

Customer service and project performance at state-owned enterprises: Towards a sustainable mechanism¹

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Orientation

In the many years I have been involved in project management, I have witnessed many projects fail to register success mainly as a result of lack of knowledge regarding project success factors. Some organisations which start off very well, sometimes collapse because of failure to address customer service issues and project performance.

Research purpose

The purpose of this scoping review is to (i) discover, describe and understand the correct state of customer service at state-owned enterprises in South Africa, and (ii) draw relationships between customer service and project performance.

Motivation for the study

The study's findings may assist private and public organisations in broadening customer service approaches in order to improve project performance. Moreover, the research will alert management of the business risk. The importance of this research study is that it will enhance business value to companies. Its PMO and centralised Enterprise Project Management Office (EPMO) are hampered by the regular reviews of the company's organisational structure and the lack of integrated project management toolsets.

Research approach/design and method

The study employed a scoping review method to explore the existing challenges affecting project performance at South African state-owned enterprises.

Main findings

The study revealed that clients are dissatisfied with government enterprises' service to the extent of pointing out that they might take their business elsewhere. The research problem presented in the study is how state-owned enterprises can improve service and

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project delivery by introducing service performance benchmarking and the best practice project methodology within its IT operational environment.

Practical/managerial implications

The imperatives for service delivery and project delivery perspectives were highlighted in the literature review. The project performance measurement example: European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) excellence model; and balanced scorecard approach to project performance management, were also highlighted in the literature review. The organisational project management maturity and implication of capacity on service and project delivery was also highlighted. The issue of resources and competence within the organisation was found to be critical for the organisation to succeed and the issues pertaining to resources and competence need to be urgently addressed at government enterprises.

Contribution/value-add

The potential significance of this research study is that it will add business value to state-owned enterprises. Business ethical values vary by company, and are defined largely by the behaviours and values that govern a business environment. In general, the business ethical values are a set of guiding principles that encourage individuals in an organisation to make decisions. The primary purpose of undertaking this research is to assist management at government enterprises in decision making and to solve organisational problems. The benefit that the organisations will achieve through this research study is an increase in revenue; minimising of risk; a decrease in expenses; acquiring new customers; improving significant knowledge; and adding financial value.

Key words: Customer service, project management, strategy

Introduction

A project is a temporary endeavour undertaken to create a unique product, service or result. In a business-to-business relationship project, the capability of the project team in delivering the project outcomes to match the needs and requirements of the user of the project is believed to impact the satisfaction of the customer, which in this case is the user of the project deliverables (Heizer, Render & Munson, 2017). In managing a project, the project team needs to overcome many challenges that may cause the project to not achieve the intended outcome. These challenges are usually called project constraints that will impact customer satisfaction. There are six constraints that can be measured as the project performance achievement which are: scope, quality, schedule, budget, resources, and risks (Blanas, Koukoumialos & Kylandri, 2012). The capability of the

performing project team in managing these constraints is assumed to be aligned with customer satisfaction and will be measured on this research (Blanas et al., 2012). With a capable project team to manage the project's scope, quality, schedule, budget, resources and risks, the higher the chances are of customers being satisfied (Vilkaite-Vaiton & Skackauskiene, 2020).

The period 1999-2007 focused mainly on project management methodologies, and the Enterprise Project Management Office (EPMO)'s role focused mainly on standards per main customer domains (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016; De Waal & Kourtit, 2013). With the rise in Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems in South Africa, many state-owned enterprises have aligned their project management processes to the ERP best practice processes. These were followed Project Management Policies, introducing the role of the EPMO and establishing a comprehensive Project Management Guidebook based on Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK). Currently, most state enterprises have their own project management methodologies which were established using a comprehensive Project Management Guidebook PMBOK. However, the problem is that most of the state-owned enterprises consistently fail to meet project deadlines, partly due to lack of capacity in the delivery of projects (Omarjee, 2018). However, the impact of these challenges on customer service could be huge. The key question which drives this study is what is the current state of customer service and project performance at state-owned enterprises in South Africa? And what mechanisms can be put in place to enhance service and project delivery? This scoping review will seek to address these questions through extant literature published in recent years.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this scoping review is to (i) discover, describe and understand the state of customer service and project performance at state-owned enterprises, and (ii) establish mechanisms that can be employed by the enterprises to enhance project delivery. The objectives of the study are thus:

- i. To establish the current state of customer service and project performance at State-owned enterprises.
- ii. To provide mechanisms that can be adopted to enhance customer service and project delivery at State-owned enterprises.

Literature review

Customer service as a driver of service delivery

Excellent customer service is the process by which an organisation delivers its services or products in a way that allows the customer to access them in the most efficient, fair,

cost effective, and humanly satisfying and pleasurable manner possible (Speer, 2006). Any successful company or employee understands that quality customer service is the foundation to the success of a business (Goodman, 2009). Good customer service is associated with many benefits that are not only limited to gaining trust with existing clients your current clients but it also helps to develop a wonderful referral system as customers spread the word about the business to other prospects (Vilkaite-Vaiton & Skackauskiene, 2020). Treating people fairly and with respect will have long-term benefits. Global business leaders such as Samsung are taking measures to enhance customer service.

As mySAP (2003) highlights, Samsung Electronics Corporation (Samsung) has implemented mySAP™ Customer Relationship Management (mySAP CRM) as the foundation for new integrated marketing campaigns around the globe, aimed at improving customer service and increasing brand awareness. Beginning in Europe and the Americans, Samsung leveraged the mobile sales, campaign management and interaction centre capabilities of mySAP CRM with its existing SAP enterprise applications to improve dialogue with its customers and accurately define target audiences. After ten years of implementing customer relationship management Samsung was nominated as one of the ten companies most often credited for 'excellent' service in the annual survey (Aho & money, 2013).

Managing the quality of products, services, and the accompanying delivery process can be proactively used to decrease the switching and defection of customers. This improvement in customer retention and satisfaction can be openly seen in the business performance. More importantly, addressing all failures before customers enter the service system can reverse the defection, thus improving customer retention (Edwards, 2009). According to Amini (2013), business without customers is not a business. Even a business with unhappy customers would not be a business for very long. It is in this context that this study seeks to investigate the level of customer service and project performance at state-owned enterprises in South Africa in order to propose a framework that can be adopted to enhance these services. Recent studies have identified the lack of customer satisfaction in state-owned enterprises. One of the key challenges identified is the service and project delivery (Amini, 2013). The lengthy turnaround time in project delivery often caused by lack of resources discourages from doing business with the state enterprises (Edwards, 2009).

Turning a customer service strategy into reality is a key challenge for organisations. Customer service is a competitive strategic weapon for any organisation. However, it is a major challenge for achieving, one which most senior managers have experienced. Leaders and managers are responsible and accountable for developing a customer-driven workforce as a key role of customer service. It is vital for the organisation to design a customer service strategy that will bring the customer closer. Some of the key questions posed by Leggett (2013) are: how do you know how well your customer service offering

compares with best practices? How do you know what to do to differentiate yourself from your competitors? In responding to these questions, Leggett (2013) proposed a Best Practices Framework that one can use to access current capabilities. Leggett (2013) adds a further comment on the topic that, there is an associated tool from a Microsoft Excel spread sheet. The tool allows organisations to evaluate themselves against 150 best practices organised. For the organisation to accomplish service excellence the organisation must create excellent service as a priority and ensure that their service leaders and customer service managers have the compulsory skills to support all customers.

Service delivery performance measurement

LeRoux and Wright (2010: 584) indicate that organisations which can demonstrate a range of performance measures, along with good governance mechanisms “should be able to strategically manage and make decisions in the best interests of their organisation and its stakeholders” The overall aim of service delivery is to demonstrate efficiency, effectiveness; to ensure that both long and short-term measures, as well as financial and non-financial measures are in place (Greiling, 2010; Taylor & Taylor, 2014). However, achieving these standards is a challenge for many organisations. Efficiency, defined as how effectiveness is achieved in relation to the resources used (Wadongo & Abdel-Kader, 2014). The dimension of service quality is vital to any organisation. Customers’ expectations and perceptions are measured across these five dimensions using questionnaires. These five dimensions help us to visualize better and analyse the services provided to customers. All dimensions are important to customers, but some are more important than others.

Baston (2013) mentions the five dimensions of service quality namely: reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy and responsiveness. Tangibles refer service quality that can be seen to be perceptible by touch or a visible existence (Khan & Fasih, 2014). For example, information and communication technology (ICT), company employees, tools and sites which are applied differently by service providers and experienced differently by consumers.

Reliability implies the process in which service provider remains faithful in rendering services to its customers can be considered as the reliability dimension of service quality (Khan & Fasih, 2014). Reliability has an impact on trust and the overall impression left in the mind of a customer after service consumption (Abd-El-Salam, et al., 2013). Assurance, according to Khan and Fasih (2014), is the process of acquired knowledge being showcased by staffs in executing their term of preferences during service delivery can be highly assuring to customers. This gives customers the confidence that the service delivery representative will perform his/her duty professionally and ethically. Naidoo (2014) argues that not all customers have the expertise to understand the quality

of service and values they received, and as such may require effective communication or personal explanations to understand the value they receive. This service quality dimension is performed through the people aspect of service quality (Kaura, et al., 2012).

Empathy refers to the ability for service delivery firms to pay attention to individual customer problems and demands, then address these issues effectively (Khan & Fasih, 2014). The way the company takes responsibility to address problems faced by their customers on an individual or group level is classified as empathy. This service quality dimension is perceived through the people aspect of service quality (Kaura, et al., 2012). Finally, responsiveness refers to the process in which service providers react quickly to resolve customer problem positively within a given time is called responsiveness (Blery, et. al., 2009). This dimension of service quality is perceived through the people aspect of service quality. However, information technology advancement like emails, webpage and customer service interface improves the responsiveness of service delivery firm (Kaura, et al., 2012). This study seeks to understand the interplay between customer service and project performance at state enterprises in South Africa and the above mentioned service delivery variables are key in the overall success of a project and achievement of customer satisfaction.

Research design

This study used the explanatory research as it was appropriate to help discover, describe and understand the state of customer service and project performance at state-owned enterprises in South Africa. Several challenges affecting these enterprises result in poor service delivery healthcare workers include post-traumatic disorders, stress, low job satisfaction and low moral ((Kaura, et al., 2012). Through explanatory research, the researcher utilised the literature review to draw the relationships between different ideas and to understand the different reasons, causes, and effects of the challenges faced by the state-owned enterprises in providing efficient customer service and project delivery (Kenyon, 2020).

Research approach

The study utilised a qualitative approach to fulfil the objectives of the study. The qualitative research “enables the researcher to develop a good level of detail from the high involvement and interaction of all the participants” (Creswell, 2015:153). In addition, the approach was appropriate for this study as could be used to also gain an understanding of underlying reasons and opinions of individuals involved with state enterprises such as employees, customers and other stakeholders regarding customer service and project management challenges within the state-owned enterprises. Abdulkareem, Douglas and Sani (2018:2) concur with this view, adding that “qualitative research aims to explore and discover issues about the problem at hand because very little is known about it”

Research method

The study employed a scoping review method to fulfil the research objectives. The choice for this method was motivated by covid19 pandemic environment where travel restrictions and health measures imposed in many countries including South Africa could undermine effective data collection in a primary research. A scoping review is done to establish extent of coverage in literature on a given topic and offer a concise indication of the volume of the literature (Munn, Peters, Stain, Tufanaru, McArthur and Aromataris, 2018). Scoping review for this study was intended to establish types of evidence on the challenges faced by frontline healthcare workers during the covid19 pandemic in South Africa (Bragge, Clavisi, Turner, Tavender, Collie and Gruen, 2011). It also sought to identify key characteristics or factors related to these challenges or inhibitors to customer service and project management within the state-owned enterprises in South Africa (Bragge et al., 2011).

Search strategy for scoping review

The researcher developed scoping review methods that included: inclusion and exclusion criteria to identify potentially relevant articles, search strategies to retrieve articles, abstract review protocols, and a system of scoring published studies for completeness. The literature search strategy was to identify all published work on customer service and project delivery. Standard search strategies involving the querying of online databases using key word search was followed. After key word search, the evaluation of the bibliographies of relevant articles will be conducted. The researcher also evaluated Websites of relevant South African state enterprises and references.

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

To ensure quality and integrity of this scoping review, the researcher ensured that the review's findings were reliable. Reliability in research entails looking at the question whether a repetition of the study, using the same method but by different researchers at a different time produces the same findings (Aspers & Corte, 2019). As Silverman (2013), recommended, the researcher clearly outlined the research process and choice of theory in a transparent manner so that the outlined steps can be reproduced. Furthermore, in order to extract relevant data from the interviews, the researcher attended two interview skills workshops which were conducted by experts in the field.

Data analysis

Studies or reports that were consistent with the research questions were included for the review. Studies or reports that focused on customer service and project management in general and in state enterprises in particular were considered for the review. Those which did not fall within this category were excluded from the review. The researcher charted

the data that fitted the inclusion criteria using a chart form. The charting form allowed the researcher to extract relevant data from the literature that answered the research questions. The charted data was then summarised using a narrative approach. This method was appropriate in establishing meanings from the articles on the subject (Synder, 2019).

Reporting style

The scoping of literature was followed by the identification of dominant themes that were in line with the objectives of the study. Relevant theories related to the subject were discussed in order to establish the relationship between theory and findings. Conclusions and recommendations were offered, informed by the findings.

Results

The scoping review was followed by charting and narrative approach in summarising the findings. The following findings were established:

Lack of resources

The literature reveals that capacity in state-owned organisations is a huge challenge as there is a constant shortage of resources in their departments and projects. The literature further highlights that some employees are overburdened and are not working efficiently and effectively (Bhika & Pretorius, 2019). Resource constraints is the biggest issue and that is why the organisations do not have time to find out whether the clients are happy with the end product, or what lessons or improvements should be focused on. While the government is ambitious on embarking on many projects it mainly relies on state enterprises to assist. However, due to lack of resources the enterprises cannot take on the work load. This shortage is highlighted by Hoppli (2014) who notes that the root cause of limited resources in South Africa is a brain drain and this leaves the most organisations without skills needed to meet the challenges of economic development. The decision to appoint people who were in the "POOL" results in incompetent people poorly managing key responsibilities (Benedict & Ukpere, 2012). The Human capital shortage in various departments as well as competence needs affects project performance and customer service.

A lack of resources in any organisation can have a huge impact. For the staff to be over-allocated in terms of work and also work overtime is not a solution as it might affect the quality of the product (Dubber & Pretorius, 2016). This is one of the reasons why this organisation is experiencing poor customer service and poor project delivery. The literature shows that the organisation is not utilising this SLA to its full capacity, which results in the company losing revenue.

Use of line managers in projects

The findings from the scoping review show that separating projects from line management is one of the key challenges the organisation is facing. The definition of roles of the project manager and the line manager is in question. Currently the reporting of project managers is subjective because the project manager reports to the line managers which mean the line manager owns the report, which also brings the roles of programme managers and the maturity of project management into question (Christensen, Innstrand, Saksvik & Nielsen, 2018). According to best practice, project managers and line managers are partners. In a normal set up, both line managers and project managers play a critical role in planning, and control are at the core of an efficient and effective use of resources in projects (Anantatmula, 2010). The impact of the current setup where line managers are made to be project managers impacts negatively on projects, and customer must come first.

Lack of customer service

Customer service is another challenge in this organisation and results in poor customer service. Clients are not happy with the service that they are getting from state-owned enterprises. From the reviewed studies, the study establishes that state-owned enterprises forget that they are service providers to clients and that customer satisfaction is a key aspect. Customer service management needs to be taken seriously and project management needs to be closely knit with service management. This will ensure that strategies are agreed with clients on service offerings already strategised within state enterprises and strategies included into our service catalogue are professionally offered, designed, transitioned and managed with continuous service improvements that are tangible (Ramzi & Mohamed, 2010). The objectives are set late, and there is a lot of pressure to deliver, and lack of senior management contact with customers. According to Machando and Diggins (2013), customers usually talk more about bad experiences than good experiences, and, once a customer is lost due to bad service, it will be a lot harder to change the perception of that customer.

Delivering customer requirement is a challenge in the organisation as the literature revealed that state-owned enterprises often fail to fulfil customer requirements. From the reviewed studies, the researcher established that service management processes and project management should be integrated to ensure proper service management, employees always extend deadline and do not fulfil customers' expectations (Machando and Diggins, 2013).

Process improvement

The study establishes that state-owned enterprises face a challenge regarding process improvement. For instance, ERP templates should be tailored to better represent service delivery methodologies; project processes and procedures should be streamlined;

clients' orders are received late from a source within the company; contracts are not in place due to obstructions in procurement; lack of communication and integration between development team, implementation team and support services; internal processes and vendor contracts are not effective enough; collaboration between operations and supporting functions is lacking. With the growing use of new technologies in organisations, must continuously improve processes or they will fall into misuse or no use at all (Wysocki, 2004). These departments behave as if they are different companies; and there are long procurement processes. There is internal politics, incompetence of managers, and lack of accountability and taking responsibility by managers. Process plays an important role in any organisation and can harm the organisation if it is not properly implemented (Christensen et al., 2018).

Role and Responsibility of the PMO

The review reveals that the PMO's roles are both weakened and lack responsibility. For instance, employees repeat the same mistakes; the mistake may be recorded, but not shared. There is no repository of lessons learnt through projects; accountability and responsibility of the PMO, and projects are not properly managed. These weaknesses can be understood as lack of competence. The effect of incompetence is that project completion is delayed and the set completion dates are missed (Maritato, 2012). The researcher observed that competence is a big challenge in this organisation. Even if an organisation has the best methodology and process, if it is lacking in competence, it will be difficult for the organisation to achieve better performance (van Heerden, Steyn & van der Walt, 2015). Does the organisation have the right people to do the work? Why are customers not happy with the service delivery? Why are projects failing? The competence in this organisation is in question.

Practical implications

Customer service is a critical component in the overall success of a project. Therefore, the lack of customer service is closely linked to customer dissatisfaction and loss of existing and future customers to other organisations. As indicated in the findings, state-owned enterprises still struggle to satisfy customer expectations due to a number of challenges such as lack of adequate resources, lack of collaboration between line managers and project managers and lack of clearly defined roles of the PMO. As a result of these identified shortcomings, the organisation's chances of successful completion of projects within specified timelines, becomes very difficult, if not impossible.

Limitations and recommendations

Currently resources are a challenge at state-owned enterprises and this need to be urgently addressed. The implementation and management of capacity planning in an organisation is vital, as capacity is the driver of any organisation. An organisation can

have the best strategy and technology, but if it does not have the necessary capacity, its performance will decline.

The study recommends process involvement. The literature indicates that one of the challenges is delay in requesting resources, the approval of contracts and the long procurement process. The key processes that can be introduced to state-owned enterprises' methodologies to improve its effectiveness are process improvement, competence, quality improvement and resources. Based on these findings, it is clear that the organisation needs to improve its processes that will help to achieve better quality in projects.

The study also suggests that there is need to improve quality and it is evident that lack of quality is the reason why customers are not happy. The EFQM Excellence Model needs to be implemented to improve quality in the organisation. According to Tennant and Langford (2008:365), "The implementation of the EFQM framework involves the 'whole' company, and does not explicitly emphasise a project focus." The following key elements indicate the importance of EFQM: developing organisational capacity, creating a sustainable future, harnessing creativity and innovation, sustaining outstanding results, succeeding through the talent of people, leading with vision, inspiration and integrity, and adding value for customers.

Conclusion

The scoping review investigated two critical variables in project efficiency and success which are customer service and project performance at State-owned enterprises in South Africa. The study established that customer service challenges are associated with poor project performance and there is an urgent need to implement capacity improvement, competence framework (proficient), EFQM framework, customer centric, the review of implementation of PMO and project management methodologies (PRINCE2).

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