

Customer service performance and delivery: A qualitative review

By Professor Colin Talbot, Jay Wiggan, Nicola Hendey, Anthony Rafferty, Rebecca Calcraft, Mark Freestone and Barrie Wyatt

Background

The issue of customer service is a key Jobcentre Plus business priority, as indicated by the Jobcentre Plus target for Customer Service (CST). Customer service management strategies vary between regions, districts and local offices, as can perceptions of customer service issues between staff.

These differences in strategy and perception are explored by in-depth qualitative research conducted through telephone and face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus management and staff.

Objectives

The objectives of the research were:

- To examine the priority given to the delivery of good customer service in general, and more specifically to achieving the Customer Service Target, including establishing where in relation to other Jobcentre Plus targets the CST was ranked.
- To identify obstacles to good customer service performance and explore the strategies used by management at local, district and regional level in managing the CST and wider customer service agenda.
- To identify lessons of good practice and consider how the National Tier can better support the field in achieving the CST and good customer service more widely.

Key findings

- The study indicates two issues central to management of customer service delivery - firstly, the narrow focus of the CST and its relationship with a broader concept of customer service. Secondly, how the CST interacts with notions of 'individual' and 'collective' customer service.
- Findings suggest trade-offs between the 'individual' and the 'collective' with an emphasis on the individual and exploration of their requirements (proactivity) sacrificed in favour of maintaining the ability to process customer enquiries quickly.
- Raising performance in customer service is based on structures and activities that generate ideas of good practice and the cascading of solutions to any customer service problems throughout the district.
- There was a widespread view amongst respondents that a stronger steer from the national tier would help embed a culture of customer service excellence across the organisation.
- Resource and time constraints were identified by all respondents within the study as impacting on the delivery of customer service. In addition, around one third of districts reported problems with telephony.
- There exists considerable support for the National Tier to implement a more comprehensive programme of customer service training during induction and to develop regular 'refresher' updates.

Executive summary

Background

The Jobcentre Plus Vision and Customer Service Charter (see Jobcentre Plus, 2004A; 2004b) set out the standard of service customers can expect during all interactions with the organisation. The specific issue of customer service is a key business priority, as indicated by the Jobcentre Plus target for Customer Service (CST). The role of management in guiding and structuring staff engagement with the CST and broader customer service issues is key. Strategies put in place to achieve this vary between regional, district and local management tiers as can attitudes and behaviour toward and definitions of quality customer service. Similarly the experience of customer-facing staff may diverge from management perceptions and expected practices.

In order to explore these differences in strategy and perception an in-depth qualitative piece of research was conducted through telephone and face-to-face interviews with Jobcentre Plus management at the regional, district and local level (including eleven contact centres). A further eleven focus groups made up of six to eight Jobcentre Plus customer-facing staff were also included.

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- To identify lessons of good practice and consider how the National Tier can better support the field in achieving the CST and good customer service more widely.

Key findings

Customer service expectations, trade-offs and delivery

The study indicates two issues central to customer service performance and delivery: the narrow focus of the CST and its relationship with a broader concept of customer service; and how this interacted with the notion of 'individual' and 'collective' customer service. The CST was perceived by respondents as limited and focused on the individual customer with little recognition that there exists a tension between this and the responsibility customer-facing staff has to the wider customer base of benefit claimants/jobseekers.

Moreover our findings suggest this lead to trade-offs between the 'individual' and the 'collective' with an emphasis on the individual and deeper exploration of their requirements (proactivity) sacrificed in favour of maintaining the ability to process customer enquiries quickly.

A measure of uncertainty existed around negotiating broader understandings of quality customer service with the more specific requirements of performance on the CST. There was some evidence that a concerted drive by District and Business managers toward achieving improved CST performance focused staff attention on relevant CST aspects of customer service. Achieving easy 'wins,' such as ensuring all staff wear their name badges, provide a correct corporate greeting and were able to use Mystery Shopping 'aide memoirs' competently underpinned the approach of management.

It was less clear that measures had been or were being put in place to manage the tensions inherent between a quantitative measure (CST) and the more qualitative nature in general terms of quality customer service.

Measurement and assessment of customer service

The findings from the research indicate that the CST was acknowledged as a useful tool for instilling in staff good basic aspects of customer service and could pick up recurring examples of

poor performance in local offices. In addition, the independence of the Mystery Shopping programme was welcomed, with District Managers feeling it earned esteem for Jobcentre Plus from partner organisations. Nonetheless the snapshot nature of Mystery Shopping assessment, combined with a perception that the interest of National Tier in customer service began and finished with the CST, generated criticism from many respondents. This may in part reflect the decision of customer facing staff and management to focus on this particular element of the role of national tier due to an understandable preoccupation with performance targets. The remit of the national tier covers a range of activities that seek to promote and embed customer service and responsibilities include Charter Mark accreditation, the development of the Quality Assurance Framework and work on a new set of Learning and Development products.

Nevertheless there was a widespread view amongst respondents that a stronger steer from the national tier would help embed a culture of customer service excellence across the organisation. For example, the Job Entry Target was ranked number one in comparison to other Jobcentre Plus targets and was a consistent focus for activity, whilst the salience of the CST was more variable.

District and Business Managers used additional tools to assess the delivery of customer service within their district and local offices. Typically these methods ranged from Mystery Shopping 'dummy runs' and staff observations (QAF) to local and district surveys of customer satisfaction. While it is important to maintain local autonomy and initiative it is necessary to caution that variability in quality of survey tools and data collection could produce misleading information.

Barriers to progress?

About one third of districts reported problems with telephony and the interaction between switchboard operators and local office staff. Misdirected calls and the failure of the switchboard to put customers through were indicated as ongoing problems by Business managers. District and Regional level management with some frustration described the limited control they could exercise over the external contractors operating the switchboards and how this impacted on customer service.

Resource and time constraints were identified by all respondents within the study as impacting on the delivery of customer service. Districts and offices with a high staff turnover linked this directly to local labour market conditions and resource constraints. High throughput of staff led to a diminishing pool of experienced staff and increased the pressure on those remaining, which in turn affected performance on the CST.

There existed considerable support amongst respondents for the National Tier to implement a more comprehensive programme of customer service training during induction and to develop regular 'refresher' updates. However, there was concern amongst some Business Managers that resource issues would make it difficult to release staff.

The District Manager and Customer Service Manager in one district were adamant that having 'bought in' training from external contractors, staff awareness of quality customer service developed and improvements in overall performance occurred. Contact Centre Managers, in contrast, indicated that training provided to call centre staff risked implicitly reinforcing the image of customer service as 'second place', because training products did not adequately fit the nature of their business.

Improving performance and delivery

A range of methods were in operation to monitor current performance and these were used to inform management of current customer service delivery and CST performance where there was a demonstrable need for intervention. Raising performance was based around putting in place structures and practices that facilitated the generation of ideas, and cascading of solutions to any customer service problems throughout the district.

It is clear that regional and district managers saw district-wide customer service networks/ focus groups as a practical and constructive structure for raising issues and disseminating examples of good practice to local offices. At their best, office customer service champions/ representatives occupied a pivotal role at the interface of district customer service strategy and its implementation at ground level. It enabled

the effectiveness of strategies used at local level to be fed back to district and compared with the operation of other local sites.

In addition the position of customer service champion created an extra voice and pressure for customer service improvements within local sites helping to drive the performance agenda forward. However, the research indicates that representatives did not always feel they were able to impact on the behaviour and attitude of colleagues toward customer service and the CST. Strong support from Business Managers was not always forthcoming, and in its absence reshaping current customer service practice could be difficult.

All respondent managers, irrespective of place in the corporate structure, thought that personal leadership was central to instilling in staff the importance of the CST and customer service although there was recognition that this could be overplayed and some focus groups called into question the limited extent to which senior management (district level and above) engaged in the 'back to the floor' initiatives identified.

A number of districts operated 'recognition and reward' schemes to provide a vocational and financial incentive to motivate customer-facing staff to deliver quality customer service, although there was no real indication as to how effective this was thought to be.

A number of managers demonstrated a real enthusiasm for customer service and the importance of the CST and talked of changing the culture of expectations around service delivery. On the other hand some regional, district and local managers viewed customer service, and the CST in particular, as an addition to the primary goal of securing Job entry or quick and accurate benefit processing.

Policy Implications

A genuine desire was broadly evident amongst customer-facing staff and across management to improve delivery with much networking and learning taking place within and between districts. Some of this linked specifically with performance on the CST, but concern to improve customer service more widely was also clear. Harnessing this enthusiasm is a necessary condition for driving forward improvements in customer service and CST performance and delivery.

Outlining a more rounded vision of customer service and recognising the tensions that exist in providing a quality service would help to improve understanding amongst customer-facing staff and the different management layers of the aims of Jobcentre Plus in this area. The perception that greater ownership is needed of customer service at national level further indicates that action around the Jobcentre Plus customer service 'vision' is required.

Respondents perceived a 'measurement gap' between the regular snapshot CST and the broader, but less frequent National Customer Satisfaction Survey and there were some attempt fill this with local or district initiatives. There maybe room here to identify and develop further qualitative and/or quantitative measures to address the desire of respondents for a measure that is more comprehensive than the CST, but offers greater potential for managerial use than the NCSS was currently felt to provide.

The research suggests that greater use of 'on-going' training would help to improve the technical side of delivering quality customer service and send a signal to staff about its significance, thus helping to embed the notion of customer service excellence throughout the organisation.

While the study identifies some differences in managerial approaches to customer service, further research is needed to identify the exact nature of the links between this and actual performance and the extent to which external factors (staff turnover, local socio-economic conditions) intervene in the process.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 871 6. Research Report 276. July 2005).

It is available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

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Paul Noakes, Strategic Research and Modelling Division, 4th Floor, The Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT. E-mail: Paul.Noakes@dwp.gsi.gov.uk