THE APPLICATION OF VANGUARD METHOD TO ENHANCE SERVICE WORKERS PERFORMANCE

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The purpose of this paper is to examine a new form of innovative models of service operations, known as Vanguard Method, by investigating its impact on service workers performance. Two case studies were conducted in two UK public sector organisations using semi-structured interviews at different levels, and documents collection. An affective commitment questionnaire among service workers was also used. Results show that Vanguard Method allows for the achievement of twofold determinants for higher workers performance; organic structure of service department and as a result high levels of employee's affective commitment. The value of this paper is that it attempts to incorporate service workers commitment concepts with service operations design to substantially promote service workers performance.

INTRODUCTION

In services, the implementation of mass production model of operations is focused on maximizing the volume of demands that the service employee can handle in a specified period of time whilst minimising the costs (Dobni, 2004). Employees can maintain a high performance level by providing a fast service even though the customers may be misunderstood and their demands incorrectly dealt with. Johnston (2004) reported that, in such cases, service quality can suffer, though performance is maintained high, and the level of service will not conform to the expected norms causing a significant detriment to the value added to the customer (Xu, 2006). Owing to the shortcomings of mass production models in

services, Spath and Ganz (2008) noted that, in order to optimise services workers performance, there is a need to shift focus from mass manufacturing systems to service systems focused on value and interactions governed by human-made laws. The capabilities of service workers have paramount effects on service quality and productivity (Xu, 2006). However, little research has been accomplished on how the service performance of service workers themselves can be enhanced (Dobni, 2004). Hackman and Oldham (1976), in their broadly accepted theory of motivating employees through work redesign, noted that work redesign is a prominent strategy for simultaneously improving work performance. Several researchers such as Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979), Mathieu and Zajac (1990), and Gong (2009) have shown that out of all forms of employees intrinsic motivation behaviours, affective commitment has the most significant impact on service workers performance. However, few studies have examined service workers' affective commitment in relation to service performance as a result of the form of service design used. Sherman (1984) found that organisations need to develop a more organic type of structure that could promote affective commitment behaviour of employees to enhance their performance. Therefore, it is not a surprise that Frenkel (1998) has made the point that bureaucratic structures, such as mass production models, are by no means suitable for service environment, they based their conclusions on the notion that service department's management is trapped between two conflicting dimensions: standardisation of employees activities and customisation of products (i.e. services) to customers. Apparently, there has to be an alternative to the mechanistic mass production models. In the research presented here, a systems engineering approach for service delivery is explained, it is developed by Vanguard Consulting in England. The term "Vanguard Method" (Seddon, 2003) will be used to describe this service delivery system throughout this paper. However, while this system has so far received little attention in the academic literature, an initial evidence was introduced on its positive impact on service performance (Jackson et al., 2008). The Vanguard Method incorporates aspects from lean service approaches, intervention theory introduced by Deming (1982), the systems theory of Ohno (1988) and pulls it together with some influential aspects from Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) developed by Peter Checkland (1981). Therefore, this research is an attempt to study the Vanguard Method's impact on service workers performance in public sector organisations. And the research question (RQ) which the authors have sought to answer in this research paper is:

RQ: How does the Vanguard Method affect service workers' performance patterns?

The paper is further organised into five sections. The Vanguard Method is presented in the next section; these are followed by a description of the research methodology, case studies conducted, and the data collected. Finally, the results are presented and the conclusions discussed.

THE VANGUARD METHOD

Vanguard Method is based on redesigning service operations around customer demand instead of functional hierarchies (Seddon, 2008). Customer demand understanding process begins with analysing customer demands over a period of time to collect information about what customers want and expect and what matters to them most. The need for analysing customer demands stems from the fact that a comprehensive understanding of the transformation processes in the service system needs to be unequivocally presented before interpretations about the situation are made (Checkland, 1995). Customer demand is analyzed on the basis of two different types usually available in service departments (Seddon, 2008). First, value demand- is what the service department has been established to serve and what the customers want which is of value to them. Second, failure demand- is the demand that the service department was not able to serve due to the lack of information or supporting operations. The findings of customer demand analysis phase help to explore all the possible ways through which a better flow of processes can be designed against customer demand. This is followed by redesigning the processes flow charts taking what have been learned considering the customer "wants" and then mapping out the new service system design. The most fruitful way to make full use of Vanguard Method concepts is through the use of a team who is basically from the people facing the problem at work and using the system (Checkland, 1995). Typically, the new service design is focused on minimizing non-value adding activities from a customer point of view. The new design is used in an experimental environment by using the new model after it has been discussed with the people doing the work. The new processes are induced gradually with careful observation of both employees reaction to it and customer feedback. The processes are tested, re-designed and re-tested again to make sure that customers get the best possible service before going fully live in the service department. However, To design against customer demand is to be more responsive by providing a solution for customer demands at the first time of contact, thus being more productive (Xu, 2006). Therefore, Vanguard Method management focus is shifted from conventional service measures (i.e. targets and statistics) towards the percentage of one stop service and demand analysis. This is supplemented with the managers continuous endeavour to further improve service operations to reduce, and ultimately prevent, repeated failure demands. Vanguard Method integrates the decision-making processes with the work itself (Jackson et al., 2008). For this purpose the role of employees change from controlled to full empowerment as Vanguard Method requires employees to be self-directed by making their own rules and judgments (Piercy, 2009). This way allows for more control on service processes because data is in the hands of the people doing the work, and provides ability and creativity in responding to the system's surrounding environment (Jackson et al., 2008). However, the success of Vanguard Method is based on achieving economies from understanding the flow of the work, and not from the scale of production (i.e. quantity of transactions). Measures used are built in so they automatically tell you what is happening. These measures are usually centred on the concept of how good the service is in achieving the purpose and absorbing the demand variety. When demand variety is absorbed service

productivity increases (Aghazadeh, 2007). Vanguard Method absorbs variety by making intelligent use of the empowered employees (Jackson et al., 2008). The result is a self-adapting system (Seddon, 2008).

Vanguard Method: the Enabler for Organic Structures

Service departments are typically exposed to a greater demand variety from the customer than are manufacturing departments (Seddon, 2003). The Vanguard Method recognises that manufacturing lean tools, which emphasise standardisation and the elimination of variation, are not appropriate for service organisations, which need to absorb variety in customer demand (Piercy, 2009). In order for service organisations to absorb this variation in demand they need to become adaptive organisations, often referred to as 'organic structures' introduced by Burns and Stalker (1961). It is recognised that when employees are given the ability to make work decisions, organisations are more able to absorb variety (Jackson et al, 2008). The characteristics of organic structures emanate from those of Vanguard Method (Suarez-Barraza, 2010). Therefore, it is discerned that Vanguard Method is the opposite of mechanistic structures. The characteristics of this approach are that the tasks are not governed by rigid rules or procedures and the service workers share the responsibility of the work. Hierarchy of control is not usually present thus allowing service workers to identify the right person to solve a particular problem (Jackson et al., 2008). However, Monat (2007) emphasized the symbiosis between these characteristics and improved performance. According to him, tying individual goals to organisational goals, and articulating desired behaviour for each employee is a cost-effective approach for performance maximization.

Service Performance and Affective Commitment

Several research studies have shown that the level of employees' affective commitment has a significant impact on the level of employee's performance and service quality experienced by customers (Porter, Steers and Boulian, 1974, Mowday, Steers and Porter, 1979). Affective commitment is of particular significance in the workplace since this has been found to have the greatest impact on employee's positive behaviour, and ultimately effective performance (Porter, Steers and Boulian, 1974, Gong, 2009). As defined by Meyer and Allen (1991), affective commitment is a measure of the employee's emotional attachment to the organisation, the strength of identification with the goals of the organisation and strength of commitment to its success and continuous improvement. The employee remains a part of the organisation because s/he wants to do so. According to this definition, workplace performance of highly affectively committed employees is increased by having invaluable tendency among employees to do extra efforts on behalf of employer to do exceptional job of delivering a quality service that keeps customers (Mowday, Steers and Porter, 1979, Mathieu and Zajac, 1990, Meyer and Allen, 1991). The literature also suggests that building affective commitment among service workers is significantly important for enhancing effective cooperation and collaboration in the workplace (English, 2010).

RESRACH METHODOLOGY

The case study was conducted at two call centres of large city councils one in the UK east midlands region and the other in the north west region. The call centres details (i.e. name and place), as well as those of the respondents, are excluded to maintain anonymity and the they will be denoted and "Case A" and "Case B" throughout this paper. The two city councils are providing all local government services within their administrative districts. Both centres are structured around the principles of Vanguard Method. "Case A" operates weekdays with a total of ten working hours every day and employs 40 staff. Centre B also operates weekdays with a total of nine working hours every day and an employment of 18 staff working on phones and emails. Both sites have one phone number for all of its customers regardless of the nature of their demand.

The data in this study was primarily collected through semi-structured interviews conducted within the premises of the two call centres involved, and followed by documents collection and observations. The nine-items organisational commitment questionnaire (Commeiras and Fournier, 2001) was also used. It measured the affective commitment level among the two call centre front-line employees. A total of 14 semi-structured interviews were undertaken at the two research sites. Interviewees were a mixture of company directors, team leaders, and operational personnel who have vast experience in the Vanguard Method intervention and its impact on the work. The use of organisational documents and reports were another valuable source of information. The documents have provided information on issues that were not easily clarified through other data collection methods. They have also provided validity for information collected through interviews and observations.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Data from interviews, documentation, observation and questionnaires in this research were collected simultaneously from call centres. This is known as triangulation of data where both qualitative and quantitative data are collected from research sites.

Questionnaire results

The nine-items affective Commitment questionnaires were statistically analysed using the SPSS software. The results of the questions analysis are outlined in Table1 for each call centre's affective commitment level. The final calculations for the affective commitment levels at both call centres provided an overall mean of 3.96 for service workers at Centre A and an overall mean of 3.77 for their Centre B counterpart. Typically, the affective commitment level in mechanistic call centres is around 3.0 which reflects a lack of affective commitment among employees (Jaaron and Backhouse, 2011). However, a return of higher than 3.5 would statistically indicate that on average employees demonstrated high levels of

affective commitment. As can be discerned then from the achieved values, both service workers evidence high level of affective commitment.

Table.1 Affective commitment means and standard deviation at both site.

Item	Centre A		Centre B	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Q1: I am willing to put great deal of effort beyond that normally expected to this council be successful.	3.755	1.013	4.125	0.718
Q2: I talk up this council to my friends as a great organization to work for.	3.648	0.907	3.812	0.834
Q3: I would accept almost any type of job assignment in order to keep working for this	3.455	0.974	2.937	0.928
Q4: I find that my values and this council's Values are very similar.	4.229	0.839	3.812	0.750
Q5: I am proud to tell others that I am part of this council.	3.700	0.877	3.875	0.885
Q6: This council really inspires the best in me in the way of job Performance.	3.655	1.086	3.625	0.806
Q7: I am extremely glad I chose this Council to work for over others I was considering at the time I joined.	4.471	0.808	4.000	0.730
Q8: I really care about the fate of this council.	4.840	1.023	4.250	0.577
Q9: For me, this is the best of all councils for which to work	3.963	0.759	3.562	0.813
Overall mean	**3.96**		**3.77**	

Interviews results

Interviews were also analysed and then compared with observations and documents' content from the two research sites. After transcribing the interviews, the "thematic analysis" approach (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984) was employed to analyse the data. The full process of analysis produced two central themes, these are presented below:

Theme1- Organisational structure for better performance:

The majority of participants at both call centres have revealed that the employees were relocated within the service department to be a part of a team. The essence of this team is that all the individuals are working together to perform an entire process and if necessary they can seek the help from each other to accomplish a task. In addition, an employee could receive a different customer demand every time he receives a call. This adds richness to the work with a tremendous potential for learning and challenge. Interviewees also added that Vanguard Method requires employees who can steer the work rather than being steered. Employees are given full control on what they have in hands; they rely on their innovation and intelligence to make decisions regarding customer demands and how to serve them the best. Employees

performance was measured on the basis of how good service workers are in matching the company's principles of serving the customer through service workers' appraisals in the service department. The number of value-adding demands handled is counted against the non-value adding demands to form the basis for measuring and evaluating employees work in general. Interviewees also indicated that the new role of managers changed from monitors to supporters, and that the top down hierarchy is no longer suitable for this new environment. Departmental and operational issues that required managerial levels meetings are now being resolved by the team members who are equipped with the right level of knowledge and freedom to make decisions. Organisational structure is also changed as a result of the open channels of communication between the team members and whomever they need to execute customer' demands and service operations.

Theme2- Working experience and affective commitment for better performance:

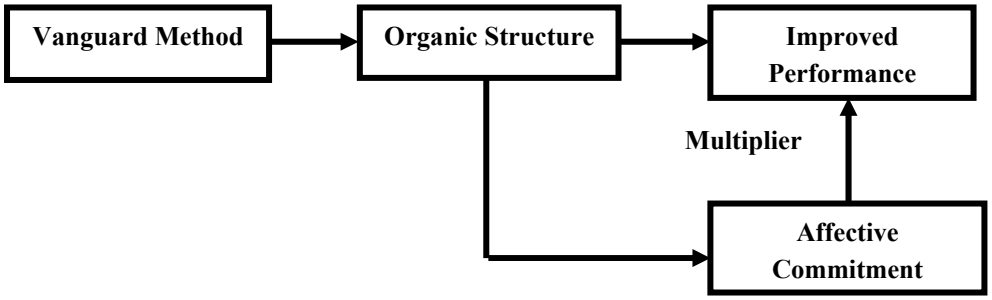
The second theme is centred on the exploration of employees working experiences in the two call centres. Understanding the working experience of employees in both call centres was very important to predict the availability of affective commitment foundations. The majority of participants at both sites indicated that putting the decision making authority at front-line level, employees are enjoying better work experience. Further, informal channels of communication were encouraged to allow for a quicker transfer of knowledge between members. Participants noted that front-line employees are now having enough time to talk to customers without the need to rush, they are delivering correct information as a result that provides a better service without the need for repeating phone calls.

DISCUSSION

Results show that there is evidence that the characteristics of organic structures, emanating from Vanguard Method implementation, play a major role in leveraging affective commitment of front-line employees. In fact, van Emmrik and Sanders (2005) found that employees' affective commitment leveraging and creation depends to a great extent on fulfilling employees personal ambitions; desire of achievement, autonomy, and a sense of control on what they have, decentralising decision making processes to be at the employee's level, meeting the expectations set by employees and employer concerning each other's obligation, and most importantly how good or bad an employee's working experience. Based on the offering of Vanguard Method, organic structures help service workers in fulfilling their personal ambitions, and in promoting their desire of achievement. It is also important to note that Vanguard Method is related to the employer ability to decentralize decision making processes to be at the employee's level. Vanguard Method this way provides employees with a sense of control on what they have, and gives them a feeling of personal importance and self esteem in the organization (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Due to these reasons employees working under the Vanguard Method are more likely to develop affective commitment with their organization. This explains the tendency of workers to have a higher performance levels

than their counterparts working in traditional service department. These discussed relationships and effects are described in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Enhancing service workers' performance through Vanguard Method.



However, converting the management role from performance monitoring to constructive support and involvement in demand analysis inevitably creates a rewarding working experience that can help increase employees' level of affective commitment (English, 2010). Affective commitment leveraging is vital to reducing employee turnover and absenteeism which can cause service departments to lose experience and talent. The longer an organization keeps employees the better the services provided would be due to the accumulated expertise over time.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the effects of applying Vanguard Method on service workers performance levels. Derived from two case studies, a framework has been developed that shows how Vanguard Method implementation contributes to the achievement of twofold determinants for higher workers performance; organically structured service department and, as a result, high levels of employee's affective commitment. The framework presented is important in that it attempts to incorporate service workers commitment concepts with service operations design to substantially promote service performance.

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