Building the bottom line by developing the frontline: Career development for service employees

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Abstract   Service firms must remember that the way they treat their employees is exactly how those employees will, in turn, treat customers. As such, taking good care of frontline personnel should be a top management concern. One way that service employees can be shown they are valued members of the organization entails the implementation of thoughtful and organized career development programs, initiatives which help increase employees' job satisfaction and feelings of empowerment in their customer-facing roles. Before they can become enthusiastic about meeting the needs of their customers, employees have to feel that their own needs are being met within the organization. In this regard, firm investment in frontline employee career development programs will be money well spent: they are capable of reducing employee turnover and increasing customer satisfaction, loyalty, and profitability. This article provides a conceptual model of career development which should prove useful to service managers in evaluating their own career development efforts. Also presented herein is a framework for tying together many disparate areas of career development that have heretofore been handled separately in the services literature.
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1. Bringing the frontline to the forefront

If the management of a services firm asked customers to describe who comes to mind when they think about the company, chances are great that the firm's frontline employees would be mentioned first and foremost because they are typically at the heart of customer transactions. These workers should also be top of mind for their employers, but this has not always been the case. Too often, employees are overlooked from a developmental perspective and regarded as expenses to be controlled, rather than viewed as assets to be developed. We propose that service firms should adopt the latter position as consumer-facing employees not only have a critical impact on their customers' impressions of the brand and the service delivered, but also play a vital role in

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the service-profit chain (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser, & Schlesinger, 1994) which demonstrates the relationship between employee satisfaction and customer loyalty, resulting in financial gains for the firm.

Frontline employees are the customer-facing retail store clerks, inside sales associates, delivery personnel, call center personnel, and other customer service employees whose personal interactions are at the vanguard of most service firm activities. These workers represent the face and the voice of the organization; their behavior can influence customers' satisfaction, as well as perceptions of service quality. There is also evidence that frontline employees' attitudes and personal job satisfaction can influence their customers' service perceptions. In a classic study by Schneider and Bowen (1985), bank employees who believed their organization supported their job performance and facilitated their career development were more likely to receive favorable service evaluations from customers than those employees who did not feel as positively about their firm's human resources (HR) practices. Moreover, a related study found that managers who increased their customer-facing employees' feelings of professional empowerment and job satisfaction increased their customers' perceptions of service quality (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996).

Taking care of frontline employees is an effective way of looking after customers and the bottom line, as employee-centered HR practices have been linked to improved organizational performance in service firms (Buford, 2006). One way that corporations can take better care of their employees—and, in turn, their customers and profits—is to implement career development programs, which are planned processes for linking service employees' career needs within their organization's employment needs. While research suggests that customer-facing service employees can have a strong impact on their customers' perceptions, little is known about specific approaches to develop and inspire these frontline workers. Additionally, there is still much to learn about the employment challenges faced by managers of service organizations, and it is our goal to close the gap between what may be found in the extant literature and what is being done in practice. In this article, we shed light on the actionable ways that service managers can support and motivate their frontline employees through career development programs.

2. Service employee career development: An investment, not a cost

In many service sector companies, customers primarily interact with frontline employees who work in the lowest organizational levels and may have had very little spent on their development (Sussman, 2006). Because employees need to feel that their own needs have been met within the organization before they can become enthusiastic about meeting the needs of their customers (Schneider & Bowen, 1993), we propose that service firm investment in frontline employee career development will be money well spent, as it will reduce employee turnover and can contribute to increased customer satisfaction.

Employees who are provided with significant career development programs are likely to show increased job satisfaction and company loyalty, which translates to reduced employee turnover for firms. This is especially important for financial services organizations like banks and investment entities, which depend on the trust built through regular encounters between their frontline employees and customers. According to research in this industry, "High employee turnover subconsciously causes customers to question how safe their money is when new people are constantly being trained. . . .every new face behind the teller line is a new face for customers to get to know and trust" (Brox, 2007, p. 31). Moreover, increased service employee retention should translate to increased customer satisfaction and firm productivity, as lower employee turnover rates have been linked with these outcomes in prior services research.

In addition to reducing employee turnover and thus increasing customer satisfaction, career development programs can also provide service managers with empowerment opportunities for their employees—including coaching and training—that will better enable them to handle the stress and responsibilities that come with serving customers, while also improving their job performance. Service employee empowerment, defined as "the process of gaining some control over events, outcomes and resources of importance to an individual or group" (Fawcett et al., 1994, p. 471), shifts decision-making authority down through the organizational hierarchy, allowing lower level employees the opportunity to gain additional responsibilities in order to perform their jobs more effectively. Empowerment is significant in services because it increases employees' latitude in performing their daily tasks including solving customer problems and handling service failures (Bowen & Lawler, 1995), and it is related to increased frontline service employee performance (Ellinger, Almadag, & Ellinger, 2007). Empowerment also reduces employee burnout, which stems from employees' feelings of stress due to constant contact with customers.

One firm that does an outstanding job of developing employees is shipping services firm FedEx, which empowers its customer service workers to take matters into their own hands and "make every FedEx experience outstanding" beyond just offering unhappy customers a refund (Pellet, 2008, p. 44). For example, FedEx trains and encourages employees to take the initiative after service failures to send the disgruntled customer flowers or a small gift to make amends, in order to bolster customer loyalty. This type of employee empowerment has not only improved employees' feelings of empowerment, but also directly affected FedEx's bottom line. According to Michael Glenn, executive vice president of FedEx in Memphis, "Every one percent increase in customer loyalty represents approximately $100 million in revenue" (Pellet, 2008, p. 44).

In sum, career development programs that include training and coaching focused on decision making and customer service can provide service managers with an effective way to empower their frontline employees, which leads to many positive outcomes including reduced employee burnout, increased employee effectiveness in their customer-facing roles, and improved company revenues. The most successful service firms and their management ensure that frontline employees have the support they need to perform their jobs well. Career development programs centered around building employee satisfaction and empowerment could provide an ideal internal climate for employee well-being, service performance, and increased revenues.

## 3. The essentials of career development for service employees

It is important to note that career development cannot be handled in a single day or with a one-shot workshop; rather, it represents a formalized effort to recognize service employees as vital organizational resources and to develop them into enriched and more capable workers. We propose a conceptual model to provide service industry managers with the key elements of service employee career development programs. As illustrated in Figure 1, the essential components of career development for service employees include identifying strengths and weaknesses, charting the appropriate course, and taking action to achieve results. This produces positive outcomes for not only service employees and their customers, but also the entire service organization.

Service firms that do not have career development programs for their frontline service personnel may utilize the model as a stimulus for areas in which they could institute new initiatives. Alternatively, if service managers already have career development programs in place, they may utilize the model and its components as a checklist to evaluate areas in which they may modify or refine their programs. Finally, it is our hope that this model can be used as a springboard to open discussions on the topic.

3.1. Step 1: Identify strengths and weaknesses

The first component of the service employee career development model is identification of individual

Figure 1.   The components of career development for frontline service employees
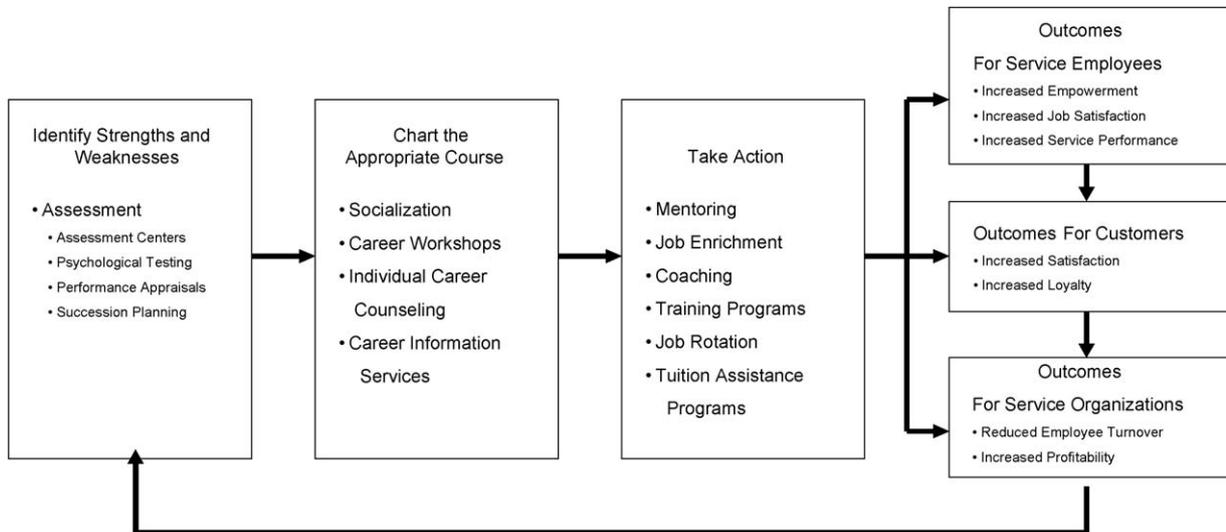
Adapted from Jackson, Hollmann, and Gallan (2006)

employee strengths and weaknesses. This assessment enables workers to choose a career direction that is appropriate for their personality, abilities, and ambition level. These personal qualities and work skills can include customer service and decision making competencies, as well as interpersonal skills in working with team members, supervisors, and other personnel. This allows service managers to work with their employees to highlight personal strengths, and identify weaknesses that need to be overcome to reach their career goals.

3.1.1. Assessment

There are two basic forms of assessment. The first is predicated on service managers assisting their employees to self-determine personal strengths and weaknesses. This requires a detailed analysis of the employee's background, interests, values, and ambitions. To aid staff in assessing their personal qualities, service managers can provide workbooks, workshops for determining fortes and limitations, and skills assessment exercises. This form of assessment is particularly valuable to service companies such as accounting and advisory services firm Ernst & Young (2008), which provides each new employee with a customized learning plan. Beginning with a personal assessment of individual strengths and weaknesses, these customized learning plans lay the foundation for future career growth within the firm.

The second form of assessment entails providing employees with an evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses from the organization's perspective. This is usually done by the service manager and involves a systematic way of gathering and processing information concerning the promotability and developmental needs of the frontline workforce. Service organizations will have greater success in the promotion of leadership from these ranks if managers take time to assess their employees' desires and readiness to assume management roles. Several tools that can be used in this process include assessment centers, psychological testing, performance appraisals, and succession planning.

Assessment centers: Developmental assessment centers allow service managers to engage their employees in exercises such as customer service scenario role playing, discussion groups, and business games. In role playing scenarios, service managers present their employees with a service failure or other probable customer situation and ask them to react as they would in a real-life business setting. The managers then assess their employees' actions and provide them with feedback to improve performance in working with customers and teammates in such situations. These sessions provide insight to management on employees' talents and weak

points, formulating the basis for every individual's development strategy and training program, and they also enable service managers to identify employees who are ready for advancement in the organization.

Psychological testing: Another assessment tool is psychological testing, which helps service managers work with frontline employees to determine their personality types and professional interests. Two service-providing firms that utilize psychological testing are entertainment giant Disney, which rigorously screens each customer-facing employee for characteristics of an upbeat personality, and FedEx, which screens for qualities associated with personal courage of conviction. Specifically, these companies use personality assessment information to hire and retain the right people who will take optimal care of their customers (Anonymous, 1997).

Performance appraisals: The goal of performance appraisal is for managers to assess service employees' performance in their current jobs, as well as to give these workers insights into their strong and weak qualities and the career paths that are available to them within the firm. Professional development criteria for customer-facing employees should emphasize the five dimensions of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988), including employees' empathy toward customers, their reliability and responsiveness in their service roles, the assurance they provide during customer interactions, and tangibles such as the way they present themselves on the job, including their appearance and manner toward others.

Succession planning: Succession planning is typically focused on preparing employees for executive positions, but there is a need to broaden this process to a wider group of positions. This is especially true in service organizations, where it is critical that all involved understand their customers. Formal succession planning allows firm leadership to identify key service personnel who have the skills and drive to fill positions within the organization. When used in conjunction with other components of career development programs, service managers train and develop these individuals to be tomorrow's leaders. Spending time on the frontline is perhaps the best way to fully get to know an organization's customers, something which is crucial for service companies. Given this reality, many service firms have formal and ongoing processes for the succession planning of service personnel. This is true of delivery, transportation, and logistics company UPS, which begins its practice with a talent identification program; thereafter, employees are carefully screened, and identified individuals receive over the course of their career the personal development

and guidance they need to reach the top of the organization (Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, & Cardy, 2007). It is important to note that not every frontline service employee has the skills or desire to move into a leadership role. Those who do not get promoted from the frontlines still benefit from the enrichment of their firm's development programs, however, and are thus better equipped to take care of their customers.

3.2. Step 2: Chart the appropriate course

The next component of career development for service employees is for managers to chart their staff members' appropriate courses, which includes determining which type of long-term career these employees desire and identifying the steps they must take to achieve these career goals. Some service employees may aspire to leave the frontline to work their way up through the organization, while others are content to improve their performance in the position they currently occupy. This phase helps managers better understand their workforce and their career aspirations, and provides service employees with socialization, career workshops, career counseling, and career information services.

3.2.1. Socialization
Organizational socialization is the process by which individuals become part of an organization's pattern of activities (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007). It is an ongoing practice that helps service managers provide their employees with information to successfully acclimate to their new organization, and facilitates work adjustment. Moreover, it also builds employee well-being and sets the foundation for a strong service culture. The goals of socialization for service employees include cultivating pride in being part of the company, creating an awareness of the scope of the firm's business, and decreasing new employees' concerns associated with their new roles. These goals can be accomplished by moving beyond the typical standard new employee information dissemination sessions that are currently offered at many companies, whereby recent hires are handed a thick binder and asked to study it during the first week of their employment. Instead, socialization and new employee assimilation should involve a structured program that is delivered by service managers, and which includes strategies for employees to learn about the firm's goals, customers, leaders, and organizational structure.

3.2.2. Career workshops
Career workshops allow service managers to aid their service employees in taking ownership of managing

their own careers. These workshops facilitate participants' education regarding making career decisions, setting career goals, and seeking information to plan their career paths. If career workshops are specifically designed to meet the needs of service personnel, they should include not only information that will help service managers work with their employees to create action plans for transitioning from customer-facing to other roles within the company, but also tips for résumé writing and interviewing at different levels in the organization. One firm that offers such workshops is Southwest Airlines, which conducts classes on personal organization, interview skills, leadership, and public speaking, to help staff develop and grow (Southwest Airlines, 2008a). This ongoing investment in employees' enrichment is vital to the company and its success. As articulated by Southwest Airlines CEO Gary Kelly, "Our people are our single greatest strength and our most enduring long term competitive advantage" (Southwest Airlines, 2008b).

3.2.3. Career counseling
Career counseling provides service employees, via one-on-one conversations with their managers or supervisors, the opportunity to discuss career aspirations and concerns. In their roles as career counselors, service managers can help frontline employees think deeply about their job preferences, personal values, and life concerns, as well as aid their direct reports in uncovering new opportunities within the organization. Open, structured, and focused career development discussions between employees and their managers are often considered the heart of career development for a firm. While some organizations use HR personnel or professional analysts to conduct this personal counseling, it is advantageous for service managers to play this role because they are most aware of their employees' strengths and weaknesses, and should be the most suitable to help their staff meet career goals. Additionally, career counseling sessions can foster an environment of trust and commitment between service employees and their managers, which aids in building a culture that supports employee satisfaction and well-being.

3.2.4. Career information services
Just as the name suggests, career information services provide service managers with career development information for their employees. To aid employees in their career advancement, this specifically should include information regarding how service employees' customer interaction skills are valued in other parts of the organization. This is important across many services firms, including

those in the community banking industry; these entities place importance on educating bank tellers as to the many positions that are available within the firm, as a first step in building the bank as a long-term career option (Brox, 2007). Career resources and information must be easily accessible by all managers and employees if they are to be used. To this end, firms often offer career development intranet sites such that the workforce can access these tools quickly and conveniently. Career information services might include job posting systems, skills inventories, career paths, and career resource centers.

Job posting systems: Job posting systems are designed and enabled by the firm, and should be promoted by service managers to encourage frontline employees to remain fully cognizant of position openings within the organization. Because job posting boards or websites effectively communicate that new employment opportunities are available for internal applicants, they serve to reinforce the idea that the organization promotes from within. This motivates employees to improve their performance, and tends to reduce employee turnover (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2007).

Skills inventories: Career information services also include skills inventories, which are mechanized listings of employees' interests, talents, and experience. When service managers need candidates to fill particular positions they can use these skills inventories to identify appropriate employees that meet their hiring needs, rather than just rely on their own memories for such information.

Career paths: Career paths represent the steps in a potential career and a realistic timetable for accomplishing these steps. Further, they notate the qualifications necessary at each level and the minimum length of time that an employee must spend to gain the necessary experience to advance up the path. Career paths provide direction and possible routes for service employees' careers, and facilitate service management working with staff members to evaluate whether their goals and values are in line with their desired career directions. This is important because employees who have clearly delineated career paths are much less likely to leave their jobs. Research on call center operations found that 26% of call center agents left their jobs because their employers did not have a transparent, defined career path for advancement. In light of these results, financial services firms like Citibank have established in their call centers tiered positions that lead to opportunities for advancement into management positions in customer service and other areas. For Citibank, this has led to a significant reduction in employee turnover (CRM Today, 2005).

Career resource centers: Career resource centers are multimedia founts of career information, including websites and company career offices. Utilizing this tool, service managers can assist employees in searching for jobs, browsing through career development workbooks and videos, and other career development activities. One example of a services firm that offers an online career resource center is insurance and financial services organization AIG. The company's *Career Navigator* internal website provides tools and links to help employees assess their skills and interests, explore career options within AIG, and plan for their personal development (AIG, 2008).

3.3. Step 3: Take action to increase skills

The third component of career development for service employees consists of the actions managers take to increase their employees' skills and overcome their weaknesses, to prepare them for future opportunities—either on or off the frontline. This phase includes mentoring, job enrichment, coaching, training programs, job rotation, and tuition assistance programs, all of which are meant to foster growth and self-improvement for service employees.

3.3.1. Mentoring

Mentoring occurs in service organizations when a more experienced person, such as the employee's manager, takes responsibility for the development and guidance of a less experienced employee. These professional relationships usually involve advising, role modeling, networking, and the provision of social support (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2007), which have proven mutually beneficial for both parties. Mentors and their protégés receive many rewards from these relationships: the manager's own promotions are often facilitated by adequate training of his or her replacements, while mentored protégés earn more money, report higher career satisfaction, and attain higher career positions than their non-mentored peers (Kelly, 2001). At investment services firm Edward Jones, mentoring is combined with the company's new investment representative training program. Under the latter, the firm partners each new hire with a more established investment professional to learn the *Edward Jones Way,* which encompasses lessons on company culture, history, and its special brand of customer service. Under this mentoring framework, each protégé works alongside his or her mentor for a period of 3 weeks, allowing much time for role modeling, support, and advisement. This mentoring program, coupled with Edward Jones' intensive employee training

initiatives, allows the firm and its employees to thrive and grow amidst a competitive marketplace (McLaughlin, 2001).

3.3.2. Job enrichment

The next element is job enrichment, whereby service managers give their employees increases in job responsibilities and varieties of tasks, in order to provide challenges and motivation. Frontline service personnel often understand the firm's customers better than anyone else in the organization. This being the case, finding ways to tap into this information and challenge these workers at the same time is beneficial for service management. For example, service firms could include frontline workers in their market research efforts, allowing these customer-facing employees to act as informants to discuss customer issues, new product development, and sales challenges; in this way, the firm might incorporate their unique perspective into company decisions. Additionally, job enrichment for service employees can entail the altering of work tasks to include higher levels of responsibility and latitude in satisfying customers, which should lead to increased feelings of empowerment for these employees.

3.3.3. Coaching

Coaching is focused on managers working to improve a service employee's performance in their current role. It should be considered as a day-to-day, hands-on process of service managers providing employees with personal guidance, meaningful feedback, and support to improve their overall knowledge and upgrade their career potential (Columbo & Werther, 2003). Encouraging supervisors and frontline managers to coach—rather than direct—service employees by setting expectations, giving constructive feedback, and guiding—rather than providing—solutions has a strong positive influence on frontline employees' commitment to rendering service quality, as well as improving employee attitudes and job behavior (Elmadag, Ellinger, & Franke, 2008). Further, highly personalized coaching shows service employees that they are respected and valued members of the organization, and it has been positively associated with frontline employee job satisfaction and performance in service firms (Ellinger, Ellinger, & Keller, 2003).

3.3.4. Training programs

Training programs not only help service managers prepare service employees for their current roles, but also supply workers with the skills they need for the next position in their career path; unfortunately, however, numerous firms provide little or no training to their frontline personnel (Tschohl, 2004). Research demonstrates that customers judge service encounters on the basis of service employees' effort and abilities (Specht, Fichtel, & Meyer, 2007), so at a minimum, formal training for these workers should be directed at helping them understand how to achieve quality service. In addition, customer needs are becoming more specialized, so frontline employees must be trained to exhibit interpersonal adaptive behavior to enable customization in each customer encounter. This type of training should help employees enact the "art of service," something which will serve them well throughout their careers. At the same time, it is also important that employees receive training on how their work affects company-wide financial performance and other firm goals. Training aimed at helping service workers grow with the organization increases their empowerment, which is vital to employees' satisfaction and success on the job. An example of a service firm that offers extensive training programs for its employees' personal and professional growth is Southwest Airlines, which provides a state-of-the-art training facility to deliver both classroom and online learning opportunities, including classes such as "Leadership 101"(Southwest Airlines, 2008a).

3.3.5. Job rotation

Job rotation provides a way for service managers to expose their employees to various jobs within the firm, such that the workers gain a wider base of skills and a broader perspective regarding other functions of the company. It is a win-win situation whereby staff may gain skills and knowledge of career options, while the organization receives more well-rounded and proficient personnel. For example, Massachusetts-based Danversbank utilizes a job rotation program that has frontline tellers shadow a number of different bank departments so that they "see opportunities beyond the lobby" (Brox, 2007, p. 31). This initiative has been successful in both reducing employee turnover and increasing operational performance, as service employees have come to understand how the quality of their work affects other departments (Brox, 2007).

3.3.6. Tuition assistance programs

Many service firms offer tuition assistance programs to support their employees' education and development, and it is important that service managers actively promote these benefits to staff members. Associated costs may be entirely or partially covered by the firm, or be contingent upon the employee's performance in the program. Higher education boosts service workers' confidence and critical

thinking skills, both of which are beneficial to the company and the employees themselves. One service firm that provides full tuition reimbursement for its staff is financial and insurance service organization USAA (McGregor, 2005). Offering this career development program helps USAA build a corporate culture wherein employees' personal growth is encouraged and supported.

4. Outcomes

Deriving from research in the service-profit chain (Heskett et al., 1994), organizational involvement in career development programs should provide benefits to service employees, which in turn will positively impact their customers, and then ultimately deliver favorable outcomes for service firms. Therefore, this model has implications for frontline service employees, their customers, and service organizations.

4.1. Outcomes for service employees

If implemented thoughtfully and in an organized manner, career development programs can benefit service employees by recognizing them as vital organizational resources and developing them into more enriched and capable workers. These initiatives provide employees with empowerment opportunities that will better enable them to handle the pressure and responsibilities that come with serving customers, while also improving their job satisfaction and commitment to providing service quality (Elmadag et al., 2008). In addition, development efforts aimed at increasing employees' self-efficacy in their customer-facing jobs, as well as enhancing awareness of how their work affects other firm departments, can infuse employees with an increased sense of motivation to perform well in their service roles (Bowen & Lawler, 1995).

4.2. Outcomes for customers

Additionally, organizational involvement in employee career development programs should result in gains for service firm customers stemming from frontline employees' stronger commitment to service quality, reductions in employee turnover, and overall improvements in customer-employee interactions. Customers who encounter higher service quality due to these improved factors ought to experience increased satisfaction with their services firms (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and this, in turn, should result in improved customer loyalty.

4.3. Outcomes for service organizations

Career development programs can also lead to outcomes which provide gains for the service organization at large. By creating a more empowered and satisfied workforce through career development initiatives, service organizations can experience reduced employee turnover; this typically translates to customer satisfaction, loyalty, and firm profitability, as demonstrated in prior service-profit chain research (Heskett et al., 1994).

In sum, firm investment in programs which develop and enrich frontline service employees can not only improve the motivation and performance of these workers, but also strengthen customer satisfaction and loyalty, which has a significant impact on the bottom line.

5. Tips for successful implementation

Now that we have described the model, we will provide several tips that service firms can follow to ensure that their career development programs are successful. First, upper management in service firms must demonstrate commitment to career development efforts by fostering a company culture that values ongoing learning and employee growth. They must support development programs financially, talk them up, and promote from within.

Next, career development programs must be approached holistically to reduce resistance and cynical reactions from employees, who may perceive changes in the organization as mere ''programs of the month'' (Rasins, Franze, & Russell, 2007). To do this, it is important to seamlessly integrate career development initiatives with other service employee management processes, including recruiting and selection, performance evaluation, and compensation.

Responsibility for career development also needs to be shared between the company, service managers, and frontline employees. The firm must invest in career development resources and reward managers for developing their direct reports. Likewise, service employees must take ownership for their career growth and satisfaction, committing to ongoing learning and building their skills. They need to set goals, stay aware of job opportunities, and actively manage their own careers.

Too, service managers should receive training in career counseling, coaching, and mentoring, in order to fulfill their roles as career development leaders. It is crucial that supervisor-employee career development meetings be honest and motivating experiences, whereby service workers are helped to set realistic goals and provided with

encouragement and support. Managers who do not have strong experience in being career coaches and mentors should turn to human resources for advice, training, and coaching.

Finally, service managers ought to take a tailored approach to career development, as what works for one service employee may not for another, and may actually prove to be damaging or counter productive. Firms should be flexible, as well, viewing career development as an open system that can be adjusted for each employee situation. Research has provided evidence for a strong relationship between service employees' satisfaction with their training and development and their overall job satisfaction (Schmidt, 2007). As such, it is important that service managers maintain open dialogs with their employees about the effectiveness of each element in their career development programs, and make changes whenever necessary.

Career development programs for service workers can be of enormous benefit to staff members, their customers, and the organization as a whole. With numerous advantages and few drawbacks, firms would be wise to invest the appropriate resources to sustain such initiatives.

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