
The Customer Is Always Right: The Issue Of Customer Aggression

Is the customer really, always right? The service sector has become one of the fastest growing sectors in Australia's economy and has outpaced the non-service industries by almost 3%. However, this significant and rapid growth in such an important industry, has resulted in the drastic increase in customer aggression. A shocking 90 percent of retail sector employees reported experiencing abuse by customers over a 12-month period (Tidey, 2019.. Abuse by customers towards service workers can cause permanent, physical, psychological and social injuries which is life threatening. An interesting issue needs to be explored are the causes of customer violence. It is important that this area is understood as distressed or injured workers can result in low workplace morale, higher costs due to absenteeism, sick leave, workers' compensation claims and high levels of staff turnover. This essay will seek to critically examine a number of contributing causal factors that lead to increased rates of customer aggression. Firstly, customer aggression will be defined from the perspective of academic literature. Secondly, there will be an analysis of various factors that contribute to customer aggression, these factors include; internal organisational policies, the service environment, as well as customer motivators. Finally, this essay will outline the effects customer aggression has on human resource management and how employers can help reduce the impact of customer aggression.

Firstly, although aggression in the workplace may be exhibited through multiple forms of behaviour, customer aggression must be appropriately defined to fully understand the causes and associated effects. Many studies explore the relationship between management and employees, however in the customer focused service industry, the relationship between customers and employees is become more significant. Dr Alicia Grandey from the department of psychology Penn state university, refers to customer aggression as a phenomenon and defines it as "work behaviours such as yelling, rudeness and threats on multiple levels". Dr Grandey explores verbal, physical and emotional aggression by customers. This report was corroborated by the Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary studies that defines customer aggression as; an incident where a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances arising out of, or in the course of their work. Ultimately, both reports explore that aggression can range from low intensity incivility to high intensity verbal abuse and physical aggression. Overall, it has been discovered that in academic literature customer aggression is defined as unacceptable hostile behaviour exhibited by a current or former customer of an organisation towards an employee that creates an intimidating, frightening or offensive situation and results in mental, physical or emotional harm.

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Customer aggression is a significant problem in modern working life and can affect the outflow of a business. One factor that can be attributed to increased customer aggression is the lack of organisational policies. A study performed by ... interviewed a series of service managers on their theory behind customer aggression. It was found that 1 in 3 managers believed the employees “brought it on themselves”, with one manager associating an employee’s incompetence with having difficulties with a particular customer. However, data taken from participant observation showed that staff training was a significant factor in the causation of customer aggression. It was found that employees with lack of customer handling skills, for example; poor listening, poor signposting and lack of confirmation of the facts, triggered greater customer anger and frustration. This emphasised the importance of an employer’s responsibility to adequately provide the appropriate training to employees. If the organisational policies and internal training associated with helping workers deal with abusive clientele is not sufficient, the business will struggle to improve customer/employee relationships. Dr C Boyd, argues that through policies, procedures, training and management the notion of ‘good customer service’ can be achieved. Boyd, outlines that a ‘good’ worker was one with good customer service skills and who maintained good relationships with the customer. The logic of her study was taken further by implying that workers should be able to “avoid all types of negative customer behaviour if equipped with the right skilful handling techniques”. In order for a business to identify the training required to help improve their customer skills a TNA (training needs analysis) needs to be conducted. This will help a company understand the organisational gap between actual performance and desired performance. In the instance of customer complaints and aggression, an organisational level of analysis must take place. As a result of the analysis, training needs could be ascertained in the relation to handling of customer needs under stressful and time-intensive conditions. Once this analysis has occurred a company can outline the best organisational and training policies to relieve the stress from employees. An effective policy will ensure complaints and aggression are dealt with in the same way.

“The customer is always right” is an ubiquitous organisational mantra that is used in many service environments. Undeniably, in a consumer centred economy it is impossible to ignore the effects of customer satisfaction on organisational success. However, inherent in these formulas is the notion of a power imbalance between customers and employees, which may encourage customers to take advantage of employees. UK psychologist Victoria Bishop coined the phrase ‘the customer is king’, a concept that is now widespread throughout organisations. Bishop highlights that inherent in the notion of consumer sovereignty is the idea of superiority and individual autonomy. This ideology is used by managers to encourage employees to respect the needs of the customer. Service workers are often required to treat customers as ‘king’, and keep up the emotional display required by management, under the pressure of offensive customers. This is often referred to as the term ‘emotional labour’ and was coined after a study conducted by Hochschild (1983), where she argued that flight attendants have to control their emotions in order to provide the service required by managers. Hochschild explained that

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workers are required to think 'profit', no matter how abusive or aggressive the passenger is being. Many studies have outlined the effects of 'emotional labour' and how the ideology of the 'customer always being right' has formed an undesirable service environment and has helped to inflict customer violence. Workers who have to face this imbalanced environment are more likely to experience emotional burnout. This is further explored by Zapf et al, which focuses on power imbalance and the overall effect on an employees output. They explore how when an employer creates an environment where the customer is always in the right, despite their actions there is an increased level of emotional dissonance. This is referred to as highest aspect of stress within the workforce. Although the Service literature journal does not specifically refer to the concept of customer aggression, Korczynski (2002) points out that when customers become irate and abusive that subservience to customers is most keenly felt. Overall, literature on the employee/customer environment paints a picture of a difficult relationship characterised by a power imbalance.

Customer attitude and motivation is another major factor that leads to abuse towards workers and is something that needs to be understood in order to improve the customer employee relationships. There are many forms of customer aggression within the service industry. According to Neuman and Baron (1998) there are a number of external factors that can lead to a customer getting angry. Upon research it was found that a number of factors could include; past experience, language barriers, time, personal reasons and fear. If a customer has had a history of negative service experiences that may trigger future aggression. According to the Queensland health, a reminder of past trauma can have a huge impact on the level of aggression. Language barriers may also be a large trigger for customer anger. In this global marketplace, there are cultural and ethnic language barriers that will come into play. There are also speech barriers such as people who speak too quickly or, people who speak too softly. Some customers may be difficult to understand due to disabilities. Employees need to learn how to recognize these differences and adapt the way you communicate to make it easier for customers to understand. Finally, one of the most difficult factors to determine or analyse is personal reasons and fear. Customers may be going through a difficult time with health, marriage, financial or even family issues. Employees must keep in mind that not all forms of customer aggression are directed at their personality or the ability to perform the role. This is where employees must take some level of empathy and understanding for the customers reaction. Overall, customer attitude and motivation can be a huge factor in causing customer aggression and is often out of the control of employees. Hence, it is important to focus on improving areas such as organisational policies and the service market – thus controlling the areas that can be controlled.

Finally, it is important to explore the implication of emotional, physical or mental abuse by customers. A study by Dr Dickter, explored the stress levels within a call centre. It was found that employees who had to deal with particularly stressful and aggressive calls took more time

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off work for the 3 months of observation. This corroborates that there is a relationship between stress appraisal of customer aggression and absence mediated by emotional exhaustion. According to Muraven and Baumeister, "taking a day off is one way that service employees can restore the energy they have lost". As a result, this suggests that by minimising the level of aggression within the workforce and the stress levels of employees, there will be an overall reduction in the number of lost work hours. From an HRM perspective, there is a wide range of repercussions on workplace absence, including loss of time and production and the cost to a company. If there is an increase in the number of unattendances there is an increased pressure on other employees, decreased productivity and increased supervisory costs. Additionally, according to Xiaoyan Li, the current average turnover rate of a call centre is between 20 to 30 percent. Li addresses that such a high level of turnover suggests that the working conditions faced by employees promote stress. This level of turnover is not sustainable for any business as it is not cost-efficient and does not promote a healthy work environment. Furthermore, human resource management is vital to helping sustain a healthy and successful workplace. The negative effects that come from customer aggression can be addressed from multiple different directions. For example by offering services for employees help cope with the effects of customer abuse, such as therapy or counselling services, you can help to reduce the number of days absent and the turnover rates. Additionally, another area that customer aggression affects is workplace morale. When there is an increase in the effects of abuse this can lead to low levels of morale which in turn leads to low productivity and an unpleasant work environment. To help boost morale in a work force that experiences high levels of abuse a company can offer team building incentives such as; casual Friday or trivia night, alternatively the company could offer daily "stand-up" meetings that allow a manager to address the struggles they are facing. There are important aspects of HRM as they help the profitability, production and overall development of a company. Overall, by understanding that customer aggression negatively affects the business employers can aim to improve workers' physical, mental and emotional health.

This essay has shown a range of factors that cause customer aggression and has outlined the importance of understanding the effects of customer aggression. In this growing service economy and an increased focus on customer satisfaction, there is a staggering increase in customer abuse towards workers. This is not acceptable in this modern society and is something we should consciously work towards improving. Thus, by understanding the factors that cause customer aggression employers and employees can make steps to improve the customer/employee relationship. Though analysing internal organisational policies, a company can understand if they are taking the right steps to train their employees to deal with the effect of customer abuse. Additionally, steps must be taken to change the current service environment. The current service environment has a significant power imbalance that is putting a strain on workers. Finally, by understanding customer motivators for aggression we can help to normalise and thus reduce the impact of aggression. Overall, customer aggression has a large HRM impact including mental, physical and emotional strain on employees, which results in

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high levels of turnover, absence and low morale.

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