

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT FOR SERVICE RECOVERY PERFORMANCE: THE EVIDENCE FROM HOTEL EMPLOYEES IN POLAND

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ABSTRACT

In the times of high global competition exceptional service quality is perceived as one of the main conditions to attract and retain loyal and profitable customers (Karatepe 2006, p. 70). Although service organizations do their best to provide high quality services, a high degree of interactions between employees and hotel guests triggers an inevitable risk of failures (Lewis and McCann, 2004 p. 6). However, successful service recovery may provide hotels with a variety of significant benefits increasing their competitiveness and overall business success. In this process service employees play a critical role, as they are the first ones who interact directly with customers, and their performance in handling customers' complaints may influence the perceived quality (Ling, Hussain, Sambasivan, 2014). Thus this study attempts to answer the key question of how hotel organizations may improve employees' recovery performance. The aim of the paper is to identify the critical role of organizational support in the service recovery context and its impact on selected employees' attitudinal outcomes and behavioral intentions in the hospitality industry. More specifically, this study develops and tests a research model that examines the effect of perceived organizational support in terms of service recovery (OS_RECOVERY) on employee service recovery performance (SRP). Additionally, the relationships between SRP and employees' satisfaction with hotel guests (SAT_with_GUESTS) and with their intention to leave (ItL) were tested. The study was conducted among contact employees of hotels located in the Pomeranian Voivodeship, located in Northern Poland. A survey instrument was used to collect the data. The study findings indicate that perceived organizational support in the service recovery context may increase employees' service recovery performance, which, in turn, enhances their satisfaction with customers and decreases leaving intentions. The research value of this study may results from the fact that it attempts to provide more holistic pictures to the study over potential antecedents and consequences of service recovery performance by using data from hotel employees in Poland. Implications of the results for both the theory and practice are also provided.

Keywords: *hospitality; organizational support; service recovery performance; service failures*

1. INTRODUCTION

Providing excellent and satisfactory service quality seems to be critical to attract and retain customers (Debasish and Dey, 2015, p. 2). However, the truth is that customers today are becoming more demanding and strongly aware of their needs (Debasish and Dey, 2015, p. 1). In many cases they expect near perfection from service organizations and usually start to evaluate their service experience since the first interaction with the service provider (Lin and Mattila, 2010, p. 823). From the customer's perspective, this interaction defines what the service encounter is (Hocutt and Stone, 1998, p. 117) and may hugely affect service quality evaluation. Thus success or failure of guests' experience may depend on how such a “moment of truth” between hotel guests and employees is handled (Ford, Sturman and Heaton, 2012, p. 5). Therefore, competitive service firms strongly rely on their contact employees' ability to ensure proper service delivery (Chebat and Kollias, 2000, p. 67), and will do the their best to achieve zero-defects and reduce failures (Lin and Mattila, 2010, p. 824). However, due to

simultaneous production and consumption, and the involved human component (Jak zapewnić znakomitą obsługę..., 2006, p. 108), something difficult and/or unexpected may happen any time during the delivery process, inducing both negative emotions of hotel guests and increasing employees' frustration (Bortniak, 2007, p. 24).

In truth, service organizations may be unable to prevent all complaints, failures or mistakes (Karatepe, 2006, p. 70); they are just inevitable (see Ling et al., 2014; Karatepe, 2006, p. 70), particularly in a high service encounter industry such as hospitality (Lin, 2007, p. 111). Thus learning how to effectively avoid and/or respond to failures should be of high priority for today's hotel organizations. As Maxham (2001) proposed, “the manner in which a firm recovers from service failure could become a sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace” (p. 12). Taking into account the above, it is surprising that complaint handling and/or service recovery still seem to be a neglected area of research (Karatepe, 2006, p. 70). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the critical role of organizational support in the service recovery context and its impact on selected employees' attitudinal outcomes (satisfaction with hotel guests) and behavioral intentions (leaving intention), taking the context of the hospitality industry in Poland.

It is believed that these study findings will contribute to the theory and practice through a better understanding of the issue of service recovery performance in the hospitality setting, in the context of both its organizational antecedents and employees' outcomes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

2.1. The role of contact employees in the service recovery process

As noted above, regardless of many precautions and efforts to avoid service failures, it is simply unlikely to eliminate all of them (Maxham, 2001, p. 11). Service failures may be defined as “service-related mishaps or problems (real and/or perceived) that occur during a consumer's experience with a firm” (Maxham, 2001, p. 11). The organization itself and its employees take particular actions in response to a customer complaint following a service failure (Pranic and Roehl, 2012, p. 244). Those attempts to rectify some customer-perceived service failure can be defined as “service recoveries” (Maxham, 2001, p. 11). Service recovery performance, in turn, may refer to “frontline service employees' perception of their own abilities and actions to resolve a service failure to the satisfaction of the customer” (Babakus, Yavas, Karatepe and Avci, 2003, p. 274).

Successful service recovery may bring service organizations many significant benefits (Lewis and McCann, 2004, p. 7). For example, the results of Maxham's research (2001, p. 20) prove that effective service recovery may increase customers' satisfaction, their purchase intention and positive WOM (word-of-mouth) and suggest that firms may retain their customers and maintain their loyalty through effective service recovery. Lewis and McCann (2004, p. 13) showed, in turn, that hotel guests satisfied with service recovery strategies were more likely than the dissatisfied ones to express their intention to return and declared recommending the hotel. Similarly, the findings of Karatepe's study (2006, p. 86) revealed that hotel guests who were satisfied with complaint handling showed increased loyalty to the organization.

As indicated in research by Bitner et al. (1990), “even service delivery system failures can be remembered as highly satisfactory encounters if they are handled properly” (p.80). It clearly shows that the role of contact employees is critical and may not to be underestimated in an effective service recovery process. Contact employees as boundary spanners between the service organization and its customers (Chebat and Kollias, 2000, p. 72; Babakus, et al. 2003, p. 273) spend many hours each day engaged in face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with hotel guests (Lee, Ok and Hwang, 2016, p. 140). Thus, unsurprisingly, they are the most visible to guests and are pivotal in both providing excellent service (Mohamed, 2015, p. 13) and

building/maintaining long-term relationships with them (Choi, Kim, Lee and Lee 2014, p. 272; Karatepe and Sokmen, 2006, p. 257). Undoubtedly, service employees can be perceived as a critical determinant of a successful service recovery process (Ling et al., 2014), being even placed “at the heart of recovery efforts” (Babakus, et al. 2003, p. 273) playing an important role in transforming displeased customers into satisfied guests (Chen, Yen and Tsai, 2014, p. 21).

2.2 Impact of organizational support on employees’ service recovery performance and its outcomes

The truth is that unexpected service failures may have critical consequences for business and employee effectiveness. Taking recovery efforts, particularly when dealing with unfriendly, disgruntled guests may be emotionally draining and energy depleting for some workers. Unsurprisingly, as proved in previous research, perceived customer unfriendliness may positively relate to employees’ emotional exhaustion (Grobelna, 2015b, p.390), lead to distance seeking and role ambiguity experiencing, which, in turn, may negatively influence employees’ job satisfaction and hence result in quitting intention (Walsh, 2011, p.72). Based on the above, one may conclude that providing employees with supportive human resource practices to manage service failures effectively should be of top priority in a service setting, especially that through such support an organization may send a clear and powerful signal to their employees that they are valued and respected and that organization cares about them and their well-being in stressful work situations.

The first of the support practices that needs discussion is empowerment, perceived as a coping strategy (Choi et al., 2014, p.282) that may help employees to find a quick solution to customers’ problems and deal effectively and promptly with guests’ complaints. Hocutt and Stone (1998, p. 125) proved that employees who have been given autonomy to manage the service recovery process experience higher job satisfaction in a service recovery attempt than those without it. In the hospitality context, Chow et al. (2006, p. 490) in their study on a full-service Chinese restaurant showed that empowerment has a significant effect on customer orientation and improves employees’ performance, whereas in study of Boshoff and Allen (2000, p. 80) empowerment exerts strong positive influence on the service recovery performance of frontline employees.

However, it is empirically proved that in a service recovery attempt, the average satisfaction of empowered employees is higher if they had been additionally trained (Hocutt and Stone, 1998, p. 125). Therefore, *the second* practice that this study focuses on is well-planned and developed employee trainings. Training programs may teach contact staff how to manage successfully customer interactions, how to respond to a variety of customers’ requests and needs, how to perceive difficult customers, and, finally, how to increase customer-oriented attitudes and behaviors and hold loyal customers (see Choi et al., 2014, p. 282).

The third practice is immediate support from supervisors, which demonstrates the value a supervisor places on a person (Lambert and Hogan, 2009, p. 467). Timely support for problem solving seems to be extremely important, particularly in labor intensive hospitality industry (see Pan, 2015, p. 88). Lack of such support may decrease employees’ ability to succeed, cause stress and result in overall negative appraisal of the job (Lambert and Hogan, 2009, p. 467). By contrast, high supervisory support may have a negative effect on job stress (Lambert and Hogan, 2009, p. 474), including a role conflict and ambiguity (Babin and Boles, 1996, p. 69), and a positive one on organizational commitment (Lambert and Hogan, 2009, p. 474), job satisfaction (Karatepe and Kilic, 2007, p. 247; Lambert and Hogan, 2009, p. 474; Babin and Boles, 1996, p. 69; Grobelna, Sidorkiewicz, Tokarz-Kocik, 2016), and employees’ self-efficacy (Karatepe and Olugbade, 2009, p. 509). Generally speaking, having strong supervisory support, employees are likely to experience less stress at work and view it in more favorable terms (Lambert and Hogan, 2009, p. 467, 468).

When employees find that their organization cares about them and supports by engaging in a variety of human resource practices, they tend to repay the delivered benefits and opportunities through their effective performance (Karatepe, 2012, p. 736). The explanation of such a relationship can be found in the Social Exchange Theory, which provides theoretical rationale why employees decide to be more or less engaged in their job and organization (Saks, 2006, p. 603) and argues that “obligations are generated through a series of interactions between parties who are in a state of reciprocal interdependence” (Saks, 2006, p. 603). A good reflection for the abovementioned relationship may be J. Willard Marriott’s statement (founder of the Marriott Hotels), who said “Take care of associates and they’ll take care of your customers” (<http://www.marriott.com/culture-and-values/j-willard-marriott.mi>), because “what employees experience in their work often is transmitted to customers” (Hocutt and Stone, 1998, p. 129). Therefore, it is believed that, when failure occurs, employees who have great supervisory support are more likely to engage in effective recovery performance and provide guests with satisfactory solutions in contrast to those who receive poor support from the top. Unfortunately, poor service recovery can exacerbate customers’ displeasure (Maxham, 2001, p. 16).

Based on the above theoretical foundation and rationale of empirical findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

(H1): The higher the organizational support (in the service recovery context), the greater the level of hotel employees’ service recovery performance.

Effective service recovery performance may be important in building and maintaining satisfactory relationships with hotel guests. Given the fact that a focus on guests and constant striving for their outstanding satisfaction is one of the goals of the hospitality industry (Walker 2014, p. 24, 17), it may be assumed that customer-oriented employees may perceive their relationships with guests favorably, particularly when displeased guests have been satisfied, recommend the hotel and repeat their visits thanks to effective recovery performance. This may increase employees’ morale and give them a feeling of accomplishment and self-realization.

There is extensive empirical evidence that supports the positive linkage between job performance and job satisfaction, including the hospitality setting (e.g. Karatepe and Kilic, 2007, s. 247; Babin and Boles 1996, p. 69). Specifically, Karatepe and Sokmen (2006, p. 264) in their research on frontline hotel employees in Turkey showed that service recovery performance is positively associated with job satisfaction. Additionally, Boshoff and Allen (2000, p. 80) proved in their study (in bank setting) that frontline employees performing service recovery effectively report not only higher levels of job satisfaction but are also less likely to resign. This result could also be strongly beneficial for the hospitality industry, as employee turnover and a high level of employees’ labor mobility are still major concerns (Robinson, Kralj, Solnet, Goh, Callan, 2014, p. 101) and generate high costs, particularly the “hidden” ones (Lam, Zhang and Baum, 2001, p. 157; Grobelna 2015a). Therefore, the turnover issue in the hospitality setting needs constant research attention and still calls for future studies.

Based on the above discussion and previous empirical results, the following hypotheses are proposed:

(H2): The greater the hotel employees’ recovery performance, the higher their satisfaction with their relationships with hotel guests.

(H3): The greater the hotel employees’ recovery performance, the lower their intention to leave.

3. METHODS

This study develops and tests a research model (Fig. 1) that investigates the relationships between organizational support in the service recovery context (OS_RECOVERY) and employees’ service recovery performance (SRP). Additionally, the relationships between SRP and employees’ satisfaction with hotel guests (SAT_with_GUESTS) and with their intention to leave (ItL) were tested.

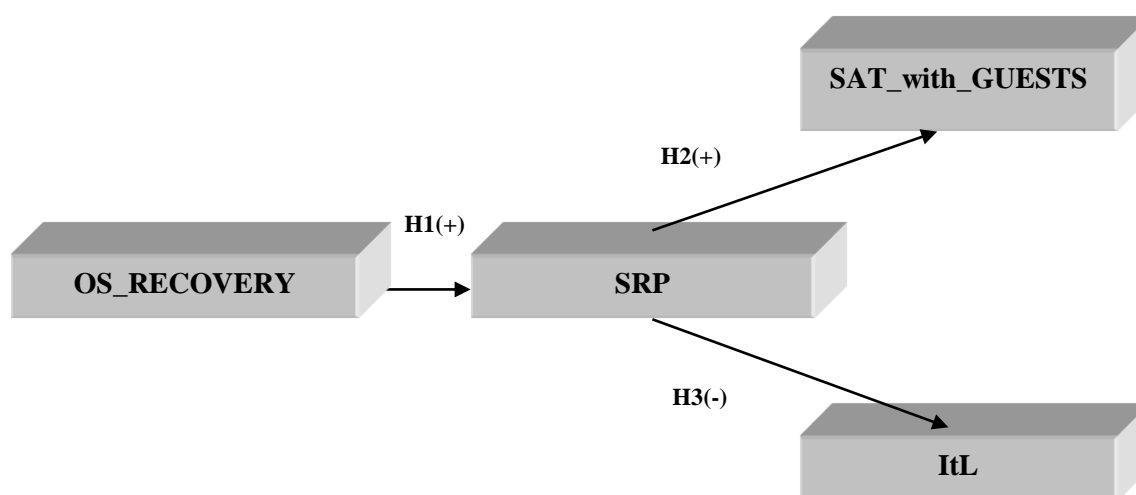


Figure 1: Proposed research model

Note: OS_RECOVERY (organizational support in the service recovery context); SRP (service recovery performance); SAT_with_GUESTS (satisfaction with hotel guests); ItL (intention to leave)

The research was conducted among hotel employees working in contact positions in five hotels that agreed to participate in this study and were located in the Pomeranian Voivodeship (Northern Poland)¹. Data were collected using a questionnaire survey. Based on the managers' feedback on a total number of hotel employees who had direct contact with customers during the time of study, 168 questionnaires were accordingly distributed to participating hotels in a pack containing a cover letter and return envelopes.

The respondents were assured of confidentiality and their voluntary participation in this research, and requested to fill out the questionnaires in a self-reported manner. Finally 104 retrieved and valid questionnaires were analyzed in this study, yielding the response rate of 61.90%. Organizational support in the context of service recovery (OS_RECOVERY) was operationalized using three (3) items developed on the basis of extensive literature review and theoretical considerations conducted in this study. Employees were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree that their hotel organization provide them with: (1) empowerment to resolve guests' problems as soon as possible; (2) good and regular trainings in customer service; and (3) immediate support (from the top) when service problems occur. Service recovery performance (SRP) and intention to leave (ItL) were measured using respectively five (5) and (3) items in line with Karatepe and Sokmen (2006), who based on Boshoff and Allen (2000). Satisfaction with hotel guests (SAT_with_GUESTS) was measured via one (1) item "I am satisfied with my relationship with the guests of this hotel". To ensure clear and understandable language and minimize errors arising from translation of the survey instrument, the back-translation method was applied. All scale items were measured on a five-point scale, ranging from "1=strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree". The scale reliability was assessed by Cronbach's alpha, whose values were as follows: 0.687 (OS_RECOVERY), 0.711 (SRP) 0.884 (ItL). All coefficient's values were above or close to the commonly accepted cut-off point of 0.70. To analyze the respondents' profile descriptive statistics were used. The research hypotheses were tested by Pearson's correlation coefficient.

¹ The research was conducted in the frame of a wider research project on investigation of work characteristics in the hospitality industry and their impact on selected employees' work outcomes. A. Grobelna (2016), *Challenge stressors in the hospitality industry and their impact on employees' performance*, forthcoming article.

4. RESULTS

Analyzing the respondents' profile, the majority of the study respondents were female (76%). 51% of the participants were between the ages of 21–30, and more than one third (36.5%) were between 31–50 years old. The remaining respondents were either older than 50 years (5.8%) or younger than 21 (6.7%). 52.9% of study participants had secondary school education, 36.5% declared higher education, the lowest percentage of respondents (10.6%) indicated the primary or vocational level. The average hospitality work experience was 2.77 years.

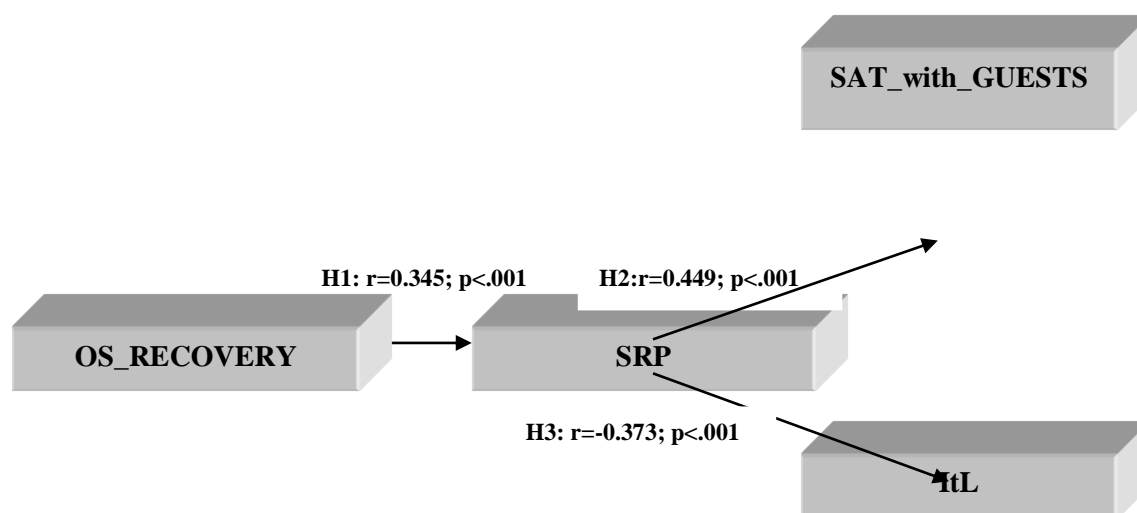


Figure 2: Verified research model

Note: OS_RECOVERY (organizational support in the service recovery context); SRP (service recovery performance); SAT_with_GUESTS (satisfaction with hotel guests); ItL (intention to leave)

Based on the results shown in Fig. 2, all hypothesized correlations among the study variables were significant and in the predicted directions. More specifically, OS_RECOVERY was positively and significantly correlated with employees' service recovery performance. This means that, in the case of this study, when high organizational support is given to employees to ensure effective recovery actions, employees' recovery performance is increasing accordingly; therefore, Hypothesis 1 is accepted.

The study results also demonstrate a positive and significant correlation between service recovery performance and employees' satisfaction with guests relations, which provides support for Hypothesis 2.

Finally, effective performing of service recovery relates significantly and negatively to employees' leaving intentions. Thus Hypothesis 3 is also supported by findings of this study.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study developed and tested a research model that examined the relationships between OS_RECOVERY and SRP. In addition, service recovery outcomes, such as employees' satisfaction with hotel guests and employees' turnover intention, were analyzed.

The study findings showed that high organizational support in the service recovery context positively relates to effective recovery performance when service failures occur. Theoretical rationale for explaining such a relationship can be found in the Social Exchange Theory. When employees perceive that their hotel organization facilitates the complaint handling process and cares about their members when inevitable service failures take place, it may motivate frontline staff to increase their efforts and to reciprocate with a greater engagement in effective service recovery actions, leading to a high level of guests' satisfaction, despite their previous

disappointment. It was also revealed that employees who achieve a higher level of recovery performance are more likely to establish good rapport with hotel guests and have a lower leaving intention. High performing and customer-oriented employees may feel personal accomplishment and high satisfaction when dealing effectively with service failures, which in turn may enhance their positive relationships with hotel guests following service failures and strengthen their bond with the organization, reducing their quitting intention.

Based on the above, this study contributes to the management literature by extending the body of knowledge about organizational factors that may relate to employees' recovery performance and its selected outcomes (satisfaction with hotel guests; turnover intention) taking the research context of the hospitality industry.

The study findings also provide a number of useful recommendations for managerial attention. *First.* It is underlined that by adopting effective service recovery strategies it is possible to retain customers and their loyalty (Maxham, 2001, p. 20). Therefore, a clear system, a policy and recovery procedures need special managerial attention and engagement.

Second. It is important to remember that hotel guests may have their own expectations towards recovery strategies (Jak zapewnić znakomitą obsługę..., 2006, p. 113). Therefore, this adoption of service recovery strategies needs guests' participation to be effective. Interestingly, in many hospitality situations guests who are familiar with the hospitality experience or those who have well-defined expectations may enthusiastically provide supervision and even train employees should they fail to perform as expected (Ford and Heaton, 2001, p. 47). Such feedback is extremely valuable, as it is given by the final arbiter of the quality of service interaction (Ford and Heaton, 2001, p. 47).

Third. Training and empowering employees is strongly recommended to make them able to respond effectively and quickly to service failures. Moreover, supervisors should be open to their subordinates, understand and encourage them when failures occur. Through such immediate actions employees may feel to be respected and valued, which may result in more confidence while facing difficult situations. Employees should also feel appreciation for their recovery efforts. Therefore, to induce motivation and enhance high performance development, a good reward system is recommended (see more Ling et al., 2014).

Fourth. As customer-orientation and employees' predispositions to fulfill guests' needs/requests seem to be crucial for effective service recovery performance (Choi et al., 2014, p. 237), the recruitment, selection and training process should focus on that issue, especially that customers' satisfaction following a service failure will be maximized when employees empathy/courtesy and responsiveness occurs (Hocutt and Stone, 1998, p. 128).

As with most research, the findings of this study also have some limitations. Self-report measurement may limit the results of this study; therefore, in future studies data from multiple sources should be collected or/and with a time lag. One service setting, a small size and a convenient nature of the sample also raise concern about generalization. Thus replication studies with a larger samples and in different service settings is proposed.

Summing up, a satisfactory solution of customers' complaints seems to be a challenging task for many service organizations (Pranic and Roehl, 2012, p. 242), particularly those operating in the highly competitive hospitality industry. However, hotel contact employees with the organizational support in recovery efforts are likely to repay for that through a high quality of service recovery performance. This, in turn, may have a significant impact on establishing good relationships with hotel guests and decreasing employees' quitting intention. All these outcomes may influence hotel revenues, reduces costs, and lead to sustainable organization's growth and profit.

Thus there is no doubt that effective service recovery performance should be perceived as a strategic weapon in today's hospitality marketplace, whose power of influence depends on organizational support given to their contact employees.

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