roles, conflict is created by expectations and pressures directed to the role occupant not only from intraorganizational sources but also from extraorganizational sources. This places the role occupant in a particularly difficult situation mainly for two reasons (Adams 1976): (a) There is a conflict of interest between interorganizational sources and extraorganizational sources (e.g., the services firm wants a short interaction between the customer and the contact employee, whereas the customer wants enough interaction time to express his or her needs and views), and (b) the employee's ability to control and manipulate expectations and pressures that come from sources outside the organization is in many cases more limited than his or her ability to control, manipulate, and influence intraorganizational expectations and pressures (i.e., the contact employee may better influence his or her friends and supervisors than the customers he or she serves). Tensions resulting from pressures external and internal to the organization heavily impact boundary-spanning roles.

A lack of role clarity has been shown to be a major source of job tension, dissatisfaction, and reduced innovativeness as workers are unsure of the exact nature of role expectations (Kahn et al. 1964). The amount of overt communication about role expectations quite obviously represents an important mediator. Schneider (1980) proposed that incongruity between the service orientation of bank employees who are probably self-selected to be service enthusiasts and the perceived orientation of management as service bureaucrats who care only about maintaining the system engenders role ambiguity and conflict. This process, in turn, translates into dissatisfaction, frustration, and intent to quit. Role conflict is defined as the incompatibility between one or more roles within an employee's role set, such that fulfilling one role would make fulfilling the others more difficult (Weatherly and Tansik 1993). Role ambiguity occurs when an employee "lacks salient information needed to effectively enact his/her role" (Singh 1993, p. 12).

Role conflict and ambiguity have been shown to reduce employees' job satisfaction (Brown and Peterson 1993), self-efficacy beliefs (Jex and Gudanowski 1992), and adaptability (Scott and Bruce 1994). Moreover, both

Schneider (1980) and Shamir (1980) reveal that employees' role stress (conflict and ambiguity) and dissatisfaction are major contributors to their inability to deliver good service. Singh (1993) provides empirical evidence that the role ambiguity experienced by boundary-spanning employees greatly reduces their job satisfaction and performance. This, in turn, leads to a decrease in customers' perceived service quality.

Contact employees act as boundary spanners between the firm and its customers, which places them in a unique position of acquiescing to the demands of the firm (i.e., managers, policy, rules) and its customers. As contact employees span this boundary between organization and client, they can become frustrated and confused in their search for the best ways to fulfill their multiple roles. Role ambiguity is especially menacing because of its negative relationship to employee self-efficacy and job satisfaction (Hartline and Ferrell 1996). It can diminish employees' ability to serve customers and indirectly decrease customers' perceptions of service quality.

The second and third hypotheses are derived from the review of the literature discussed above.

Hypothesis 2: Higher contact employee role conflict leads to lower levels of contact employee (a) adaptability, (b) self-efficacy, and (c) job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Higher contact employee role ambiguity leads to lower levels of contact employee (a) adaptability, (b) self-efficacy, and (c) job satisfaction.

Employee-Customer Interface: Contact Employee Prosocial Behaviors

In many service companies, contact employees are the source of strategic differentiation and competitive advantage (Pfeffer 1994). Consumer satisfaction, service quality perceptions, and decisions to remain loyal to service providers are significantly influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of these company representatives. Contact employees contribute to service excellence by creating a favorable image for the firm, by going beyond the call of duty for customers, by promoting the firm's products and services, and by providing better service than the competition does (Bitner 1995; Schneider and Bowen 1992).

Several survey-based studies of service satisfaction suggest that the human interaction component of service delivery is essential to the determination of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. A study of relationship marketing in the life insurance industry found clients' satisfaction with their contact person to be a significant predictor of overall satisfaction with the service (Crosby and Stephens 1987). Other researchers have found the human interaction component to be of importance in evaluating professional services (Chebat, Savard, and Filiatrault 1998; Day and

Bodur 1978), medical services (Brown and Swartz 1989), and retail outlets (Westbrook 1981).

The attitudinal and behavioral responses of customer contact employees are important because of the interactive nature of service delivery. According to Bitner (1990), these responses can positively and negatively affect customers' perceptions of the service encounter and their judgments of service quality. Their qualitative study indicated that customers were more satisfied with the service encounter when employees possessed the ability, willingness, and competence to solve their problems. They also found that an employee's ability to adapt to special needs and requests enhanced customers' perceptions of the service encounter. Bateson (1985) has argued that contact employees are better able to satisfy customers when they have some control over the service encounter. Bowen and Schneider (1985) and Rafaeli (1993) have shown that the friendliness, enthusiasm, and attentiveness of contact employees positively affects customers' perceptions of service quality. Moreover, branch-level studies conducted by Bettencourt and Brown (1997), Hartline and Ferrell (1993), and Podsakoff and MacKenzie (1994) consistently demonstrated positive correlation between contact employee behaviors and customer satisfaction.

Prosocial behaviors are part of the employee's organizational role and are intended to promote the welfare of the individual or the organization at which they are directed. By analyzing contact employee prosocial behaviors, significant insights can be gained in relation to consumers' cognitive activity, their attributions to service quality, and their ultimate evaluations of service quality.

As already noted, a distinction exists between role-prescribed and extra-role prosocial behaviors (Brief and Motowild 1986; Katz and Kahn 1978; Organ 1988). Role-prescribed customer service refers to the expected employee behaviors in serving the firm's customers (Brief and Motowild 1986; Katz and Kahn 1978). Expectations for these behaviors may derive from explicit norms in the workplace or from explicit obligations, as specified in organizational documents (e.g., job descriptions and performance evaluations), such as common courtesy, demonstrating accurate knowledge of policies and products, addressing customers by name, and cross-selling the firm's services (Bettencourt and Brown 1997). These behaviors are basic requirements.

Extra-role behaviors affect customers differently: a contact employee delights the customer by providing little extras and spontaneous exceptional service during the service encounter for increased customer satisfaction and positive emotional responses (Bettencourt and Brown 1997). Such unexpected behaviors represent real "satisfiers." Three attitudinal and behavioral responses of customer contact employees (adaptability, self-efficacy,

and job satisfaction) are shown in the literature review to positively affect the prosocial behaviors (role-prescribed and extra-role performances) exhibited during the service encounter with customers. Exploring these responses enables us to conceptually link the two interfaces (employee-organization and employee-customer) and examine them simultaneously within the same study.

Employee adaptability. Hartline and Ferrell (1996) define adaptability as the ability of contact employees to adjust their behavior to the interpersonal demands of the service encounter. It can be described as a continuum, ranging from conformity to an established script, in which employees approach each customer the same way, to service personalization, in which employees must adapt to serve customers individually (Solomon et al. 1985).

Previous research has linked employee adaptability to performance. For example, Spiro and Weitz (1990) showed that adaptive selling was positively correlated with salesperson performance. Adaptability has also been linked to customers' perceptions of the service encounter. Humphrey and Ashforth (1994) provided evidence that employees who mindlessly followed a service script were more likely to make mistakes and less likely to meet individual needs. Bitner, Booms, and Mohr (1994) reported that almost half of particularly satisfying customer encounters resulted from the contact employee's ability to adjust the system to accommodate customer needs and requests. Success was attributed in these cases to the employee's own ability and willingness to adjust, not simply to do more: Adaptation lies more in the nature of the behavior than in its intensity. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that contact employees who adapt their behaviors during customer interactions are more likely to fulfill the needs and requests of their customers and thereby increase customers' perceptions of service quality. The following hypothesis is suggested:

Hypothesis 4: Higher levels of contact employee adaptability lead to improved contact employee (a) role-prescribed performances and (b) extra-role performances.

Employee self-efficacy. As a key part of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, self-efficacy refers to an employee's belief in his or her ability to perform job-related tasks. The importance of self-efficacy lies in its ability to increase employee performance. Self-efficacy grows stronger over time as the employee performs tasks and builds the confidence necessary to fulfill his or her role in the organization (Gist and Mitchell 1992). As self-efficacy increases, employees exert more effort, become more persistent, and learn how to cope with task-related obstacles.

Empowered employees have to internalize the feedback received from customers: They must modify their behaviors on the basis of their behaviors' outcomes. On one hand, they question themselves as to their capacity to adapt to customers' demands, which, in turn, is likely to elevate their levels of anxiety because of the lack of clear and rigid scripts. On the other hand, the intense cognitive activity related to their daily adaptive work enables them to learn about their job, the organization, their customers, and more important, themselves. Employees who have survived the test of flexible scripts are likely to have a feeling of self-efficacy.

It may then be expected that contact employees who hold strong self-efficacy beliefs are more likely to create favorable service encounters than those who do not. An employee's performance typically involves responding to customer needs, handling special requests, and performing under adverse circumstances (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). Because of the increased effort that accompanies self-efficacy, highly self-efficacious employees should perform better in these service activities, thereby increasing customers' perceptions of service quality. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Higher levels of contact employee self-efficacy lead to improved contact employee (a) role-prescribed performances and (b) extra-role performances.

Employee job satisfaction. Locke (1969) defines job satisfaction as the pleasurable emotional state that results from the appraisal of one's job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one's job values. Churchill et al. (1985) argue that, in a sales context, employee job satisfaction is closely related to employee behavioral performance. A similar relationship is likely to occur with respect to service employees. During the service encounter, employee behavioral performance often *is* the service, as it is perceived by customers (Bitner 1990). This relationship lies in the interaction between contact employees and customers, in which satisfied employees are more likely to engage in behaviors that assist customers (Weatherly and Tansik 1993). In a 5-year study of a bank operation, based on interviews with management personnel, frontline employees, and customers, Schneider (1980) found that job satisfaction was a primary reason for the delivery of good service. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 6: Higher levels of contact employee job satisfaction lead to improved contact employee (a) role-prescribed performances and (b) extra-role performances.

FIGURE 1
Conceptual Model

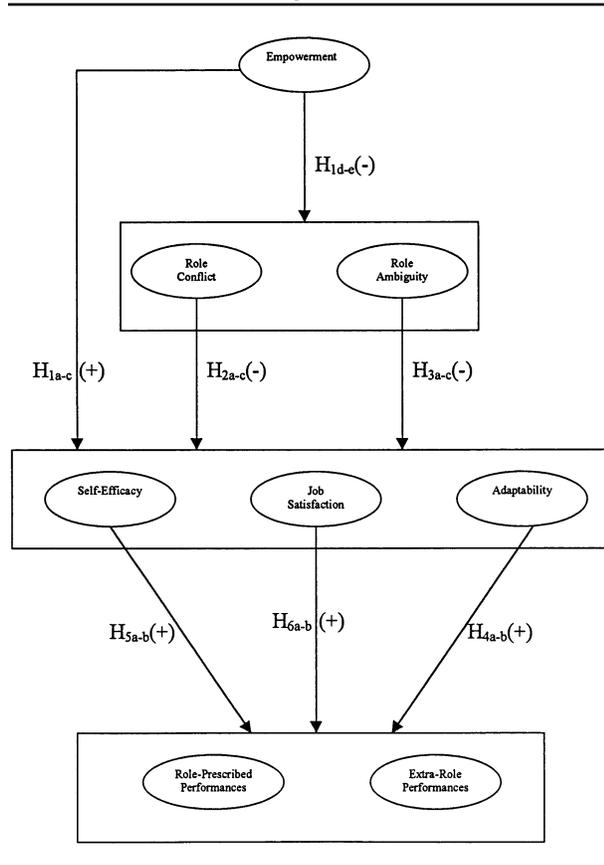


Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of our study.

RESEARCH METHOD

Sample and Research Setting

To empirically assess the impact of empowerment *per se*, we controlled for the possible effects of service heterogeneity. To do so, we chose a research strategy similar to that of Delery and Doty (1996): "The current study was conducted in a single industry to control for between-industry differences" (p. 811). Accordingly, they limited their sampling frame to the banking industry. So did we. The banking services industry was chosen because the delivery of most financial services to clients is of a highly involved nature and requires considerable customer contact. In addition to this, to cancel out possible sources of service heterogeneity between banks, we limited our sample to a single major bank. "Some banks offer a wide variety of services to a diverse set of customers; others offer a limited set of services to a largely homogeneous set of customers"

(Delery and Doty 1996, p. 811). We also controlled for the effects of organizational culture. As pointed out by Bowen and Lawler (1992), the same service (e.g., mail and parcels delivery) can be provided either by companies that empower their employees (e.g., FedEx) or by companies that do not (e.g., UPS). In that case, they conclude that the type of service cannot account for these variations but that taking account of the organizational culture can. In our study, we wanted to cancel the effects of the global organizational culture in order to pinpoint the sole effects of empowerment.

Forty-one financial service managers (FSMs) of six branches of a prominent Canadian bank were surveyed. Retail banking is an interesting service setting for testing the proposed hypotheses because FSMs are in direct and continuous interaction with customers and are thus able to provide accurate descriptions of attitudinal and behavioral responses exhibited on the job and to evaluate their own prosocial behaviors while serving the branch's clients. In addition to this, Canadian banks recently experienced a major downsizing that mainly consisted of flattening the hierarchical structure to the detriment of middle management. This implied that more decisions had to be made by contact employees themselves.

The FSMs were asked to complete a 56-item questionnaire regarding the three interfaces that constitute their job at the bank. More specifically, they were asked about their perceptions of formal controls (3 items on management service orientation, 4 on training, 2 on empowerment, and 4 on behavioral-based evaluation) and those of workplace fairness (3 items on pay rules, 2 on pay administration, 2 on internal equity, and 2 on work pace); their levels of role conflict (9 items) and role ambiguity (7 items); their degree of self-efficacy (4 items), adaptability (4 items), and job satisfaction (4 items); and finally, their customer service prescribed (3 items) and extra-role (3 items) performances.

Constraints imposed by the bank's management prohibited us from directly contacting employees. As a result, we relied on the regional manager to distribute the employee surveys. Both English and French versions of the questionnaire were handed to all respondents, along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and assuring the anonymity of their responses. To ensure anonymity, a preaddressed and prestamped envelope was provided. All questionnaires were returned directly to the researchers.

Validation of Measures

Measures used in this research had been validated in previously published studies. All measures pertaining to empowerment, role stress, adaptability, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction were taken from Hartline and Ferrell's

TABLE 1
Correlation Matrix

	<i>Empowerment</i>	<i>Role Conflict 1</i>	<i>Role Conflict 2</i>	<i>Role Ambiguity 2</i>	<i>Role Ambiguity 1</i>	<i>Self-Efficacy 2</i>	<i>Job Satisfaction</i>	<i>Adaptability</i>	<i>Role Prescribed</i>	<i>Role Extra</i>
Empowerment	1.000	-.436	-.659	-.778	-.694	.300	.631	.574	.511	.524
Role conflict 1	-.436	1.000	.000	.000	.000	.068	.000	.001	.004	.003
Role conflict 2	.013	.013	1.000	.371	.130	.043	-.041	-.132	-.131	-.184
Role ambiguity 2	.013	.500	.500	1.000	.715	.776	.422	.260	.261	.184
Role ambiguity 1	-.659	.000	1.000	.715	1.000	-.319	-.584	.595	-.650	-.485
Self-efficacy 2	.000	.500	.000	.000	.000	.056	.001	.001	.000	.006
Job satisfaction	-.778	.371	.715	1.000	.548	-.396	-.715	-.678	-.630	-.646
Adaptability	.000	.031	.000	.002	.002	.023	.000	.000	.000	.000
Role prescribed	-.694	.130	.776	.548	1.000	-.205	-.462	-.690	-.627	-.428
Role extra	.000	.264	.000	.002	.000	.157	.009	.000	.000	.015
Empowerment	.300	.043	-.319	-.396	-.205	1.000	.369	.441	.426	.489
Role conflict 1	.068	.418	.056	.023	.157	.369	1.000	.491	.506	.446
Role conflict 2	.068	.418	.056	.023	.157	.032	.491	1.000	.004	.011
Role ambiguity 2	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.032	.005	.005	.004	.011
Role ambiguity 1	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.032	.005	.005	.004	.011
Self-efficacy 2	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.032	.005	.005	.004	.011
Job satisfaction	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.032	.005	.005	.004	.011
Adaptability	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.032	.005	.005	.004	.011
Role prescribed	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.032	.005	.005	.004	.011
Role extra	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.032	.005	.005	.004	.011

(1996) empirical investigation on the management of customer contact service employees. Bettencourt and Brown's (1997) empirical examination of bank employees' prosocial behaviors provided the measures pertaining to role-prescribed and extra-role performances.

In both referent studies mentioned above, respective measures were subjected to a psychometric evaluation to assess their internal consistency and their dimensionality. Note that all the measures taken from previously published articles had already been subjected to confirmatory factor analyses by the authors of these respective articles to assess the scales' a priori structures. Only the items that produced the highest factor loadings were selected for the present study in order to limit the length of the questionnaire and enhance the return rate. We assessed the reliability of scales by Cronbach's coefficient alpha, which was followed by an item purification process that led to scale size reductions. Second, principal components factor analysis was employed for items that remained after purification to extract the factors that best represented the dimensionality of the instruments' data.

ANALYSIS

Factor Analysis

Separate factor analyses were performed for all measures consisting of three or more items (i.e., role conflict,

role ambiguity, self-efficacy, adaptability, job satisfaction, and role-prescribed and extra-role performance). The latter four measures were found to be unidimensional. On the other hand, items of the first three measures loaded on two factors.

Role ambiguity's first two items measured the degree to which the employees feel certain about the way they handle on-the-job tasks, whereas the remaining five items measured the degree of certainty regarding other organizational factors that affect their role in the bank (e.g., the branch's rules and regulations). Role conflict measured the degree of employees' agreement as to their responsibilities on the job, their way of serving customers, and their compatibility with the supervisor. The first two loaded on one factor, indicating that contact employees perceive the interpersonal relationships with the clients as an intricate part of their responsibilities on the job. The three items measuring their agreement with the supervisor loaded on the second factor, indicating that conflicting demands and/or expectations with superiors constitute an additional source of role conflict. Finally, the dimensions constituting self-efficacy measured, first, the contribution of the employee's job to his or her self-achievement and, second, their confidence levels in measuring up to their job and their colleagues. Table 1 shows the correlations between the factors included in the model.

Reliability Analysis

The reliability analysis led to significant levels of Cronbach's alpha for all scales, except for the two scales measuring the self-efficacy dimensions (.57 and .56 for Dimensions 1 and 2, respectively). Other studies also report low levels of reliability for this scale: .67 in Hartline and Ferrell (1996), .68 in Corsun and Enz (1999), and .65 in Sutton and Fall (1995).

General Linear Model Regression

General linear model multivariate regression was performed to determine the significance of the hypothesized relationships. The relations between constructs were examined on a one-to-one basis to determine the significance of the hypothesis linking each pair of constructs together.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1: The employee-manager interface. Empowerment consistently affected all behavioral and attitudinal employee responses, with the exception of self-efficacy 1 (the contribution of the employee's job to his or her self-achievement). It was found to consistently and negatively affect all four role stress dimensions (at $p < .01$). Accordingly, Hypothesis 1d and Hypothesis 1e were supported. Empowerment was also found to positively affect ($p < .05$) adaptability, self-efficacy 2, and job satisfaction. Hence, Hypothesis 1a, Hypothesis 1b-2, and Hypothesis 1c were supported, whereas Hypothesis 1b-1 was not.

Hypotheses 2 and 3: The employee-role interface. As hypothesized, role stress had a significant and negative impact on job satisfaction and adaptability. This implied that the lesser the degree of role conflict and role ambiguity experienced by contact employees on the job, the more willing they were to adapt to the particular demands of each service encounter and the more satisfied they felt about their job (see Table 2).

Role conflict 1, which measured the degree of employees' agreement with respect to their responsibilities on the job and their way of serving customers, was not found to significantly affect any of the dependent variables. On the other hand, role conflict 2, which measured employee compatibility with the supervisor, had a positive but marginal effect on adaptability ($p < .1$). However, because the directionality of this relationship was hypothesized to be negative, Hypothesis 2a-2 was not supported. Role ambiguity 1 (i.e., the degree to which the employees felt certain about the way they handled on-the-job tasks) was found to have a significant and negative impact ($p < .01$) on

TABLE 2
Significant Paths: Models of Service Employee Management (parameter estimates)

Path	Hypothesis	Beta Coefficient	t value	η^2	Significance Level
Empowerment–adaptability	1-a	.653	2.824	.330	$p < .05$
Empowerment–self-efficacy 2	1-b2	.768	3.098	.090	$p < .05$
Empowerment–job satisfaction	1-c	.552	2.377	.391	$p < .05$
Empowerment–role conflict 1	1-d1	-.730	-3.120	.435	$p < .01$
Empowerment–role conflict 2	1-d2	-.726	-4.360	.190	$p < .01$
Empowerment–role ambiguity 1	1-e1	-.912	-4.969	.606	$p < .01$
Empowerment–role ambiguity 2	1-e2	-.631	-3.565	.482	$p < .01$
Role ambiguity 1–adaptability	3-a1	-.560	-2.838	.477	$p < .01$
Role ambiguity 2–adaptability	3-a2	-.748	-3.429	.460	$p < .01$
Role ambiguity 2–job satisfaction	3-c2	-.815	-3.271	.511	$p < .01$
Adaptability–required performance	4-a	.740	4.960	.652	$p < .01$
Adaptability–extra-role performance	4-b	.804	4.984	.673	$p < .01$

adaptability only. On the other hand, role ambiguity 2 (i.e., degree of uncertainty as to organizational factors that affected their job) was found to have a significant and negative impact ($p < .01$) on both adaptability and job satisfaction. As a result, Hypotheses 3a-1, 3a-2, and 3c-2 were supported.

Hypotheses 4, 5, and 6: The employee-customer interface. Finally, the model relating the three behavioral outcomes of adaptability, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction to contact employee prosocial behaviors was found to be highly significant ($p < .01$). Adaptability had a significant effect ($p < .01$) on both prosocial behavior dimensions. That is, the more adaptive contact employees, the more effectively they performed their role-prescribed tasks and the more willing they were to provide extra-role support to their clients. Accordingly, both Hypothesis 4a and Hypothesis 4b were supported.

Both self-efficacy and job satisfaction had only marginally significant (and positive) impacts on contact employee prosocial behaviors. More precisely, the higher the level of satisfaction with the job, the better the required

performance ($\beta = .50, r^2 = .27, p = .07$) and the extra-role performance ($\beta = .44, r^2 = .25, p = .09$). Similarly, the higher the level of self-efficacy, the better the required performance ($\beta = .42, r^2 = .28, p = .06$) and the extra role performance ($\beta = .49, r^2 = .28, p = .04$). As a result, Hypothesis 5a-b and Hypothesis 6a-b were only marginally supported.

DISCUSSION

The Employee-Manager Interface

Contact employees who perceive that they are given increased discretion when performing their role experience less ambiguity with the various aspects that define their job and are less likely to experience conflict with their supervisors, with the way they serve customers, and with their responsibilities on the job. Furthermore, when current managerial practices are perceived as allocating sufficient discretionary power to contact employees, they feel more satisfied with their job, more willing to adapt to the particular demands of each service encounter, and more confident when measuring up to their job and their colleagues.

The Employee-Role Interface

Although self-efficacy 1 (i.e., the contribution of the employee's job to his or her self-achievement) was found to be significantly and inversely affected by role stress in the overall model, none of the individual role stress dimensions seemed to have a significant impact on employees' sense of self-achievement. Furthermore, self-efficacy 2 (i.e., employees' confidence levels in measuring up to their job and their colleagues) was also found not to be significantly related to any role stress dimensions. Because of the small sample size, such nullified results must be taken cautiously. However, this does seem to indicate that employees' confidence levels when measuring up to their job and their colleagues are not affected by the levels of role conflict and role ambiguity experienced while performing their job or measuring up to their colleagues, which are, in turn, two external sources of assessment. Rather, their confidence levels are largely determined by internal factors (i.e., the degree to which they believe they hold the necessary skills and abilities to perform the various tasks that constitute their role at the bank). It is noteworthy that these beliefs are not related to the levels of role conflict and ambiguity experienced on the job.

The results regarding role ambiguity confirmed the hypothesized directionality: The lower the degree to which the employees felt uncertain about the way they handled the job tasks (role ambiguity 1), the more adaptive their be-

havioral and attitudinal responses were during each individual service encounter. Similarly, the lower their degree of uncertainty as to organizational factors that affected their job (role ambiguity 2), the more adaptable the employees were while serving customers, and the more satisfied they were with their job at the bank.

The Employee-Customer Interface

Adaptability affects employee performance much stronger than self-efficacy and job satisfaction do. Accordingly, it seems more important to train contact employees to adapt to customers rather than to enhance their attitudes toward their job and/or develop self-efficacy. However, such an abrupt conclusion may not fully reflect a more complex reality: Additional regression analyses show that job satisfaction affects adaptability significantly ($\beta = .44, r^2 = .20, p = .02$). In other words, even if job satisfaction does not have a direct impact on employee performance, it affects adaptability, which, in turn, enhances employee performance. Training for adaptability is the ultimate purpose of training programs, as long as employees are satisfied by their jobs.

Such a training for adaptability may be (at least partially) achieved through two routes: first, empowerment-adaptability (Hypothesis 1a) and, second, empowerment-role ambiguity-adaptability (Hypothesis 3). We understand these two routes as the convergence of two learning processes. On one hand, the employees are trained by the supervisors (to reduce the job ambiguity and to increase their adaptability). On the other hand, they are self-trained as empowered employees (in the sense that, as already noted, empowerment stimulates their cognitive activity and adaptation to consumer variability). It just seems that empowerment is one element of a general learning process that affects both the individual employee and the whole organization. This dual learning process can hardly develop independently from the organizational values. As pointed out by Winter, Sarros, and Tanewski (1997) in their literature review,

Generative or "double-loop learning" . . . the ability of individuals and organizations to learn from their current actions, experiences and practices (rather than past learned experiences), is associated with participative management practices that value and reward openness and empathy towards employees. (p. 13)

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The main limitation of this research study stems from its limited sample size, because it is a pilot study, and from the fact that it was contained within the banking services sector. As mentioned above, the sample involves only six branches, from which 41 FSMs were purposely chosen as respondents. Thus, the nonrandom nature of the sample and its small size, as well as the fact that we focused on a single service industry and organization, may raise concerns about limited generalizability.

Managerial Implications: From and Beyond Our Findings

The following discussion explores critical human resource practices that have the potential to significantly enhance customers' perceptions of service quality. Although the recommendations provided in this section go beyond the scope of the results presented above, they can prove to be useful mechanisms for managers who want to positively influence contact employees' behavioral and attitudinal responses during service encounters with organizational clients.

Among the three interfaces of service employee management (employee-manager, employee-role, employee-customer) addressed in our study, the employee-customer interface is the most important determinant of contact employee prosocial behaviors. In our model, the relationship linking prosocial behaviors to contact employee attitudinal and behavioral responses was found to be highly significant. This implies that managers should ensure that the implementation of various organizational controls is conducive to the creation of positive contact employee behavioral outcomes, such as adaptability, self-efficacy, and job satisfaction.

Our results highlight the importance of four managerial issues:

Managerial commitment to quality. Managers who are personally committed to service quality are more likely to engage in activities that improve service quality. Managerial commitment to service quality is regarded as an antecedent of other formal controls (George 1990). Although we did not find significant relationships between all these constructs, previous research has alluded to a possible connection (Hartline and Ferrell 1996). Management commitment to service quality is important because it helps align the firm toward a common goal of superior service quality (Reardon and Enis 1990). In this sense, it can become the manager's vision for the firm. This vision is likely to be noticed and modeled by employees, which

eventually increases employee satisfaction and service quality (Niehoff, Enz, and Grover 1990).

Those who show this commitment are more likely to take initiatives that help contact employees deliver high-quality service, such as creating more flexible processes, dedicating resources to the improvement effort, promulgating a quality-oriented vision throughout the firm, and rewarding employees for their efforts and commitment to the process (Ahmed and Parasuraman 1994).

Empowerment as a way of influencing contact employees' behavior. Granting control to employees over their daily behavior enables them to take appropriate actions. As shown by the findings related to Hypothesis 1, the increased discretion and flexibility experienced by empowered contact employees make them feel better about their jobs, increase their confidence in performing job-related tasks, and increase their ability to adapt to changing conditions within the service encounter.

To support empowerment, managers should focus on behavioral criteria in evaluating contact employees rather than on the basis of the measurable (and often transactional) outcomes they achieve. Because employees can control their own behaviors more easily than they can control work-related outcomes, behavior-based evaluation gives employees more control over their evaluations, which in turn reduces role conflict and ambiguity.

Reducing role conflict and ambiguity. Although both role conflict and role ambiguity exert a considerable negative influence on employee responses, role ambiguity appears to have the most prominent effect on adaptability and job satisfaction. As shown in this study, when unsure about how to perform their jobs, contact employees show lower levels of adaptability (Hypothesis 3a) and job satisfaction (Hypothesis 3c).

Whereas reducing role conflict may depend on the manager's ability to communicate with his or her employees (Reardon and Enis 1990), good socialization and training programs can help alleviate employee role ambiguity (Hartline and Ferrell 1993). According to Singh (1993), jobs may be designed to reduce role ambiguity; this involves consideration, feedback, and empowerment and autonomy. Consideration appears to effectively target boss- and company-related ambiguity; training managers to be more considerate toward their employees may facilitate coping with boss and company facets of role ambiguity.

Training empowered employees. Training can help ensure that empowered employee decisions are in the best interests of the organization (Conger and Kanungo 1988). As shown in this study, employees' adaptability is a key variable that affects their performance but also demands training efforts. Service organizations may want to train

their employees to better manage multiple contact employee role demands (Weatherly and Tansik 1993); for example, an employee whose communication skills have been improved by training might give feedback to his or her boss about job-related problems instead of avoiding the boss.

Because the performance of boundary spanners has been shown to be largely a function of ambiguity (Singh 1993), training programs focused on ambiguity may be efficiently used to reduce role ambiguity and improve prosocial behaviors. Such tailored programs are potentially not only more efficient (because of their focus) but also likely to be more effective (because of their link to specific outcomes) than currently available methods of reducing role ambiguity.

Such training programs may bridge the gap between (internal) managerial processes and (external) customer perceptions and behaviors. Rust, Zahorik, and Keningham (1995) offer such frameworks for assessing the relationship between internal firm processes and customer satisfaction, retention, and firm profitability. These frameworks may be effectively applied to gaining a better understanding of the critical human resource practices of the firm that relate to customer satisfaction. However, more gaps remain to be explored and eventually bridged.

Bridging Some Gaps: Suggestions for Further Research

Gap between organization employees and customers about the meaning of critical incidents. Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985) suggest that to achieve customer satisfaction in service encounters, agreement between the firm's managers, contact employees, and customers as to what constitutes dissatisfactory and satisfactory service is important. One direction for future research involves comparing manager, contact employee, and customer perceptions of critical incidents in service encounters and the specific role expectations of all parties.

Gap between organization and employees about role conflicts and role ambiguity. Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) report difficulties in trying to distinguish empirically between the various types of role conflicts. Certain organizational and personal factors could have different relationships with various conflict types. It is necessary to research more sensitive measures of role conflict to verify the dimensionality of role conflict and to identify its antecedents, determinants, and consequences (Shamir 1980).

Similarly, in the case of role ambiguity, critical gaps are also evident in role ambiguity research. Jackson and Schuler (1985) found a significant portion of unaccounted variance in studies that used role ambiguity as an antecedent to several dependent variables. King and King (1990)

assert that because most studies view role ambiguity as a global, unidimensional construct, they fail to capture the breadth of uncertainties faced by boundary spanners. Future research studies should attempt to fill these gaps to provide a better understanding of boundary role ambiguity.

Gap between organization and employees about self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Our results show that the higher the employees' sense of accomplishment and self-achievement for their current jobs, the less likely the long-term satisfaction with that particular role. This finding points at the gap between the employees' perceptions of their jobs and their perceptions of themselves. This relation likely stems from a learning process and a decreasing enjoyment of the role. Longitudinal studies may help us understand what types of incidents job satisfaction dramatically decreases and at what point in time this occurs.

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