EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF SERVICE QUALITY IN THE NAMIBIAN HOTEL INDUSTRY: A SERVQUAL APPROACH

Chileshe Ng'andu Musaba

MBA Graduate, Regent Business College, Namibia

Emmanuel C. Musaba[†]

International Water Management Institute, Pretoria, South Africa

Simon I.R. Hoabeb

MBA Coordinator, Regent Business College, Namibia

ABSTRACT

This study assessed employee perceptions of service quality in the Namibian hotel industry using the SERVQUAL approach. The data for the study were collected from 77 employees drawn from two large hotels in Windhoek who were surveyed using a questionnaire covering five service quality dimensions of empathy, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and tangibles. Data were analyzed using gap score analysis and factor analysis. The gap score estimates revealed that on all the items, employee perceptions of quality service delivery in the hotels were lower than their expectations. The largest gap scores (-1.84 to -1.70) pointed to the presence of service gaps relating to: employers' fair treatment and care of employees; employees as a valued resource; employee empowerment to respond to customers without consulting managers; and employees trained and inducted for efficiency and effectiveness. Factor analysis extracted four factors which accounted for 73% of the total variance. The first factor being the most important accounted for 50% of the variance and it included items from the reliability and assurance dimensions namely: employees' comparable pay and benefits, flexible working hours, the use of employee feedback to improve service delivery, and training and inducting employees for efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. Based on the results management of hotels should address the employees' concerns raised in gap analysis and factor analysis in their formulation of strategies to enhance and sustain quality service delivery in their hotels.

† Corresponding author

Keywords: Employee perceptions, Factor analysis, Gap score, Service quality, Services industry, Service gaps, Hotels, Servqual model, Namibia.

Contribution/ Originality

The current paper contributes to the emerging literature on service quality by examining the perceptions of employees rather than consumers. The paper applies the SERVQUAL model for the first time in the Namibian hotel industry and services sector at large. It presents results which managers may consider in formulation of strategies to enhance employee management and to improve quality service delivery in the hotels.

1. INTRODUCTION

Food, drink and accommodation are the main components of hospitality and constitute the largest part of the expenditures of those seeking hospitality from hotels (Ross, 1997). In Namibia, hotels and restaurants are an important part of the tourism industry. The quality of hospitality establishments in Namibia is guaranteed and monitored by the Hospitality Association of Namibia and the Namibian Tourism Board (Hospitality Association of Namibia, 2010). In 2012, the hotel and restaurants industry contributed about 6.6% of total employment and accounted for 1.8% of GDP in the Namibian economy (Bank of Namibia, 2012). The World Travel and Tourism Council identified Namibia as the 6th fastest growing tourism industry in the World in 2006. However, the global financial crisis during 2009-2011 adversely affected the tourism industry worldwide. The seasonal nature of the industry also has implications on labour management and as a result the industry tends to have high staff turnover and this has consequences on quality service delivery. Despite this situation, one critical factor for the success of the hotel industry is availability of high-quality staff. To achieve its objectives, it is essential for the hotel industry to deliver high quality service through effective management of employees.

In this regard, understanding employee perceptions of service quality is relevant because employees are the internal customers of any firm and their perceptions in their work environment determine the nature and quality of service they will offer the external customers. Employees are in the frontline and it is them who make or break the organisation's reputation with their customers. However, in the quest for customer satisfaction, employees are too often forgotten and their perceptions have rarely been used in developing or testing theoretical frameworks concerned with customer service (Dean and Rainnie, 2009). Furthermore, literature review indicated that relatively little work has been done to explore factors which impact on frontline employee behaviour with regard to quality service delivery, and the predictors of employees' behaviour toward service quality perception and satisfaction (Ramseook-Munhurrun *et al.*, 2009).

Service quality is of fundamental importance to any service organisation's strategy and competitive positioning. It is also a differentiating tool in an industry like hospitality which is essentially homogeneous in nature. The study of service quality has been dominated by studies of consumer expectations and perceptions of service in many sectors of the service industry based on the SERVQUAL model. Little work has been done on the expectations and perceptions of the service providers, notably the employees, who interface with the consumers of the service.

The literature search on the hospitality industry in Namibia found a few studies dealing with the consumer perceptions, for example, Mwanza and Chingarande (2013) and Pienaar and Otto (2010), but found no studies on the perception of service quality by employees in the hospitality industry in Namibia. This is one of the reasons why this study is particularly important. The lack of studies also makes it difficult to ascertain the nature of labour relations between employers and employees in the hospitality industry in Namibia. Therefore this study attempts to contribute to the emerging studies on employee perceptions of service quality, by investigating the situation in the hotel industry in Namibia. The objective of the study is to determine the employee perceptions of quality service delivery in the Namibian hotel industry.

2. THE CONCEPT OF SERVICE QUALITY

Parasuraman et al. (1988), defined perceived service quality as "global judgment or attitude relating to the superiority of the service". The superiority of the service is confirmed by what the service delivers, which is the outcome and is evaluated after the performance, and how the service is delivered, which is the process and is evaluated during delivery.

According to Asubonteng et al. (1996), what a service delivers is difficult to evaluate for any service, so consumers or customers rely on other measures of quality attributes associated with service delivery, as evidenced in the five generic dimensions of service quality. A survey of service theory seems to indicate that, clients will judge that quality is low if performance does not meet their expectation and that quality is high if performance exceeds their expectations. So as Asubonteng et al. (1996) conclude, customers' expectations serve as the foundation on which service quality will be evaluated.

Service quality is defined as, "an attitude formed by a long-term, overall evaluation of a firm's performance" by Hoffman and Bateson (2006). This distinguishes the concept from customer satisfaction which is a short-term, transaction-specific measure (Hoffman and Bateson, 2006). The service quality process can be examined in terms of the gaps between management, employees' and customers' expectations and perceptions (Hoffman and Bateson, 2006). According to Hoffman and Bateson (2006), service quality focuses on the customers' cumulative attitude towards the firm which is the result of a number of successful or unsuccessful service experiences.

3. MEASURING SERVICE QUALITY: THE SERVQUAL MODEL

The SERVQUAL model developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988) is the most frequently used measure of service quality. It measures the gaps between expected service and perceived service in different industries. The difference in perceptions and expectations is what determines the nature or quality of the service. A negative gap score is indicative that the perception scores are lower than the expectation scores and, therefore, the service does not meet and exceed a customer's expectations. SERVQUAL is based on five dimensions of service quality, namely, reliability (ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately), responsiveness (willingness to help customers and prompt service), assurance (knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to gain trust and confidence), empathy (providing individualized attention to the customers)

and tangibles (physical facilities, equipment and personnel appearance), and is operationalised in the form of two 22-item sections to measure customer expectations and perceptions.

This measurement instrument is the most widely used tool for measuring service quality and its application continues to increase in different services settings, such as banks (Jabnoun and Al-Tamimi, 2003), hospitality (Saleh and Ryan, 1992), health (Arasli *et al.*, 2008), education (Tan and Kek, 2004), travel and tourism (Mwanza and Chingarande, 2013), and the call centre industry (Ramseook-Munhurrun *et al.*, 2009).

Despite its wide usage the SERVQUAL model has been criticised by a number of researchers (Carman, 1990; Babakus and Boller, 1992; Teas, 1994). Criticism was directed at the conceptual and operational aspects of the model, mostly its validity, reliability, operationalization of expectations, and dimensional structure. However, there is general agreement that SERVQUAL items are reliable predictors of overall service quality (Khan, 2003). Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) noted that even if it may be necessary to reword or modify some of the items, the SERVQUAL scale is applicable in a wide range of business services.

Through empirical research work on service quality Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) have identified five distinct gaps between what customers expect and what they perceive they receive. The five gaps are: (a) the knowledge gap or the difference between what customers expect of a service and what management perceives that consumers expect; (b) the standards gap or the difference between what management perceives that consumers expect and the quality and specifications set for service delivery; (c) the delivery gap or the difference between the quality specifications set for a service delivery and the actual quality of service delivery; (d) the communications gap or the difference between the actual quality of service delivered and the quality of service described in the firm's external communications such as brochures and mass media advertising; and (e) the service gap which encapsulates all the other gaps and describes the difference between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the service they receive. This is the most significant gap and is the focus in this study.

4. SERVICE QUALITY IN THE HOTEL INDUSTRY

Several studies have used the SERVQUAL model to assess service quality in tourism and hospitality settings. Service quality has been measured by focussing on perceptions only while others have measured service quality in terms of gap scores defined as the difference between customer's perceptions and expectations. Which of the two approaches is more appropriate remains debatable in service quality literature (Markovic and Raspor, 2010). The authors that used the performance only approach to assess service quality in tourism and hospitality from the perspective of customers' include; Gabbie and O'Neill (1996) in Ireland, Choi and Chu (2001) in Hong Kong, Juwaheer (2004) in Mauritius, Poon and lock-Teng Low (2005) in Malaysia, Akbaba (2006) in Turkey and Markovic and Raspor (2010) in Croatia.

There are few studies of service quality from the service providers' and employees' perspectives. In a study of the Canadian hotel industry, Martin (1995) measured quality service using the Importance/Performance Analysis technique and the service gap technique and found significant differences between management and employee perception of service quality.

Tsang and Qu (2000) assessment of service quality in China's hotel industry from the perspective of both international tourists and hotel managers, found that tourists' perceptions of service quality were consistently lower than their expectations, and that managers overestimated the service delivery, compared to tourists' perceptions of actual service quality in the hotel industry in China. Furthermore, the results from gap score analysis indicated that the delivery gap and the internal evaluation gap were the main reasons contributing to the service quality shortfalls in the China hotel industry.

There are no studies from the employees' perceptions and expectations of service quality in the hotel industry. The literature, however, has some studies with an employee perspective in the call centre industry. This includes Ramseook-Munhurrun *et al.* (2009) in Mauritius, who used a modified SERVQUAL model and found three service quality dimensions: assurance-empathy, reliability-responsiveness and tangibles to be core dimensions in the call centre industry in Mauritius. Regression results showed that employee satisfaction was best predicted by tangibles and intentions to stay and willingness to recommend are best predicted by the reliability-responsiveness dimension. The work of Gilmore (2001) considered the perceptions of different levels of staff and their relationship with service quality and managerial approaches in a call centre. She found that front line employees (FLE) were dissatisfied with the managerial approach as they felt that they were not empowered to handle customer problems efficiently and effectively.

5. METHODOLOGY

There are about 16 hotels/lodges in Windhoek, out of which are four large hotels with more than 100 guest rooms each. Of the four large hotels, two 4-star hotels agreed to participate in this study. A sample of 90 employees from these two hotels was involved in this study. A questionnaire was constructed based on an adapted SERVQUAL model and was used to measure the expectations and perceptions of employees. Respondents were asked to rate their expectations and perceptions of each of the 18 items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree. The questionnaire was pre-tested on 24 employees at two 3 star hotels, and the questionnaire was found suitable with minor modifications. The questionnaire was administered to 90 employees at the two hotels selected from the three departments of housekeeping, food and beverages (restaurant) and reception, because these employees have the most contact with customers and their performance has the most impact on quality service delivery. A sample of 85 questionnaires were completed and returned and 77 were found usable for data analysis in this study. The survey was conducted during the months of January and February 2010.

The data was analysed using SPSS version 17 for windows. Descriptive statistics were used to assess the hotel employees' expectations, perceptions and gap scores. The gap score (P-E) was defined as the difference between perceptions (P) and expectations (E). Gap score analysis was done to determine employee perceptions of weak areas in the provision of quality service in the

hotels under study. Paired t-tests were conducted to assess the significance of the differences between the two means of expectation and perceptions at a significance level of 1%. The principal component analysis was conducted to reduce the 18 service quality items into a set of simplified dimensions that should be emphasised in developing improved service delivery strategies. In this regard, factor analysis was performed on the 18 gap score items that assessed the employees' perception of the delivery of quality service.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Means for Expectations, Perceptions and Gap Scores

Table 1 presents the means for the perception and expectation items relating to the five dimensions of service quality in the SERVQUAL model. The means for expectations ranged from 5.04 (=somewhat agree) to 5.92 (=strongly agree). The lowest mean of 5.04 was in the assurance dimension on item A3, about the flexibility of shift hours so as not to negatively impact the employees' quality of life. The highest expectation mean of 5.92 was on item T2 in the tangibles dimension, stating that the employees had strongly agreed that a safe and healthy place of work can facilitate and enhance the employees' delivery of quality service to the hotel customers.

For perceptions the means ranged from 3.38 (=somewhat disagree) to 4.67 (=somewhat agree). The lowest mean was on item A1 in the assurance dimension and referred to fair treatment and genuine care for employees by the hotel and employees somewhat disagreed to this statement. The highest mean score for perception was on item T3 in the tangibles dimension and dealt with the issue of regular communication between employees and sales and advertising, to which employees somewhat agreed.

A gap score (P-E) is equal to perception minus expectation. In Table 1, all items showed negative gap scores, which means that the expectations of the hotel employees on service quality items as suggested by Parasuraman et al. (1988) were higher than their perceptions. The more negative the gap score, the less desirable the performance. The t-statistics were also calculated to test for significant difference between expectations and perceptions. All the gap scores were statistically significant at 1% probability level.

All the items recorded negative gap scores which suggest that the hotels need to attend to all the items. However, in terms of magnitude of the gap scores, it was found that the gap scores ranged from -0.88 to -1.84. The lowest gap score of -0.88 was for item T3 (i.e. sales and advertising regularly communicates with customer service employees) in the tangibles dimension. It was followed by -0.96 for item A3 on flexible working hours in the assurance dimension. The four highest gap scores included: -1.84 for item A1 (i.e. fair treatment and care) in the assurance dimension, followed by -1.83 for E1 in the empathy dimension concerning employees as a valued resource, followed by -1.82 for item RS1 concerning the empowerment of employees to respond to customers without consulting managers and -1.70 for item RL4 in the reliability dimension concerning employees being trained and inducted for efficiency and effectiveness.

These top four gap score results suggest that in these hotels employees have a low perception regarding items: A1 (fair treatment and care from their employers); E1 (their worth as a valued resource); RS1 (their power to respond to customers without consulting managers); and RL4 (their

training and induction for efficiency and effectiveness). In short these are some of the service gaps which the hotels should address to ensure that employees perform their duties and contribute to improved quality service delivery in the hotel industry.

On the other hand the items with the lowest gap scores, for example, T3 (sales and advertising regularly communicates with customer service employees), A3 (flexible working hours) and T1 (hotel has adequate facility and supplies), suggest that these are the areas where the hotels are doing relatively well from the employees' perspective and the hotels should uphold what they are doing to sustain quality service delivery.

Table-1. Mean Expectation, Mean Perceptions and Mean Gap Scores for Hotels

Attributes		Expectation		Perception		Gap	
		Mean	SD.	Mean	SD	Mean	t-value
E1	Employees valued resource	5.61	1.89	3.78	1.97	-1.83	5.91*
E2	Employees coached and directed	5.62	1.69	4.01	1.84	-1.61	5.71*
E3	Managers available for consultation	5.54	1.87	4.25	1.91	-1.28	4.73*
A1	Fair treatment and care	5.22	1.95	3.38	1.97	-1.84	6.33*
A2	Comparable pay and benefits	5.11	1.95	3.74	2.06	-1.38	4.60*
A3	Flexible shift hours	5.04	2.20	4.08	2.13	-0.96	2.67*
RS1	Empowered to respond without consulting managers+	5.74	1.78	3.92	2.09	-1.82	5.65*
RS2	Vision, mission orientation to quality service	5.51	1.74	4.25	1.87	-1.25	4.34*
RS3	Vision, mission communicated	5.70	1.70	4.38	1.77	-1.32	4.59*
RS4	Rewards outstanding performance	5.63	1.56	4.11	1.98	-1.52	5.50*
RL1	Regularly communicate importance of error free service	5.72	1.65	4.08	2.03	-1.64	5.29*
RL2	Employee feedback used to improve service delivery processes	5.84	1.51	4.20	1.96	-1.64	5.78*
RL3	Employees trained to anticipate customer needs and exceed expectations	5.84	1.60	4.56	1.89	-1.28	4.91*
RL4	Employees trained and inducted for efficiency and effectiveness	5.69	1.79	3.99	2.06	-1.70	5.70*
RL5	Employees regularly trained and developed to enhance QSD skills	5.84	1.45	4.42	2.07	-1.41	4.81*
T1	Hotel has adequate facility and supplies	5.40	1.72	4.35	1.76	-1.05	3.65
T2	Quality performance facilitated by safe and healthy place of work	5.92	1.49	4.35	1.86	-1.57	6.59
T3	Sales and advertising regularly communicates with customer service employees	5.55	1.81	4.67	1.89	-0.88	3.286

Note: E = empathy; A = assurance; RS = responsiveness; RL = reliability; T = tangibles.

* t-test two tail with probability < 0.01

6.2. Factor Analysis on Gap Scores

In order to explore and recognise the attributes or factors that have the most effect on employee perceptions, factor analysis was conducted on the gap scores of the 18 items in the questionnaire. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.729 and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant at $p<0.01$, indicating that the data is appropriate for

factor analysis. Only factors with Eigen values greater than 1.0 and factor loadings of 0.5 and higher were considered and retained (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Items that loaded on more than one factor were discarded, because they are meaningless. Furthermore, factors with less than two items from any dimension were not considered and interpreted. Four components were extracted showing that the data failed to conform to the five dimensions of the SERVQUAL model.

The most important gaps from the employees' perspective are reflected in the first factor, which had a total explained variance of 50% (Table 2). This factor drew two items from the assurance dimension, two items from the reliability dimension and one item from the empathy dimension. The assurance items dealt with the issue of comparable pay and benefits for employees (A2) and the flexibility of shift hours so that the quality of life of employees was not negatively affected (A3). The reliability items dealt with the use of employee feedback to improve service delivery processes in the hotels (RL2) and the issue of employees being trained and inducted for efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery (RL4). The empathy item dealt with the issue of managers being readily available for consultation in the course of the employees' duties. Factor one is, therefore, essentially an assurance-reliability dimension. The managerial implications are that, the hotel managers need to pay particular attention to these items when formulating strategies to enhance and sustain quality service delivery in their hotels.

Table-2. Factor Analysis for Gap Scores Rotated Component Matrix

No.	Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
A2g	Comparable pay and benefits	0.821			
A3g	Flexible shift hours	0.726			
RL2g	Employee feedback used to improve service delivery processes	0.738			
RL4g	Employees trained and inducted for efficiency and effectiveness	0.568			
E3g	Managers available for consultation	0.679			
T1g	Hotel has adequate facility and supplies		0.71		
T2g	Quality performance facilitated by safe and healthy place of work		0.773		
RL3g	Employees trained to anticipate customer needs and exceed expectations		0.675		
RL5g	Employees regularly trained and developed to enhance QSD skills	0.518	0.65		
RS2g	Vision, mission orientation to quality service		0.612		
E1g	Employees valued resource			0.726	0.521
E2g	Employees coached and directed			0.778	
RS1g	Empowered to respond without consulting managers			0.709	
RS3g	Vision, mission communicated			0.771	
RS4g	Rewards outstanding performance				0.81
A1g	Fair treatment and care				0.616
RL1g	Regularly communicate importance of error free service				0.583
	Eigen values	9.003	1.69	1.475	1.112
	Variance extracted %	50.014	9.387	8.194	6.179

The other three factors made low contributions to the variance in the data set. Factor two with a variance of 9.3% emerged to be a tangibles-reliability dimension, because it loaded two items (T1 and T2) from tangibles dimension and two items (RL3 and RL5) from the reliability dimension and one item (RS2) from the responsiveness dimension. The items included the hotels' vision and mission being orientated to quality service delivery (RS2) and a reliability item RL3 which dealt with employees being trained to anticipate customer needs and to exceed their expectations. Factor three with an even smaller variance of 8.1% can be labelled an empathy-responsiveness dimension. It loaded two responsiveness items which dealt with the empowerment of employees to respond to customer problems without consulting managers (RS1), and RS3 which dealt with the hotels' mission and vision being properly communicated to the employees. The empathy item loaded onto this factor dealt with employees perceiving themselves as a valued resource (E1) and employees being coached and directed in the delivery of quality service to the hotel customers by managers (E2). Factor four had one item each from the responsiveness (RS4), assurance (A1) and reliability (RL1) dimensions.

7. CONCLUSION

This study presented findings of employees' perceptions of service quality in the hotel industry in Namibia. The study employed an adapted SERVQUAL tool for data collection and analysed the data collected from 77 employees at two four-star hotels in Windhoek, the capital city of Namibia, using gap score analysis and factor analysis. The findings indicate that employees' expectations of service quality on all 18 items were higher than their perceptions. This suggests that there are service quality gaps on all items, and it implies that what employees' expect of their employers was higher than what they perceive to be the treatment they receive from their employers as internal customers of the hotels. The large service gaps identified in the assurance, empathy, responsiveness, and reliability dimensions include; employees not receiving fair treatment and care from their employers (A1); employees being treated not as a valued resource to the hotels (E1), employees not empowered to respond to customers without consulting managers (RS1), especially where service recovery needs to be instituted immediately and to be trained and inducted for efficiency and effectiveness in quality service delivery to customers (RL4).

The lowest gaps were found in three items namely: T3 (sales and advertising regularly communicates with customer service employees), A3 (flexible working hours) and T1 (hotel has adequate facilities and supplies). The items with the lowest gap scores imply areas where the hotels are doing relatively well from the employees' perspective and the hotels should uphold what they are doing to sustain quality service delivery. These items pertain mostly to the tangibles dimension.

The results of factor analysis produced a four factor model instead of the five dimension model of SERVQUAL. Factor 1 accounted for 50% of the variance, and was the most important factor. The items which loaded on factor 1 captured the assurance-reliability dimension. The items include: A2 (comparable pay and benefits), A3 (flexible working hours), RL2 (using employee feedback to improve service delivery), and RL4 (training and inducting employees for efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery). Therefore the items identified above through gap score

analysis and factor analysis should be considered by management in the formulation of strategies to enhance and sustain quality service delivery in the surveyed hotels.

Further research on quality service in hotels in Namibia, could consider increasing the sample size by including more hospitality establishments of different sizes. The hotel managers also need to determine why employee perceptions of the service dimensions are so low and include the issues of employee satisfaction, so that a more comprehensive picture of employee perception of QSD in the hospitality industry in Namibia can emerge.

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