

Service Sabotage by Front Line Employees: A Study of Antecedents and Consequences

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the influence of five antecedents of service sabotage by frontline customer-contact personnel. Using a survey-based approach, the authors collected data from 150 respondents working in the front line service settings. Regression analysis showed that only employees' risk-taking proclivity and their perceptions of the extent of surveillance were significant predictors of sabotage. Other antecedents (employees' need for social approval, perceptions of the extent of employee-customer contact and labour market fluidity) were not significant contributors. This study will help the services sector to minimise deviant behaviour at the workplace.

Keywords: Deviant behaviour, ethical behaviour, front-line employees, Malaysia, service sabotage

INTRODUCTION

The behaviour of frontline employees is often equated with their service quality and in turn company profitability (Sergeant & Frenkel, 2000). The incidence of sabotage is not as uncommon as many would think;

it happens on a daily basis and in different settings (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002, 2006). It is difficult to quantify the effect of sabotage in the service industry but it is undeniable that it affects company's growth (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). The behaviour is detrimental to the long-term survival of the company (service quality and brand image are compromise) and should be seriously addressed.

This paper investigates individual characteristics of service sabotage behaviour by examining five antecedents: the extent of employee to customer contact, risk-taking proclivity, need for social approval, labour market fluidity and the extent of

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surveillance. The paper concludes with discussion on managerial implications and suggestions to address this issue.

Literature Review

Sabotage is explicitly focused on doing harm and more “subtle and covert” forms of retaliation (Ambrose, Seabright, & Schminke, 2002). Harris and Ogbonna (2002) defined service sabotage as organisational behaviour intentionally planned to negatively affect customer service. The aim is to inflict maximum damage to the business and property. Thus, this deviant behaviour is harmful to the company and affects their work performance. Abdul Rahim (2008) opines that sabotage behaviour deviates from company’s goal as deviant employees intentionally provide inferior service to the customer. This behaviour is often branded to be ‘deviant’ and the employee considered a “service saboteur” (Patterson & Baron, 2010). Southey (2010) refers to this as an aberrant activity, premeditated and out-of-norm.

Hypotheses Development

Risk-taking proclivity is defined as an individual addiction or “desire for taking risks or being adventurous” (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). Skeel, Neudecker, Pilarski, and Pytlak (2007) further define risk-taking as the balancing of potential rewards and losses, and the relationship between short-term and long-term consequences. Company staff intentionally involved in service

sabotage do so out of frustration, boredom and also to break out of the mundaneness of their work. They would intentionally stray from the company’s service procedure and policies (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009). Some employees have innate characteristics as thrill seekers. Although seeking excitements need not necessarily be harmful to customers, it nevertheless affect the latter (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009). An adverse evaluation by the customer would surely affect overall image of the organisation. Harris and Ogbonna (2006) proposed that the greater the risk-taking proclivity of service employees, the greater the likelihood of service sabotage. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 1: The higher the risk-taking proclivity, the higher will be the effect on service sabotage.

Service employees are usually organised in groups and have deep relationship with their colleagues; thus, the need for social approval from their colleagues. Fisher and Smith (1993) opined that desire to be accepted by others and to belong to a group will influence the employee’s action. Those who are better at controlling their emotions will receive more social support from their supervisors and colleagues. Therefore, social approval encourages employees from doing things that are not socially acceptable in the workplace. Staff members who do not follow the group norms may become unpopular and side-lined by their peers (Cialdini, 2007; Southey, 2010). This may

cause tension and unpleasantness at the workplace and which may prompt acts of sabotage. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the need for social approval, the higher will be the effect on service sabotage.

Harris and Ogbonna (2002) reported that many frontline service employees are aware of the surveillance imposed by the company and the purpose for doing so is to control the workplace behaviour. Previously, monitoring capabilities were limited as the company could only do so through recording and observation. With the advancement in technology, electronic surveillance has now become the norm in many workplaces. Increasing number of organisations believe that employees need to be closely monitored. Dorval (2004) found that close monitoring might be detrimental as many employees feel that it is an invasion of their privacy and that they no longer have their individual space. This has been further confirmed by VorVoreanu and Botan (2001) that there is additional stress imposed on employees due to the lack of privacy and close surveillance. Decision making are controlled because it needs to be accepted by their employers and this limits the employee's self-improvement. Employees that are controlled too closely could cause nonconformity or deviant behaviour (Wallace, Chernatony, & Buil, 2011). On the other hand, it was also discovered that companies that developed

and increase their surveillance system successfully will be able to reduce employee deviant behaviour and sabotage (Harris & Ogbonna, 2009). These arguments form the basis of the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The higher the perception of the extent of surveillance, the lower will be its effect on service sabotage.

Labour market fluidity is when employees believe that there is still abundance of employment opportunities outside the firm (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006). Usually employees will find reasons to stay in the organisation, either because of the individual's career dispositions or due to certain organisational characteristics (Harris & Ogbonna, 2002). Employees who are committed to their organisation are less likely to be involved in service sabotage. The person's perception of his ability to find a new employment is crucial in this respect (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006). Education and work experiences will increase the person's chances of getting employed. Harris and Ogbonna (2002) examined individuals who perceived high possibility of being employed and found as the level of service sabotage increases, there is increased possibility that such a deviant behaviour would be explicitly manifested. Therefore, hypothesis 4 is proposed.

Hypothesis 4: The higher the perception of labour market fluidity, the higher will be the effect on service sabotage.

When the job requires constant interaction with customers (Harris & Ogbonna, 2006) such employees are the 'face' of the organisation, representing the company. Many managers rely on their frontline staff personal contact and dealing to influence their clients (Yee, Yeung & Cheng, 2011). On the short-term basis, these employees might face emotional distress such as anxiety, tension, frustration, resentment and annoyance. If left unchecked, it may cause them to seek revenge or engage in sabotage behaviour as payback. Harris and Reynolds (2003) revealed that service employees experience first-hand some form of dysfunctional customer behaviour regularly. This aberrant customer behaviour is also known as "problem customers" and "consumer misbehaviour". Jaarsveld, Walker and Skarlicki (2010) found that employee' job strains and emotional fatigue mediate the relationship between customer rudeness and employee incivility. This, if left unattended, may lead to sabotage. The more exposed the employees are to customer misbehaviour, the more likely their acts will be retaliatory (Jaarsveld et al., 2010). Based on this explanation, hypothesis 5 is proposed.

Hypothesis 5: The higher the perception of the extent of employee-customer contact, the higher will be its effect on service sabotage.

METHODS

A total of 200 self-administered questionnaires were distributed using

convenient sampling. The target population comprises front-line service employees who work within Klang Valley. Data was collected from 150 respondents, representing a response rate of 75%. Females accounted for 55.6% of the respondents. About 59.3% of the respondents were aged of 25 and below followed by those in the age group 26-35 accounting for 34.7% of total respondents. The respondents came from various industries with top three from retail (20%), hotels/restaurants (13%) and education (9%).

The survey instrument of service sabotage (9 items), risk-taking proclivity (7 items), need for social approval (5 items), the extent of surveillance (4 items), labour market fluidity (4 items) and employee-customer contact (4 items) were adopted from Harris and Ogbonna (2006). All questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), where respondents indicated their degree of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements. The Cronbach alpha reliability for all antecedents and dependent variables ranged from 0.759 to 0.877. The results indicated a high degree of internal consistency which is line with Hair, Money, Samouel and Page (2007) 0.70 cut-off point.

RESULTS

The relationship between the five antecedents and service sabotage were determined through a multiple regression analysis (see Table 1). It is clear and positive relationship between risk taking proclivity and service

sabotage. Additionally, there was a negative association between frontline employee surveillance and service sabotage. Therefore, H1 and H3 are supported. As for H2, H4 and H5, the results indicated no significant relationship between social approval, labour

market fluidity and employee customer contact with service sabotage ($p > 0.05$). The value of R2 indicated that 10.8% of the independent variables contributed to the dependent variable of service sabotage.

Table 1
Regression analysis between the five antecedents and service sabotage

Independent variables	Dependent variable (Service Sabotage)			
	Beta	t	Sig.	Outcome
Risk Taking	0.281	2.844	0.005	Supported
Social Approval	0.034	0.345	0.730	Not Supported
Frontline Employee Surveillance	-0.223	-0.209	0.024	Supported
Labour Market Fluidity	0.059	0.051	0.617	Not Supported
Employee Customer Contact	0.061	0.053	0.635	Not Supported
R2			0.108	
F			3.408	

DISCUSSION

The results show perceptions of surveillance and risk-taking proclivity are significant in promoting service sabotage. Thus, organisations must select the 'right' type of employees as well as implement relevant control mechanism in monitoring their frontline service staff. Human Resource managers need to take heed of this during recruitment, orientation, training and appraisal to reduce the possibility of deviant behaviour and by identifying those who are more inclined to high and risky behaviour. The successes of an organisation is tied to the performance of its frontline employees. An external monitoring system is vital as employees with high risk-taking behaviour

are usually more difficult to manage as they are prone to disregard the firm's rules and regulations which do not sit well with them.

To handle staff that are most likely to sabotage their work, direct control to minimise this via electronic monitoring and surveillance maybe helpful. Some of the measures might include electronic surveillance such as CCTV and close managerial supervision. Companies might be able to diagnose various forms of dysfunctional behaviour among the staff when these monitoring and controlling are done. Correcting deviant behaviour via these early measures may lead to service improvement and employee job satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

The regular contact between service employees and customers has brought into sharp focus the role of the former in preserving the reputation of their companies and in turn contribute to their growth. Frontline customer contact employees are considered as important connector between the company and their customers. The service rendered by these employees will affect customer perception of service quality as well as their evaluation of the company's brand image. Due to the importance placed on frontline employees, companies need to ensure that their employees are able to deliver excellent service. Managers also need to be aware that there are differences in customer expectations and perceptions of what good services are. Therefore, they will surely need to lead by example as well as provide appropriate training and mentoring to all the staff in anticipation of the increasing demand for quality service.

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