

Describing Service Performances: What Are The Challenges?

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Abstract. To enhance operational sustainability of services, service quality is needed to be monitored. Expected and experienced service can be compared to evaluate service quality. Service performances involves a sequence of events with many details; describing performances can therefore be challenging. Several methods and tools supporting description of service performances have been introduced. However, there has been little attention on which methods or tools are used in practice and what are the challenges. We conducted an online-based survey with fifty-four people working in service design and development in Norway. We found that there is a need for standardised and consistent methods that can illustrate different communication channels in service delivery processes and support description of both the details and whole process in an intuitive manner. Having a standardised software tool and the guideline, which support illustration of service delivery processes, will be a possible way to overcome the challenges.

Keywords: Service quality · Service performance · Service delivery process · Service depiction methods and tools

1 Introduction

Service quality is performance of a service compared to expectation about the service. Lewis and Booms defined service quality as “a measure of how well the service level delivered matches customer expectations” [1]. Expectation about a service can be a picture of a service that customers imagine before they actually experience the service. Whereas performance of a service can be a picture of a service that customers can draw after they have experienced the service. Performance of a service might not always be same as the expectation about the service. If the performance is better than the expectation from the service customer’s perspective, the perceived service quality will be high. However, in case the performance is worse than the expectation from the service customer’s perspective, the perceived service quality will be low.

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How to detect difference between a performance of a service and an expectation about a service can be important for service organisations in order to improve their service quality. Grönroos said that service quality is rely on expected service and perceived service [2]. Goldstein et al. claimed, “One reason for poorly perceived service is the mismatch between what the organisation intends to provide (its strategic intent) and what its customers may require or expect (customer need) [3].”

In section 2, we talk about different ways of measuring service quality and introduce our research questions. In section 3, we present our research approach to answer the research questions. In section 4, we show results from our case study and discuss the findings.

2 Related work

There are different techniques that are used when measuring service quality. Service organisations search for the tools to assess its service quality, but choosing the right tools and collecting the data can be costly and time consuming [4]. We present the techniques according to service organisations’ and service customers’ perspective.

Typical examples of how service organisations measure service quality using key performance indicator (KPI) or net promoter score. KPI is about what is important to know for the service organisations when evaluating the performance of their service [5]. A set of KPI would be selected differently depends on what is important to the organisation [6] and what kind of service the organisation provides. For a field service, the possible KPIs might be labour time as a % of total planned time, travel time as a % of total planned time, first time fix rate, and real time reporting +/- 15 minutes [7]. For instance, when a customer uses a computer repairing service, how much time the technician spent for the repair, how fast he/she arrived at the site, whether the technician repaired it during first visit or not, and how much time the technician spent for the real time reporting might be the key performance indicators (KPIs) for the service organisation in order for them to evaluate the service. Net promoter score is measured by answering to a question, “How likely is it that you would recommend our company/product/service to a friend or colleague?” [8]. The scale of scoring for this answer is mostly from 0 to 10 and the higher score indicates the stronger recommendation. Since the scale is numeric, Net promoter score is easy to compare. In addition, it is useful when measuring a new service’s impact, even though it does advise you how to make it better [9].

The most well-known techniques of how customers evaluate service quality are SERVQUAL and RATER. SERVQUAL is a framework for measuring service quality which was introduced by Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry [10]. It measures gaps between organisation’s intended service and the actually delivered service [9]. Ten determinants affecting the gaps are used for the measurement and they are competence, courtesy, credibility, security, access, communication, knowing of the customer, tangible, reliability, and responsiveness. RATER is a refined framework of SERVQUAL introduced afterwards. It measures gaps between the expectations and the experience using five key dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy, and responsiveness. RATER is one of the most used models when evaluating customers’ expectations and perceptions of the service quality [11].

The above-mentioned methods primarily measure one or several attribute that might affects the evaluation of the service quality. Holistic approach of evaluating service quality is missing. Choosing a set of KPIs and measuring service quality using net promoter score, SERVQUAL, or RATER can be subjective based on the individual's opinion. Therefore, there is a need for a method that enables to measure service quality in an objective way. The aforementioned methods are more focused on the outcome of service. Service quality is about what is delivered (outcome) and how it is delivered (process) [12]. Thus, we need to take care of not only the outcome but also the process.

Focusing on "critical incidents" during service provision and consumption can be a solution as a way of measuring service quality objectively. Applications of critical incident technique (CIT) has been introduced by several researchers as means of collecting and classifying satisfactory events or unsatisfactory "critical incidents" of customers' service experiences [13-16]. However, Stauss and Weinlich criticised that only exceptional customer encounters are recorded and the process oriented-characteristic of services has not been taken in CIT [17]. They introduced sequential incident technique (SIT), as means of collecting and classifying not only the critical incidents, but also the usual, uncritical incidents by applying the story-telling method [17]. However, SIT is based on data collected from interview that is time-consuming and costly. In addition, both CIT and SIT are focused on measuring quality of services that customers' already experienced and not measuring quality of services that were expected.

Expected and experienced service performance might be compared and used in a process-oriented approach as an input to monitor the quality of services. However, describing both expected and perceived service performance can be challenging. The reason is because a service performance follows a sequence of events which involves many details and activities and the details and activities are often difficult for the casual observer to detect [18]. Several methods and tools supporting description of service performance have been introduced. Yet, there have been little attention on how service performances are described and what lacks in the existing methods. This leads to the following research questions:

Q1. Which methods and tools are used for description of service performances in practice?

Q2. What are the challenges when people use the methods and tools?

3 Methods

Case study methodology was used to answer the research questions. We conducted an online survey with people working with service design and service development in Norway. Fifty-four people were participated in the online survey. A service design seminar was held in January 2015 in Norway. We sent out an invitation email to a voluntary participation of the survey to the people who attended the seminar. Statistical analysis and qualitative content analysis [5] was used when we analysed the collected data.

4 Results

Twenty-five male and twenty-nine female participants answered the online survey questions. The average age was 40 years old. The role of the participants vary. The majority of the participants were business developers and people with design competences. Fifteen people were in leadership positions while five people were software developers.

The results from our data analysis reveal that customer journey maps were used the most when describing service performances. Storytelling and storyboarding followed customer journey maps. Service blueprints were used less frequently than customer journey maps, storytelling and storyboarding. We also found that the methods and tools for business process management such as Unified Modelling Language (UML) and Business Process Model and Notation (BPMN) were also used to describe service performances. Surprisingly 22.9% of the participants answered that they did not use any specific methods and tools.

Regarding the challenges when describing service performances with existing methods and tools, many participants answered that it is difficult to see the whole process in a straightforward or intuitive manner. A participant emphasised that during a service delivery process there is often quite a lot of information to be communicated and the information should be communicated in an easily understandable manner. Another participant highlighted that visualising the complexity in a service delivery process in a simple way is challenging. Several participants answered that it is challenging to get communicated both the whole and the details simultaneously, while some other participants stated that people's knowledge about the tools is lacking. A participant claimed a need for software tools because presenting the results in both presentation and report is double work. Another participant complained that the existing tools are not standardised. One participant answered that using a storytelling might be challenging to describe a service performance, which involves many channels.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In order to enhance operational sustainability of services, the quality of service is needed to be monitored. Several ways of measuring service quality were introduced. From service organisations' perspective, KPI and net promoter score, and from customers' perspective, SERVQUAL and RATER are most widely used. However, these are service quality attribute-based and quite subjective, focusing on the outcome of the services than the process of the services. CIT and SIT were introduced as more ways of evaluating service quality. Nevertheless, they are only focusing on measuring what was delivered without comparing it with what was expected to be delivered. There is a need for methods that can evaluate service quality in a holistic, objective, and process-oriented manner, which can compare the difference between expected and experienced service performances. Goldstein et al. [3] claimed that the fact that a service may be seen as a 'whole experience' has been ignored sometimes. Cook et al. argued that "The perception of service quality results from a comparison of customer

expectations with actual service performance [4].” However, we lack of understanding how service performances are described in practice and what lacks in the existing methods. Using an online survey, we found that customer journey map, storytelling, storyboarding, service blueprints, UML, and BPMN, user stories and film were used to describe service performances. However, surprisingly 22.9% of the participants answered that they did not use such specific methods and tools. The participants answered that describing both the whole and complex details in a service delivery process simultaneously in an intuitive manner is challenging.

We conclude that there is a need for a standardised and consistent method for description of service performances that can illustrate the different communication channels in a service delivery process and support description of both the details and whole process in an easily understandable manner. Poorly specified service is one of the factors that cause the gap between a service organisation’ intends and customer’ expectation [3]. Having a standardised software tool with a guideline, which support illustration of service delivery processes, might contribute to overcome the challenges in the existing methods when describing service performances. Further, the tool will support appropriate assessment of service quality. Cook et al. argued, “Properly conducted, service quality culture and strategic consensus assessment has the potential of informing a service organisation of its current position and potential areas for service system improvement [4].”

A formalised visual language for modelling service journeys has been introduced [19] and tested [20]. Using such language in an analytic way can be helpful when comparing expected and perceived service performances. Furthermore, the result from comparison can be used as an input to improve the quality of services in organisations.

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