

Using Laddering to Understand the Nature of Job Stressors and Job Enrichers for Customer Service Personnel

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ABSTRACT

Marketing managers have long recognized the importance of developing relational ties with customers. By occupying the boundary-spanning position between the marketing organization and the customer, front-line personnel have the potential of playing a strategic role in this process of developing and nurturing customer relationships. Because customer perceptions of service quality are formed by the job attitudes of boundary personnel, examining the nature of job stressors and job enrichers is a first step to understanding quality customer relationships.

This paper serves as an introductory look at the potential application of means-end theory and laddering methodology for understanding how front-line employees translate the attributes or characteristics of their jobs into meaningful associations with respect to self-defining attitudes and values. The means-end theory focuses on the linkages and interrelations between attributes, consequences, and values. The "means" can be thought of as the rational components, and the "ends" as the emotional components. The theory seeks to explain how an individual's job environment enables him/her to achieve desired end states. In this study, the attributes are the job characteristics or environment of the firm. Consequences accrue to employees from working in such environments. They may be positive or dysfunctional to boundary personnel depending on whether they are barriers or facilitators to the employees personal goals and beliefs. A value is an enduring belief that an end-state of existence is personally or socially useful or worthwhile.

A useful depth-interviewing technique, which allows the researcher to tap into the subject's network of meanings, is laddering. A series of directive probes, typified by "Why is that important to you?" questions, assist the researcher in ascertaining sets of linkages between salient perceptual elements across the range of attributes, consequences, and values.

The laddering process forces the subject up the "ladder of abstraction" in order to uncover the structural aspects of the subject's knowledge as modeled by the means/end chain. The detailing of linkages in the subject's cognitive structure provides a method for uncovering the underlying reasons why an attribute or a consequence is important.

Twenty customer service representatives, employed by an international financial service company, participated in the initial study. Participants were asked to examine the assumptions underlying their everyday work behavior. Structural aspects of the subject's knowledge regarding job stressors and job enrichers were modeled using the means-end chain approach. The detailing of linkages in the subject's cognitive structure provided a method for uncovering the underlying reasons why an attribute or a consequence is important.

It is clear from the results that a means-end approach to job stress improves our understanding of the role stress process. Specifically, the method examines why and how certain job stressors affect job outcomes. Furthermore, the research provides answers to why and how certain job tasks or other job-related characteristics are inherently motivating or enhance the well being of customer service personnel. Such insights can be beneficial in allocating resources toward company policies or procedures which can positively enhance the psychological well being of service providers.

More research is needed to refine the techniques for use in this area. But the potential for increased understanding of the cognitive structures that customer service personnel have regarding job stressors and job enrichers seems great.