

Disentangling the effects of role stress on service performance : the role of frontline employees' ideas for improvement

Citation for published version (APA):

Heijden, van der, G. A. H., Schepers, J. J. L., & Nijssen, E. J. (2013). Disentangling the effects of role stress on service performance : the role of frontline employees' ideas for improvement. In J. Burroughs, & A. Rindfleisch (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 2013 AMA Winter Marketing Educators' Conference : Challenging the Bounds of Marketing Thought* (pp. 220-221). (AMA Winter Educators' Conference - Proceedings; Vol. 24). American Marketing Association.

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2013

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of Record (includes final page, issue and volume numbers)

Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
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- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

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DISENTANGLING THE EFFECTS OF ROLE STRESS ON SERVICE PERFORMANCE: THE ROLE OF FRONTLINE EMPLOYEES' IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

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SUMMARY

Frontline service employees (FSEs), such as call center agents and field service engineers, face a demanding work environment as their managers want them to work cost efficient while going the extra mile to give customers high quality service. These competing manager expectations typically cause these employees to experience unclarity and conflict regarding how to execute the job, known as role stress (Hartline and Ferrell 1996).

The effects of role stress on service performance remain unclear, as extant literature outlines two conflicting perspectives (Tubre and Collins 2000). A first perspective posits that role stress is negatively related to performance because dealing with uncertainty and conflict drains cognitive resources that are needed for task execution (e.g., Arnold et al. 2009; Singh 2000). A second, alternative perspective posits that role stress may positively affect employee performance because of creative coping (Bettencourt and Brown 2003; Goolsby 1992). Unfortunately, empirical back-up for this positive effect of role stress remains scant.

The aim of this study is to reconcile the inconsistent results of prior research regarding positive and negative performance effects of role stress. We build on self-regulation theory (Kanfer 1990) and model an integrative process of role stress causes and performance effects. We posit that although role stress may harm frontline service performance (Singh, 2000), it also forces employees to think about a “constructive way out” of the situation (Bettencourt and Brown 2003). Employees at the firm’s boundary are especially likely to come up with new ideas on how they can do so, because they are confronted continuously with customer insights which are unaffected by dominant organizational paradigms. This provides a valuable source of new insights that is tapped into when employees are required to cope with stressful work conditions (Ye et al. 2011).

Three aspects of this study are noteworthy. First, we introduce the concept of FSEs’ *ideas for improvement*,

which we define as novel responses that provide improved solutions for service tasks at hand (West 2002). Ideas for improvement act as a mediator between role stress and FSE performance and thus partial out the negative direct effects of role stress on performance. Second, we extend literature on efficiency-quality trade-offs and model role stress and ideas for improvement as an integral process of achieving efficiency and quality performance. While both are important, we argue that a large part of FSE role stress is caused by managers’ dual emphasis on both efficiency and quality objectives. Third, we identify two relevant predispositions that can influence FSEs’ stress coping strategies: a *learning* and a *performance orientation* (Dweck 2000; Dweck and Leggett 1988). We expect that learning-oriented individuals will be more inclined to develop ideas from role stress, while performance-oriented individuals may avoid idea development because a direct contribution to one’s output is not readily observable for others.

Method

We test our framework within the service division of a major international manufacturer of print and document management solutions. FSEs are specialized in delivering on-site repair services at the customers’ location. They need to maintain a balance between efficiency and quality by conducting as many service visits per day as possible, but also work accurately and assure optimal post-visit product functioning. Both efficiency and quality requirements are part of the FSEs’ monthly evaluation. A paper-and-pencil survey was used to collect subjective data from the FSEs. A code was used to match each employee’s survey responses with objective performance data from the firm’s database.

The latent constructs incorporated in the survey were: role stress (role ambiguity and role conflict; total of six items), ideas for improvement (four items), managers’ dual strategic objectives (emphasis on efficiency and emphasis on quality; total of eight items), and FSEs’ goal orientations (four items for learning orientation and three items for performance orientation). Efficiency and quality performance were based on longitudi-

nal archival data for a ten-month interval provided by the firm. We analyzed our data using SPSS 15 and Smart PLS 2.0 (Chin 1998; Ringle et al. 2005). We applied SPSS to examine the descriptive statistics and compute the reliability of the individual constructs. Convergent and discriminant validity were satisfactory.

Results

Our model explains 25.4% of the variance in role stress, 36.4% in ideas for improvement, 28.7 percent in efficiency performance, and 18.4 percent in quality performance. Compared to other studies that include objective measures of frontline performance as dependent variables these figures can be considered satisfactory (cf., Ahearne et al. 2010). We found a strong positive effect of a manager's emphasis on dual objectives on FSE role stress. FSE role stress was positively related to ideas for improvement. In turn, ideas positively affected FSE's efficiency and quality performance. Consistent with our expectations, role stress showed a direct negative effect on efficiency performance. However, the hypothesized effect of role stress on quality performance was not significant. A learning orientation positively moderated the relationship between role stress and ideas for improvement. It also positively moderated the relationships between ideas for improvement and efficiency performance and quality performance. Performance orientation positively moderated the relationship between role stress and ideas for improvement, which was contrary to our expectations. As expected, performance orientation negatively moderated the relationship between ideas for improvement and efficiency performance.

Discussion

In frontline jobs, role stress is a double-edged sword that can have dysfunctional effects, but also stimulate FSEs to develop ideas to improve their service performance. A manager's emphasis on dual objectives induces FSE role stress, which in turn affects FSE performance directly and through ideas for improvement. FSEs are most likely to improve their performance under conditions of high role stress and a high learning orientation. Performance-oriented employees also put effort in idea generation when they encounter role stress at work, but seem unable to put these ideas into action. One explanation could be that such FSEs fear the potential failure associated with idea implementation (Elliot and McGregor 2001).

Our study has several practical implications. First, in the recruitment of FSEs, we strongly advise HR officers to not only assess individual skills, knowledge and abilities, but also to screen for learning orientation. Learning-oriented individuals can constructively deal with conflicting expectations and the uncertainty. Second, managers should allocate routine service jobs to performance-oriented employees, because such workers tend to be more efficiency-focused. In contrast, learning-oriented employees should be assigned to service portfolios that comprise a large variation of customers and require creativity to fulfill efficiency and quality requests. Third, we urge managers to systematically invest resources (i.e., time and money) to benefit from the innovation potential of their frontline service staff. This does not only contribute to FSE performance, but may also help the development of more formal improvement practices. References are available upon request.

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