

## Factors Influencing Perceptions of Service Quality in Cooperative Extension Workers

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**Abstract:** *The authors examined the direct and indirect impact of empowerment on service quality as perceived by Extension staff. Using a sample 283 respondents, the results revealed that along with empowerment, constructs such as job satisfaction and organizational identification positively affected service quality. Undoubtedly, each of these variables contributes in explaining how employees perceive their service performance, together with elements of customer orientation.*

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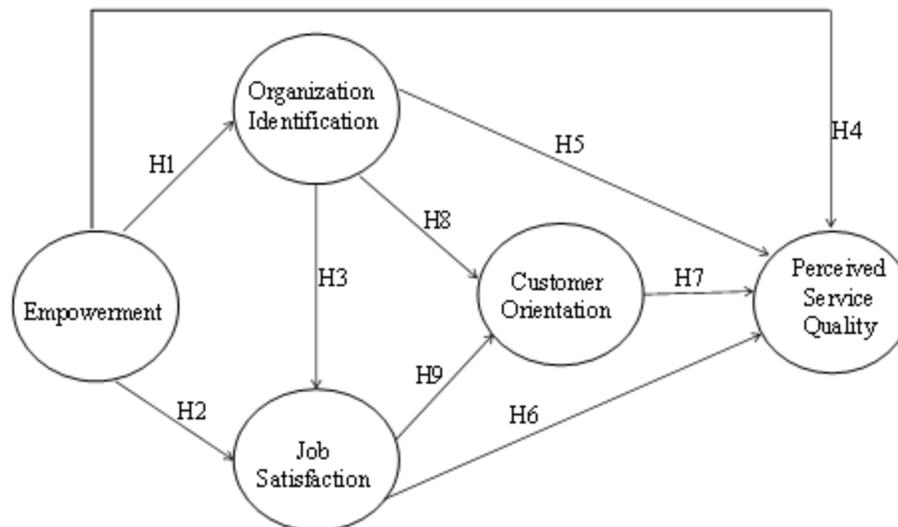
### Introduction

The study reported here examined the impact of empowerment in motivating desirable workplace outcomes that ultimately foster service quality in an Extension setting. Researchers in the organizational behavior field have referred to empowerment as the critical response to sluggish employee performance and service delivery (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000). At the same time, an emerging trend in the service literature is the impact of employee empowerment on service quality (Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004).

Within the past two decades, the scope and size of services provided by the Cooperative Extension System has witnessed immense growth (Joint Task Force on Managing the Changing Portfolio of the CES, 2006). Today, their presence is felt in almost all service sectors of the economy, including the health, education and technology field (United States Department of Agriculture, 2010). Evidence of this rapid growth has been accompanied by the constant need to improve service quality (Galindo-Gonzalez & Israel, 2010).

The reasoning that empowerment practices will increase job satisfaction and promote a sense of workplace belongingness was employed as the basis for the study (Figure 1). The extent to which such factors contribute to perceptions of service quality among a sample of Extension workers is examined, and appropriate lessons are drawn.

**Figure 1.**  
Proposed Model



## Hypotheses Development

### Empowerment

Hailed as the blueprint for employee initiative, empowerment entails "a practice, or set of practices involving the delegation of responsibility down the hierarchy so as to give employees increased decision-making authority in respect to the execution of their primary work tasks" (Leach, Wall, & Jackson 2003, p. 28). Researchers argue that the benefits of establishing empowerment practices in organizations breeds desirable employee behaviors and attitudes that ultimately enhance performance. Proponents for empowerment claim that employees who feel empowered at work are more likely to exhibit positive reactions to their job, such as increased identification (Liden et al., 2000; Spreitzer, Kizilos, & Nason, 1997). Here, identification is labeled as organizational identification (OI). OI is recognizable when employees share central, enduring, and distinctive belief systems with their place of employment (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). With the exception of Torppa and Smith (2009), the notion of OI is rarely talked about within Extension, although many of their offices benefit from having employees who strongly identify with the organization. Moreover, Liden et al. (2000) have noted that employee empowerment positively impacts a person's level of attachment to his/her firm. Thus the following is hypothesized:

*Hypothesis 1:* Empowerment will positively impact OI.

### Job Satisfaction

The notion of job satisfaction (JS) continues to render itself illusive within Extension. In an attempt to predict JS, we advance past empirical research findings that support the fact that empowerment contributes immensely to how satisfied an individual is with his or her job (Liden et al., 2000). Thus the following is proposed:

*Hypothesis 2:* Empowerment will positively impact JS.

As mentioned earlier, OI is strong in many Extension offices. Congruent to this fact, several scholars have noted that OI may be in part responsible for stronger levels of JS (Tidwell, 2005). However, this is yet to be established within an Extension setting. Thus the following is proposed:

*Hypothesis 3:* OI will positively impact JS.

### **Employee Perceived Service Quality**

Much of the literature on service quality comes from commercial-service settings. Notwithstanding, the notion of service quality through improved employee productivity has gained momentum among Extension professionals and Extension researchers (Terry & Israel, 2004). While researchers (Seibert et al., 2004) have explored productivity and other work-related outcomes, a deeper understanding of the relationship between empowerment and service quality is needed to build a stronger case for the implementation of an empowered workforce.

*Hypothesis 4:* Empowerment will positively impact perceived service quality.

A growing body of research suggests that individuals with strong OI will display positive dispositions that indicate good service. Although there are positive findings within for-profit settings (Bell & Menguc, 2002), data are lacking that have examined this relationship within an Extension-based setting.

*Hypothesis 5:* OI will positively impact perceived service quality.

The linkage of service quality, though not entirely novel, has mainly been tested from the customer's point of view in both for-profit settings (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996) and Extension environments (Terry & Israel, 2004). Given previous research, it is believed that Extension employees with higher levels of JS will put forth more efforts in providing quality service.

*Hypothesis 6:* JS will positively impact perceived service quality

### **Customer Orientation**

The growing popularity of customer orientation (CO) is gradually finding its way into CES. CO refers to "employee's behaviors that are geared toward satisfying customers' needs adequately" (Stock and Hoyer, 2005, p. 536). Due to past empirical support that positive orientation towards customers improves organizational performance (Gounaris, Stathakopoulos, & Athanassopoulos, 2003); one would expect that increases in CO would also positively affect service quality.

*Hypothesis 7:* CO will positively impact perceived service quality in Extension settings.

Though some evidence in the literature demonstrates that culturally driven organizational processes/activities push for the development of an effective customer-oriented culture and, in many cases, market-oriented workforce, much remains unknown about this relationship within CES. Thus the following is proposed:

*Hypothesis 8:* OI will positively impact employee CO.

Next, we theorize that JS is positively associated to CO among Extension professionals. Based on previous scholarly findings suggesting that satisfied employees are more driven to meet client needs (Hoffman & Ingram, 1992), we examine the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 9:* JS will positively impact employee CO.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

Empirical analysis for the research described was conducted using data from employees working for a Midwestern Extension system. A total of 1,015 Extension professionals, support staff, and local administrators working in 92 counties within the state received the survey invitation to participate in the research, and 319 of them were completed. After listwise deletion, 283 respondents were left. The average age of a typical employee was 49 years. Seventy-two percent of those surveyed were female, 27% were male, and 1% were undisclosed. Respondents were mostly Caucasian (98%) and married (75%), while over 63% of them held a post-graduate degree. During data collection, employees were explicitly asked to provide the title of their positions. Though this list is not exhaustive, several of those surveyed held the following

positions: Extension educator, lab director, Web application developer, county Extension director, Extension specialist, marketing manager, district director, water quality analyst, program manager and professional agronomist.

## Instruments

All the instruments used in the research presented here were drawn from previously established scales. Empowerment was measured using Hartline and Ferrells' (1996) four-item scale. A sample question asked participants to respond to the following: *My supervisor allows me to use my own judgment in solving problems*. OI was measured using the Mael and Ashforth (1992) scale, and a sample item reads: *This organization successes are my successes*. JS was operationalized using Quinn and Shepard's (1974) index. One of the questions asked reads as follows: *All in all, I am very satisfied with my current job*. CO was measured using seven items (Korschun, 2008). One of the seven questions asked participants to respond to the following: *Every customer's problem is important to me*. Perceived service quality was measured using a scale by Bitner and Hubbert (1994). A sample item reads as follows: *Based on everything you know about the organization, rate the overall quality of this organization*.

## Control Variables

Additional variables were introduced to control for alternative result explanations and improve internal validity. The first variable introduced was organizational prestige, while the second was remuneration. Organizational prestige was measured using a subset of Mael's (1988) eight-item scale. A sample question asked participants to respond to the following: *It is considered prestigious in the community to be an employee of this organization*. Remuneration was introduced as an antecedent of JS and assessed using three items drawn from the Matzler, Fuchs, and Schubert (2004) scale and one item from Gounaris (2008) scale. A sample item reads as follows: *My income and the annual increases are much related to those of other people with similar qualifications working in this or any other industry*.

## Analytic Approach

The confirmatory and structural model was analyzed using AMOS 17.0. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships. SEM is a statistical method that takes a confirmatory approach to analyze models grounded in theoretical justification. Given the hypotheses testing structure of the research presented here, SEM was considered the more appropriate means for data analysis. Fit indices as prescribed by Hu and Bentler (1999) were used to examine model fit. A value greater than 0.90 for confirmatory fit index (CFI) indicated a satisfactory model fit. While a value of 0.08 or less for root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) further suggested adequate model fit.

## Results

### Measurement and Structural Model Assessment

Results from the measurement model show adequate fit ( $\chi^2$  of 615.661, degrees of freedom (df) of 242, CFI of .917 and RMSEA of .072). Results from the structural model as displayed in Table 1 also reveals acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 928.300$ ,  $df = 420$ ,  $p = 0.000$ , CFI = .905, RSMEA = .066). The positive impact of empowerment on OI as proposed in hypothesis 1 was supported at the .05 level. In support of hypothesis 2, the findings reveal that empowerment was significantly related to JS ( $p < .05$ ). Supporting hypothesis 3, OI positively and significantly predicted JS ( $p < .05$ ). Empowerment was found to positively affect service quality, in support of hypothesis 4 ( $p < .05$ ).

**Table 1.**  
Standardized Regression Weight and t-values

Paths	Model	Findings
Empowerment → OI	.19(3.06) <sup>c</sup>	Supported

Empowerment → JS	.25(4.20) <sup>c</sup>	Supported
OI → JS	.34(5.67) <sup>c</sup>	Supported
Empowerment → Perceived Service Quality	.19(3.27) <sup>b</sup>	Supported
OI → Perceived Service Quality	.28(4.09) <sup>c</sup>	Supported
JS → Perceived Service Quality	.25(3.78) <sup>c</sup>	Supported
CO → Perceived Service Quality	.29(4.73) <sup>c</sup>	Supported
OI → CO	.36(4.46) <sup>c</sup>	Supported
JS → CO	.09(1.25) <sup>n.s</sup>	Not Supported
<b>Control Variables</b>		
Organizational Prestige → OI	.44 (6.06) <sup>c</sup>	
Remuneration → JS	.31 (5.05) <sup>c</sup>	
<sup>b</sup> significant at the 0.01 level <sup>c</sup> significant at the 0.001 level <sup>n.s</sup> not significant		

In addition to empowerment, OI (H<sub>5</sub>), JS (H<sub>6</sub>) and CO (H<sub>7</sub>) were tested as antecedents of perceived service quality. Results found that OI, JS, and CO significantly predicted perceived service quality at the .05 level, which supports all three hypotheses. The research findings reveal that OI significantly and positively affects CO, in support of hypothesis 8. Next, the analysis fails to support a causal relationship between JS and CO ( $p > .05$ ).

## Discussion and Implications

The results show that actions tailored to improve service quality within the surveyed Extension offices should involve premeditated efforts to empower employees, enhance JS, increase employee-Extension office identification, and cultivate CO. Particularly, initial implementation of empowerment practices may help to uniformly attain full-fledged service productivity with the sole intention of ensuring quality service delivery. In the following section, we broaden our discussion by suggesting practical implications that have emerged from the findings, but it should be noted that the findings are narrowly restricted to the sampling pool.

- First, the results show that Extension service quality can be considerably improved when Extension professionals exhibit a culture of empowerment.

The results provide evidence to show that a necessary factor required in building a better Extension professional and better Extension services involves the implementation of an empowered workforce. While there are several methods available to aid the process of empowerment, we advocate the initiative involving greater workplace autonomy and self-involvement from Extension professionals. Building an environment where all employees have the ability to make relevant decisions concerning the work they do reflects a level of strategic control over ones job. As the study's results show, when a person has control over his or her job, it heightens JS and eventually enhances work productivity. For example, in the case of Extension professionals in college departments, if educators were provided wider latitude to organize programs they themselves deem necessary for the public's well-being without having to worry about their department heads or other faculty members second-guessing their every judgment call, then their JS and work productivity should increase.

- Second, the importance of OI as a means of enhancing service quality was found to be relevant in the model.

The question then becomes, how can OI be improved? Previous studies (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) have suggested that the enactment of congruent practices, objectives, and value systems salient to all Extension employees' regardless of their affiliation to the university, local government, program areas, or college department will increase identification. Currently, Extension professionals vary in their classification of place of employment. Some consider the university to be their frame of organizational reference, while others classify their county government, program area, college department, and Extension system to be their frame of organizational reference. With all Extension employees identifying with various organizational sources, it may be difficult to enact congruent practices across the board. However, the alignment of practices across statewide Extension offices will help Extension professionals connect to Extension as a whole. The more Extension professionals form meaningful bonds and share commonalities with their local Extension offices, the greater their interest will be in providing quality services.

- Third, the positive impact of CO on service quality introduces Extension to the competitive advantage customer-centricity provides.

Given the fundamental objective of Extension as a research-based public service provider, it is essential that Extension professionals understand how to ultimately meet the needs of those they serve. Extension offices looking to adopt a customer-oriented approach will be better served by hiring employees who hold similar views with the changing portfolio of Extension. A recommendation for how this can be accomplished may involve the creation of questions that assess an applicant's level of CO during the initial interview stages. This will ensure that before a person takes on the role of Extension professional, he or she already possesses a customer service mindset. For current Extension professionals, Extension offices may consider embarking on periodic training programs and development seminars targeted at teaching administrators, support staff, and educators about best practices used in ensuring customer satisfaction.

- Fourth, the study reports that Extension will greatly benefit from ensuring JS.

Again, the human resource practice of employee empowerment was found to strongly affect JS. This shows that providing employees with the necessary support to perform their task will enhance JS, consequently improving employee productivity. Overall, the findings conclude that increased service quality in Extension offices is dependent on both employee and organizational actions. For application purposes, we highlight the obligation that directors possess in supporting their staff by being responsive to their work-related desires such as greater work involvement and decision making capabilities.

## Limitation and Conclusion

One of the major limitations of the research findings pertains to the use of cross-sectional data from one particular Extension system. This shows a very narrow sampling pool that minimizes the generalizability of our findings to other Extension offices and limits our ability to make inferences concerning other Extension systems. Although the research findings can be transplanted to other Extension offices, caution must be taken in the execution phase to ensure that the maximum outcome of increased productivity is achieved. In the future, researchers are encouraged to embark on multi-state studies where collaborative efforts with other personnel are solicited to strengthen the currently tested model. In closing, we conclude that improved Extension employee performance as it relates to service quality is attainable as a direct function of OI, CO, JS, and empowerment.

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