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SOURCES OF CUSTOMER SATISFACTION AND DISSATISFACTION WITH INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY HELP DESKS

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Abstract

As the use, development, and control of information systems continues to become diffused throughout organizations and society, the information technology (IT) help desk function plays an increasingly important role in effective management and utilization of information resources. Various referred to as information centers, software support centers, software hotlines, and PC help desks, such centers have been established to help end users resolve problems and obtain information about new functions in the information systems they use.

This study investigates the determinants of customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction with service encounters involving information technology help desks. The IS satisfaction research that has been done to date has viewed satisfaction as an attitudinal, bipolar evaluative construct (Melone 1990; Heckman 1993). Satisfaction as viewed in this way is a relatively enduring, stable cognitive state. In the marketing literature, however, satisfaction has also been conceptualized as a less enduring post-consumption response. In this study, a conceptualization of the satisfaction construct based on the service encounter and consumer product satisfaction literatures (e.g., Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990) is adopted as a starting point. After responses to help desk service encounters have been analyzed from this perspective, an attempt is made to integrate these findings with attitudinal satisfaction constructs.

The study employs the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), an inductive, qualitative methodology. It consists of a set of specifically defined procedures for collecting observations of human behavior and classifying them in such a way as to make them useful in addressing practical problems (Flanagan 1954). It is a method that is comparable to other inductive grouping procedures such as factor analysis, cluster analysis, and multidimensional scaling. Unlike other such procedures, however, CIT uses content analysis of stories rather than quantitative solutions in the data analysis stage of the procedure. The study addressed four research questions:

1. What specific behaviors and events lead to user/customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction with IT help desk service encounters?
2. Are the underlying events and behaviors that lead to satisfactory and dissatisfactory encounters similar? That is, are these events and behaviors opposites or mirror images of each other?
3. Are the underlying events and behaviors in help desk service encounters similar to those found in other contexts?
4. Can an understanding of user/customer responses to help desk service encounters shed light on the development and modification of attitudinal satisfaction constructs such as UIS (Ives, Olson and Baroudi 1983), EUIS (Doll and Torkzadeh 1988), and VPIS Satisfaction (Heckman 1993)?

Descriptions of approximately 500 incidents have been obtained to date and analyzed. A tentative classification scheme was developed from the preliminary analysis. It was modeled after the incident classification scheme developed by Bitner, Booms and Tetreault and uses the same three major categories: core service failure, special customer request, and extraordinary provider behavior. As in the Bitner, Booms and Tetreault analysis, results suggest that a core service failure does not inevitably lead to dissatisfaction. Initial analysis also suggests that while the scheme is applicable in some ways, the knowledge-based nature of the IT help desk service encounter requires several additional constructs to account for various customer responses.

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