SERVICE QUALITY IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to obtain a better understanding of the extent to which service quality is delivered within the Mauritian public service by drawing on front-line employees (FLE) and customer perceptions of service quality. The paper investigates how closely customer expectations of service and FLE perceptions of customer expectations match. SERVQUAL is used to measure service quality amongst FLE and customers in a major public sector department in Mauritius. The survey captures customers' expectations of an excellent public service and compares these with their perceptions of the service delivered by a particular public service department in Mauritius. The paper also reports on a parallel SERVQUAL survey of FLE to examine how well they understand their customers' expectations and how well its internal processes support the delivery of top quality public services.

The findings reveal that while there is a significant shortfall in meeting customer expectations, the FLE appears to have a good understanding of what these expectations actually are. The FLE should focus on those dimensions which receive lowest ratings and attributes with high gap scores. This research adds to the body of knowledge relating to public service quality management. It will also be of interest to strategic and operational public service managers and to academics investigating the reliability and value of service quality assessment tools. It addresses key relationships between service dimensions and service quality within the Mauritian public service.

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KEYWORDS: Service quality, SERVQUAL, Front-line employees, Customer expectations, Public sector, Mauritius

INTRODUCTION

The service industry plays an increasingly important role in the economy of many countries. In today's global competitive environment delivering quality service is considered as an essential strategy for success and survival (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Reichheld and Sasser, 1990; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). Even the public sector organizations have come under increasing pressure to deliver quality services (Randall and Senior, 1994) and improve efficiencies (Robinson, 2003). Customer needs and expectations are changing when it comes to governmental services and their quality requirements. However, service quality practices in public sector organizations is slow and is further exacerbated by difficulties in measuring outcomes, greater scrutiny from the public and press, a lack of freedom to act in an arbitrary fashion and a requirement for decisions to be based in law (Teicher *et al.*, 2002).

Since Mauritius has gained independence in 1968, the public sector has undergone a number of transformations. In 2006, the Government has introduced the Public Service Excellence Award for the public department which excels in all spheres of its operations in order to increase productivity and efficiency (Government of Mauritius, 2006). The public sector is under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their services are customer-focused and that continuous performance improvement is being delivered. The purpose of this paper is thus to examine the service quality concepts and their application in the public service sector in Mauritius. The study uses the SERVQUAL approach to examine the gap between customers' general expectations of a service and their perceptions of the service

received by a specific service provider. This paper investigates how closely customer expectations of service and front-line employees (FLE) perceptions of customer expectations are matched. This approach has been used extensively to assess the quality of private sector services but fewer applications of the approach have been reported in public services.

This paper is organized as follows: the introductory section gives a brief description of the service quality and a background of the Mauritian public service sector. This is followed by relevant literature review pertaining to service quality. The methodology of the research paper is explained, followed by the results of the empirical analysis. Conclusions and managerial implications are noted, and limitations and future directions are discussed. Finally, recommendations for improving service quality within the public service sector of Mauritius based on the findings of the study are provided.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), service quality can be defined as an overall judgment similar to attitude towards the service and generally accepted as an antecedent of overall customer satisfaction (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996). Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) have defined service quality as the ability of the organization to meet or exceed customer expectations. It is the difference between customer expectations of service and perceived service (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). Perceived service quality results from comparisons by customers of expectations with their perceptions of service delivered by the suppliers (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). If expectations are greater than performance, then perceived quality is less than satisfactory and hence customer dissatisfaction occurs (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1985; Lewis and Mitchell, 1990).

Services unlike tangible products are produced and consumed at the same time in the presence of the customer and the service producer. The presence of the human element during the service delivery process greatly increases the probability of error on the part of employees and customers. This error is due to intangible behavioral processes that cannot be easily monitored or controlled (Bowen, 1986). However, although a substantial amount of service quality research has focused on service customers' perceived service quality (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1988; Carman, 1990; Parasuraman *et al.,* 1991; Babakus and Boller, 1992; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Babakus and Mangold, 1992), relatively little attention has been paid to exploring the factors that impact on service employees' behavior with regard to delivering service quality.

More than two decades ago, Surprenant and Solomon (1987) stated that service encounters are human interactions. They suggested that customers and service providers have roles to play during and possibly after service encounters and that these roles are based on "interpersonal interactions" between organizations and customers. Service quality in all service encounters is thus intrinsically affected by the perspectives of both the service provider and the service receiver. Similarly, Czepiel (1990) concluded that research on service quality must always include the perspectives of both the provider and the receiver. However, most research on the service quality construct has been restricted to one perspective: that of the service receiver (Parasuraman *et al*., 1988; Guerrier and Deery, 1998). A few have applied dual perspectives and considered interactive features of service quality in service encounters (Tam and Wong, 2001; Chow-Chua and Komaran, 2002; Dedeke, 2003; Svensson, 2004, 2006).

Because service delivery occurs during the interactions between contact employees and customers, attitudes and behaviors of the contact employees can influence customers' perceptions of service quality (Schneider and Bowen, 1985). Moreover, Beatson *et al.* (2008) found that perceived employee satisfaction, perceived employee loyalty, and perceived employee commitment had a sizable impact on perceived product quality and on perceived service quality. According to Zeithaml and Bitner (1996), contact employees represent the organization and can directly influence customer satisfaction, they perform the role of marketers. Whether acknowledged or not, service employees perform marketing

functions. They can perform these functions well, to the organization's advantage, or poorly, to the organization's detriment. According to Bettencourt and Gwinner (1996) FLE has the opportunity to tailor in real-time not only the services the firm offers, but also the way in which those services are delivered. Customer actions, reactions and other characteristics can have a profound influence on the actions and mannerisms of front-line service personnel (Solomon *et al.*, 1985; Matzler *et al.*, 2004). Customers largely establish their impressions of the organization's level of service provision based on their encounters with FLE. Therefore employees involved in the delivery of front-line services can provide valuable information for improving service. FLE are knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of the service through their contact with customers and this is an important form of feedback that can be used by organizations in decision-making to better serve customers. Research has established a positive correlation between the attitudes of employees and those of customers, including employee and customer perceptions of service quality (Schneider and Bowen, 1985).

The SERVQUAL Model

The SERVQUAL model proposes that customers evaluate the quality of a service on five distinct dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles. The SERVQUAL instrument consists of 22 statements for assessing consumer perceptions and expectations regarding the quality of a service. Perceived service quality results from comparisons by consumers of expectations with their perceptions of service delivered by the service providers (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). It can be argued that the factor underpinning the delivering of good perceived service quality is actually meeting the expectations of the customers. Thus, excellent service quality is exceeding the customers' expectations. Zeithaml and Bitner (2000) suggested that customer expectations are beliefs about a service that serve as standards against which service performance is judged.

Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) suggested that customer expectations are what the customers think a service should offer rather than what might be on offer. Zeithaml *et al.* (1990) identified four factors that influence customers' expectations: word-of-mouth communications; personal needs; past experience; and external communications. A gap is created when the perceptions of the delivered service is not as per the expectations of the customer. This gap is addressed by identifying and implementing strategies that affect perceptions, or expectations, or both (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Zeithaml *et al.*, 1990). Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) stated that SERVQUAL had been designed to be "applicable across a broad spectrum of services" and the format could be adapted to fit specific needs, and that it would be most valuable when used to track service quality trends periodically. They proposed that the SERVQUAL model could be extended to measure gaps in quality and could therefore be used as a diagnostic tool to enable management to identify service quality shortfalls. The gap score is calculated by the perception statements being deducted from the expectation statements. If any gap scores turn out to be positive then this implies that expectations are actually being exceeded. This allows service managers to review whether they need to re-deploy resources to areas of under performance (Wisniewski, 2001). The SERVQUAL instrument ascertains the level of service quality based on the five key dimensions and also identifies where gaps in service exist and to what extent (Table 1).

Table 1: Definition of the SERVQUAL Gaps

Gap 1 (the positioning gap)	managers' perceptions of consumers' expectations and the relative importance consumers attach to the quality dimensions
Gap 2 (the specification gap)	the difference between what management believes the consumer wants and what the consumers expect the business to provide
Gap 3 (the delivery gap)	the difference between the service provided by the employee of the business and the specifications set by management
Gap 4 (the communication gap)	the promises communicated by the business to the consumer do not match the consumers' expectations of those external promises
Gap 5 (the perception gap)	the difference between the consumers internal perception and expectation of the services

Table 1 presents the five SERVQUAL gaps as generally defined by (Zeithaml et al., 1990).

The lower the mean score, the larger the gap in service quality and conversely the higher the mean score, the smaller the gap in service quality. Gaps 1 to 4 are within the control of an organization and need to be analyzed to determine the causes and changes to be implemented which can reduce or even eliminate Gap 5, which is the gap reflecting the difference between customers perceptions and expectations of the firm's level of service. Surveying of employees can help to measure the extent of Gaps 2 to 4 (Zeithmal *et al.*, 1990). This may reveal a difference in perception as to what creates possible gaps.

Criticisms of SERVQUAL

The SERVQUAL instrument for measuring service quality has been subjected to a number of criticisms. Most research studies do not support the five-factor structure of SERVQUAL put forward by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), and administering expectation items is also considered unnecessary (Carman, 1990; Babakus and Boller, 1992). In addition, Cronin and Taylor (1992) have developed their own performance-based measure, the SERVPERF. In fact, the SERVPERF scale is the unweighted perceptions components of SERVQUAL, which consists of 22 perception items thus excluding any consideration of expectations. In their empirical work in four industries, Cronin and Taylor (1992) found that unweighted SERVPERF measure (performance-only) performs better that any other measure of service quality, and that it has the ability to provide more accurate service quality score than SERVQUAL. They argue that current performance best reflects a customer's perception of service quality, and that expectations are not part of this concept. Despite the criticisms, SERVQUAL has been used to measure service quality in a variety of contexts, including hospitals (Bakar *et al.,* 2008), universities (Galloway, 1998), police services (Donnelly *et al.*, 2006), banks (Kangis and Passa, 1997), travel agencies (Luk, 1997) and public utilities (Babakus and Boller, 1992). The wide array of application of such an instrument as SERVQUAL spells confidence in its utilization as a technique for measuring service quality in various business sectors and service industries.

Although some studies did fail to support its structure, Parasuraman *et al.* (1993) defended the use of the different dimensions, based on conceptual and practical grounds. Parsuraman *et al.* (1988) noted that even if it may be necessary to reword or modify some of the items, yet the SERVQUAL scale is applicable in a wide range of business services. However, Parasuraman *et al.* (1991) cautioned that the addition/deletion of items and/or dimensions may result in the loss of the scale's integrity.

Service Quality in the Public Service

Public sector services are responsible and accountable to citizens and communities as well as to its customers. Several researchers have dealt with service quality in public services (Wisniewski and Donnelly, 1996; Rowley, 1998; Wisniewski, 2001; Brysland and Curry, 2001). Brysland and Curry (2001) stated that the literature clearly supported the use of SERVQUAL in the public sector. According to Gowan *et al.* (2001), service provision is more complex in the public sector because it is not simply a matter of meeting expressed needs, but of finding out unexpressed needs, setting priorities, allocating resources and publicly justifying and accounting for what has been done. In addition, Caron and Giauque (2006) pointed out that public sector employees are currently confronted with new professional challenges arising from the introduction of new principles and tools inspired by the shift to new public management. Anderson (1995) also measured the quality of service provided by a public university health clinic. Using 15 statements representing the five-dimensions of SERVQUAL (Parasuraman *et al.,* 1988), she assessed the quality of service provided by the clinic at the University of Houston Health Center. Patients were found to be generally dissatisfied with the five dimensions of SERVQUAL. The highest dissatisfaction was felt with assurance. On the other hand, tangibles and empathy exhibited the lowest level of dissatisfaction. Using the SERVQUAL approach, Wisniewski (2001) carried out a study to assess customer satisfaction within the public sector across a range of Scottish Councils services. In the library

service, the analysis of gap scores revealed that tangibles and reliability had negative gaps which indicate that customer expectations were not met.

On the other hand, responsiveness and assurance were positive implying that customer expectations were actually exceeded by the service provided. Furthermore, Donnelly *et al.* (2006) carried out a study to explore the application of SERVQUAL approach to access the quality of service of Strathclyde Police in Scotland. The survey captures customers' expectations of an excellent police service and compares these with their perceptions of the service delivered by Strathclyde Police. The paper also reports on a parallel SERVQUAL survey of police officers in Strathclyde to examine how well the force understands its customers' expectations and how well its internal processes support the delivery of quality services in the police department. It was found that Strathclyde Police appears to have a good understanding of the service quality expectations of their customers as represented by the responses of elected councilors in the area covered by the force. There is room for improvement in service quality performance both from the viewpoint of the customer and through police force attention to the definition of, and compliance with, service quality standards. Agus *et al.* (2007) carried out a research to identify management and customer perceptions of service quality practices in the Malaysian Public sector. It is important to note that whereas the SERVQUAL model focused on identifying "gaps" between expectations and actual delivery, their model focused only on perceptions of actual service delivery. They used nine of the ten service dimensions identified by Parasuraman *et al.* (1985). Their study looked at the perceptions of management and customers, thereby excluding the views of FLE. It is thus observed that most of the studies to date, have concentrated on service quality in US and European public service sector, while some more recent studies have looked at service quality in developing countries (Agus *et al.*, 2007).

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The SERVQUAL instrument was adopted to measure the quality of customer service as it demonstrated the "gap" between the customers' expectations and the perceptions of FLE of the customers' expectations. The survey questionnaire was thus administered to these two distinct groups of respondents. Each group had a disparate view of the quality of service. The questionnaire used in this study comprised of two parts: Part A contained questions about personal profiles of the respondents including gender, educational level and age. Part B included expectations (E) and perceptions (P) of respondents according to five dimensions and these were tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The items in the questionnaire were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "1 = strongly disagree" to "5 = strongly agree" and the respondents were asked to rate their expectations and perceptions of the various items for the public service. The developed questionnaire was pilot-tested by 15 customers and 5 FLE. It was observed that respondents were confused with the wording of some questions and two questions were repeated. Given that the SERVQUAL instrument can be modified to fit specific research needs, the required wordings were changed and the 22 statements were shortened to 20. Question 5 and question 8, as "promise to do something by a certain time" and "provide its services at the time it promises" have more or less the same meaning, therefore the former one was omitted. Also, statement 18 and 20, as "individual" and "personal" share the same meaning, hence, statement 18 was removed.

Research Sample

This research is carried out in one of the public sector departments in Mauritius. The major function of that public department is to ensure that laws regulating road transport are enforced in order to sustain the social and economic activities of the country. This public department has sub-branches all over the island, and its Head Office is found in Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius. The department provides a range of "at-cost" services. According to Donnelly *et al*. (1995), public sector caters for both customers who pay

for the provision of a service and for those who do not pay for the provision of a service. It is pointed out by Robinson (2003) that public services that charge customers are more likely to be in competition with services offered in the commercial sector, thereby offering the customer a choice. The public department chosen for this study charges customers for its service provisions, but this service is not offered by another commercial sector and thus not in direct competition with other service organizations. However, the customers demand a better service for which they are paying. On the other hand, it can also be argued that public services that are free of charge are less inclined to adopt service quality practices unless pushed by customer demands and government legislations. The survey questionnaire was self-completed by the customers, with assistance available if required. Non-probability convenience sampling was used for data collection purposes. Customers who were leaving the public department were intercepted and those who were willing to participate in the survey were given a questionnaire to fill. Finally, during the second and third weeks of August 2008, a sample size of 250 was targeted and 202 questionnaires from the customers were judged usable for data analysis for this study, giving a response rate of 81%. Furthermore, following discussions with the staff as to the purpose of the research, FLE were given the same survey questionnaire as the customers for self-completion on an individual basis. Of the 30 FLE, 28 returned completed and usable questionnaires resulting in a response rate of 93%.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 14.0 was employed to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics analysis was used to measure respondents' expectation and perception scores. Paired t-test was carried out to test the significant difference between the two means of expectations and perceptions. To compare customers' expectations with their perceptions of the service delivered by the public FLE, a gap score analysis was performed, thus revealing important managerial issues.

RESULTS

The findings of the survey revealed that the sample of customers consisted of 77% of male and 23% of female. More than 57% of the respondents were between the ages of 26-41. Approximately 67% have either School Certificate or Higher School Certificate as highest level of education.

The sample of FLE shows that the gender distribution was 43% of males and 57% of females. With respect to age, the highest proportion of the respondents (43%) fell into the 26-33 year age group, followed by the 18-25 year age group. The question on the educational level of employees showed that 54% of the respondents hold a Higher School Certificate and regarding the employees' year of service, 71% have been in service for less than 5 years.

To test the reliability of the SERVQUAL scale and the internal consistencies of the five dimensions as suggested by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), the research instrument was analyzed using Cronbach's α values for each dimension using data on perceptions, expectations and the differences between the perceptions and expectations. The reliability scores for the public service department customers and its employees are shown in Table 2. Thus, the SERVQUAL instrument is reasonably satisfactory to be used for the public service department, as Nunnally (1994) suggested that a modest reliability range from 0.5 to 0.6 would suffice. The result of Cronbach's α values ranging from 0.515 to 0.929 for customers and 0.437 to 0.855 for FLE fulfils the minimum requirement level of reliability. Therefore the values of the Cronbach's α show that these measures are reliable.

SERVQUAL Analysis

Table 3 displays the gap scores for each service quality attribute of the customers and FLE at the public service department. The table contains the mean ratings, corresponding standard deviations and the t-test results that indicate the level of agreement among customers and FLE, for each attribute. The gap scores for each attribute were calculated by subtracting the expectation means from the perception means. A

negative service quality gap indicates that customer expectations are greater than their perceptions, based on the service provided. Positive service quality gaps result when customer perceptions exceed customer expectations. In this study all service quality gaps were found to be negative and they were statistically significant at 5% levels. Knowing what consumers expect is an essential process in delivering quality service at any level of an operation. Any differences between customer expectations and the organization's perception of customer expectations of quality are important to identify and determine the level service quality provided.

Table 2: Reliability Scores of SERVQUAL Scale for Customers and FLE

Dimensions	Customers			FLE		
	Perception (P)	Expectation (E)	Gap (P - E)	Perception (P)	Expectation (E)	Gap (P - E)
Tangibles	0.695	0.584	0.648	0.772	0.793	0.752
Reliability	0.836	0.515	0.777	0.659	0.521	0.517
Responsiveness	0.864	0.716	0.855	0.458	0.574	0.437
Assurance	0.680	0.575	0.642	0.581	0.585	0.544
Empathy	0.749	0.713	0.710	0.614	0.691	0.566
Overall (20 items)	0.929	0.851	0.915	0.855	0.539	0.735

Table 2 presents the reliability scores for the customers' and FLE perceptions, expectations and gap respectively. According to Nunnally (1994) reliability coefficients greater than or equal to 0.50 are considered sufficient for exploratory studies.

From Table 3, the highest average gap between customer perceptions and expectations exists in the reliability dimension. Among the four items in the reliability dimension, customer responses indicated that the greatest gap existed in the area of FLE 'Provide services at the promised time'. Customers perceived a gap in this area measured at -2.28, the biggest gap among all items. The next greatest gap existed in the area of 'Perform the services right the first time'. The third largest gap was observed in the area of 'Show sincere interest in solving customers' problems', followed by 'Maintain error-free records'. The employees, on the other hand, have a slightly similar perspective. They indicated that the greatest gap in their view was in the area of 'Provides services at the time promised', followed by 'Show sincere interest in solving customers' problems', 'Performs the service right the first time' and 'Maintains error-free records'. These similarities in opinion indicate that it is advisable for the public service department to conduct surveys among its customers and employees to identify the most important areas for improvement. If an organization is not aware of its customers' and employees' requirements, it cannot devote resources effectively to improving those areas that may have the most significant impact on customer satisfaction. Therefore to reduce these gaps, the public service department needs to make improvements in these areas.

According to customer opinion, the second largest gap existed in the responsiveness dimension, and even for employees this dimension has resulted in negative gaps. Among the four items in the responsiveness dimension, both customers and FLE indicated the greatest gap was related to whether the item 'Offers prompt services to customers'. FLE perceived a gap in this area measured at -2.04, the biggest gap among all items. This clearly shows that this public department needs to give more support to FLE so that they can improve the quality of the services they are required to provide to customers. The second largest gap was found to be in the area of 'Inform customers when services will be performed' for the customers and employees; the second most important gap for employees was also observed for 'Always willing to help customers'. The third most important gap perceived by customers was in the area of 'Always willing to help customers.

Table 3: Gaps between Perceptions and Expectations (P-E) for Customers and Employees

Statements	Customers' Gap Scores (P-E)		FLE' Gap Scores	
	Mean	t-value	Mean	t-value
Tangibles				
Have up-to-date equipment	-1.36 (1.49)	12.98	-2.00 (1.36)	7.78
Physical facilities are visually appealing	-1.81 (1.41)	18.17	-1.79 (1.45)	6.52
Employees are well dressed and neat in appearance	-1.17 (1.46)	11.40	-0.86 (0.80)	5.65
Visually appealing materials associated with the service	-1.68 (1.30)	18.46	-1.50 (1.17)	6.78
Reliability				
Show sincere interest in solving customers' problems	-1.98 (1.29)	21.81	-1.75 (1.04)	8.90
Performs the service right the first time	-2.11 (1.29)	23.22	-1.71 (0.94)	9.68
Provides services at the time promised	-2.28 (1.23)	26.21	-2.04 (1.14)	9.47
Maintains error-free records	-1.92 (1.32)	20.67	-1.68 (0.90)	9.82
Responsiveness				
Inform customers when services will be performed	-1.86 (1.34)	19.75	-1.79 (0.96)	9.88
Offers prompt services to customers	-2.09 (1.28)	23.33	-1.89 (0.96)	10.48
Always willing to help customers	-1.85 (.124)	21.19	-1.79 (1.03)	9.16
Readily respond to customers' request	-1.77 (1.35)	18.61	-1.46 (1.10)	7.01
Assurance				
Able to instill confidence in customers	-1.68 (1.23)	19.33	-1.57 (1.26)	6.60
Customers feel safe in their transactions	-1.43 (1.21)	16.77	-1.46 (0.74)	10.41
Employees are courteous at all times	-1.58 (1.19)	18.91	-1.71 (0.98)	9.30
Have the knowledge to answer customers' questions	-1.70 (1.15)	21.03	-1.82 (0.72)	13.33
Empathy				
Have convenient operating hours to all	-1.19 (1.52)	11.10	-1.21 (1.03)	6.23
Employees given personal attention to all	-1.58 (1.46)	15.45	-1.61 (0.79)	10.82
Employees have customers best interests at heart	-1.68 (1.32)	18.13	-1.64 (0.78)	11.14
Employees understanding customers' needs	-1.81 (1.29)	19.94	-1.71 (1.05)	8.65

The value in parentheses indicate the standard deviations for each attributes; all the attributes indicate significance at 5 percent levels. Table 3 presents the gap scores for both the customers and FLE. All the items measuring the customers' and FLEs' perceptions revealed negative gap scores.

For assurance, the greatest gaps perceived by both FLE and customers were in relation to the statement 'Have the knowledge to answer customers' questions'. The second customers' largest gap was related to 'Able to instill confidence in customers', the third most important gap for employees. The third largest gap for customers was in the area of 'Employees are courteous at all times', the second most important gap for employees. It was very interesting to note that the employees themselves knew that they were not being courteous enough to customers. Therefore this is another important aspect that can be improved upon.

According to customer opinion, the fourth largest gap existed in the tangible dimension. Among the four items in the tangibles dimension, customers indicated the greatest gap was related to whether the 'Physical facilities are visually appealing', however second largest gap for employees. The second largest gap was found to be in the area of 'Visually appealing materials associated with the service' for the customers; the third most important gap for employees. The most important gap perceived by employees was in the area of 'Have up-to-date equipment' and the third largest gap for customers. However, both customers and employees perceived 'employees are well dressed and neat in appearance' to be the area of least importance.

Both the customer and employees perceived negative gaps for empathy. Surprisingly among the four items for empathy, the customers as well as the employees have the largest gap for 'Employees understanding customers' needs', followed by 'Employees have customers best interests at heart', 'Employees given personal attention to all' and 'Have convenient operating hours to all'. This shows that employees do not understand customers' needs and are not able to respond to those needs. All the gap scores were negative indicating shortfall in meeting customers' expectations across all dimensions.

Summary of Statistics

Table 4 depicts the service provider gaps based on FLE perceptions and customer expectations. Service provider gaps were calculated by subtracting customer expectations from employee perceptions on each of the individual service dimensions. Previous researchers (Parasuraman *et al*., 1988, 1991) have successfully used this method for calculating difference scores. A negative service provider gap indicates that customer expectations are higher than FLE perceive them to be. A positive service provider gap indicates that customer expectations are lower than FLE perceive them to be. In this study all the service provider gaps were found to be negative and they were statistically significant at 5%. Customers rated the importance of the attributes as reliability, assurance, responsiveness, tangibles and empathy, while the FLE ranked the importance of the attributes as assurance, tangibles, empathy, reliability and responsiveness. The results indicated that FLE believed they were not doing a good job in meeting the customers' expectations. The largest gap was observed for the "reliability" (-1.88), followed by the 'responsiveness" dimension (-1.79) and the attributes under these dimensions were related to the performance of the FLE in providing the service right the first time, solving customers' problems, maintaining error-free records, delivering prompt service, readily responding to customers' request and informing customers when services will be performed. These attributes were the major shortfalls and will require significant attention by public service providers in terms of making improvement efforts.

Knowing what customers expect is an essential process in delivering quality service at any level of an operation. Any differences between customer expectations and the organization's perception of customer expectations of quality are important to identify and determine the level of quality of service provided. Management needs to recognize the importance of the behavioral aspects of service as customers place great emphasis on FLE response to their needs that can vary according to the occasion or purpose for the service. Management needs to ensure that there is appropriate selection and training of FLE so that they are able to perform and display the qualities of responsiveness and reliability regarded by customers as being important.

Table 4: Employees Perceptions and Customers Expectations of Service Dimensions

Dimensions	FLE Perceptions	Customer expectations	Service Provider Gap	t-value
Tangibles	2.87 (0.88)	4.44 (0.45)	-1.42 (1.02)	-7.36
Reliability	2.85 (0.62)	4.74 (0.37)	-1.88 (0.76)	-13.18
Responsiveness	2.82 (0.50)	4.66 (0.44)	-1.79 (0.66)	-14.27
Assurance	2.97 (0.49)	4.70 (0.35)	-1.63 (0.77)	-11.11
Empathy	2.87 (0.41)	4.40 (0.57)	-1.56 (0.67)	-12.43

All dimensions are significant at 5 percent levels. Table 4 shows the service provider gaps based on FLE perceptions and customer expectations. The values represent the mean scores measured on a five-point Likert scale and the values in brackets measured the standard deviation. A negative gap indicates that FLE believed their service delivery did not meet customers' expectations while a positive gap indicates that FLE perceived that their service delivery exceeded customers' expectations

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

From a practical aspect, the study attempted neither to test existing theory nor to develop new research instruments. The study tried to present the findings of assessing the expectations and perceptions of service quality for customers and FLE in a public service context in Mauritius. The assessment of service quality expectations and perceptions investigated in this study has proved to be reliable in the public service setting. The service quality gaps indicated that the public service department was failing to meet the expectations of their customers. The results of this analysis provide evidence that service provider gaps must be reduced. An important step in minimizing service provider gaps is to measure customer expectations and communicate these expectations to FLE. If FLE do not fully understand the needs of customers, they cannot be expected to meet or exceed these needs. The larger the gap, the more serious the service quality shortfall. In fact, the service quality shortfalls in the public service in Mauritius are related to a number of constraints, such as inadequate internal systems to support the FLE and insufficient capacity for quality service delivery. Because of these constraints, FLE are unwilling or unable to perform the service at the level required by customers.

In order to bridge the gap between customers' perceptions of service delivery in the public service in Mauritius, the public service department needs to provide more training to the FLE to enhance their customer service skills. The training should focus on FLE ability to help customers resolve their queries and problems quickly. In the process of resolving such problems, they should show a caring, courteous attitude and a sincere interest in helping customers. Furthermore, FLE should improve their knowledge and skills so that they can provide a fast and reliable service to their customers. When they promise to do something for the customer within a certain time, they must fulfill that promise. More importantly, service enhancement through customer orientation will provide the public sector with an opportunity to gain confidence from the tax-paying public.

Using the SERVQUAL instrument, this study was able to help this public organization identify important areas for improvement in its service delivery. The findings revealed that employees and customers did not have significant differences in opinions in terms of the gaps between their perceptions and expectations of that public organization. The findings are congruent with the studies of Bitner *et al*. (1994) and Schneider and Bowen (1985) where both employees and customers have common perceptions regarding the level of service quality delivered in an organization. This study was therefore able to highlight how important it is for an organization, be it a public sector organization, to conduct a survey and consider the opinions of its customers and its employees in identifying areas for service quality improvements. It is therefore very important for them to know how customers evaluate service quality and what they can do to measure and improve service quality. Therefore, to exceed customer expectations, it is necessary for even a public sector organization to continually improve the quality of service provided to its customers.

Limitations and Future Research

There were limitations in this study that need to be acknowledged. First, the study was limited to one public sector department, therefore the reliability of the results restrict the extent to which the findings can be generalized across the Mauritian public service. Secondly, this study looked at the perceptions of FLE and customers, thereby excluding the views of management. Given the financial and resource constraints under which public sector organizations operate, it can be argued that it is crucial to measure management perceptions of organizational service quality practices so that they can also understand customer expectations. Such information will then assist management in identifying cost-effective ways of closing service quality gaps and of prioritizing which gaps to focus on, a critical decision given the scarcity of resources. Thirdly, Parasuraman *et al*. (1991) original argument that SERVQUAL's five dimensions are transportable to other service sectors remains to be verified in the other Mauritian public sector. This study provides public service quality researchers with useful guidelines for future research.

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