

Press Release

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PolyU Study Finds Job Creativity Requirements Cause Stress in Chinese Service Workers

Employer expectations of job creativity can cause high stress levels in service employees, according to Dr Alice Hon of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. In a recently published research article, Dr Hon shows that given pressure to ensure high quality customer service and lacking the time to change their approach, service personnel can suffer from stress, emotional exhaustion and reduced morale. Yet having conducted a survey of hotel and service organisations in Shanghai, Dr Hon also shows that helpful and supportive coworkers, and managers who encourage employee teamwork and mutual support, can alleviate this situation. Having creative employees might be critical in today's business environment, but it should be approached in just the right way.

The positive effects of having a creative workforce are well known, and many firms emphasise job creativity in the belief that it will improve service performance. Providing excellent customer service is one of the best ways to increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, and hence increase profitability and long-term survival. Nevertheless, Dr Hon notes that there may be a downside to encouraging creativity.

For a start, creativity can require a much hard work and may entail “uncertainty, apparent riskiness and potential for failure”, according to Dr Hon. Yet many people avoid tasks that have a high risk of failure and tend to “resist changing away from their normal way of thinking and doing, which stymies creativity and inhibits innovation”. A further obstacle is that supervisors and co-workers are likely to resist the ideas that creative employees come up with, because these are likely to “challenge the established organisational policies, work methods and task relationships”.

Dr Hon argues that these obstacles to creativity could cause job-related stress in employees who are required to be creative as part of their jobs. That stress could result in emotional exhaustion, whereby the employee becomes “overly tired from the emotional demands of a task”. There is much evidence that stress at work is associated with a variety of negative outcomes, such as reduced performance, low morale, disloyalty and absenteeism. These negative effects may be compounded in service employees, many of whom already work long hours under considerable time pressure. This can result in depersonalisation, or what Dr Hon describes as “an unconcerned and cynical attitude toward service recipients”.

Dr Hon postulates that two other factors might influence the relationship between creativity, work-related stress and job performance. The first is the organisational

climate. Service-oriented organisations place a strong emphasis on high-quality customer service, and working in such an organisation may help employees to understand the importance of providing excellent customer service. The second factor is a supportive work environment. Supportive colleagues can reduce job-related stress by helping to solve problems, share information and provide encouraging feedback, which should make it easier for employees to be creative.

To investigate these issues and determine the extent to which “service firms provide work environments appropriate to the creativity required by such jobs”, Dr Hon surveyed employees and their managers at 48 hotel and service organisations in Shanghai. The employees were asked to rate their job-induced stress levels, their perceptions of the organisation’s service climate and the amount of support they received from colleagues at work. Their managers were asked to provide information on the level of job creativity required and the service performance of these employees.

As Dr Hon expected, if the environment does not provide enough time, training, and methods, those employees with jobs that required them to be creative reported higher levels of job-related stress than those who were not expected to be so. Employees who reported higher stress levels were also more likely to be rated by their managers as having worse performance.

In other words, employees with heavy workloads and time pressure who were expected to be creative experienced more stress than other employees, and this affected their performance at work. Dr Hon thus argues that “requiring employees to generate creative activities is risky and may lead to unintended costs for individual employees”. It may also “ultimately stymie organisational efforts to encourage creativity and decrease service performance”.

The negative effects of job-induced stress on work performance were not as pronounced for those employees who had helpful and supportive co-workers. This, Dr Hon suggests, implies that organisations could reduce the negative effects of stress and improve service performance by encouraging employees to be more supportive towards one another. A supportive environment not only provides immediate support, but also “means that those who are suffering from stress, depression and anxiety have a social safety net upon which they can rely”.

Dr Hon emphasises that managers should “encourage teamwork and arrange employees into cooperative and supportive workgroups” in which they are willing to share knowledge and help one another. Such arrangements provide both physical and psychological advantages – employees receive advice and assistance that can help them perform their jobs better, and the sense of being part of a supportive team improves their feelings of well-being.

In contrast, Dr Hon found the negative effects of job-induced stress were more pronounced for those working in more service-oriented organisations. Although emphasising excellent customer service is an effective business strategy, Dr Hon suggests that employees who are already experiencing job stress may find it difficult to put aside additional time and make the extra effort required to deliver such service. They may instead resort to “habitual and routine schedules to perform tasks”.

In such a climate, rather than improving performance, requiring employees to be creative merely increases their workload and responsibility, so that their service performance becomes worse. A possible solution, Dr Hon writes, is to “allow managers or supervisors to provide training to those stressed employees to cope with their job problems”.

Dr Hon concludes that service employees “play a crucial role in service performance” and job creativity is one of the “pivotal factors” contributing to high-quality service performance. However, managers should also realise that “a service-oriented climate will improve employee service performance only when subordinates can cope with the job stress induced by a job requirement of creativity”. Employees are better able to cope with stress if they are part of a supportive team and “avenues for seeking help directly from supervisors and coworkers” are available.

Hon, Alice. (2013). Does Job Creativity Requirement Improve Service Performance? A Multilevel Analysis of Work Stress and Service Environment. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 35, 161-170.

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