

# Review on Service Climate, Service Quality and Service Performance with Reference to Strategic Human Resource Management Perspectives

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## **Abstract**

*Strategic human resource management and managerial practices directly link with the service design and delivery process. Recent studies and the based theories have discussed the interconnection of such human resource perspectives and service performance highlighting empirical and practice significance. However, studies found in the scope of strategic human resource management practices for service performance still suggest the need for further studies since service performance and strategic human resource management practices are transforming with different industrial dynamics. Having said, this paper also addresses the importance of reviewing strategic human resource management perspectives with the service performance by explaining related variables and concepts. Alongside, service performance, service climate, front line employee performance and service quality were reviewed to explain their interconnections. It has followed comprehensive literature review as the main research tool to produce a conceptual review. Alongside, journal articles, book chapters and case studies were mainly associated to explain the concepts, variables and key inputs of relevant theories as well to support for the conceptual review and discussions. This paper includes a discussion to navigate future research works by highlighting how service performance, particularly service quality, is influenced by the relevant variables found within the scope of strategic human resource management. In addition, the notion of internal marketing has also been reviewed and discussed to support the main insights presented in this paper. It has explained the relevant variables for the notions encouraging future researchers to steer empirical investigations. This study concludes the insights of new research avenues highlighting modern transformations that took place in the human resource management and market dynamics within the service sector. Additionally, the importance of revisiting the fundamental theories related to strategic human resource management, and the service management aspects were also posited as a conclusion remark.*

**Keywords:** *Strategic Human Resource Management, Service Performance, Service Climate, Service Quality.*

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Date of Submission: 04-02-2025

Date of acceptance: 16-02-2025

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## **I. Background**

Over the past three decades or so, several strategic human resource management (SHRM) scholars have demonstrated the importance of investing in human resource (HR) practices to enhance employee competencies to achieve an organization's operational and financial goals (Delery and Doty, 1996; Jiang, Hu, Liu, & Lepak, 2017). A central justification of this research stream is that organizational strategic objectives can be achieved by using a bundle of HR practices (HR systems) to develop and leverage employee competencies, rather than individual HR practices used in isolation (Chuang & Liao, 2010; Jiang, Lepak, Hu, & Baer, 2012). Numerous SHRM studies have demonstrated the impact of HR systems such as high-performance work systems (HPWS) on organizational performance (Aryee, Walumbwa, Seidu, & Otake, 2012; Chuang & Liao, 2010; Hong, Liao, Hu, & Jiang, 2013). Datta, Guthrie, and Wright (2005, p. 136) define HPWS as a "system of HR practices designed to enhance employees' skills, commitment, and productivity in such a way that employees become a source of sustainable competitive advantage".

While the initial research in this domain focused on the manufacturing sector, much recent research has been conducted in the service sector. This is because the service sector has emerged as the main contributor to gross domestic product (GDP) in many economies (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998). Vargo and Lusch (2004, p. 2) define services as "the application of specialized competences (knowledge and skills) through deeds, processes, and performances for the benefit of another entity or the entity itself". Services across a range of contexts, including hotel industry are characterized by attributes such as intangibility (only customers can evaluate during the consumption), heterogeneity (every single service encounter is unique), and concurrent production and consumption (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). These attributes align the interests of customers with organizations because customer service evaluations are mostly influenced by the quality of interactions between

customers and customer service employees (Liao & Chuang, 2004) leading to customer satisfaction and ultimately, organizational effectiveness (Hong et al., 2013; Liao & Chuang, 2007; Martinaityte, Sacramento, & Aryee, 2016; Subramony & Pugh, 2015). Consequently, front-line employees in service organizations play a vital role in providing unique services to maximize customer satisfaction. Liao and Chuang (2004) note that these front-line employees figuratively represent the organization to customers and their behavior and attitudes can influence customer outcomes. Front-line employee performance has been conceptualized in numerous ways such as service performance (Chuang & Liao, 2010), emotional performance (Gabriel, Cheshin, Moran, & van Kleef, 2016), creative performance (Martinaityte et al., 2016), and service innovation (Karlsson & Skålén, 2015). While there are various conceptualizations of front-line employee performance, this paper conceptualizes employee performance in terms of service performance and emotional performance. This is because Subramony and Pugh (2015) claimed that both task performance and emotional facets of the service delivery are evaluated by customers in forming their overall perception of service quality. Emotional performance describes employee expressions of required emotions during a service encounter (Chu & Murrmann, 2006; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005; Gabriel, Acosta, & Grandey, 2013; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015) while service performance refers to the behaviors of service employees and the completion of core tasks prescribed in their formal job descriptions using standard service procedures (Raub & Liao, 2012).

## **1.2 Purpose of the Study**

The main research niche of how human resource management activities and practices influence on the service management and service performance related outcomes has been researched and interpreted in many studies mentioning the future research avenues within. Service management can be viewed in many multi-disciplinary contexts including front-line staff management, emotional labor management, service process management, service marketing, service design and service quality delivery models. However, the main notion of how employee-related matters and the service management outcomes is still a valid notion to discuss, research a review for future research insights. Thus, this paper also aims to review the concepts related to integrating content and process perspectives within the service context addressing empirical gaps referred to in the relevant scope. It has followed literature review as the main research tool based on the deductive approach to reviewing the concepts and their interconnected behavior. Alongside, journal articles were mainly referred to as the main source, whilst a discussion is generated aiming to future research works and application perspectives.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Service Performance**

Service performance has been defined in numerous ways across different contexts. Liao and Chuang (2004) define service performance as employees' behaviors of helping and serving customers. Raub and Liao (2012) subsequently expanded this definition to include "service behaviors that follow formalized job descriptions and service scripts and consist of completing core service tasks using standard service procedures" (p. 652). This definition reflects the expertise of service employees in performing the principal tasks of their job through the conscientious use of service standards. Similarly, Hong et al. (2013) define service performance as "collective-role-expected service behaviors that contribute to organizational effectiveness" (p. 241). As noted by Subramony et al. (2017) service role is experiencing significant changes due to technological innovations, for example, smartphones in banking and self-checkouts in retail stores.

Meanwhile, Chen, Zhu, and Zhou (2015) also state that service performance is not only service quality enhancing behaviors but also behaviors that reflect adaptive, nonstandard and creative service. In contrast to these recent arguments, Subramony et al. (2017) states that standardized scripts should be provided with new employees so as to make sure consistent service and adoptive and innovative performance can be enhanced through training and empowerment. When measuring service performance most of the researchers have covered the content of job descriptions of service employees and use of service standards (Chuang & Liao, 2010; Gabriel et al., 2013).

In addition, HR systems should be determined by the strategic objectives of the organization, SHRM researchers increasingly focus on designing bundle of HR practices around specific strategic focuses such as services, innovation, and safety (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Consequently, the importance of service excellence as a competitive strategy requires adjusting bundle of HR practices with the intention of developing leveraging the capabilities of front-line employees to enhance service quality (Martinaityte et al., 2016). Therefore, it is required to design a service-oriented HPWS which means a system of interrelated HR practices designed to enhance employee competencies, motivation, and opportunity for service and emotional performance. Liao, Toya, Lepak, and Hong (2009) define service-oriented HPWS as bundle of HR practices which are specifically targeted for service quality.

## **2.2 Role of Organization and Service Climate**

As per some studies, organizational climate is defined as the shared perceptions of employees regarding the standards of expected behaviors which are rewarded and supported by the organization in a particular work setting (Schneider et al., 1998). Schneider (1990) claims that multiple climates often coexist within a single organization, depending on its strategic focus (e.g. safety climates, climates for productivity, and service climates). Given that service features (intangible, heterogeneous, and simultaneous production and consumption) are different from manufactured goods, organizations find it difficult to accurately evaluate, monitor or control the service delivery process (Schneider et al., 2005). Therefore, a strong service climate needs to be established to guide service employee attitudes and behaviors (Hong et al., 2013) and has been shown to serve as a crucial linkage in translating management philosophy into organizational performance (Schneider et al., 2005; Schneider et al., 1998).

In addition, service climate refers to employees' understanding and belief about the weight an organization puts on service quality throughout the process of service production, delivery and consumption (Hong et al., 2013). Employees derive these perceptions grounded in their experiences of the organization's events, practices, and procedures and their understanding about what sort of behaviors are rewarded, supported and expected.

Meanwhile, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) state that HR practices operate to communicate the organization's strategic focus to employees and visibly establish what is being expected, supported, and rewarded. However, service climate is distinguished from a general climate since it is strategically anchored for service quality (Schneider et al., 1998). Thus, specific types of HR practices which are oriented to service quality, are required to establish a favorable service climate within a service organization (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Hong et al., 2013). For example, in a service-oriented HPWS, recruitment and selection function can be designed to hire candidates with service-related skills (in this study candidates who have skills to perform front-line jobs in star-rated hotels), training and development function can target enhancing service-oriented behaviors and performance evaluation, and rewards can be designed to reward employee service-oriented behaviors. Chuang and Liao (2010) demonstrated that there is a positive effect of a comprehensive HPWS on service quality, including selecting and training of employees for service competence, rewarding employees to motivate quality service delivery, and empowering and involving employees in decision making. In their study, Hong et al. (2013) found that service-oriented HPWS has a stronger relationship with service climate than general HPWS. In line with these findings Subramony and Pugh (2015) also state that design of a service-oriented HPWS is required to create a positive service climate. Consistent with the theory of SIP Bowen and Ostroff (2004) suggested that employees tend to share a common perception when there is a strong HR system. All these studies have focused on the influence of unit level service-oriented HPWS on unit level service climate. However, mostly the focus of those studies was on unit level relationships, for example the unit level influence of HPWS on unit level service climate. Nonetheless, SHRM is inherently multilevel (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) as per the assumptions of multilevel theory (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) and thus SHRM researchers have recently paid their attention to examine HRM-performance relationship across multiple levels of the organization (Jiang, Takeuchi, & Lepak, 2013).

## **2.3 Interconnection of Front-Line Employees and Service Management Excellence**

It is noted that customer service evaluations are mostly influenced by the quality of interactions between customers and customer service employees (Liao & Chuang, 2004) leading to customer satisfaction and ultimately, organizational effectiveness (Hong et al., 2013; Liao & Chuang, 2007; Martinaityte, Sacramento, & Aryee, 2016; Subramony & Pugh, 2015). Consequently, front-line employees in service organizations play a vital role in providing unique services to maximize customer satisfaction. Liao and Chuang (2004) note that these front-line employees figuratively represent the organization to customers and their behavior and attitudes can influence customer outcomes.

Supportively, front-line employee performance has been conceptualized in numerous ways such as service performance (Chuang & Liao, 2010), emotional performance (Gabriel, Cheshin, Moran, & van Kleef, 2016), creative performance (Martinaityte et al., 2016), and service innovation (Karlsson & Skålén, 2015). While there are various conceptualizations of front-line employee performance, this paper conceptualizes employee performance in terms of service performance and emotional performance. This is because Subramony and Pugh (2015) claimed that both task performance and emotional facets of the service delivery are evaluated by customers in forming their overall perception of service quality. Emotional performance describes employee expressions of required emotions during a service encounter (Chu & Murrmann, 2006; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005; Gabriel, Acosta, & Grandey, 2013; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015) while service performance refers to the behaviors of service employees and the completion of core tasks prescribed in their formal job descriptions using standard service procedures (Raub & Liao, 2012). Some scholars argue that emotional performance is part of employee in-role activities or formally required activities (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Chen et al., 2012; Diefendorff et al., 2005; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). According to the prevailing literature and empirical evidence, both emotional

performance (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Li, Canziani, & Barbieri, 2018; Pugh, 2001) and service performance (Liao & Chuang, 2004; Raub & Liao, 2012; Subramony & Pugh, 2015) influence organizational performance as reflected in terms of operational outcomes and financial performance. However, what is not yet clear is how service and emotional performance differentially affect organizational performance. Thus, one of the main objectives of this study is to identify the differential effects of emotional and service performance of front-line employees on organizational performance.

The differential adoption of HPWS despite its documented impact on organization performance, makes it imperative for research to understand the factors that influence its adoption. As service features are different from the attributes of manufactured products, service organizations seek to achieve sustainable competitive advantage through their human resources, specially, through front-line employees. Therefore, these organizations are not only required to manage front-line employees but also need to strategically align these employees' abilities and behaviors with the strategic goals of the organization (Wright & Ulrich, 2017). According to contingency theory, the effectiveness of HPWS is contingent upon external fit which means the alignment of HR strategy with business strategy of the organization (Delery & Doty, 1996). Supportively, it has proved the importance of designing service delivery systems considering how their impact could result in higher level of service performances. (Dissanayake & Norsanina, 2017). It has been noted that multiple climates can co-exist in organizations thereby shaping normative expectations regarding strategically appropriate attitude and behaviors (Schneider, 1990). Given the varied needs and expectations of customers, organizations find it difficult to perfectly manage the service quality process (Schneider, Ehrhart, Mayer, Saltz, & Niles-Jolly, 2005). Therefore, as Hong et al. (2013) noted, a strong service climate needs to be established to guide service employee's work behavior.

In line with social information processing (SIP) theory, Lam, Huang, and Janssen (2010) state that service climate signals to service employees what service-focused behaviors are expected and rewarded. In tandem with service climate, the expectation that service employees display positive emotions during a service encounter with the intention of enhancing customer outcomes (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015) has become a significant component of their service role. Diefendorff and Richard (2003) state that display rules provide employees with standards for emotional expressiveness and has been shown to relate to sales performances (Christoforou & Ashforth, 2015) as well as employee emotional display (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003). Therefore, in this study employees' shared perceptions of the standards appropriate to express emotions during a service encounter is considered as climate for display rules. Despite the importance of service and emotional performance, the extant research has not examined whether service-oriented HPWS influences these climates and their impact on service and emotional performance.

### **III. Discussion on Employee Behavioral Aspects and Service Quality Performance**

While the top-down approach has received more attention, researchers are increasingly adopting a bottom-up approach to examine cross-level influences of individual attitudes and behaviors on unit-level outcomes (Aryee et al., 2012; Ehrhart, Witt, Schneider, & Perry, 2011; Liao & Chuang, 2004). One of the primary ways this is done is by examining how aggregate individual level outcomes relate to unit-level outcomes (Jiang et al., 2013). Service-quality is a concept that exists at the organizational-level but is based on the psychological meanings of individuals attached to a situation (Renkema, Meijerink, & Bondarouk, 2017). As conceptualized in this study, aggregated service quality stems from individual-level customer perception of service quality which is influenced by front-line employee service and emotional performance. As per the explanation of Jiang et al. (2014), collective emotional performance and service performance do not directly contribute to organizational operational and financial performance. It is high-quality service that translates this performance into enhanced customer satisfaction and then generates profits for organizations. In this study, it proposes individual-level service quality to emerge at organizational level to influence customer satisfaction and financial performance. The brand citizenship behavior is also another key notion that should be managed and researched as a tool for effective service delivery (Jayampathi & Dissanayake, 2018). Hong et al. (2013) also claims that service quality significantly influences both customer satisfaction and financial performance of the organization. Oliver (2015) defines customer satisfaction as "the consumer's fulfillment response. It is a judgment that a product/service feature, or the product or service itself, provided (or is providing) a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or over-fulfillment" (p. 8). Customer satisfaction is determined by their own perception of the service quality. At the individual level, employee service performance to a particular customer may directly affect that customer's perception of the service quality. But overall customer satisfaction is not influenced by a single customer perception of service quality. Customer satisfaction is influenced by the overall customer perception of service quality. Therefore, it is required to aggregate the individual-level service quality to organizational level service quality to affect customer satisfaction. In terms of empirical evidence, several studies demonstrate that service quality influences customer satisfaction (Hong et al., 2013; Schneider et al., 2005).

Additionally, Schneider et al. (2005, p. 1018) argue that "leaders who emphasize the importance of



service quality will be especially likely to do the things necessary to create a climate for service”. Consequently, this study proposed that service-leadership influence department-level service climate and climate for display rules. Since department-level climates relate to employee performance and service leadership relates department-level, it can generate a link to investigate how those finally connect to service quality. Hong et al. (2013) also demonstrated a strong relationship between service climate and service performance. This indicates the importance of initiating and executing human resource practices to improve the service climate with needful management styles to improve the service performance. Thus, service quality can be considered as one of the service performance perspectives in terms of how customers perceive the service delivery strategy led by front-line staff and the supportive processes.

Subramony and Pugh (2015) state that both task performance and employee emotional facets of the service delivery are evaluated by customers in forming their overall perception of service quality. According to service marketing, internal marketing is a crucial factor to motivate service delivering staff to ensure they commit perfectly for interactive marketing with the external customers. Emotional expressiveness or Emotional performance is an integral part of any front-line service role. Gabriel et al. (2013) defined emotional performance as “nonverbal, expressive behaviors consistent with organizational display rules”. This indicates the service performance is highly connected with the excellence of the employees engaged within the service design and delivery systems. As per service quality perspective, “People” contribute an exceptional value addition to service quality and customer satisfaction behavior. Thus, investigating the engagement of service staff is critically important for both research and managerial implications.

The overall employee management and related leadership or organizational strategies have been examined within the concept of internal marketing. Internal marketing is simply identified as how senior management treats to its front-line employees to motivate them to perform the service that eventually results highly perceived service quality for clients (Ongâ, Kowa, Wakibi, & Ssenyange,2019). The psychological wellbeing of employees should be strategically managed by the service sector companies to ensure better service delivery and performance (Javed, Sambasivan & Dissanayake,2015). It has discussed and highlighted the researching priorities to investigate how internal marketing activities could result service quality and service performances in recently held studies (Piljan, Simonović, dan Ćurčić,2020). In addition, the role of organizational culture, which is directly linked with the organizational climate and management culture could influence the overall delivery of services. This has been examined with the inclusion of teamwork as an internal marketing tool (Faheem & dan Iqbal,2023). Likewise, service quality and service performance could be investigated with human resource management practices and related concepts as it still carries a valid notion for future studies. However, the digitalized service sector needs more attention to technology and employees when it comes to researching the modern service quality and service performance related perspectives.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

This paper mainly attempted to present a review on human resource concepts that are mainly linked with front-line employees to discuss how those are interconnected for service performances. Additionally, concepts like service climate, service performance, service quality within the scope of strategic human resource practices were reviewed to explain their inter connections. The major notion derived from this article is that the internal service design process is highly connected with the strategic human resource management practices which are found in the empirical context with different variables including service climate and emotional labor. Thus, future research works are encouraging to systematically investigate the significance of variables found in strategic human resource contexts that are linked with service management and service design system to investigate how those influence to external customers. The service quality is one such phenomenon which is perceived to external customers, but valid research works cold further investigate how perceived service quality is influences through internal marketing practices that include almost all the employee management methods and work environmental aspects. Additionally, this paper brings specific attention for future studies to consider digitalized service atmosphere with innovative research priorities since digitally transformed services need people and technology to design and deliver service performance. Thus, integrated nature of technology and people related variables should be further investigated to measure the perceived service process and effectiveness of such managerial implications across the service sectors. In addition, service performance of gig economies need special attention since the human resource practices of gig workforce management are different to traditional models applied by conventional HR structures. The future research works are encouraged to investigate how emotional labor, and organizational climates should be revisited to deliver excellent service management via gig workforces. Meanwhile, new generation or generational gaps and their peculiar emotional and behavioral dynamics should also be investigated as service delivery workforce to evaluate the perceived service performance. The main theories could be revisited to validate how far such theories could explain the modern service management environment with the transformation took place within the new HR dynamics.

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