

# CONSEQUENCES OF EMPLOYEE'S CUSTOMER ORIENTATION IN PUBLIC SERVICES

**PhD Student Andrada IACOB**

West University of Timisoara, Romania

Email: iacob.andrada1981@gmail.com

## *Abstract:*

*The goal of this paper is to explore the consequences of employee's customer orientation in public services organizations. We will start with a literature review of the theory of customer orientation measurement and the consequences of this orientation at organizational and individual level. Then, the research methodology and results are presented. Conclusions, research limitations and future directions are included at the end of the paper. We identified positive direct effects of the employee customer orientation on organizational commitment and organizational identification, but no significant direct relationship with job satisfaction.*

*Keywords: employee's customer orientation, organisational commitment, organisational identification, job satisfaction, public services*

## **1. Introduction**

Terms marketing orientation, market orientation and customer orientation have become critical in marketing theory and practice in the last two decades. These are used to describe the organizational orientation in which customer needs are the basis for organization's strategy making and implementation. The importance of customer orientation of business and non-profit organizations is widely recognized. Peter Drucker (1954) is considered the precursor of this idea as he suggested that the entire organization should focus on the customer, not just the marketing department, as a specialized function. Day (1994) continued in the same direction, considering that customer orientation is a concept that transforms the marketing into a powerful competitive weapon, shifting values, beliefs and organizational behaviours toward a relationship approach between customer and firm.

Customer orientation construct developed in the context of studies investigating market orientation being conceptualized as a dimension of

market orientation. Narver and Slater (1990) described the customer orientation as the ability of an organization to continuously create superior value for the customer based on deep understanding of the needs and wants of target markets. Deshpande et al (1993, p. 27) defined customer orientation as "the set of beliefs that put customer interests first". Gatignon and Xuereb (1997) found that customer oriented firms have the ability to identify and respond to user needs.

It was argued that customer orientation has a relevant role in the services sector organizations than organizations from other sectors (Kelley, 1992). In the services sector, the marketing concept implementation is realized in customers-employees interactions (Donavan et al 2004), employee behaviour underpinning the implementation of a customer-focused strategy (Dobni, 2002).

We will start with a literature review of the theory of customer orientation and the consequences of this orientation at organizational and individual level. Then, the research hypothesis, methodology and results

are presented. Conclusions, research limitations and future directions are included at the end of the paper.

## **2. The Customer Orientation Construct**

The first concerns regarding the measurement and identification of customer orientation scale at organizational level are founded in research on market orientation concept. In a meta-analysis of the most commonly used scales to measure market and customer orientation (considering equivalent the two concepts), Deshpande and Farley (1998) concluded that the three scales identified (Narver and Slater, 1990; Kohli et al., 1993; Deshpande et al., 1993) behave similarly in terms of reliability, discriminant and predictive validity. Based on a factor analysis of the 44 items included in the three previous scales, Deshpande and Farley (1998) developed a 10-item scale that they called MORTN (market orientation). This scale is focused on customer orientation issues. The scale unidimensionality was not originally considered by its authors, and Slater and Narver (1998) did not detect the unidimensionality of this scale.

Research undertaken on customer orientation recognize the key role of frontline employees-customer interactions to ensure the success of organizations in the service sector (Crosby and Stephens, 1987; Parasuraman et al., 1985). In marketing literature is largely recognized that frontline employees are the key driver of perceived level of customer orientation of a service organization (Wieseke, Ullrich, et al 2007). Hennig-Thurau et al. (2002) highlighted the significant contribution of interactions quality between service employees and customers on satisfaction, loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. Some studies have investigated the relationship between customer orientation of

frontline employees and the firm performance (Macintosh, 2007).

Although the importance of customer orientation of employees in the implementation of the marketing concept was highlighted, research efforts aimed at conceptualizing and measuring this construct at the individual level were much less intense. The first attempt to measure the customer orientation at individual was conducted by Saxe and Weitz (1982). They developed SOCO scale (Sales Orientation/Customer Orientation) containing 24 items, 12 of which were formulated positively to reflect customer orientation and 12 were negative formulated to reflect the sales orientation. This self-assessment scale refers to the willingness of employees to assist customers in purchasing decisions, evaluate customer needs to provide products that meet their needs, to adequately describe products, avoid using in sale the tactics of deception and manipulation. They used this scale to assess the sales personnel efforts to increase long-term customer satisfaction. The main limit of SOCO scale is generated by its focus on measuring customer orientation only in the sales process.

Other customer orientation scales have been developed. Thomas, Ryan et al (2001) proposed a simplified version of SOCO scale, Mavondo and Conduit (2001) developed a scale to measure the organisation's internal customer orientation, and Wright, Pearce et al (1997) developed a scale of service orientation construct. Based on SOCO scale limits, Brown, Mowen et al (2002) conceptualized customer orientation of service employees as a bi-dimensional construct. Both the needs and pleasure dimensions are needed to fully understand the employees ability to serve the customer and to motivate them to provide satisfaction. The needs dimension concern the employee beliefs about their ability to meet customer

needs and is based on Saxe and Weitz' customer orientation conceptualisation. The pleasure dimension assess if interactions with customers and serving them is perceived as a pleasure by employees. These dimensions highlight a customer-oriented behaviour of the employee.

Hennig-Thurau and Thurau (2003) conceptualized the customer orientation of service employees (COSE) as a three-dimensional construct, comprising: employee motivation to meet customer needs; skills the employee must possess to meet those needs; freedom or authority (perceived by the employee himself) to make decisions relevant to the needs and desires of the customer. Many researchers consider the results of Hennig-Thurau and Thurau research as a major breakthrough in developing an effective conceptual model for assessing the impact of customer orientation of service employees on organizational performance. They based their research on the work of the German social psychologist Von Rosenstiel (1988) who made a distinction between individual knowledge, personal goodwill and social tolerance as requirements of employees behaviour. Subsequently, Hennig-Thurau (2004) extended the conceptualization of customer orientation of service employees to four dimensions: technical skills of employees; social skills of employees; motivation, and power to make decisions. To meet customer requirements, employees' skills and organizational variables must be congruent to strengthen customer orientation of service employees. Donovan, Brown et al (2004), based on an extensive qualitative research, conceptualized customer orientation of service employees as a four-dimensional construct: the need to pamper the client; need to identify customer needs; need to create

personal relationships, and the need to deliver the requested service.

### **3. Consequences of the Employee' Customer Orientation**

Customer-oriented organizations achieve favourable psychological and social benefits (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Jaworski and Kohli, 1993; Kelley, 1992). Previous empirical studies have found correlations between customer orientation and job satisfaction (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Pettijohn et al., 2002) and between customer orientation and organizational commitment (Hartline et al., 2000, Pettijohn et al., 2002, Stock and Hoyer, 2002). Donovan, Brown et al (2004) examined the effect of customer orientation on service employees' responses to their jobs: the level of organizational commitment; satisfaction at work, and (3) organizational citizenship behaviour.

Employee's organizational commitment is reflected in staff loyalty to the organization. Commitment expresses the relative strength of an individual's identification and involvement in achieving the goals, objectives and mission of the organization.

Organizational commitment create close relationships between employees and create a sense of pride to be part of the organization (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Jaworski and Kohli, 1993). Some previous studies have identified psychological attachment as a basis for affective commitment (Bansal, Irving et al 2004; Fullerton, 2003). The first studies on employee commitment focused on behaviours and attitudes (Porter et al., 1974). Allen and Meyer (1990) found that employee commitment is manifested in three distinct dimensions: affective, normative, and continuity. Organizational commitment and job satisfaction have major implications for employees to stay within a service organization (Mobley, 1977; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Porter and Steers,

1973). Many studies have found that employee engagement is one of the major determinants of service quality, emphasizing a sustainable desire of every member of the organization to provide high quality services to customers.

Identification with organization is a key component of the Wieseke, Ullrich et al (2007) model that explicitly links individual behaviour with certain organizational norms and values such as customer orientation. Compared with attitudes at work, identifying the organization has a different nature, with a high potential explanatory power of the dissemination of customer orientation.

Various behaviours of organizational citizenship behaviour of the employee (Biestock et al., 2003), pro-social behaviour in services (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997), customer orientation (Bettencourt and Brown, 2003) and service orientation (Kelley, 1992; Lytle et al., 1998) have all been linked to positive customer evaluations of service interactions. These evaluations influence the perceived quality of customer-firms relationships. Several authors have defined organizational citizenship behaviour as non-compulsive behaviour, useful and constructive in relationship with an organization or to its members (Bateman and Organ, 1983; Beatson, Lings and Gudergan, 2008; Podsakoff and MacKenzie, 1994). Although organizational citizenship behaviour is not a part of the general requirements of a job (Organ, 1997), it is found in employee evaluations made by managers (MacKenzie, Podsakoff et al 1993). While employees can not be evaluated objectively on this behaviour, however previous research suggests that this behaviour positively influence the work environment.

Although have been identified several dimensions of citizenship behaviour, altruism appears to have a

high importance. The altruistic citizenship behaviour is defined by the help that an employee give to another employee who confront with a problem in his work (MacKenzie, Podsakoff et al 1993). Customer-oriented employees are motivated to help other employees because this behaviour is a mean of satisfying customers. Customer focused employees recognize that to be successful exchanges with customers, you first need to have effective internal exchanges. Frontline employees that are likely to meet the needs of customers will go beyond the inherent requirement to help their colleagues. Therefore, a higher level of employee customer orientation leads to a higher level of altruistic type of citizenship behaviour.

Conceptual domain of job satisfaction includes both affective dimension and cognitive one (Organ and Near, 1985; Brief and Weiss, 2001). Brief (1998) identifies job satisfaction with an attitude, defining it as "an internal state that is expressed by an emotional and/or cognitive evaluation of a job at some degree of approval or disapproval" (p. 1) and Weiss describes it as "an evaluative opinion positive (or negative) on work or work situation" (2002, p. 6). The literature suggests that improving workplace satisfaction leads to increased productivity and company profits. In this sense, some studies have found a positive relationship between employee and customer satisfaction in the context of services (Bernhardt et al., 2000). Scheneider and Bowen (1993) argued that satisfaction at work has the potential to improve customer service and increase customer satisfaction. Some studies have highlighted the relationship between salespeople customer orientation, job satisfaction and commitment to the organization (Siguaw et al., 1994; Pettijohn et al., 2002). Hoffman and Ingram (1992) found that job satisfaction was the context in which customer-oriented

behaviour manifested, and Hartline and Ferrell (1996) stated that satisfied employees provide better service to their customers.

#### 4. Research Hypotheses

The goal of this research is to identify the consequences of employee's customer-oriented behaviour in the public service setting. Based on the theoretical foundations of customer orientation and public management literature, we developed three hypotheses concerning the relationships between employee's customer orientation, job satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational identification.

Previous research have investigated the relationship between job satisfaction and customer orientation (Hoffman and Ingram, 1991; 1992; Pettijohn, Pettijohn et al 2002) using SOCO scale developed by Saxe and Weitz (1982). The main conclusion is that higher levels of job satisfaction generate higher levels of customer orientation. However, being a characteristic of the employee, the employee available to be customer oriented can lead to increased satisfaction at work. A customer oriented employee naturally fits a job in the service sector, and consequently will experience greater job satisfaction. The direction of causation relationship between customer orientation and job satisfaction is a key issue because of the implications on recruitment and selection naturally fits a job in the service sector. If satisfaction is considered a consequence of customer orientation, managers should strive to employ people whose personality is customer-oriented. Consequently, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a positive relationship between customer orientation and employee job satisfaction.

In their research on market orientation of organizations, Jaworski and Kohli (1993) found that employees show a greater commitment to the organization when they perceive the organization's involvement in the practice of marketing concept. Donavan, Brown et al (2004) suggested that the same effect can be found at the individual level of employees in service organizations implementing marketing concept through the work-behaviour of their employees.

Thus, as service employees manifest deeper levels of customer orientation, they will become more attached to the organization. As most suitable characteristics of a customer-oriented work environment, these employees will experience a higher level of commitment to the organizations they belong. Kelley (1992) and Pettijohn, Pettijohn et al (2002) have argued that organizational commitment is an antecedent of customer orientation rather than a result of customer orientation. However, it is useful to test the extent to which the employee predisposition to manifest customer-oriented behaviours lead to strengthening its' organizational commitment. These arguments lead to the following hypothesis:

H2: There is a positive relationship between customer orientation and employee organizational commitment.

The role of front-line employees in determining how an organization is perceived as customer-oriented is widely recognized, the performance being contingent upon the employee-customer interactions. Previous empirical research has highlighted the psychological and social benefits of customer orientation, and found positive correlations between this orientation, job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996, 2000; Pettijohn et al., 2002; Stock and

Hoyer, 2002 ). Using social identity theory as a conceptual foundation, Wieseke, Ullrich et al (2007) have introduced in their model the organizational identification construct to explain the customer orientation of service employees as a result of social influence based on identity. Therefore we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: There is a positive relationship between customer orientation and employee identification with the organization.

## 5. Data Collection and Sample

The sample consisted of 230 employees in public services organizations based in Timis and Hunedoara counties. These organizations provides the following public services: tax management services; local government services; health, and pension and social security services. We have used a convenience sampling technique, sample members being contacted personally. The questionnaires were personally distributed to respondents, and subsequently the completed questionnaires were retrieved directly from respondents in a sealed envelope. Data processing was performed in SPSS 19. The profile variables of the sample members were: sex, age, level of education, type of public service in which they operate and the nature of the employee (front-office and back-office). Of the 230 questionnaires distributed we received 188 questionnaires, of which a number of 174 were validated and used in data analysis.

The main characteristics of sample members are: the nature of public service provided by the organizations in which they work; nature of the position held, the latest studies completed and age of employees. 112 respondents

representing 64.36% of the total sample are active in organizations offering tax administration services. The remaining 64 respondents (35.64% of the sample) are active in organizations offering services to local government (28 respondents representing 16.2%), health care (15 respondents representing 8.6%) and pension and social security services (19 respondents representing 10.1%). 153 respondents (87.9%) hold positions in the front-office, being in direct interaction with customers, and the remaining 21 respondents (12.1%) of the sample occupying positions of back-office. 85 respondents (48.85%) have Bachelor Degree, 61 respondents (35%) have a Master Degree, and the rest 28 (16.15%) have a high school diploma. This structure reveals that a high level of education of human resources that work in public services organizations should lead to a high level of service quality and customer satisfaction. Regarding the age, 56 respondents (32.2%) of the total sample were aged between 36 and 45 years, 43 respondents aged between 46 and 55 years (24.7%), and 42 respondents aged 26 and 35 (24.1%), 24 respondents over 56 years (13.8%), and the 9 respondents aged between 18 and 25 years (5.2%).

## 6. Results

Employee customer orientation was measured using a scale adapted from Thomas, Soutar, and Ryan (2001) consisting of 10 items (see table 1). All items were measured using a 5-step Likert scale (5 – Strongly agree, 1 – Strongly disagree). The scale is reliable with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.748. No variable significantly reduces the overall reliability of the scale of measurement. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator shows a value of 0.656, and Bartlett test of sphericity value of 382,188 being significant.

**Table 1****Employee customer orientation**

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
Positive attitude toward customer	2,00	5,00	4,2471	0,69003	0,712
Memorising customers' names	2,00	5,00	3,9360	0,87958	0,741
Satisfaction with the customers' happiness	1,00	5,00	3,9422	0,88732	0,712
Pleasure to serve customers	2,00	5,00	4,0523	0,78184	0,719
Pleasure to rapid response to customers' demands	1,00	5,00	4,0936	0,77650	0,736
Understanding customers' message	2,00	5,00	4,1105	0,81255	0,733
Putting in customer's situation	1,00	5,00	4,1098	0,79575	0,725
Trying to help customers	1,00	5,00	4,1205	0,79996	0,722
Stimulating customers to present their needs	2,00	5,00	4,0756	0,74934	0,736
Problem-solving behaviour	2,00	5,00	4,1279	0,68904	0,748
Priority of customer's interest	1,00	5,00	4,2197	0,84789	0,729

Job satisfaction was measured using a 10-items scale (see table 2) adapted from Lytle and Timmerman (2006). All items were measured using a 5-step Likert scale (5 - Agree 1 - Strongly disagree for positive items and 5 - Strongly disagree 1 - Agree to negative items). Five items were

removed because they have reduced the scale reliability scale. The Cronbach's alpha of the final scale is 0.689. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator shows a value of 0.701, and Bartlett test of sphericity value of 138,619 being significant.

**Table 2****Job satisfaction**

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
I'm bored with what I do at work	1,00	5,00	3,9708	1,05956	0,685
I have to force me to go at work	1,00	5,00	3,8263	1,16672	0,635
Each day at work never ends	1,00	5,00	3,7572	1,27088	0,604
My job tasks are uninteresting	1,00	5,00	3,6257	1,28349	0,579
I'm unhappy that I will do this job forever	1,00	5,00	3,3006	1,17723	0,675

Organizational Commitment was measured using a 10-items scale (see table 3) adapted from Porter (1974), Allen and Meyer (1990), and Noor and Mohamad (2005). All these items were measured using a 5-step Likert scale (5 - Agree 1 - Strongly disagree for positive items and 5 - Strongly disagree

1 - Agree to negative items). Two items were eliminated. The Cronbach's alpha value of the remaining eight items is 0.755, indicating a reliable scale. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator shows a value of 0.699, and Bartlett test of sphericity value of 230,966 being significant.

Table 3

## Organizational commitment

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
My future is linked to the future of this organization	1,00	5,00	4,0000	0,71528	0,738
I am willing to strive to contribute to organizational success	1,00	5,00	3,1850	1,09460	0,713
I am willing to accept almost any job to stay within the organization	1,00	5,00	3,0405	1,17314	0,699
The organization I work inspires me	1,00	5,00	3,6901	0,95355	0,710
I say to my friends that this organization provides a wonderful job	1,00	5,00	3,7135	0,82233	0,726
I belong to this organization	2,00	5,00	3,8555	0,67938	0,750
I am glad that I work for this organization	2,00	5,00	3,8023	0,76959	0,737
I have a special emotional relationship with this organization	1,00	5,00	3,2659	0,92689	0,748

Organizational identification construct was measured using a scale adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992), being composed of 5 items (see table 4). An item was deleted because it reduces the scale reliability. All items were measured using a 5-step Likert

scale (5 - Agree 1 - Strongly disagree). The Cronbach's alpha has a value of 0.718, the scale being reliable. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin indicator shows a value of 0.730, and Bartlett test of sphericity value of 129,811 being significant.

Table 4

## Organizational identification

Items	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
I'm interested in what others think about this organization	1,00	5,00	3,7326	0,88423	0,681
When I talk about this organization, I express the pronoun "we"	2,00	5,00	3,9595	0,79503	0,624
Organization's success is my success	2,00	5,00	4,1098	0,78100	0,632
When someone praises my organization I feel it like a personal compliment	2,00	5,00	4,0809	0,73480	0,687

Linear regression was used to test the hypothesis of the research model. Table 5 presents the standardized coefficient of the regression function, the t-statistic, significance level, and

the coefficient of determination  $R^2$  for each hypothesis. The research hypothesis were accepted or rejected depending on the level of significance.



Table 5

## Results of hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	Not Standardized coefficient B	The value of t statistics	The significance level p	Coefficient of determination R <sup>2</sup>	Result
H1	0,086	0,645	0,520	0,002	Rejected
H2	0,390	5,330	0,000	0,149	Accepted
H3	0,483	7,111	0,000	0,232	Accepted

In the case of the first hypothesis, the coefficient of determination  $R^2$  shows that only 2% of the variance in job satisfaction is explained by the employee customer orientation, and the correlation between the two variables is still of very low intensity (0,086). The t-statistic is 0.645 at a significance level of  $0.520 > 0.05$ . Consequently we reject this hypothesis. According to the second hypothesis that was accepted, between employee customer orientation and organizational commitment there is a significant relationship, but of low intensity ( $B = 0.390$ ). The coefficient of determination  $R^2$  shows that 14.9% of the variance in organizational commitment is explained by employee customer orientation. The t-statistic is 5.330 at a significance level of 0.000. In the case of the third hypothesis, the coefficient of determination  $R^2$  shows that 23.2% of the variance in organizational identification is explained by employee customer orientation. Based on the t-statistic of 7.111 at a significance level of 0.000 we concluded that the relationship between organizational identification and employee customer orientation is positive and significant, but of moderate intensity.

## 7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research was focused on three consequences of employee's customer orientation on job satisfaction, organizational commitment and organizational identification in public services sector. The results of hypothesis testing confirm the positive

direct effects of employee's customer orientation on organizational commitment and organizational identification. These effects are consistent with results of Jaworski and Kohli (1993) and Donovan, Brown and Mowen (2004) who found that employees show a greater organizational commitment when they perceive the organization's involvement in the practice of marketing concept. By rejecting the first hypothesis we found no positive and direct relationship between employee's customer orientation and job satisfaction. This result is in accordance with Hoffman and Ingram (1991; 1992) and Pettijohn, Pettijohn et al (2002) who found that that higher levels of job satisfaction generate higher levels of customer orientation.

From the results of this research rise several managerial implications. Top management team must create the climate to disseminate the organizational customer orientation values at individual level of employee. Thus it is more likely that employees highlights customer-oriented behaviours, high levels of organizational commitment and organizational identification. The rewarding system and the organizational climate must assure a high level of employee's job satisfaction which will generate customer-oriented behaviours. The limitations of this research are generated mainly by the not probabilistic sampling method that we have used, and by the sample size. The tax administration services are over-represented. We analysed only the

direct relationships between employee's customer orientation, and job satisfaction, organizational commitment and identification, neglecting the mediator and moderator factors. Future research could add new empirical evidence from other public services

organizations, e.g. education, health, and local administration. New insights could arise from a deeper analysis of mediated and moderated relationships between employee's customer orientation and its' consequences.

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