

WORDS THAT MAKE CUSTOMER CONTACT EMPLOYEES TICK: A GROUNDED STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Why do some customer contact employees (CCEs) show high levels of engagement while others of similar profile and training within the same organization remain disengaged and disinterested? We address this question using a grounded study that aims to extract themes of engagement from the words that CCEs use to describe what makes them tick in their work roles. Past studies have examined extrinsic determinants of employee engagement but overlooked the nature of engagement itself. Using qualitative data from 38 CCEs across 6 service companies, we: a) uncover the affective foundations of CCE engagement; b) crystallize its affective foundations as passion-to-serve (PSE) and passion-to-solve (PSO) constructs; and c) identify the associated cognitive and behavioral states. Directions for building a frontline theory of CCE engagement are proposed.

Key words: Passion; empathy; frontline employee; employee engagement; job satisfaction; customer service; call center; human resources.

INTRODUCTION

In today's theory and practice, little disagreement exists that organizational employees are not only critical human *resources* that endow an organization with inimitable competitive advantage, but also human *capital* that organizations may acquire, cultivate and grow to enjoy abnormal return-on-investment, provided they develop superior capabilities for human resource development (Lepak & Snell, 1999). Within this view, a differentiated and disaggregated perspective has begun to emerge that eschews a primary emphasis on organizational-level analysis and favors a focus on individual and contextual variability *within* organizations. This study aims to explain variability in customer contact center employees' level of engagement using a grounded study of customer contact employees' lived experiences.

Customer contact employees (CCEs) are specific types of employees that perform distinct work. They span organizational boundaries, are essential to an organization's service recovery efforts, deliver on the organization's promise of service quality to its customers and determine customer satisfaction during one to one interpersonal interactions with customers—often called “moments of truth” (Beaujean, Davidson, & Madge, 2006). Moreover, companies rely on customer contact employees to represent their brands through words and actions. CCEs' engagement at work is a significant issue where current approaches are lacking. For instance, Gallup studies report that CCEs in the U.S. evidence dismal and *declining* trends with less than thirty percent of employees engaged; estimating the overall lack of employee engagement is costing companies \$450 to \$550 billion dollars a year (Gallup, 2013). This does not imply that CCE engagement is uniformly low *across* and *within* organizations. Some customer contact employees go to extreme measures to provide exceptional service, yet others fail to meet basic customer expectations (Edwards, 2012). Our current knowledge of factors that contribute to the variability in CCE engagement is weak at best.

Thus, the specific purpose of this research is to discover “Why do some customer contact employees (CCEs) show high levels of engagement while others of similar profile and training within the same organization remain disengaged and disinterested?” This study uses grounded theory inductive qualitative research methods to share critical insights into CCE engagement. Through qualitative data, we capture insights (in their own words and experiences) from 38 CCEs across five diverse industries, serving in six unique companies. Based on our analysis, we: a) uncover the affective foundations of CCE engagement; b) crystallize the affective foundations as passion-to-serve (PSE) and passion-to-solve (PSO) constructs; and c) identify the cognitive and behavioral states associated with affective dimensions of CCE engagement.

Our research provides new insights into the antecedents, interactions and outcomes of the emotional, cognitive and behavioral connection between the individual customer contact employee and the customer during service encounters. This research extends the literature and addresses a gap in understanding specific motivational influences for customer contact employees who exhibit engagement by expressing strong emotions, such as saying they “love” their jobs, while also providing high quality service to customers. We share actionable insights for those in practice seeking to differentiate their businesses by building and growing human capital of CCEs to help combat increasing competition in the global marketplace and propose building a frontline theory of CCE engagement.

Motivation for Present Study and Research Questions

Our focus on customer contact employees (CCE's) for this research study is based on the uniqueness and importance of these roles, along with our limited current understanding of the nature of CCE engagement.

Customer contact employee roles are differentiated from non-customer facing employee roles, especially in service organizations (Hartline, Iii, & McKee, 2000). CCEs connect companies with their customers (Singh, 2000). They are critical to making good on a company's promise to its customers in what is called the "moments of truth" (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002). Service firms, in particular, rely on customer contact employees to translate their business strategy into quality service (Chebat & Kollias, 2000). This means that customer contact center employee performance holds distinct consequences for the firm's bottom line (Grandey, Goldberg, & Pugh, 2011). CCE roles are also highly interactive and relatively more complex. To meet changing customer demands and continuously increasing service quality standards, CCEs have to be more versatile, learn quickly, use more discretion and show greater initiative than other company employees (Batt, 2002). CCEs are even important conduits for innovation. They often generate new knowledge in customer interactions (Ye, Marinova, & Singh, 2012) which may be used for bottom-up innovation (Cadwallader, Jarvis, Bitner, & Ostrom, 2010; Melton & Hartline, 2010). Corporate leaders are continually being challenged to improve engagement for these unique employees.

Almost two decades ago, interest in the study of "engagement" for organizational employees began to gain traction in consulting practices, organizational psychology, and business literatures with recent interest as organizations call for human resource development (HRD) professionals to create engagement within their organization (Shuck, 2011). Kahn formalized this emerging concept by defining it as the degree to which individuals choose to invest their self physically, cognitively and emotionally in performing their work roles (Kahn, 1990). Bridging into role theory, this definition suggests that individuals deploy varying degrees of "self" in the roles they perform at work. In contrast, disengagement is a decoupling of oneself from the work role performance, which results in apathy, disinterest, and other negative consequences for the individual and organization alike (Hochschild, 2003). As such, employee engagement is rooted in the motivational foundations of work roles. Consistent with this, recent work in burnout research defines engagement as a "mirror opposite" state of employees' psychological relationships with their work indicated by "an energetic state of involvement with personally fulfilling activities enhancing ones sense of personal efficacy" (Maslach & Leiter, 2008: 498). Likewise, Schaufeli and Bakker define work engagement as "a positive fulfilling, work related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption" (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004: 295). Macey and Schneider (2008) developed an even broader framework to define engagement as a multidimensional construct that includes trait (individual characteristics), state (feelings of energy and absorption) and behavioral indications (extra-role behaviors). Among these various definitions, the common theme of intrinsically motivated employees who approach work roles with energy, effort and efficacy is unmistakable.

Several studies have now examined organizational and individual payoffs from engaging employees resulting in at least two meta-analyses (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Simpson, 2009). Research provides evidence that when employees are engaged in their work roles, it improves customer satisfaction and loyalty (Harter et al., 2002), decreases employee turnover,

increases productivity and even positively impacts overall employee emotional well-being (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003). Collectively, there seems to be sufficient evidence to conclude that when organizational employees are engaged at work, they create a competitive advantage for their employers by uniquely positioning them with value that is difficult to imitate and contributes substantially to the bottom line (Macey & Schneider, 2008)

With accumulation of largely consistent evidence of competitive payoffs from employee engagement, the focus and approach of studies into the nature and mechanisms of employee engagement has shifted from the initial work that established this field. As an exemplar of initial studies, Kahn (1990) used qualitative grounded theory building research to circumscribe the distinct nature of employee engagement and identify its key psychological characteristics to explain variance in employee motivation for their work roles. Building on Kahn's theory, May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) conducted an empirical study to test Kahn's model and found that role meaningfulness was the most significant discriminator of engaged employees. Meaningfulness captures deep rooted intrinsic factors that evoke and confirm strongly-held identity representations for employees as they associate and seek personal significance in the performance of their work role (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Despite advances in researching overall employee engagement, current knowledge as to why employees in the same setting respond with varying degrees of engagement remains very limited (Saks, 2006). For CCE's working in customer contact centers, this limitation is especially notable. As customer expectations and task complexity for customer facing employees are increasing, customers are also becoming more dissatisfied with the quality of service interactions; while at the same time, customer contact employee disengagement is growing (Gallup, 2013). To the extent that customer loyalty is a fundamental premise for business sustainability, several researchers have called for a renewed focus on understanding employee engagement in the frontlines of organizations (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). To fuel this renewed interest, some researchers have suggested that the term *engagement* is inappropriate to capture the affective, cognitive, and behavioral state employees experience when they are at their best in work roles; calling for a new term "work passion" to help break from the entrenched work that associates engagement with burnout and job involvement and chart a new direction for future research (Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2009).

The few studies that have explored this direction suggest promising insights. For instance, in a study of CCEs in call centers, Rafaeli, Ziklik, and Doucet (2008) use qualitative inductive and exploratory methods to identify employee behaviors associated with high levels of engagement in delivering customer service. They found that engaged CCEs evidence behavioral profiles that include innovativeness and proactiveness by: a) anticipating customer requests; b) offering explanation/justifications; c) educating the customer; d) "Positive affect facilitates creative problem solving" providing emotional support; and e) offering personalized information. This grounded study does not explore the affective states of highly engaged CCEs, although it suggests that their behavioral responses are motivated by strong emotional connections with their work roles. Nevertheless, this study opens new avenues for studying CCEs by emphasizing that work roles of CCEs are sufficiently distinct to warrant study as separate from other organizational employees and that, for CCEs, interactions with customers is a significant, if not the salient, dimension of their work role.

Likewise, Bradley, Sparks, Zapf, McColl-Kennedy, and Jimmieson (2013) draw on grounded theory approaches to examine the content of frontline interactions involving CCEs and customers to motivate new directions for theorizing what makes service interactions effective and why. To gain insights, they analyzed words, phrases and utterances evident in audio recordings of one-to-one interviews with CCEs, customers, and other stakeholders to explore three key areas: 1) service encounter dynamics; 2) displayed behaviors that were annoying and enjoyable; and 3) behaviors associated with service success and failure. Bradley et al. (2013) show that their grounded study uncovers mechanisms that have been largely ignored in past research, which they theorize as a Task-Relationship-Self (T-R-S) model. However, this study's focus is only on displayed behaviors and does not address the affective or cognitive states experienced by CCEs, although they call for more holistic studies.

Our research responds to the call for a new direction for the study of CCE engagement by building on the preceding studies to examine the following research questions:

RQ1: What affective dimensions are distinct and salient when customer contact center employees experience high (versus low) levels of intrinsic engagement in their work role?

RQ2: What distinctive cognitive and behavioral characteristics of customer contact center employees are associated with employees' experience of high (versus low) levels of intrinsic engagement in their work role?

RESEARCH METHODS

Design and Sample

To capture CCEs' lived experiences of workplace engagement (or lack thereof) directly in their own words, we utilized a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) that allows for concepts and their interrelationships to emerge from semi-structured interviews with frontline employees wherein they describe their affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations at work. One-on-one interviews with individual employees in conditions that promote confidentiality and trust between the researcher and the employee provide rich qualitative data that is both useful for theory-building based on capturing CCEs' authentic experiences and allowing engagement themes to emerge inductively, and also complements the largely theory-testing, quantitatively-oriented studies in the literature that examine one or more models of employee engagement. Specifically, in accord with Corbin and Strauss (1990), the proposed grounded theory design facilitates posing open-ended questions and, through induction, discover concepts, categories and themes relevant for understanding employee engagement in customer interactions. Constant comparison and contrast is used throughout, within, and between individual interviews to reveal emerging themes and concepts (Charmaz, 2006).

Our sample consists of interviews with 38 CCEs within six diverse companies who agreed to volunteer for the study with cooperation of their group leader and approval from corporate. The types of customer contacts handled by these employees vary from service (e.g., billing to technical problems) to sales (e.g., renewals to new products), and the mode of communication is usually multichannel, including phone, email and chat. Collectively, the

companies operate in retail, healthcare, and consumer product industries, although all involve business-to-consumer focus. Originally, the study design involved capturing interview data from a matched sample of high and low performers in each company; however, several participating companies were reticent to openly identify lower performers. Thus, study participants were selected from a group of volunteers who were managers reported to be consistently receiving “good to excellent” quality of service scores from customers, based on each participating company’s customer satisfaction survey instrument and other positive customer feedback. We felt this sampling limitation did not compromise the study’s aims since its focus is on employee engagement, *not* disengagement.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews averaging 45 minutes each were conducted between May and July 2013. All interviewees and companies were guaranteed confidentiality. Names appearing in this paper bear no resemblance to actual names of respondents—in order to preserve promised confidentiality—and were randomly assigned for purposes of reference and discussion.

An interview protocol guided our data collection and focused on three broad topics: a) brief background about themselves, how they came to work in the company/industry, and the training they received to perform their role; b) understanding, in the interviewee’s own words, the more significant aspects about her/his work, and which reaffirmed that this job is or is not for her/him; and c) exploration of interviewee’s favorite and least favorite aspects of the job, his/her motivation for coming to work every day and for the role s/he performs. As is typical of critical incident interviews, the interviewees were asked to illustrate their reflections with specific situations and instances of customer interactions to concretize their observations within real, lived experiences. Probes such as: *What were you thinking about, how were you feeling? and how did you make that decision?* were used to secure rich detail.

Figure 1 describes the analytical processes utilized to extract grounded themes from data collected, and identify new concepts for theorizing CCE engagement. We discuss each stage of the data analytical process next.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Stage 1: Data screening and memo writing. Each transcript was read while simultaneously listening to the audio file multiple times during an initial screening process in order to: a) ensure transcription accuracy; b) capture key words; and c) develop a memo summarizing cognitive, affective and behavioral responses for each interviewee.

Stage 2: In vivo and open coding. Based on Corbin and Strauss (1990), initial in vivo codes were created by directly recording interviewees’ spoken words in first-level understanding of the data. Over 1,700 words and phrases were captured in this stage, and coded line-by-line for sorting into affective, cognitive and behavioral states.

Stage 3: Focused and axial coding. Subsequent to a satisfactory development of first-level codes that were comprehensive to represent a grounded understanding, the codes were

separated into different categories to reflect the affect, cognition, and behaviors evoked in CCE experiences using the protocol interview questions as guide. As depicted in Figure 1, the a) affective state integrated responses from questions three, eight and nine; b) cognitive state integrated responses from questions eight, nine, ten and eleven; and c) behavioral state integrated responses from questions four, five, six, seven, nine and twelve. This grouping provided a coherence and common ground to distill the open codes into more integrative primary and secondary themes based on saliency, significance and uniqueness.

Stage 4: Concepts & categories. In the final stage, diagramming and mapping of affective concepts was implemented to compare and contrast individual profiles until similarities and differences began to coalesce into as meaningful configurations. Once meaningful affective configurations were identified, they were associated with their respective cognitive and behavioral themes to develop holistic understanding of CCE engagement (Hart et al., 1990).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This grounded research shares new insights at the individual level unit of analysis for customer contact employee (CCE) engagement, including its motivational foundations and associated cognitive and behavioral patterns. While the significance of employee engagement is undisputed, most past studies have tended to focus on organizational and personal factors that foster and promote employee engagement. By contrast, studies focusing on the nature and experience of work engagement by organizational employees have been scarce. Insights for organizational and personal drivers of engagement are likely to be more meaningful if they are complemented by an understanding of the nature and experience of employee engagement. The few studies that focus on employee engagement experiences unequivocally show that: a) changing work roles and specialization in organizational demands require a differentiated examination of employee engagement—experiences of engagement differ by *type* of employee roles; and b) continuing declines in reported employee engagement levels—despite decades of organizational research and practice to bolster it—warrant a disaggregated study of employee engagement—engagement experiences significantly vary *within* organizations perhaps comparable to *across*-organization variability. This study takes an initial step in a differentiated and disaggregated study of employee engagement.

Focusing on customer contact employees in similarly organized call centers, our grounded study offers several insights. First, at the base affective foundation of CCE engagement employees within our study report deriving affect from six core areas: pay, work environment, goal achievement, share or gain knowledge and decision making. These individuals shared that they are satisfied with their job as “just a job”, or because it allows them to receive a paycheck to pay bills, have friends at work, achieve goals, learn or do something new. We name this group “passive”, since although they may be performing in their roles, but they do not appear to be actively feeling positive affect translating into engagement while serving customers. According to this group of CCEs, these job characteristics appear to be “minimum requirements” for continuing to perform in their roles. Second, we differentiate those more “passive” in describing their roles as “jobs” in many cases, versus those sharing their “love” for their positions with emotions one might use to describe their favorite hobby. Shifting back to prior research, we integrate concepts from positive affect and engagement. The term “passion” is often cited as an

intense feeling motivating individuals to make a difference (Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009). Vallerand and Houliort (2003) define passion as a strong inclination toward and activity that people like, find important and invest time and energy. As a customer, almost everyone has experienced an encounter with a disengaged CCE; however, in our study, we discover this unique group of individuals who enjoy their roles and describe personally benefiting as individuals from customer interactions. They share their customer contact work in words and with strong positive emotions, such as: “*Getting up in the morning and being happy to know you are coming into work...knowing you’re coming in to help someone.*” (Betty) “*I really, really love my job.*” (Gina), “*My passion to help is not wavering.*” (Marsha) We identify this level of engagement as “passion”.

Within this group we labeled as experiencing “passion”, we further delineate two groups, based on how these employees describe their affective, cognitive and behavioral states during specific service encounters with customers. We discover that the source of affect fueling their engagement is bifurcated, yet salient. For 61% of the individuals exhibiting passion, they describe their affective engagement tied directly to “helping customers”. Such as, “*I’m a helper at heart... I’m most passionate about being able to help people.*” (Maura) We identify this group as passion-to-serve (PSE). The other 39% of those CCEs exhibiting passion describe affect originating from “solving problems”, which we identify as passion-to-solve (PSO). For example, “*It’s my passion. You bring me a problem. I’m going to solve it. If I can’t solve it. I’m going to get the help that I need to solve it. That’s my job. I love what I do.*” (Kathy) These findings further support the view of context and individual variability influences to employee engagement. We identify cognitive and behavioral states differentiating passive, passion-to-serve and passion-to-solve. Clear distinctions between meaningfulness, empathy, ownership, focus, role, decision making and variety, clarify the construct. This final analysis also sheds light into two factors limiting engagement: CCE judging the customer and role conflict due to role stress. These factors may be reduced through organizational interventions, such as hiring practices, goal setting and communication.

Adding to previous differentiated studies that focus on customer contact employee burnout or disengagement, our research investigates the positive aspect of these roles with CCE engagement benefiting both customer contact employees and the customers they serve. Also differentiated from previous studies, our research finds that scripting and/or acting appears to no longer be as acceptable to employees or customers. Customers expect high quality *personalized* service with requests often requiring CCEs to perform extra-role behaviors. Fortunately, for those CCEs engaged in their roles, providing such service to customers creates reciprocal benefits. Over half of the CCEs in our study are leveraging this new paradigm of task complexity requiring additional boundary spanning and problem solving as their foundation for engagement: passion-to-serve (PSE) and passion-to-solve (PSO).

Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, there are limitations for this study. Interviews were based on the

recollections from call center customer contact employees without validating interactions from the customer's perspective or including other customer contact environments. CCEs may also have not recalled their actions or the customer's responses accurately. However, since this study focused on investigating CCE affective, cognitive and behavioral responses during customer interactions we believe it still provides valuable insight into the foundations for employee engagement within these roles. Additionally, the sample of thirty-eight employees was limited to the Midwest and West Coast high performing CCEs. Although no specific demographic or industry variations in responses are noted, additional research would provide the opportunity to expand the sample size and validate responses.

CONCLUSION

Individual variability in customer contact employee engagement continues to interest and perplex researchers and practitioners alike. Through our grounded study, we add to the literature and share actionable ideas for those in practice asking: "*Why do some customer contact employees (CCEs) show high levels of engagement while others of similar profile and training in the same organization remain disengaged and disinterested?*" Just as organizations must adapt to increasing competition and customer expectations, so must frontline employees. Fortunately, we find many customer contact employees are already engaged as they embrace these new challenges. Our study extends the existing research by addressing a gap in motivational influences for customer contact employee engagement. By understanding the words which make customer contact employees tick, we provide insights toward a new direction in building a frontline theory of CCE engagement. Through our continued academic research and practitioner collective efforts, more companies may reach a seemingly elusive pinnacle—engaged customer contact employees and engaged customers.

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FIGURE 1
Grounded Theory Methods Approach

