

Customer Service Experiences at a Public Department Office in the City of Tshwane

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Abstract: *The president of South Africa, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, stated in a speech delivered on 28 March 2019 in Tembisa, that service delivery will be the top priority of the African National Congress (ANC) if re-elected. One can therefore deduce that the government is aware that the citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of service delivered by public institutions, as can also be seen by the widespread service protests that regularly flare up. This study was conducted to determine the service quality perceptions of a certain group of customers of a public department in the City of Tshwane. The researcher selected international students as participants in this study. International students were selected as they often complained to the researcher with regards to the quality of service they received from the public department office. Add the problem statement and clearly specify the purpose, aim or objectives of the study. A quantitative research design was followed. A survey was conducted with 156 participants. The results revealed that the two service quality dimensions that had the highest number of respondent agreeing were “the department has information brochures and correspondence that are easy to read” (tangibility) with 59.6%, and “the department has convenient operating hours” (empathy) with 59.6%. The following service quality aspects scored below 50%, up-to-date (modern) equipment, visual appeal of office furniture, cleanliness of equipment, level of professionalism by employees, and should be improved upon. The departments’ employees can improve customer satisfaction by customer service by being engaged and committed when dealing with the public. The findings on the perceptions service quality will inform the public department managers on which areas of service quality need improvement and which areas’ current standards of service must be maintained.*

Keywords: *Customer service, public department, total quality management*

Introduction

Customer satisfaction can only be achieved when an entity can meet or exceed the quality expectations of the customer. This remains a

challenge in public departments as services are mainly delivered through human contact between the customer and a public employee. Quality

service is frequently impeded by the fact that South African public departments are often under staffed, which leads to overworked and demotivated employees. The provision of superior service quality is vital to ensure customer satisfaction and satisfaction with the service delivery of the public sector, and therefore remain an important subject for consideration among researchers. As awareness of customer service orientation and improved service quality standards grows, the significance of quality services provided by public departments to the customer becomes more important and these departments must strike an accurate balance between their internal problems and customer expectations. For departments to be able to improve their service quality, there is a need to measure the status quo to be able to identify both areas that need improvement and areas where performance is satisfactory (Ingaldi, 2016).

Research Method

This study followed a quantitative design and a survey was conducted using an existing SERVPERF questionnaire. Quantitative methods include writing questions for surveys to quantify responses and statistically (mathematically) analysing the collected data (Nardi, 2003). Descriptive research was used in this study to (1) provide a detailed, highly accurate picture of the phenomenon being investigated; (2) locate new data that contradict past data; (3) clarify a sequence of steps or stages; (4) document a causal process or mechanism; and (5) report on the background or context of a situation (Neuman, 2006). The population for this study consisted of 1 841 international students registered at an institution of higher learning in Tshwane. A convenient sample of 156 international students was drawn. They were selected because their e-mail addresses were available to the researcher. In the process of conducting this quantitative research, the researcher utilised a questionnaire to produce quantitative measurements that could signify various variables. The researcher chose the quantitative approach because it would be possible to generalise the results to the total

population. The data-collection tool used in this research project comprised the following sections: (1) an informed consent letter, (2) the cover letter, and (3) the questionnaire. The questionnaire included the instructions to the participant, Part A consisted of biographical questions, and Part B contained all the service quality-related questions.

Measuring Instrument

An existing standardised SERVPERF questionnaire was used. SERVPERF consists of the same performance statements as SERVQUAL, which measures the gap between service quality expectations and actual service quality experience, while SERVPERF measures perceptions of service quality and was therefore deemed more suitable for this study (Ann & Otobo, 2019). Cronin and Taylor (1994) also argue that SERVPERF is an improved means of measuring perceptions of the service quality concept. SERVPERF is used to study the level of quality of the service delivered and realised (perception). SERVPERF captures respondents' perceptions of their experience of quality and does not take expectations into consideration (Meleddu, Melis, Pulina & Aguirre, 2019). Cronin and Taylor (1994) found that customer expectations cannot be quantified because expectations belong to the indistinct and variable category. Some other authors are of the view that the difference between expectations and performance could be unclear and lead to a misunderstanding regarding the difference between quality and satisfaction. The SERVPERF scale is not only proficient in capturing customers' true perceived service quality, but also reduces the number of items to be measured (Adil, Ghaswyneth & Albkour, 2013). SERVPERF is both useful and satisfying because it delivers justified and successful outcomes that relate to service quality (Ladrum, Prybutok & Zhang, 2007).

Analysis & Findings

The results revealed that most of the international students who participated were male (54%) and

from Botswana (21%). Most participants (26.9%) had stayed in South Africa for at least three years at the time of participating in the study. Most respondents (17.3%) had visited the office of the public department at least three times. The results for the first dimension of SERVPERF, tangibility, revealed that the majority of the respondents perceived that the public department’s information brochures, correspondence, and documents are easy to understand (53.8%), easy

to read (59.6%), and neat (53.9%), while 50% of the respondents also agreed that the equipment is functional (see Figure 1). The respondents were less satisfied with how up to date the equipment and furniture at the department were. Figure 1 further reveals that the majority (5/9 aspects) of “agree” responses were below 50%, which is an indication that more respondents either disagreed or were unsure about the statements regarding the service quality dimension of tangibility at the public department.

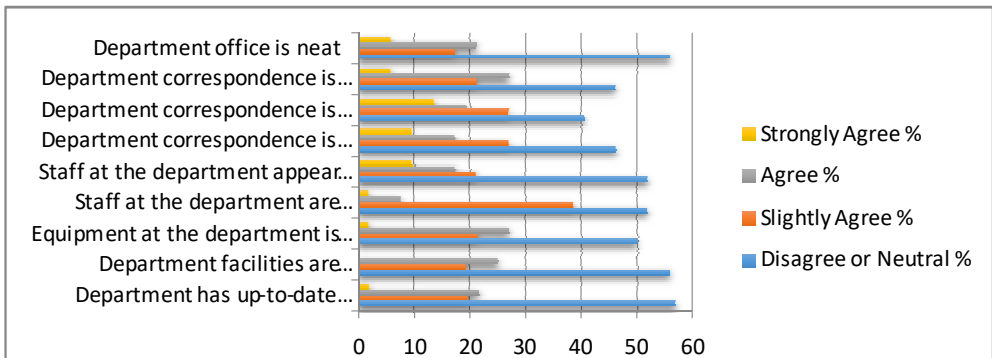


Figure 1: Perceptions on Tangibility

The results for the second dimension of SERVPERF, reliability, revealed that 48% of the respondents agreed that documents issued were free of mistakes, compared to 21% who disagreed, and 31% who were not sure (see Figure

2). Therefore, 52% did not agree that the documents’ quality was acceptable. The aspects that tested whether the department is dependable and has a sincere interest in solving problems both had an “agree” percentage of 44.2%.

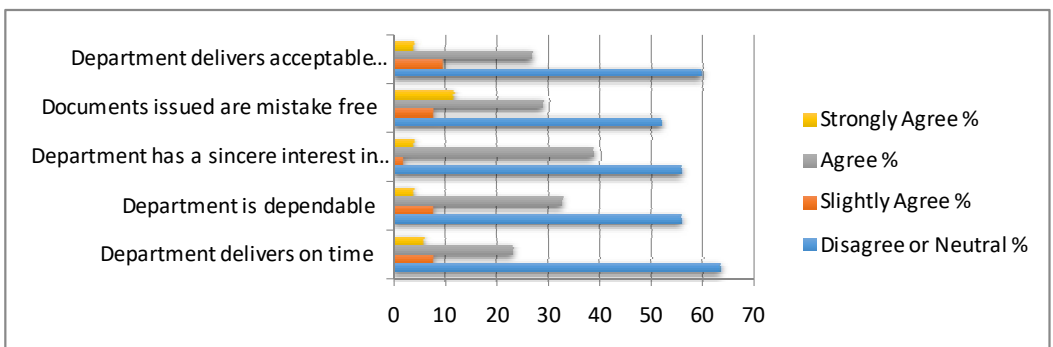


Figure 2: Perceptions on Reliability

The aspect on whether the department delivers an acceptable service received 40.3% of “agree” perceptions. The lowest “agree” percentage of

36.6% was for the timely delivery of service. When considering the perceptions of the respondents on all five reliability aspects, the

public department's reliability quality aspects do not contribute to customer satisfaction as they

all scored higher than 50% of perceptions that were "disagree" or "neutral" and therefore need to be improved.

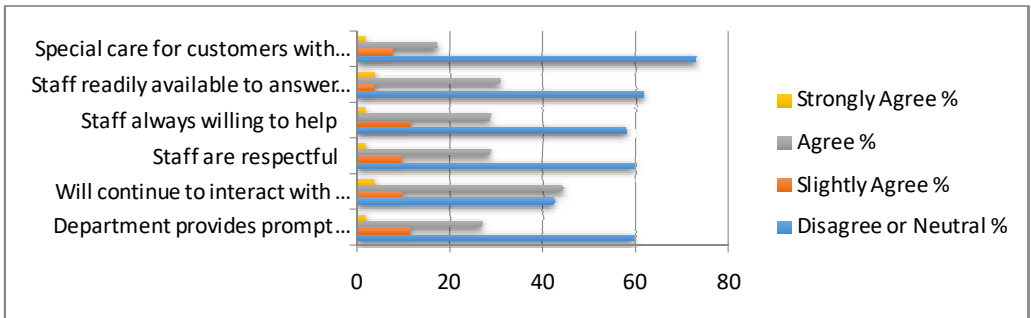


Figure 3: Perceptions on responsiveness

The results for the third section of SERVPERF, responsiveness, revealed that the majority (58%) of the respondents agreed that they would continue to interact with the public department (see Figure 3). This was the only responsive dimension where perceptions seemed to indicate satisfaction with service quality. The perceptions of prompt service, respectful service, willingness to help, availability of personnel, and special care for special needs customers show that the

majority of the participants were not satisfied with the public department's responsiveness to their needs.

The results for the fourth section of SERVPERF, assurance, revealed that there was only one dimension where the majority (54%) of the participants' perceptions were that they agreed that they could trust the employees of the public department (see Figure 4).

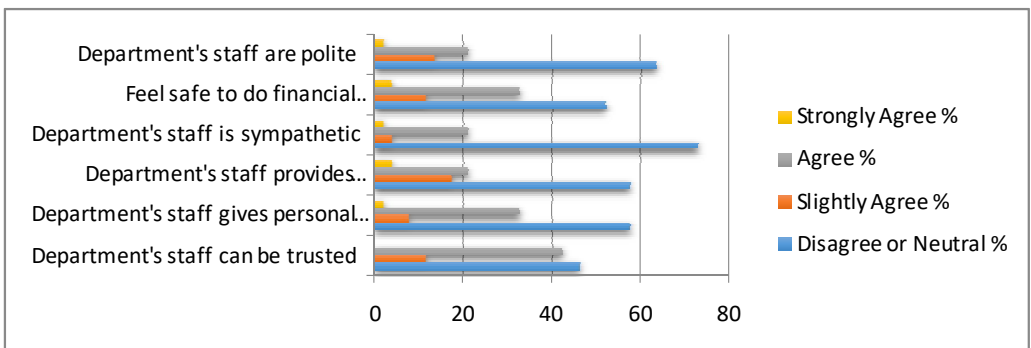


Figure Error! No text of specified style in document. : Perceptions regarding assurance

Responses where perceptions of "agree" were below 50% are an indication that the respondents either disagreed or were unsure about the statements regarding assurance at the public department. The lowest "agree" result on assurance was on the dimension of sympathy (27%). The results for the fifth section of

SERVPERF, empathy, revealed that in all five dimensions of empathy that were tested, the majority of the respondents agreed that they were satisfied with the service provided (see Figure 5). The highest "agree" perception was 59.6% for the dimension that the public department has convenient operating hours.

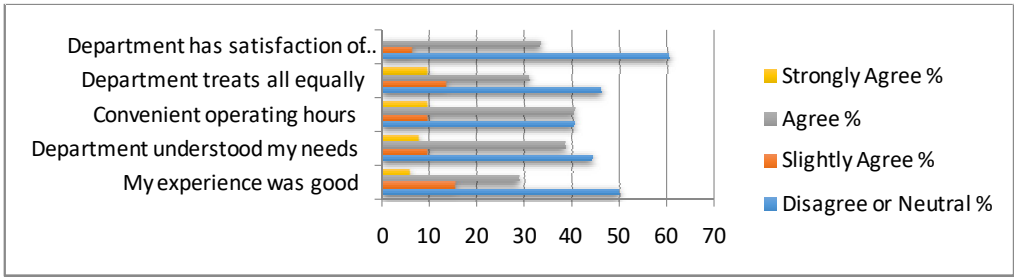


Figure 5: Perceptions on Empathy

The main finding of this study is that international students' perceptions showed that they were not happy with the quality of service at the public department.

Conclusion

The respondents' perceptions of service quality indicated that service quality at this public department does not contribute to customer satisfaction. From the reported results, it can be inferred that the majority of the department's staff are not really engaged and committed to their service duty. Training and development are part of the solution for poor service quality, but there should be a proper service-level agreement with employees. Managers should also motivate employees to walk the extra mile to help customers. Checking and evaluating systems to limit the misbehaviour and lack of professionalism that currently prevail in the department and rewarding employees that deliver excellent service are needed. Better leadership and motivation should be able to turn around the situation. It is strongly advised that the department should embark on Ubuntu implementation, which has the potential of raising awareness and reinforcing service quality aspects. The study were conducted with only one segment of the public office customers' namely international students of one university. The work in this study can be elaborated on by also measuring the service quality perceptions of a sample that will represent the entire population that makes use of the service.

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