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THE INSTITUTE OF CUSTOMER SERVICE

The Institute of Customer Service is the not-for-profit, independent professional body for customer service. The Institute’s mission is to lead customer service performance and customer service professionalism.

The Institute has a diverse organisational membership drawn from across the private and public sectors. Members develop good practice and leading edge thinking through, for example, participation in this, the Institute’s Breakthrough Research Programme, as well as by involvement in and access to national and regional networking, study tours, benchmarking and publications.

A wide range of organisational membership categories is available to meet the needs of all types and sizes of organisation.

The Institute sets the national standards on which customer service qualifications and awards are based, and offers individual membership to those who can demonstrate achievement in customer service or who support others with their achievements.

Three broad categories of individual membership are available:

- Practitioners: those who deliver customer service to a defined national standard
- Assessors, Developers and Trainers: those who support customer service practitioners to develop their ability to deliver customer service to a defined national standard
- Leaders and Managers: those who lead and manage customer service and create the environment in which customer service practitioners can deliver to a defined national standard.

Membership brings professional recognition, opportunities to keep up to date with developments and initiatives in customer service and access to the experience and support of other customer service professionals.

The Institute believes that building the self-confidence and self-esteem of customer service professionals will benefit not only the individuals concerned but also their organisations and, ultimately, their customers.

As part of its commitment to provide service leadership in customer service development, the Institute - through its Breakthrough Research Programme - is pioneering cutting edge research on a range of service related themes. The Breakthrough Research Programme was formed to co-ordinate research activity and involves senior representatives from member organisations and leading academics.

This report is based on the experiences of customer-facing staff in five organisations previously identified - in Professor Robert Johnston’s original report ‘Service Excellence = Reputation = Profit’ - as having a reputation for service excellence. It shows how front-line staff deliver excellent service and, crucially, how they manage to do so day after day, week after week and month after month.

The Institute is delighted to hear from anyone wishing to join this community of organisations and individuals dedicated to professionalism in customer service.

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INTRODUCTION

Service, whether excellent, poor or just ordinary is, in the main, delivered by front-line employees. These people, individually and collectively, play a key role in service organisations. They provide the prime contact with customers. They represent the organisation to the outside world. They provide the conduit for orders, income, queries and complaints and they deliver the service to the organisation’s customers.

While some organisations have been replacing front-line employees with technology or do-it-yourself service, the leading-edge organisations in this study have demonstrated that their front-line employees provide them with a distinct and important means of delivering outstanding service. The genuinely personal and caring service that they deliver makes a difference. Investing management time and effort in supporting front-line employees, in the right way, pays off not only in terms of outstanding service but also in terms of the impact on the bottom line.

This study had three objectives framed in terms of questions:

1. What does service excellence mean to the people who deliver it?
2. How do they go about delivering it?
3. What are the conditions that enable and encourage them to deliver it?

We also wanted to identify the ‘secrets of success’ gleaned from five service organisations with reputations for excellent service; First Direct, the RAC, Shangri-La Hotels, Singapore Airlines and Tesco.

This report is based on interviews with 19 front-line employees at these five outstanding organisations. The interviews with these employees have provided us with some intriguing and challenging ideas about how service organisations can go about improving, at little or no cost, the service they provide to their customers, both internal and external.

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Robert Johnston is Professor of Operations Management at Warwick Business School. Before moving to academia Dr Johnston held several line management and senior management posts in a number of service organisations in both the public and private sectors. Dr Johnston continues to maintain close and active links with many large and small organisations through his research, management training and consultancy activities.

During the past 15 years at Warwick Business School Dr Johnston has been researching operations management issues in the delivery of service, in particular service design, service recovery, performance measurement and service quality. Dr Johnston is the co-author or editor of over 25 books and has contributed 28 chapters to other texts. He has published around 40 articles in refereed journals and has written over 60 case studies and three computer based simulations.

Dr Johnston has served as associate dean of the Business School for four years and as a member of the School’s management committee for 10 years. He has also been head of group and director of two MBA programmes. Dr Johnston is the founding editor of the International Journal of Service Industry Management and he also serves on the editorial board of the Journal of Operations Management, the International Journal of Internet and Enterprise Management and the International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research. He is a founder member and board member of the European Operations Management Association, a member of the steering committee of the International Academy of Services Research and Education, a member of the Services Management International Advisory Board, EGAD, Mexico and a board member of the Performance Measurement Association.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study had three objectives:

1. What does service excellence mean to the people who deliver it?
2. How do they go about delivering it?
3. What are the conditions that enable and encourage them to deliver it?

To front-line employees service excellence simply means ‘helping people’, customers and colleagues. Excellent service is primarily concerned with delivering the promise and dealing well with complaints. Outstanding service is delivered by genuinely committed and caring front-line employees.

In terms of delivering excellent service the front-line employees at the five organisations recognised for their reputations for delivering excellent service had developed personal interaction into an art form. They delivered their promise in the style of the organisation’s ‘personality’ which seemed to be embodied in the way they worked. Despite the size and complexity of the organisations these employees realised that their personal interaction with a customer could make a difference and they often used friendly banter with the customers and their own personality to develop their relationships with them.

There were four key enablers of excellence that made it easy and indeed possible for them to take responsibility, act professionally and deliver excellent service to their customers. The support of colleagues, team leaders and managers was essential. Support from managers came in the form of mentoring and coaching and support for personal issues. Management by appreciation was much in evidence. All the organisations’ systems and procedures were user (employee) friendly and made it easier for people to do their jobs well. Finally the organisations’ values underpinned their cultures - what people did and how they did it. These values were ingrained in behaviours.

Additionally, these enablers resulted in several virtuous cycles. Because employees were given responsibility and they enjoyed what they did, this enjoyment rubbed off on their customers, which in turn improved the rapport and bond between them. The front-line employees also had strong feelings towards their organisations and this bond both further underpinned and strengthened the organisation’s culture and values. The final virtuous cycle was a financial one. Many of these front-line employees exercised considerable commercial judgement based on their understanding of the financial consequences of their decisions. As a result excellent service was delivered cost effectively.

The key findings are summarised in figure 1.

The aim of this research was to shed some light on not only how the people responsible for actually delivering service to customers go about delivering excellent service, but also how they manage to keep doing it day after day, week after week and month after month. The purpose was to try to distil what makes organisations with a reputation for excellent service so successful and provide us with an opportunity to share the secrets of their success.

There were several findings which were neither new nor surprising, including, for example, the importance of team working, customer (internal and external) focused systems and procedures, an open and supportive management style and well designed complaints systems.
There were also several findings which provided some new insights into how outstanding organisations deliver excellent service through their front-line staff, many of which we believe will challenge even the best service providers! The report highlights the importance of ‘banter’ between employees and customers, the need to interact and communicate with the customer rather than simply ‘do the job’, the need to provide employees with customer and financial feedback and to allow employees to get on and make decisions about how best to deal with most situations. Many front-line employees are faced with potentially routine jobs yet by focusing on the customers, by recognising that each of them is different and by allowing the front-line employees to be ‘service professionals’, these organisations create caring employees and enable the delivery of excellent service.

Without doubt the right employees deliver superior customer service and shareholder value. While delivering excellent, even outstanding service might be the job of the front-line employee, the challenge for managers is enabling it to happen by designing the right systems, creating the right culture and nurturing and supporting their front-line employees in the right way. The report concludes with ten ‘secrets of success’ and twelve suggestions for managers that we believe will make a difference to the service their organisation provides.
PART 1
THE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

The ICS research report entitled Service Excellence = Reputation = Profit [1] which documented the results of the first stage of this project posed four questions. Two questions were from a customer perspective:

1. What is meant by a reputation for service excellence?
2. Which organisations have such a reputation?

As a result of a series of focus group interviews it became clear that excellent service manifests itself simply as “being easy to do business with”. From the customer’s perspective this involves the organisation delivering the promise, providing a personal touch, going the extra mile and resolving problems well. Problem resolution and complaint management were found to have a particularly significant impact on customers’ assessment of an organisation’s reputation for service excellence. In total, 120 people were asked to identify those organisations that had such a reputation and those organisations that had a reputation for delivering poor service.

Two further questions took an organisational perspective:

3. How can service organisations develop and sustain a reputation for service excellence?
4. Does excellent service deliver bottom line benefits?

Based on interviews with senior executives in five of the top ten organisations with a reputation for delivering service excellence, it was evident that service excellence was the result of committed staff, a service culture, service focused systems and a distinct ‘service personality’ (see figure 2).

Figure 2 Key components of service excellence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committed staff</th>
<th>A service culture</th>
<th>A service personality</th>
<th>Easy to do business with</th>
<th>Financial benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer-focused systems</td>
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Analysis of the financial performance of over 40 organisations demonstrated that the organisations with the better reputations for delivering service excellence were also those that performed better in terms of profit, return on equity and profit per employee, for example.
However, there is a missing link - the role of front-line employees in delivering excellent service (see figure 3). The aim of this research is to shed some light on not only how the people responsible for actually delivering service to customers go about delivering excellent service, but also how they manage to keep doing it day after day, week after week and month after month. The purpose is to try to distil what makes organisations with a reputation for excellent service so successful and provide us with an opportunity to share the secrets of their success.

Figure 3  The missing link

This research has three main objectives framed in terms of questions:

1. What does service excellence mean to the people who deliver it?
2. How do they go about delivering it?
3. What are the conditions that enable and encourage them to deliver it?

No managers were interviewed in this research, just front-line employees. This report provides the view from the front-line.

1.1 THE FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES

Between three and five front-line employees were interviewed in each of five organisations; First Direct, the RAC, Shangri-La Hotels, Singapore Airlines and Tesco. These organisations were identified as having reputations for excellent service and were also used as the sample frame in the previous report.

The interviewees were in part self-selecting, i.e. they expressed a willingness to talk to the researchers, and in part they were selected by their managers. This selection was based on who was available at the time the interviews were scheduled to take place (depending on shift patterns), and our request for the organisations to provide a mix of people who had been in post for a short and a long time and who could represent a range of views. The critical criterion was that they should all have significant customer contact.
In total 19 people, ten women and nine men, were interviewed and the interviews lasted around one hour each. The jobs of the 19 front-line employees were as follows:

- **First Direct**: Three customer service representatives from the Leeds call centre.
- **RAC**: Two patrol officers from the West Midlands area and three call centre operators from the RAC Centre in Walsall.
- **Shangri-La**: A guest service agent, a cleaner, a waiter, a doorman and a chef at the Shangri-La Hotel in Bangkok.
- **Singapore Airlines**: A Singapore-based customer service officer, a passenger relations officer, and a purser (senior flight attendant).
- **Tesco**: From the Sheffield branch of Tesco, one general assistant, a customer service assistant, and a management trainee.

Three people had been with the organisations for less than one year and three for more than 15 years. The average length of service was eight years.

Some individuals were much more articulate than others, but all of them seemed to share a passion for the organisation, a love of the job and a willingness to talk openly about their job, and their relationships with colleagues and managers.

### 1.2 THE INTERVIEWS

With the exception of the Shangri-La Hotel in Bangkok, the interviews were held in English. The English language skills of the front-line employees in Bangkok was not strong so they were interviewed by a Thai national (a researcher at Warwick Business School) and the transcripts were then translated into English.

Many of the interviewees were initially nervous about being interviewed and also, with their agreement, the presence of a tape recorder. However, the interviews were conducted in an informal way and the interviewees very quickly relaxed and even enjoyed talking to us. Indeed some of them were difficult to stop!

The interviews were conducted as an informal chat and questions were deliberately kept open-ended. There were seven open-ended questions that were used to structure and guide the discussions. No leading questions were asked.

1. Can you tell me a little about your job here?
2. Do you enjoy your job? ..... Why?
3. Can you tell me what ‘excellent service’ means to your customers?
4. How do you personally contribute to the organisation’s reputation for excellent service?
5. What about when things go wrong and customers complain - how do you deal with those situations?
6. What are the difficulties in delivering such great service day after day?
7. Why did you choose to work for this organisation?
1.3 METHOD

All the interviews were transcribed. The verbatim materials covered over 200 pages, and averaged 4,630 words per interview, nearly 83,000 words in total. The comments and descriptions were then analysed using a grounded theory approach. Initially the structure which emerged from the first report was adopted but several different themes emerged and the comments were restructured in line with the emerging themes and ideas.

Each set of comments for each theme was entered onto an Excel spreadsheet, then the sheets were combined so that the material across the organisations could be compared and contrasted. This was captured on 168 sheets of paper (see figure 4).

Figure 4  Professor Bob Johnston with the initial thematic structuring of the comments

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1 Grounded theory is an interpretative, hermeneutic case-based approach to research which allows for an investigation of the many contextual variables. It is not based on a priori assumptions or hypotheses but derives explanations of social phenomena based on observations, deduction and interpretation. While a grounded theory approach is unsuitable for drawing inferences to a larger population, the objective of such research is to use case studies for explanatory purposes and to generalise back to, and refine, theory.
1.4 REPORTING THE DISCUSSIONS

Several verbatim quotes have been included in this report to provide a taste of the discussions. They also provide an insight into the passion felt by these individuals for what they did. We have amended some of the quotes to try to ensure they are not attributable to any one individual. The intention is not to single out any individual or indeed any one of the organisations. The information has been provided to highlight what appears to constitute good practice so that other individuals and organisations can use the ideas to help them improve the service that they provide.

Some quotes have been placed in the text as an integral part of the narrative. Others have been included in boxes - these are supplementary and are used to illustrate some of the key points in the narrative.
2. **A GREAT PLACE TO WORK**

Most of the respondents reported that their jobs were challenging, demanding, stressful, and at times, not much fun. To quote an RAC patrol:

*You have got the danger of the roads and you have got the situation of a potentially irate customer, and, let’s be honest, doing a wheel change on the side of the M5 and it is pouring down with rain is not fun at all.*

There is the challenge that you have to meet sales targets. (FD)

It is a demanding job. (RAC)

It can be very stressful. (RAC)

It is a demanding job. Especially when it is really, really busy and to keep those standards up is difficult. (RAC)

There are plenty of problems about work. (S-L)

It’s difficult at times - ticketing is complex. (SIA)

It’s difficult to be excellent all of the time. (Tesco)

However they all, without exception, really enjoyed their jobs.

2.1 **LOVE THE JOB**

All of the respondents were asked if they enjoyed working for the organisation. From the general assistant in Tesco with eight months in the job, through to the doorman who had worked seven years at the Shangri-La to the SIA customer service officer with 25 years’ experience, the answers were unhesitating and positive. Although the precise answers varied and were in their own words, they were the sort of responses that many organisations would be envious of. (Throughout this report we have illustrated points with occasional quotations. On this occasion we have included the direct quote from every respondent.)

**Do you enjoy working here?**

**First Direct**

*I think it is good here, I really do…. I get a real buzz….*

Yes. Obviously all jobs can get a little bit tedious at times but yes I do. *I really do like working for First Direct. I love it. It is a fun place to work, it really is.*

**RAC**

*I love it.*

Yes ..it is the people enjoyment factor.

Yes I do.

I get bored. *That is my choice I am doing this job because it suits me…. But I enjoy it and I enjoy talking to the members.*

Yes I do. *I feel at home here, 99% happy here. It changed my life.*

**Shangri-La**

*I am satisfied, otherwise I wouldn’t be seven years working here.*

Yes, I do.

Yes … it strengthens my life experiences.

*I have chosen my path, so I like it anyway.*

Yes, I do. *I love my work. My job is fun.*

**Singapore Airlines**

Yes everything.

*Oh yes. I enjoy it to the maximum I look forward to coming to work every day.*

Of course. *I still look forward to every flight.*
Tesco
Yes I love it.
Yes it is challenging but I would not come back for another day if I did not enjoy it.
Yes I do actually.

2.2 WHAT MAKES IT GOOD?

All the interviewees were asked why they enjoyed the job. Three clear and distinct themes emerged (see figure 5)

- The job
- The support
- The outcomes

Figure 5 The view from the front-line - the job, the support, the outcomes
2.2.1 The job

These front-line employees enjoyed what they did. Their roles, which some people might consider routine, were far from routine and their view of them may be quite different to what one might expect. Section 3 describes how they see their roles.

It really is a good fun place to work. (FD)
Everything is different, every day is different. (RAC)
Because every customer is a new experience.
It will never get dull. You never find it so routine. (SIA)
No two days are the same. (Tesco)

These individuals were quite clear what excellent service means to their own customers, quite different in each case, but taken together they provide an insight into why these organisations are outstanding (see section 4).

Section 5 provides some insights as to how these front-line employees go about delivering excellence, including the importance of developing a rapport with their customers.

Just talking to different people rather than just sitting at a desk job. I like to have a little conversation. (RAC)
I love meeting the public, have a good chat to them. (Tesco)

Two themes emerged which shed light upon one key question – how do these individuals manage to provide such great service day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year. They saw their role as a service professional (section 6) and having personal responsibility for the job (section 7).

I have got loads of discretion. (FD)
And then we are encouraged to not be like robots. (FD)
We get feedback on our own performance and are left to get on with the job. (RAC)
So we just leave it to the crew to deliver what is necessary. (SIA)
Years ago, when my English skill was not so good, I knew it was my disadvantage. I felt frustrated very much. Nobody needs to tell me, even my supervisor, I knew it was my problem myself. I solved it by applying for further English study. (S-L)

2.2.2 The support

Much of the enjoyment of the job was a result of the people they worked with. And, without exception, these front-line employees loved the people they worked with. The team working and ‘family’ atmosphere really made the difference (section 8).

Colleagues who you work with, management are approachable. (RAC)
I enjoy the people. It is a nice environment, the people are nice. (RAC)
We live together as a family. (S-L)
I just like coming to work to meet people and I love the people I work with. (Tesco)
Well I think the people I work with are really nice. We try to work as a team. The staff are brilliant. (Tesco)
Another key element in the supportive culture was management. Managers, team leaders/supervisors and line managers were seen to be incredibly helpful and supportive (section 9). Section 10 describes the employees’ views of their organisation’s systems. Again they reported that they helped rather than hindered the delivery of excellent service.

Your managers are right behind you, your team leaders are right behind you. (FD)
I feel over the years that they have looked after me. As and when I have required ... they have given me support. (RAC)
The management listens to our opinions. We can tell supervisors about what makes us uncomfortable. Overall, we live as siblings. (S-L)
My company treats us very well. (SIA)
If you have got any problems they will sort them out. (Tesco)

The first report identified the importance of strong organisational values in underpinning a culture of service excellence. Although we did not ask direct questions about values, in section 11 we ask if those values are embodied in these front-line employees.

2.2.3 The outcomes

Enjoyment of the job resulted in several virtuous cycles. Because they enjoyed what they did, this enjoyment rubbed off on their customers, which in turn improved the rapport and bond between them (section 12.1). The front-line employees also had strong feelings towards their organisations and this bond both further underpinned and strengthened the organisation’s culture and values (section 12.2). The final virtuous cycle was a financial one. It appears that many of these front-line employees exercised considerable commercial judgement based on their understanding of the financial consequences of their decisions. Excellent service was delivered cost effectively (section 12.3).

2.3 SUMMARY

• Every one of these employees enjoyed working for their organisation.
• Three things made the difference for them; the job, the support they receive and the outcomes or results that they get from doing their job.

2.4 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. How would your employees reply to the question, do you enjoy working here?
2. What are their reasons?
3. Why not ask them?
4. Do you enjoy working here?
5. Are their reasons the same as yours?
6. What are you going to do about it?
The front-line employees interviewed identified five key elements to their jobs (see figure 6):

- The role of the front-line employee
- Having a clear understanding of service excellence - what it means to their customers
- How they go about delivering excellent service
- Their roles as service professionals, with responsibility for diagnosis and decision making
- Having personal responsibility for their job.

Figure 6 The job
3. THE ROLE OF FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES

If you think that RAC patrols fix cars then you would be mistaken. If you think that a general assistant in Tesco stacks shelves or a Shangri-La cleaner just cleans rooms then you would be selling them short. In essence, all of these 19 front-line employees from five very different service organisations saw their jobs in exactly the same way - ‘helping people’. Those ‘people’ were sometimes external customers and sometimes internal customers (see section 8). The critical point is that they saw themselves in a ‘helping people’ role. Their job was not selling financial products, or cleaning rooms, or making food, it was helping their customers by assessing their real needs and then delivering the solution.

*We are encouraged to talk to the customer and discuss things with the customer and to discover what they need and try to offer them the best solution. (FD)*

3.1 HELPING PEOPLE

The most striking example is provided by the RAC. It was patently clear that RAC employees don’t fix cars, they fix people.

*That is the difference - we class the customer first. The customer is first, not the car. I think that is the secret to our success - we are treating the person, not the vehicle. Everybody is a trained mechanic so everyone can treat the vehicle but what matters is how you deal with the person. When you turn up and get out the van you talk to them. You are dealing with them rather than the car.*

Likewise the RAC’s call centre operators deal with people who need help, not broken down cars:

*I am a breakdown specialist where I actually take incoming calls from people that need help.*

This ‘customer focus’ of the job was summarised by an RAC patrol:

*The job is dealing with customer needs - 70% is about fixing the person, 30% is about fixing the car.*

The front-line employees at all the organisations similarly described their job as attending to the customers’ needs, first diagnosing those needs (see the role of the service professional section 6) and then helping them with those needs. If, for example, the RAC’s customer needed urgently to get to an appointment, the patrol might leave the car and take the customer to the destination. At First Direct the employees saw their job as helping people do whatever they needed to do, move money, make an investment or just get themselves out of a pickle:

*A lot of customers come on, particularly in lending, who have got themselves in a pickle and it is embarrassing to tell your bank “I am in a pickle, I have got no money can you help me?” You just put them at their ease by talking to them and asking them how they got into this problem. You find out the background to it. And afterwards they will say, “I wish I had phoned earlier, if I had known you were going to talk to me.” It isn’t painless for them, but they go away feeling that they have asked for something that they really don’t want to have to ask for but they feel we have treated them as people.*
The front-line employees at Tesco described their jobs as helping people not stacking shelves or taking money off people. The employees at Shangri-La defined their roles as helping people not as cooking, cleaning or opening doors. Singapore Airlines’ employees were committed to helping their passengers in any way they could.

These front-line employees saw their jobs very simply as ‘helping people’ - and that’s just what they did.

3.2 SUMMARY

- These front-line employees all saw their role as ‘helping people’.
- By focusing on the broader nature of the role, rather than the task of cleaning rooms or fixing cars, these employees were able to focus on the customer - understanding their needs and delivering solutions.

3.3 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. How do your employees describe their jobs to other people - fixing cars (or your equivalent) or ‘helping people’?
2. Do they help people (customers and each other) or do they just do the job?
3. How do you describe their jobs?
4. How do you communicate that view to your employees?
5. What are you going to do as a result?
4. UNDERSTANDING SERVICE EXCELLENCE

The interviewees were quite clear about how they could help their customers, i.e. what excellent service meant for their customers. However, this varied between organisations and from person to person since they performed different jobs. A chef, for example, was concerned about taste and freshness, whereas a call centre operator was concerned about responsiveness. Although they all had slightly different perspectives, importantly, they each were quite clear about their own personal contribution to the customers’ total service experience. The following boxes provide some of the descriptions of what excellent service meant to the employees. These will be analysed in the following sub-sections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Direct</th>
<th>Shangri-La</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Good service means that they get calls answered promptly, they get their issues dealt with on one call wherever possible. They get an efficient service, they can trust us to carry out their instructions as and when they require them.**
| **Problem-free stay during the time they stay with us.**
| **Totally painless, putting them at their ease.**
| **Adding the charm.**
| **Treating them as people.**
| **And people rely on us now. If we say a payment is going to be made a payment is going to be made.**
| **When I meet them, I give them smiles. I greet them with friendliness, with sincerity, and hospitality. I give them a warm welcome.**
| **Trying to get the call back on time that we say we are going to give them a call back. I just think they find us incredibly reliable.**
| **They expect good and simple services without fussiness.**
| **If a customer cried Wow!!!, after his or her first time tasting my food, it would be the best. It was beyond his or her expectation. The food should look tempting and also smell great.**
| **When we give them more than what they asked, this will impress them.**
| **Sometimes, I remember the guest’s room number then I would ask the receptionist for the room’s keys.**

| **RAC** | **Singapore Airlines** |
| **High quality service with personal patrolman attending.**
| **Clean tidy vans and patrolman.**
| **Greeting with a smile.**
| **Seeing to the customers needs - not necessarily the car, reading the customer.**
| **Excellence is attending to his needs.**
| **Doing it all in one go.**
| **Quick, smart, professional - treat them as customers.**
| **Confident, reassuring, give that personal feeling. It’s about attitude - making people feel at ease and they trust you - they have to trust you fully. I think that is the secret of the RAC, we treat people as individuals.**
| **We relax the customer, put their mind at ease.**
| **Provide information.**
| **Compassion, honest, reliable and willing.**
| **Just give them a bit of peace of mind really.**
| **Showing compassion.**
| **Fast, and the person on the other end of the telephone listening to what I am saying not what they think I am saying.**
| **One telephone call and be sorted. You don’t want any hassle.**
| **Interested in the person.**
| **With empathy with care and compassion.**
| **Or you might go and check the tyres, the pressures, it only takes a few seconds.**
| **The attributes that we need in the job are caring, warm and enterprising personalities.**
| **It is delivering professionalism and with a smile!**
| **In our job it is to be there when you are needed and not to be there when you are not required to be there.**
| **We have a reputation as a safe airline so we have to make sure that things are done properly and the safety issues should not be compromised.**
| **Make you relaxed, feel comfortable, to look after you.**
| **When they come to the airport we try to provide them with an extra mile.**

| **Tesco** | **Tessco** |
| **I suppose it looks good, the way that it is set out.**
| **The freshness obviously.**
| **Smile and be friendly towards them.**
| **Generally dealt with straightaway.**
| **To always give the best service possible.**
| **Well I always try to be pleasant. I always try to be as helpful as I possibly can.**
| **To make sure the customer is satisfied with what you have said and that they have gone away happy.**
| **A happy cheery smiling face.**
| **Just to try and help the person as much as possible.**
4.1 EASY TO DO BUSINESS WITH

Table 1 provides a summary of the descriptions of service excellence provided by the front-line employees in terms of the adjectives they used. These adjectives are usually referred to as service quality factors and have been split into enhancing factors and hygiene factors. Enhancing factors are the softer, interpersonal factors, such as caring, compassion, friendliness, and warmth, which have the potential to delight customers. Hygiene factors, those associated more with systems and procedures such as reliability, responsiveness, availability, are those that need to be in place and if not done well can be a source of dissatisfaction [2].

Table 1 Descriptions of service excellence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enhancing (interpersonal) factors</th>
<th>Hygiene (systemic) factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First Direct</strong></td>
<td>trust, assess needs, flexible,</td>
<td>prompt, efficient,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>painless, putting people at ease,</td>
<td>one touch, reliable,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>treating them as people, discover</td>
<td>responsive, offer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>extra needs</td>
<td>solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>RAC</strong></td>
<td>personal, friendly, dealing with</td>
<td>one touch, quick,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>their needs, provide confidence,</td>
<td>professional, provide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>provide reassurance, putting</td>
<td>information, reliable,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>people at ease, trust, compassion</td>
<td>smart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>honest, willing, listening,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no hassle, empathy, care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>do the extra</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shangri-La</strong></td>
<td>charm, friendly, warm, sincere,</td>
<td>problem free, seamless,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no fussiness, provide more than</td>
<td>look good, taste great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Singapore Airlines</strong></td>
<td>warm, caring, enterprising, friendly, discreet, relaxed, the extra mile</td>
<td>available, safe, comfortable, professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tesco</strong></td>
<td>friendly, helpful, pleasant,</td>
<td>fresh, prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cheerful, as much help as possible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first report summarised excellent service from a customer perspective as “being easy to do business with” [1]. This is mirrored here. The front-line employees recognised the importance of “no-hassle”, “no fussiness”, “seamless”, and “relaxed” service. Furthermore, the factors covered the four elements of “being easy to do business with”, i.e.:

- delivering the promise
- providing a personal touch
- going the extra mile
- dealing well with problems and queries

4.1.1 Delivering the promise

Delivering the promise is primarily about getting the basics right (the hygiene factors) such as getting from point A to point B, or providing groceries or banking services. The list of hygiene factors demonstrates that front-line employees were aware of the need to deliver these basics: we see adjectives such as “prompt”, “reliable”, “problem free”, “safe”, “available”, and “fresh”, in Table 1. They also felt customers trusted them to do the job with adjectives such as “trust”, “discreet” and “professional” occurring in both lists.

4.1.2 Providing the personal touch

The softer, enhancing issues are very much in evidence. There are many elements of providing a personal touch in the table including “treating them as people”, “personal”, “dealing with their needs”, “friendly” and “caring” for example.

4.1.3 Going the extra mile

There was some evidence that employees recognised the importance of going the extra mile in their descriptions of excellent service. We see phrases such as “discovering extra needs”, “doing the extra”, “going the extra mile”, and “providing more than was required”.

4.1.4 Dealing well with problems and queries

Dealing well with problems and queries has two elements. The systemic part is about being available and responsive to deal with problems and issues and we see factors such as “available”, “quick” and “responsive” in the list of hygiene factors. There is also the interpersonal side to dealing with problems and queries witnessed by factors such as - “painless”, “flexible”, “honest”, “listening”, and “helpful” in the enhancing list.

4.2 EASY AND PLEASANT TO DO BUSINESS WITH

Service excellence is not predominantly about being pleasant and friendly. The focus groups in the first study defined service excellence as being easy to do business with, and this involved primarily delivering the promise and dealing well with problems and queries. These are the predominant elements of service excellence (see figure 7).
The enhancing, interpersonal factors were less important. It was good to have a personal touch, and have staff go the extra mile - and importantly it was recognised that what might have felt like a mile to the customers was often only an inch in practice. Service excellence is predominantly concerned with the hygiene factors (figure 8a).

What the front-line employees at the five organisations in this study appear to deliver, however, is beyond the definition of service excellence provided by the focus groups in the first report, and this may be a reason why these are such exceptional organisations. As we can see from table 1, more enhancing factors were provided than hygiene factors. It would seem that while all the employees recognised the vital importance of getting the basics right they were particularly concerned about the way they did it. The long list of enhancing factors suggests a strong underlying theme of cheerfulness and pleasantness with words such as “putting people at ease”, “willing”, “warm”, “pleasant”, and “cheerful”, for example. These attributes suggest that what employees actually delivered was an organisation that was not simply easy to do business with but further they saw service excellence as being both easy and pleasant to do business with. Outstanding service has the hygenies in place and is concerned with enhancing the service through personal interaction (figure 8b).
4.3 SUMMARY

- The employees clearly understood what service excellence meant for their customers.
- Service excellence is about being easy to do business with, i.e. delivering the promise and dealing well with problems, with a personal touch and going the extra inch.
- These outstanding organisations went further. Their front-line employees were concerned with the way service was delivered, i.e. the softer, interpersonal side. Additional value was provided through personal interaction.
- Outstanding service is about being easy and pleasant to do business with.

4.4 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. Do your front-line employees know precisely what excellent (even good) service means to their customers? If not why not?
2. Do you know what it means?
3. Is your organisation ‘easy to do business with’? Are your internal services ‘easy to do business with’?
4. Is your organisation easy and pleasant to deal with, or is this going too far?
5. If you are good, where is the evidence? Would your front-line employees agree?
5. **DELIVERING SERVICE EXCELLENCE**

How then do these front-line employees go about delivering excellent service? The answer is that they hardly think about it, they just do it! To quote one employee from the Shangri-La Hotel:

> Giving excellent service is not in our job description - we just do it.

With further probing we gained some breakthrough insights into how these individuals:

- deliver the promise
- provide a personal touch
- go the extra mile
- deal well with problems and queries

5.1 **DELIVERING THE PROMISE**

One key element of service excellence is delivering promises and this was well understood by the interviewees. To quote just one front-line employee from Singapore Airlines:

> Service excellence is actually delivering what we promise.

In essence the front-line employees knew what they had to do (see section 4). What is interesting is how they delivered that promise. The first report summarised the senior managers' views of the organisations' personalities (table 2) and these captured the ways they believed their front-line employees delivered their service. The question is: is this the way their front-line employees delivered the promises?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Service personality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Direct</td>
<td>Service with attitude and rapport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAC</td>
<td>Service with empathy, understanding, reassurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shangri-La</td>
<td>Service with care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore Airlines</td>
<td>Service with personalisation and anticipation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tesco</td>
<td>Service with spontaneity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Service personalities


5.1.1 **First Direct - Service with attitude and rapport**

First Direct's personality was summarised in the previous report by Matthew Higgins, First Direct's Planning and Research Manager:

> First Direct is a bank with personality. Our staff are witty and warm, straightforward, informed and informing, and certainly not ordinary. [1]
This service personality appears to be delivered by the front-line employees and was summarised simply by two of the front-line employees as:

You just put them at their ease by talking to them.

It's just all about creating a little bit of magical rapport.

**Attitude:**

The employees ‘attitude’ was not an aggressive, direct approach but one that appeared to be warm, caring, but done in a far from ordinary way – through conversation rather than questions: It appears to be akin to a conversation between two friends who are trying to help each other:

Talking to the customer is more important than anything. I talk to them and you find things out and it puts the customer at their ease. And they say we bought this and we had to pay for the funeral and things like that. You talk in a kind of gentle way and then some of the time we find that we can’t help them, but most of the time we can. And it is done just by talking to them.

Today I took a person through an assessment for an increase on his overdraft and then he asked something else afterwards and I said well anything further you will have to go through another assessment. He said, “what do you mean? Have I just been through an assessment?” I laughed and joked all the way through it. And it was totally painless, it is putting them at their ease. He said this is what the assessment is, and I said yes, basically it is. We talk to them, well I talk to them, other than just by firing questions at them. Basically you get the questions and you are just going to get the answers if you do it through a conversation with them. What I try to do is always put myself into the customer’s shoes and I would try and view it as if I was the customer and if I was placed in the same circumstances what would I like to happen.

**Rapport:**

The easy going conversation which both assesses customer needs and discusses options was the result of a rapport struck up between the operator and the customer in a matter of seconds.

Putting people at ease through chatty conversation, where the employees judged it to be appropriate, was the secret to their success.

We just chat to them, basically that is it, we just talk to them. We don’t do anything more or anything less than that.

You can start creating rapport with customers. The customer says I need to transfer £2,000 from my savings into my cheque account. I say, “Oh, are you going to buy something nice?” “Yes I am getting a car”. “Oh, what are you getting?” “Oh I have just got a new car”, - that type of thing. Obviously if they like the person that they are talking to, they are going to trust that person more and enjoy ringing up more. And they are going to trust the organisation more and buy more into the company.

It is what the bank here is for, good rapport, and we are just renowned for building up a good rapport with customers. It is just a case of chatting and asking the right types of questions - we get the pay off by being friendly. And demonstrate that we are interested in their account.
5.1.2 RAC - Service with empathy, understanding, reassurance

The RAC tries to deliver a service, which is empathetic, understanding and reassuring. Nigel Paget, RAC’s Customer Service Director, summarised the RAC’s personality:

*Our distinction is not just our range of services but our personality. This is about the way we behave towards our customers and towards each other, day in and day out. It’s not easy in a business like ours to make it personal for our customers but we do try to do this – it’s about empathy and understanding [1].*

**Empathy:**

An empathetic approach was seen as key by the front-line employees. As one individual said:

*We do it with empathy, with care and compassion.*

**Well you have to put yourself in their situation and how you would feel if you broke down on the side of the road. I will contact them if it is appropriate, maybe not first thing in the morning. I think especially early in the morning, you don’t want people ringing. If the job is going fine I won’t ring, not at seven in the morning. I will just ring, basically, when I know he is on his way.*

**Understanding:**

It must be all too tempting as a trained mechanic to want to dive in and sort out the car. However, ‘understanding’ came from listening to the customer and that was what the front-line employees, both on the road and in the call centres, worked hard to do.

*When we go out to our customer I say right first of all listen to them, see what their needs are before you jump in, and evaluate what they mean. Whether they want their car done straightaway, they want to shoot off - do that. If they want to talk about something else, talk about it with them first. Let them get it off their chest. Sometimes they need to tell you the history of the car. That is what the customer wants. If he feels or she feels that it is helping you by giving you the history of the car then listen to them. It might help you because it might give you clues on what might have been happening.*

**Reassurance:**

Reassurance was about making the customer feel that not only the job will be done and done well but also about reassuring the customer about calling out the RAC, i.e. making them feel OK.

The RAC front-line employees provided additional reassurance by giving their name, showing concern for the customer’s situation and spending time with them or talking to them over the phone.

Reassurance was also about setting and meeting (or bettering) those expectations.

*Some say, “I have done a silly thing, I have locked my keys in the car” or “I have put petrol into a diesel car”. It is all about them not feeling silly isn’t it. And you get some people that apologise, they say “I am really sorry”. “It sounds daft but can you come and change my tyre” and I just say “yes, of course, don’t worry, if I had a puncture I would be calling the RAC - that is what you pay your RAC for.” We give our name we show concern and it is about spending time. They tell them the patrol is on the way and will be there within 45 minutes. The expectation is then 45 minutes. If the response centre gets the patrol there quicker, as often happens, the customer is delighted.*
5.1.3 Shangri-La – Service with care

Shangri-La’s service is about showing genuine care and warmth to their guests as explained by Jean Michel Offe, Group Director of Food and Beverage:

*The overall experience is to show the guest that we do care for him, we appreciate him and want to make him feel welcomed* [1].

This hotel chain puts its customers first and its employees care about their customers. When asked about priorities one employee simply stated:

*The first is our attitude towards guests.*

**Care:**

Warmth towards and appreciation of the customer seemed to run deep in the veins of the employees. This also applied to cleaners and chefs who might be considered to be non-contact, back office staff. Two of these employees stated:

*I like taking care of people.*

*I love meeting people.*

The care provided was not simply in response to requests from customers but employees tried to anticipate the needs of their customers. They think about the type of guest they are facing, including their nationality, and try to assess what might be the most appropriate response.

*I will give information and take care of the guests as well as I can.*

*We need to consider what kinds of guest are asking questions whether travellers, business persons, or others. We can tell from our working experience about their attitude and what they really want.*

*We talk with them once or twice or even when we see their face, then we know what they are thinking.*

*For example, if they are getting out of the hotel and they seemed not so sure which direction to go, I would ask them if they need a taxi or what? I would let them know first what they will need even before being asked for help. This is a part of excellent service in their eyes.*

*It must be over their expectation. If they wished only one, but deep inside they expect for two or three.*

*Like I said, sometimes they ask only one question, but we need to provide them several answers. It depends on guests also. Some of them may ask only one question and demand solely single answer, not more not less.*

5.1.4 Singapore Airlines - Service with personalisation and anticipation

SIA’s unique personality traits are concerned with personalising the service for the individual customer and trying to anticipate their needs. Dr Goh Ban Eng, Senior Manager Cabin Crew Training, explained:

*Excellent service is really attentive and very personalised service with great attention to the little details. We want the passenger to feel that they don’t have to ask for anything. We want to anticipate their needs and at the same time be very warm and caring* [1].
Anticipation:

Anticipation was seen as the way to really make a difference for customers and to personalise the service for them. Importantly employees appeared to carry this out in a discreet and careful way:

In our job it is to be there when you are needed and not to be there when you are not required to be there.

Anticipation was not serendipitous - employees looked for opportunities to make a difference.

Opportunities for excellent service: when you see someone who is looking around unsure of where to go, we can approach them and ask, “which gate are you going to? Which flight are you on? What time do you have to board at which gate?”

Delivering excellent service is tough but as I said the opportunities are there as long as you approach a passenger and ask what you can do for them. They will be very pleased. Even though they may not have any need, they will say oh thank you very much we are all OK we are enjoying our flight.

5.1.5 Tesco - Service with spontaneity

Tesco’s service edge is provided by their spontaneous approach, as explained by Marketing Director, Tim Mason:

What we are trying to do is encourage spontaneity. We want to give our staff the ability and the opportunity to be spontaneous rather than feeling that they are so surrounded by a rulebook that they are not able to do anything [1].

Spontaneity:

Spontaneity was not necessarily about anticipation but there was a clear desire to be as helpful as possible.

We just try and be as helpful as possible and as pleasant as possible.

This willingness to do things for the customer was evident and employees would take responsibility for the event, however minor, and see it through.

If a customer wants something - oh, don’t worry we will get it for you just stand there and we will get somebody to get it for you. If a customer has got a baby that is screaming its head off and obviously wants feeding, we will do your shopping for you we will pack it and you can pay for it later. Feed the baby, come back and pay for your shopping. I think it is just things like that that makes it a bit different.

If there is the slightest query they know there is somebody there to help them. If they want assistance with their shopping or there is a certain trolley they want, I would physically go out into the car park, just as others would, and try and find one for them.

In summary, it appears that front-line employees had internalised the organisations’ service personalities. These personalities were not reported ‘mantra-style’ by employees but were a natural part of the way they worked and the way they went about delivering the promise.
5.2 PROVIDING A PERSONAL TOUCH

From the earlier sections it is clear that front-line employees provide a distinctive personal touch to their customers. This appears to be the secret of success; to quote one RAC employee:

*I think that is the secret of the RAC, we treat people as individuals.*

These front-line employees managed to do this despite the size and complexity of the organisations of which they are each a very small part, because they recognised the importance of that event to the customer:

*At the end of the day it is a large organisation and the call is just a small part of our day. However it is a critical event for the customer.* (RAC)

We give our name, we show concern and it is about spending time. And that is probably where we make the difference. (RAC)

We are interested in the person and willing to take responsibility. (RAC)

We are supposed to have a routine of asking for membership number and so on but you don’t want to sound like you are going through a text book so RAC train you to take the information down, but you adjust it to the member. (RAC)

The highlight of adding the charm to service providers is to recognise guests’ names. If you can’t, at least you should remember guests’ room numbers or greet them. (S-L)

We are good at remembering guests’ preferences. Names are not necessary. We just need to recognise them. For me, I won’t meet the customers in person, but I would know if they come. When the waiters place an order to me they would let me know who is ordering that food. (S-L)

We try and make you feel relaxed and comfortable and look after you. (SIA)

*I think in here they all know we offer help and say hello, offer help, say goodbye, that kind of thing.* (Tesco)

Even the cleaner at the Shangri-La understood and enjoyed providing her own personal touch:

*I have chances to greet my guests and to talk with them. I love meeting people. When I meet them, I give them smiles. I greet them with friendliness, with sincerity, and hospitality. I give them a warm welcome.*

Employees recognised that the personal touch not only has an impact on their customers but was easy to do.

*It’s the personal touch makes that little bit of difference. It’s no effort at all.* (RAC)

5.2.1 The importance of banter

One common way that ‘personal touch’ was provided was through ‘banter’, good-humoured, open, personal and friendly conversation between ‘friends’ in this case between employee and customer. Although careful judgement was needed by the employee to get this just right, employees appeared to be both trusted and encouraged to ‘be themselves’. This was in part because the organisations tried to recruit the ‘right’ people (see section 10.2) and because employees were seen to be service professionals (see section 6).
Customers don’t feel they are dealing with a traditional bank. The atmosphere here is quite nice, and we are laughing and joking with customers and we would be discussing football matches and anything else. We will just talk to them and that is it. That is what the call is all about. And it is doing it in a way that we get to know customers better. (FD)

You can start creating rapport with customers. The customer says I need to transfer £2,000 from my savings into my cheque account. “Are you going to buy something nice?” “Yes I am getting a car”. “Oh, what are you getting?” “Oh I have just got a new car”. That type of thing. (FD)

If you are not going to get out of the van with a smile on your face then people think this is a crabby so and so. So we try and encourage people to get out and be open. Give them a smile and a greeting. Hello Mr Green or Mrs Smith or whatever. And that will ultimately make people think, “Oh how do you judge that? You just do. (RAC)

I had a gentleman once who had been waiting an awful long time. I asked his name and because he was transferred through he could hardly open his mouth to say his name, I managed to get the information, that the contractor was en route so he said well what would happen because he had been waiting about two hours, what would happen if he does not come within that time. So I said I will come and collect him myself. Gave him my name and he did lighten up at the end. You know really after years of being here if you can joke or if you can’t. You know when you can’t. How do you judge that? You just do. (RAC)

So you land on the doorstep and they say “oh I was not expecting you just yet”, a bit of banter have a cup of tea with them as you are doing the job adds a personal touch to it. They feel as though they know you. (RAC)

Then I talked with them - what kind of business are you doing? And how is it going? Later I can greet them specifically by calling their own names. I met him once by chance in the toilet, after I moved down here. I greeted him “Hi Martin, How are you?” “How is the business going?” I greeted him by calling his name. I also let him know that I am no longer doing his room and asked him if his new maid was doing a good job. By talking to him like this, he will feel good with me. (S-L)

I need to make an eye contact with them then I start the conversation like “Where have you been?” I talked with the guests while we walked to the lift. (S-L)

How do we deal with the customer and meet expectations? We have small talk with the customer. Say for instance they come to us and they say they want to get the thing changed. When we first see the customer we meet them and greet them, very hospitable. And from there we will check their schedule, the one they want to change. (SIA)

We ask “How was your flight, how was your previous flight?” (SIA)

Yes just general banter between customers and staff works really well. (Tesco)

While all of the front-line employees recognised that banter oiled the wheels and made a contribution to customers’ perceptions of excellent service, First Direct in particular recognised the business value of banter. Chatting with the customer provided leads and sales.

We just chat to them, basically that is it. We just talk to them. We don’t do anything more or anything less than that. And it is just a case of chatting and asking the right types of questions - we get the pay off by being friendly. (FD)

Obviously if they like the person that they are talking to, they are going to trust that person more and enjoy ringing up more. And they are going to trust the organisation more and buy more into the company. (FD)
5.3 GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Providing 'a bit extra' appears to be an integral part of the service in these organisations. It is not an 'add on extra' but, just as banter is part of the conversation with a customer, so is trying to do a touch more part of the natural inclination of these individuals. It is simply a natural and normal part of their job, and certainly not something they have to ask permission to do, even though occasionally it may contravene a rule (see section 7.3).

The front-line employees were aware that these small, extra things were easy to do and they also knew that small gestures and actions felt like an extra mile to their customers. Some of these extra miles were quite long stories and one had the impression that these had been told many times before. Such stories appear to be an integral part of sustaining a culture of service excellence:

We talk to them about what the payment is for and why they are making a payment in such a way and just basically find out if there is anything extra that we can add. (FD)

In the winter for instance you might fix the car, get the car started and clear the windscreen for them. Things like that. It is all warmed up, windscreen has been de-misted, de-iced, they come out and say thanks. Or you might go and check the tyres, the pressures, it only takes a few seconds. (RAC)

Another thing is acting without a request from the guests. For example, there was a disabled guest who needed to get the key to her room. When we knew she was coming we would bring her key by calling her name, so that she didn't need to come to collect the key from the counter. We share this kind of information in the briefing session. The staff who work in the shift before, will inform the staff in the next shift to take a good care of this special guest. (S-L)

When they came here they contacted me, they asked me questions and I answered them. She is five to seven years older than me. She's like my elder sister. She came here with her husband. At that time it was Christmas season, I knew it would contravene the rules, but I bought a basket full of fruits to wish her a merry Christmas. This impressed her very much. I did it without expecting anything in return. (S-L)

I try to remember my guests' names, especially our returning guests. There is one guest whose name is Ricky. He's stayed here a few times. I already know what he likes to eat. He likes bananas very much. The first time he came, he asked only for bananas. I need to prepare four bottles of water for him and also other stuff he likes. When he came back again I know for sure it was him then I set the room in the way he likes. When he entered into his room, he exclaimed Wow!! He was absolutely impressed. (S-L)

Once, there was Dr Peter whom I talked to for a while. I prepared a combination set of fruit for him because, from our conversation, I learned that he loves eating guava very much. At that time, the hotel did not order enough guavas for our guests. I then went to buy some for him. (S-L)

There was a guest who ordered fish, in which at that time we don't have that kind of fish in our fridge. We ran to another kitchen very far away to get that fish for our customer. (S-L)

If you can't deal with it then obviously go to someone else who can. It is the same if they ask for something that is not on the shelf. If you just go and say I will go and have a look for it, that is something else, they like you to just go and look. Instead of saying no we have not got this, it is nice if you say well I will just go and have a look in the back. (Tesco)

We do have regular customers that come in with little babies and we will say we will put your shopping in for you, we will pack it for you. Just come back when you are ready to pay. Because obviously they will feed the baby in the coffee shop and come back and they will pay for their shopping. And it is things like helping them out to the car as well with their shopping. (Tesco)
5.4 DEALING WELL WITH PROBLEMS AND QUERIES

There were three distinct areas of problem handling that these front-line employees appear to have to face; dealing with queries, handling complaints and dealing with distressed and difficult customers. In terms of complaints, employees seemed well briefed as to how to handle complaints and these procedures will be dealt with in section 10.7. From the earlier sections one can see that handling queries and dealing with small issues and questions was a routine part of the job that allowed employees to interact with customers and thus provide that personal service and go the extra mile for the customer. As one employee from Tesco summarised:

If they have the slightest query they know there is somebody there.

5.4.1 Dealing with difficult customers

This section will focus on how employees managed distressed and difficult customers. Without doubt these employees faced difficult, and at times, abusive customers.

I have been sworn at and shouted at and God knows what by customers. We just take it in our stride. (Tesco)

Dealing with stressful, even dangerous situations and with desperate and sometimes emotional customers is the nature of the job for the RAC:

I do a part time job now, before I was a manager for another company for a lot of years and dealt with the public, dealt with people that made purchases, so obviously from time to time you had people who were upset. One thing that has shocked me here in some ways is that you get members who phone up and they can be in a desperate situation. It is frightening being on the motorway in a breakdown situation, and they have not got a clue where they are and they expect you to find them and sort it out. It can be very stressful.

The employees at Tesco seemed to have to deal with their fair share of difficult customers but they were very stoical about it:

There is always going to be one person but you think, oh get on with it, you have not got a life. All you are doing is coming in here and complaining about something. Go to Sainsbury’s.

I can cope with it. You just carry on don't you. The nice ones make up for the poor ones. As I say there are a lot of nice ones around here.

Their actions, however, were different to their thoughts! There were times when they felt like strangling the customer but they appeared to deal well with the abuse some of them received.
I had somebody the other day, a woman, and I had not had a bad call for a long time but basically she was not a member. She had phoned in on behalf of her mother but she did not really know where she was and wanted us to get somebody out immediately. And for some reason her membership number was invalid but she wouldn't give me her name. I said “I am trying to help you and I appreciate your problem”. I was trying to give her 100% and she was giving me 5%. And she went mad at me. She was totally unreasonable. I said “if you carry on like that I will disconnect because I have not got to take that”. If my parents had broken down on the M6 I would be very stressed but I would explain. She said “I am sorry if I am uptight but I am concerned about them”. It’s all about communicating - she was wanting 150% and giving 5%. (RAC)

Don’t get me wrong, sometimes you would love to do it (strangle the customer). That has happened to me in the past and if the customer does get abusive then you are entitled to walk away. Or if they start swearing at you which has happened in the past. Not to me personally but then you are entitled to walk away or to shout for a manager. There are limits to what you can put up with. No matter what the job is nobody can be expected to take that. (Tesco)

No, sometimes a bit. If I have a customer that is being particularly nasty I think that I won’t come back to work any more - I’m not getting spoken to like that and I don’t get paid enough to be spoken to like that - and then I just think “you stupid idiot, it is only one customer, get up, get to work, you will be fine, and you do it all over again”. (Tesco)

That one nasty customer you think “sod you”, I don’t get paid enough to be sworn at, get lost, and you walk away from it and your blood boils at the time and then you just think “oh shut up”. I like doing my job I am here because I like talking to people and that is what makes me stay. (Tesco)

In the list below we have summarised the main ways in which these front-line employees dealt with difficult situations. One point that was made forcefully was that it was accepted that there were a few difficult customers, and, they were a pain.

- They accept that the customer is not always right and can be a pain.
- They accept that it happens and let it ‘go over them’, i.e. they ‘bite their tongue’ and don’t take it personally
- They remind themselves that it doesn’t happen often.
- They try to find the root cause, rather than deal with the symptoms or dwell on the outbursts.
- They remain professional, calm and in charge.
- They try to provide information and choices.
- They keep information on customers to help them see patterns of behaviour and possible causes.
- They are prepared to remove customers from the service, or to encourage them to go.
- They take personal time out if needed.

There is no point in letting anyone upset you. (FD)
Basically there is a root cause to them complaining. (FD)

We make notes on customers’ accounts so you have to look at the notes and you can usually find that there has been an issue in the past. (FD)

There are some difficult customers and we do occasionally say goodbye. The way we put it is we don’t seem to be able to come up to your expectations and obviously you must have very high expectations if we don’t meet them. Would you like to close your account. We don’t sort of force it upon them. (FD)

But the key issue is not to take it personally. I don’t. (RAC)

I will say “no if you don’t stop swearing then I will cut you off”. And then normally they will say “all right then I am sorry about that I did not mean it personally”. (RAC)

Even when we have a very angry customer when you smile the customer softens most of the time. As long as you don’t take it personally. (SIA)

They will be shouting at you because of availability and you think it is not my fault and I don’t know anything about it but I will just stand and take it anyway (Tesco)

We just take it in our stride (Tesco)
They have clear limits about what is acceptable and what is not. They know the point at which they are entitled to walk away/end the conversation. You have to bite your tongue. I am quite good in that respect. I put up with a lot of things really. The public can upset me. (Tesco) I had to go away and calm down. (Tesco) I think sometimes we just have to let things ride above us. I don’t think you have to take things personally. (Tesco)

These employees performed well in some difficult circumstances with some exceptionally difficult, indeed unpleasant, customers. Yet they seemed to have the art of remaining in control but in a pleasant way.

In the first minute I can always think “oh dear we are going to have a hard one here”. You get some people and they are obviously really desperate and you have got to try and swing them round because you need to check that they are a member and so on but without cutting them dead. The main art with anybody is just making them have that peace of mind when you talk to them, yet having control in the conversation at the same time. (RAC)

This point gives us an initial insight into the abilities of these real service professionals. This point is developed further in the next section.

5.5 SUMMARY

- These employees delivered their service through their (organisation’s) service personality.
- Despite the size and complexity of the organisations these employees realised that their personal interaction with a customer could make a difference.
- Employees were encouraged to ‘be themselves’ and use their own personality to interact with customers.
- Banter can often oil the wheels.
- Banter helps to establish an equivalent relationship between employees and customers.
- Providing the extra inch was a natural inclination and employees knew how much a difference it could make.
- The employees were stoical about difficult customers but remained professional.

5.6 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. What is your organisation’s service personality? Does this reflect how your service is actually delivered?
2. Do your front-line employees feel that they can actually make a difference?
3. How would you describe the rapport between employees and customers? How would they describe it?
4. Do you give your employees permission to ‘be themselves’?
5. How can you select employees who are good at ‘banter’?
6. How can you encourage them to use it?
7. Is going the extra inch acceptable, allowed and encouraged? Who defines the inch?
8. How do you help your staff deal with abusive or threatening customers?
6. THE SERVICE PROFESSIONAL

At one level the tasks that these front-line employees undertake might be considered straightforward, routine, even boring. Indeed these people spend their time, day after day, month after month cleaning bedrooms, repairing cars, stacking shelves or making meals. It was surprising then that these potentially routine jobs were seen as challenging, exciting and enjoyable. This was because all of the individuals were expected/encouraged to apply substantial judgement to their jobs and in particular to the way they dealt with their customers. They were not just service providers, they were amateur psychologists. A key part of their job was diagnosing not only the problem but more importantly the sort of person they were dealing with and then working out the best way to handle that individual – they were, and are, service professionals.

I thought my key skill was as a mechanic, I have learnt that the key skill is actually dealing with people. (RAC)

This role was something that they didn't think about, and when it was described back to them they were almost dismissive about it. As one employee at First Direct said:

You don't think about doing it. It is not something that you consciously do. You just do it.

6.1 A FLAT BATTERY IS A FLAT BATTERY BUT EVERY CUSTOMER IS DIFFERENT

RAC patrol officers turn out in all weather and work in very dangerous situations (at the side of motorways for example) dealing with 10-16 breakdowns a day, which are often small and repetitive problems. Yet they saw every job as being distinct and a challenge, not because of the repair but because of the person they were dealing with.

Every car can be the same can’t it? But every customer is different. You can go to ten flat batteries in a day. They are all flat batteries, they are all jump starts and they are all on their way, but the people driving them are different aren’t they?

As I say, I can do ten flat batteries a day. A flat battery is a flat battery, a car is a car but the people you speak to are so different. Perhaps it is a little old lady who thinks you are the best thing since sliced bread. It might be a mother in a rush to get the kids from school. It could be the rep on the motorway with a puncture. It could be the family with a caravan on the back with the radiator gone.

There was a similar recognition of the individuality of the customer and the customer’s situation at the other organisations, as stated by one SIA employee:

Everything is different. Every customer is different. (SIA)
As a result front-line employees are required to apply three different, professional skills, diagnostic, sensing and decision making skills. An RAC patrol for example has to:

- Diagnose and assess the situation - assess the entitlements of each customer, assess the physical situation for danger, and assess the breakdown situation.
- Sense the customer - assess their physical and psychological needs, their level of stress and distress.
- Respond appropriately - instinctively making the right decisions in response to each individual based on the situation and the specific needs of the customer, working out the best solution and at the same time making the best use of the organisation’s resources and dealing with the priorities of the other calls in hand.

These three points will be developed in the next sections (though the issue of making best use of the organisation’s resources will be developed in section 12.3 on applying commercial judgement).

6.2 DIAGNOSTIC SKILLS

The RAC’s call centre employees handle hundreds of calls each day but they know that on the other end each time is a customer with a problem, in a differing state of distress. Their role, like that of the front-line employees we talked to, is to assess the situation, quietly and calmly diagnose the customer needs, recognising that this customer is different to the last individual they were talking to.

*We actually try and gain as much information from them, some jobs are very easy and they know exactly where they are. And you obviously get people who have not got a clue which motorway they are on and have not got a clue which direction they are going in. So that can be a bit tricky.* (RAC)

*Some of them may ask only one question and demand solely a single answer, not more not less. We need to consider what kinds of guest are asking questions whether travellers, business persons, or others.* (S-L)

*You have to think about the way you are talking with that customer. Although you say the same thing, you are constantly aware in your head that this customer is different from the last one that shouted at you.* (Tesco)

Some of this information about individual customers and their preferences is captured and retained by some of the organisations (often referred to as Knowledge Management). At First Direct such information, even hobbies and interests, is captured on the customers’ files. At Shangri-La it is shared at briefing sessions. Information is retained by individuals at Tesco who often encounter the same customer; some informal sharing of such information also takes place.

*We know this kind of information in the briefing session. The staff who work in the shift before will inform the staff in the next shift.* (S-L)

*And you know you get people who are coming back regularly, you get to know faces. And then you can just think there is something not right here because every time they come they have got a problem with the bill and then bells start ringing.* (Tesco)

*You have got to be thinking about every customer that is approaching you, the mood, how best to respond to them, what they need and what you can do about it.* (Tesco)
6.3 SENSING SKILLS

One vital part of assessing the situation is weighing up the customer. This must be one of the most skilful, often underestimated and complex roles undertaken by front-line employees. Sensing the customer involves picking up cues and clues from tone, attitude, expressions and body language.

In their tone, their manner, the minute some people speak - it's in their voices. You ring someone up and you know instantly what they are going to be like - how they are going to deal with whatever problem you have got. (RAC)

We talk with them once or twice or even when we see their face, then we know what they are thinking. They need help or we should offer them help. (S-L)

We can tell from their attitude. (S-L)
We can tell from the body language. (SIA)

This skill of sensing the customer seemed to come naturally to the employees:

It's not difficult. You can sense it - I was told when I first started you can almost sense it when they are going through security - the first thing we say to a customer is: "Hello, this is First Direct. May I take your postcode please". So they give you the postcode and then you ask for the surname and initials and then two random letters from the password and one more security question. That might take 30 seconds. And by the time that is finished even though they have only been answering their questions you can sometimes get an idea of what that call is going to be like, and the background noise sometimes as well. Kids squealing or if you can sense that they are driving the car or at work. You can pick up things as soon as the conversation starts because obviously there are times when you need little gap fillers anyway because they might say "I want to transfer some money from my visa into my cheque account". "Well that might take us a while to do that". And while you are doing it you might be talking to the customer about something else - and I think a lot of our customers do expect that extra little bit of rapport. (FD)

6.4 DECISION MAKING SKILLS

Having diagnosed the situation and assessed the customer, the front-line employee has then to decide when to intervene, how to intervene and what information to provide in an appropriate way for the person and the situation. This is made more difficult by the fact that some of the customers can be in a distressed or agitated state. Judging the response is a work of art.

Well you can't always tell. We can normally sense how the conversation is going to go and it has taken a while because obviously the job was very different to me but I have now learnt that if you get somebody who says "Hello, I have broken down" and they are fairly humorous about it then you know that you can maybe change the routine slightly and make token gestures about the weather or whatever. You get the people that instead of small chat they just want the breakdown booked so you refer more to the textbook. But I find that everybody is different aren't they? (RAC)

So you have to be a bit softer or a bit firmer and say "well, no, listen to me I am talking - this is what happens". Or if you have a little old lady you are not going to shout at her and say "listen to me I am talking to you", I think it is just different customers make you react in different ways. (Tesco)
6.5 AN ACQUIRED SKILL

We would argue that these skills involving the ability to assess the situation and act on it are natural human skills which these individuals are allowed and expected to display in their jobs. It is encouraged by managers (see section 9) and is assisted by training (see section 10.4), and also through experience and sharing experiences with colleagues and supervisors.

Some customers have got no time, it is just bang, bang, bang. But you can tell by the tone of their voice when they come on and you say “hello how are you today?” and they say “I am fine but I am in a bit of a hurry.” Then you don’t go on, and you say “O.K. I have got to take you through an assessment”. You judge which customer - you just do it automatically. That is a First Direct thing. Anyone that talks to a customer at First Direct does that. Sometimes you get a customer - and you “say my name is [name]” and “how are you today?” and they respond “I am doing quite well”. And it gives them time to say I am fine but I am in a hurry and you just go through it. This customer is in a hurry so I am not going to chat about the weather. You can just tell, after a bit you just know. You don’t think about doing it. It is not something that you consciously do. You just do it. (FD)

6.6 PROVIDING THE CHALLENGE

This skill, the art of the professional service provider, was often referred to as the element that provided the real positive challenge of the job (difficult customers provided the main negative challenge):

Often you will get something that throws a spanner in the works that you have never had before and you think “oh my God, how am I going to deal with this”. It sets your day apart. (Tesco)

No calls are the same. Every call is different and all our customers are different so you never know what you are going to get on the next call. You never ever know and I think that is one of the things that keeps it interesting for me. (FD)

It is really a place where you can be exposed to many other departments and you get to know many people. We have better exposure because we have customers, we have internal customers and all that. But it is the learning that we have it makes our life even more challenging. (SIA)
6.7 SUMMARY

- These front-line employees expected and were allowed to display professional skills. This meant that potentially routine jobs were seen as challenging, exciting and enjoyable.
- The challenge of the job came from recognising that every customer, not every job, is different.
- Employees were encouraged to diagnose the situation and apply their natural sensing skills.
- They were allowed and expected to make decisions based on their diagnoses.

6.8 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. Do your front-line employees see their job as routine?
2. Do you encourage them to diagnose and respond appropriately to how they see the situation?
3. How?
4. Does that actually help them? How do you know?
5. How good are your Knowledge Management systems - the systems to capture, retain and purposefully use customer information?
7. PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE JOB

These front-line employees took their responsibilities seriously. Each one of them felt that they represented the organisation to the customer: they were First Direct, or the RAC or Shangri-La or Singapore Airlines or Tesco.

*Obviously the first time you step out of that van what do people see - they see you. They see the RAC.* (RAC)

*At the end of the day we are all Singapore Airlines.* (SIA)

Importantly they believed they had a personal responsibility for the job and they were entrusted with that responsibility:

- They were not over-managed.
- They were given the tools to do the job.
- They were allowed to take a flexible approach to policies and procedures.
- Their performance was measured in such a way to encourage them to take responsibility.

Supportive management (section 9) and supportive systems (section 10) also played an important part in allowing them to take responsibility.

7.1 NOT OVER-MANAGED

Front-line employees were not over-managed. However they were not simply ‘left’ (i.e. abandoned) to get on with the job but were trusted to get on with the job with plenty of support provided as and when needed.

*We are left to get on with the job but there is plenty of support, training and help whenever needed.* (RAC)

They were encouraged to deal with the situations that arose.

*We are encouraged not to be like robots. We are encouraged to talk to and discuss things with the customer and to discover what they need, and then try to offer them the best solution.* (FD)

*We are left to get on with the job.* (RAC)

*The management also passes down some power.* (S-L)

*(The supervisor) can’t be there every time actually so we just have to leave it to the crew to deliver what is necessary.* (SIA)

*They train you to deal with people. Sort of give you guidelines to follow. But then I think really it is up to you as a person and I think a lot depends on your attitude as well with people.* (Tesco)

*I think the training that I am doing now is very much driven by me but I have got a lot of support.* (Tesco)
The front-line employees clearly felt that they were allowed, expected, even encouraged to do this. This responsibility and flexibility was appreciated and valued.

This hotel gives more discretionary power to the staff compared to other hotels. (S-L)

**7.2 TOOLS TO DO THE JOB**

Employees felt that there were clear systems, procedures and processes. When we asked if there were any that were not appropriate or helpful - they could not think of any!

Sometimes you just have to ask the customer “what do you want me to do?” and once they have told you, you say “well I can do that” or not. And that is how flexible things are here. (FD)

The RAC like you to be an individual. (RAC)

I feel over the years that they have looked after me. As and when I have required ... they have given me support and I have been loyal to working for them. (RAC)

There is a step by step procedure that you can follow. (RAC)

We have very well defined working systems which I like. Other places without systems this good won’t last long. There are clear and easy-to-follow instructions here. (S-L)

Other tools to do the job, such as information systems and equipment were readily available and had been designed with these internal customers in mind, to make their job as easy as possible.

We have a system called FDnet, which gives us all the information we need about all the services about procedures, rules and regulations. We even get time off to update ourselves on changes in regulations. There are also regular communications from our commercial and customer communication teams. We are constantly being updated with information - they make a big effort in that way. (FD)

They make it easier. You have seen how big the place is and the different departments. The resources we have got now are second to none. It is easy to get the equipment we need - just one phone call - we have different branches round the country where we can walk in fetch the equipment and walk out again. (RAC)

Tools, repairs to vehicles, spares… there are walk-in shops all over the country where we can walk in, sign for it, and away you go. (RAC)

**7.3 A FLEXIBLE APPROACH TO RULES AND PROCEDURES**

There was also a clear expectation that front-line employees would apply a healthy amount of discretion when applying the rules, procedures and policies. They would always try to follow the rules but knew there would be times when they would have to break them. To quote one employee from Shangri-La:

There are some rules that sometimes I have no choice but to break. I normally try to follow the rules as much as I can. (S-L)
This view of the need to be flexible and the application of discretion was not unusual, though employees seemed clear about the limits of their discretion.

There are clear processes and procedures but you can bend the rules. If they swear at you, you are not allowed to cut them off but I will say if you don’t stop swearing then I will cut you off. (RAC)

If the case is minor I can make the decision myself. But when I talked about the process mentioned earlier, I meant something like a bottle of wine which I don’t have authority to give it to the guest. But some other things, like a set of fruit, I can decide when to give it to the guests. I have the authority for that. Normally, the problem would end at this point. However, if the guests were still unhappy, I would report to the management. (S-L)

There are some rules that sometimes I have no choice but to break. I normally try to follow the rules as much as I can. (S-L)

Staff are expected to do what they see as appropriate to alleviate the immediate problems and report to the supervisor later on. But the reasons must be solid and result in satisfied guests. Good service depends on the individual discretion of our 800-900 staff here. (S-L)

It depends. If it’s just about beer or anything trivial, I can deal with it myself. I’ve been given authority to do that. I am able to replace the beer for my guest then I will tell my supervisor later. (S-L)

We have some discretion but not all the time. But we have back up and support from management. Sometimes we need a senior officer when we do an authorisation. (SIA)

The interesting point is that they, personally, were allowed and expected to make the judgment, if they thought it was OK then it was OK. They did not usually have to justify it to anyone but themselves.

For example, one conversation with a front-line employee at First Direct went as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q</th>
<th>How much discretion have you got?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>I would say loads actually.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>Do you check with anyone?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>There are rules and procedures that we have to follow but it is quite flexible. If the rules don’t fit the customer’s needs then, if we are aware of the consequences of changing the rules to suit that customer and if we can justify that to ourselves, then rarely would we have to justify it to anyone else.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.4 TRUSTED TO MAKE THE RIGHT DECISIONS

The bottom line was that it was OK to break the rules but it had to be for the right reason:

I remember him (a director) saying, and saying this to everybody: rules are something that you have to think about before you break them. That is from the top. Yes, he said if anyone breaks the rules and they are doing it for the right reason then he will stand by them. Which makes you feel good. As long as it is for the right reason. It is not that we are all trying to break the rules all the time but we are given the empowerment to think a bit bigger than the rule. (FD)
Employees were trusted to make the right decisions, not simply focusing on satisfying the customer at any cost. These front-line employees were well aware of the commercial implications of their actions (this point is developed further in section 12.3), as a result they focused on maximising satisfaction and minimising the cost to the organisation.

*When it's busy we will prioritise things. If it is a really busy day you are not going to spend time fitting parts when you could tow it to a local garage or an electrical centre to be repaired. We make the decisions - but we explain the choices to the customer. That's the secret. (RAC)*

Dealing with the situation and satisfying the customer was not necessarily about doing 'anything' for the customer, it often meant taking responsibility, explaining the options or even just trying to deal with the situation. The outcome was still a satisfied customer but not at any cost nor while compromising safety.

*You give them a way forward. In the two years that I have been here I have probably only spoken to three or four customers that I could not give them a way forward. You are saying 'no' but you try to offer them a way forward - we can't do a personal loan for you but we can do x, y, z, for you. We do have to decline customers and we do have to say no. (FD)*

Normally what I do is if somebody says that is not good enough I will take their number and I am never ever afraid to give my name. I will say you are talking to [name] and I will look into it. I will take your number and then I will speak to the relevant people to get me the answer. And obviously I will phone the member back myself ... it is all about owning the problem and responsibility, isn't it? And if somebody phones into me with a breakdown situation then I am quite happy to give my name because I am not going to fob them off. I say you are talking to [name] and if I can't answer I will be honest with them all the way down the line. I am not going to say to them well yes there is a patrol coming out if there isn't. I will say you are talking to [name] I need to look into this, and I will get back to you within the next 10 - 15 minutes and I will make sure I do that. (RAC)

*We have to make sure that things are done properly and the safety issues should not be compromised. (SIA)*

### 7.5 SUMMARY

- These employees knew that they represented the organisation, and acted as such.
- The employees were trusted to get on with the job with plenty of support provided as and when needed.
- The organisations appeared to make it as easy as possible for these people to do their jobs.
- Employees were trusted to make the right decisions, even if that meant breaking rules, within reason.
- They were aware of the commercial decisions of their actions and as a result they focused on maximising satisfaction and minimising the cost to the organisation.
### 7.6 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. Do you ‘over-manage’ your front-line employees?
2. What do they think?
3. Do your employees believe they have the right tools to do the job?
4. Why not ask them?
5. How do you go about helping them understand the balance between customer satisfaction and cost?
6. Do you trust them to make the right decisions?
7. Do they agree with you?
8. How well are the bounds of discretion defined? Are they appropriate?
The front-line employees interviewed identified three main enablers of excellence. These were the factors that made it easy and indeed possible for them to take responsibility, act professionally and deliver excellent service to their customers. They were:

- supportive colleagues
- supportive management
- supportive systems

Underpinning these enablers were organisational values, which are discussed in the final section (see figure 9)

Figure 9  The support
8. SUPPORTIVE COLLEAGUES

Many of the front-line employees stated that the main reason the customers keep coming back was because of the employees, as summarised by one Tesco employee:

Q So what makes a difference - why do they (the customers) keep coming back?
A Definitely the staff. Without a doubt it is the staff.

And it was for the same reason that the employees enjoyed their job - each other! Their colleagues made the difference.

The buzz they got from the job and a key source of job satisfaction was the people they worked with.

I love the job because of the colleagues I work with. (RAC)

The people that you work with make the difference, make it really nice. Everyone gets on with one another. (Tesco)

The employees:

• Get on well with each other
• Are warm and caring towards each other
• Are relaxed and enjoy each other's company

This really made the difference and was sometimes the reason why an employee came but certainly the reason why they stayed and did a good job.

I like First Direct because there is a very good positive attitude towards both customers and staff. (FD)
Another reason why we do so well I think in the call centre is because of the people that work here. (FD)
You come in here and everybody is relaxed and smiling. (FD)
Our organisation here is not only customer orientated but staff orientated as well. That is the key to keeping good staff isn’t it. (RAC)
I enjoy the people. it is a nice environment and the people are nice. (RAC)
One of my first impressions coming here was the greeting I received from the staff of whom I did not know before. They made me feel so welcome. (S-L)
A lot of people want to work here because of the warm welcome from the staff and supervisors. (S-L)
The people that you work with, it makes it really nice. (S-L)
Everyone gets on with one another. (Tesco)
Well I think the people I work with are really nice. The staff are brilliant. (Tesco)
I think all in all it is the staff that make this place work. I think everywhere in Tesco is like that. It does not matter which store you walk in I think it would be the same everywhere. (Tesco)

There appear to be four reasons why these employees worked so well together and even enjoyed working together:

• Their colleagues were genuinely committed and caring people.
• There was a strong ethos of team working.
• The focus was on helping each other.
• There was a feeling of camaraderie.
8.1 GENUINELY COMMITTED AND CARING PEOPLE

As is evident so far, these individuals not only enjoyed dealing with (most) of their customers they had great personal satisfaction from doing the job well.

Such commitment and caring was more than just skin-deep, it was natural and deep-rooted.

RAC call centre employees, for example, worried about jobs they had passed to their colleagues at the end of a shift. They felt a personal attachment to, and genuine concern for, the customer:

I thought you (employees) would come in and do your bit and go home. But there are certain jobs that play on your mind. I just want to know they are OK.

They saw the ‘jobs’ as customers, people like themselves, and empathise with the situations their customers were facing:

I travel home a lot on the M6 and M40, and I think that if I was broken down on the hard shoulder I would be panicking. And there are some women who are as I would be - so I am committed to my job. I am committed that we will be on hand as quickly as possible.

This commitment sometimes extended beyond the regular job:

We organise cooking classes for the people who are interested in learning how to cook. We also arrange trips to the Chatuchak flea market. The activity shows the foreigners other aspects of Thailand. Sometimes we take the people to shop for cooking ingredients at the market. We go shopping first then to the Central Markets for produce and then come back to the cooking class. Our guests have a really great time. (S-L)

The employees were open and honest with each other and with their customers. They know bluffing just does not work and that customers see through it.

As long as you explain things they are happy but it is just the way you come across being honest and open. They are not feeling then that you are trying to bluff them. That is the thing I hate. If somebody is lying to me and bluffing me I don’t like that. I would rather be open and honest about it and say this is how it is. (RAC)

These personal qualities, of caring, honesty and commitment were ‘genuine’. They did not flick a switch when they came to work or when they went home.
From my personal life to my work life I think I carry across the same qualities that are needed. Being open, being friendly, being flexible. Treat people as individuals. I like to think people perceive me as the same. You get to know people in your own areas - regular customers and sometimes you meet them, you will be out doing the shopping with the wife and they will come up to you and say “hello Mr RAC man”. And you will be sat there talking to them for five minutes. (RAC)

8.2 TEAM WORKING

All of the front-line employees interviewed worked in teams. These were small numbers of colleagues who had similar jobs. It was evident that the team working had a significant impact on their working lives and resulted in close and supportive relationships.

We work together very closely as a team in here. (FD)
They a good bunch of people to work with. (RAC)
We work as a close team. (S-L)
We work together well. (S-L)
All the time it is part of a team. (SIA)
There is a lot of team work. (SIA)
It a nice team to work with. (Tesco)

Team working was seen as important even in the case of the RAC and SIA where team members are geographically dispersed.

Obviously if some of the shifts don’t clash on a daily basis, there are times where we might get 20 minutes in the day when we can meet up for a cup of tea. (RAC)

There are times when we can’t reach anybody but we still have our station manager around. It is like as I say, working as a team. (SIA)

Team working appears to have a critical impact on job satisfaction. Employees gained comfort from the closeness of the relationship and the fun and enjoyment that this brought to the job.

You do work as a team. And it is nice. It is almost like a second little family that you come into. It is good fun. Usually there is a lot of laughter. (FD)

It is a bit like being in the fire service or in the Army, you do become very close. (FD)
But when you have got team spirit you go and say my mate has got one of those in the back of his van......... Again the patrolman will jump out his van and say here is the part – cheers. (RAC)
It makes it different but the people that you work with, it makes it really nice. Everyone gets on with one another. (Tesco)
Well I think the people I work with are really nice; we try to work as a team. (Tesco)
8.3 HELPING EACH OTHER

In section 3 we suggested that the front-line employees saw their job as ‘helping people’. This applies just as much to their team members as it does to their customers.

We are always helpful to each other. (S-L)
Everybody is very co-operative. (S-L)
They are equal. All of us in every position have equal shares in serving the guests. (S-L)
My colleagues help me with everything. (S-L)
At any one time if there is a passenger who has got a specific problem that I need to go and address, my other colleagues will just carry on and cover. There is a lot of teamwork. (SIA)
Yes colleagues are co-operative they help you. We help each other. (SIA)

Some of our staff are shy and quiet, afraid to talk and frightened. We will try to help them avoid tough guests especially when our staff is new and not knowledgeable of their jobs. (S-L)

There was a supportive working atmosphere at all of the organisations.

One other thing I always do is helping other staff whoever they are, receptionists or housekeepers. I will help them as much as I can. This will create a good working atmosphere of collaboration then many good things will follow that. (S-L)

Teamwork and helping each other made the job easier for the employees and played a part in delivering excellent service to their customers. It was also the means by which employees not only shared their experiences but also learnt from each other, thus enhancing their own, as well as each other’s performance.

Every one is a responsible person, sometimes it is just that time is the constraint. Sometimes you have to run from one gate to another to get hold of people. So I can see their problems. So things that we can handle, we handle together and we work together. For success, all of us have to work together. (SIA)

We cannot afford a mistake serving customers food. We usually know each other well. For example, if guests came to our restaurant to have a dinner and ordered ten dishes of food, suppose only one dish, out of the ten, does not taste good at all, it would make the whole meal worse. (S-L)

We normally help each other. We will not survive if we do not collaborate. If only one part in the whole process was flawed, it would affect the end results of the service process. (S-L)

It was clear that team working was, in part, responsible for the success of these organisations:

Breaking the teams down like we have done putting the leading patrol in smaller teams like that and managing that small team works well. It works really well and I think that is where our turning point was. (RAC)

And the team was an important part of the service that customers bought.

Our customers feel they are buying the team. (Tesco)
In some of the organisations, notably First Direct and the RAC, these teams were used to create an internal competition.

We do have to meet certain targets so we are competing in that arena as well. And not only competing among ourselves here but we are competing against their other call centres. There are five or six other call centres that we compete against. (FD)

8.4 A FEELING OF CAMARADERIE

There was a spirit of camaraderie at the offices we visited that is difficult to capture in words. Essentially there was a buzz of interest, and excitement, and interaction, just like a grown up version of the atmosphere you can experience when visiting a nursery school! The interaction between employees and customers and each other, a sense of close working together, joint projects and concerns and emotions.

This spirit was particularly in evidence where people were working closely together, at Tesco and First Direct for example, but it was also evident at SIA and the RAC where some colleagues were separated by distance. It was clear that many employees had developed close and valued friendships with their colleagues:

I think it helps the way people work because we are not just colleagues, we are friends at work. (Tesco)

It’s not that you are just coming to work and that is it, we all talk about each other’s families so we all know when somebody is having a dodgy time. You are a bit nicer to them or whatever or if you know somebody’s birthday is coming up we all put a collection in and get something for their birthday. We all know what is going on in each other’s lives basically. (Tesco)

This spirit carried over to the social lives of many employees and the team was often the unit for social interaction both inside and outside work.

On Valentine’s Day we were all dressed up. Other times there are very nice prizes to be won as well like DVDs. It comes over as fun and the customer can sense that from us. (FD)

We go on team nights out. Your team means a lot to you. Your team is your team and you work together on everything. (FD)

Maybe once a month we go on a social as well. There is quite a team spirit here. (RAC)

We all go out quite a lot. There are certain groups that will go out but I think all in all we spend a lot of time together outside of work as well as at work. (Tesco)

There is a good social circle outside of work if you want it - but if you don’t you don’t feel obliged that you have got to have it. (Tesco)
8.5 SUMMARY

- There was a strong working relationship between employees.
- They were genuinely committed and caring individuals.
- Team working was an important support mechanism.
- Team members were keen to help each other.
- These employees were not simply colleagues; many of them saw themselves as friends at work.
- Employees enjoyed the chance to spend (free) time with each other.

8.6 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. Have you hired people who are genuinely committed and caring?
2. Do you make use of team working?
3. Do you encourage your front-line employees to enjoy their time at work and with each other?
4. What more can you do to facilitate a team spirit?
9. SUPPORTIVE MANAGERS

The ‘management culture’ from the front-line perspective can be summed up in one word - support.

In section 3 it was evident that front-line employees saw their role as ‘helping people’. It was clear that they saw the role of managers as helping them, enabling them to do the job. This support was at all levels, from senior managers to line managers. There was also plenty of evidence of management by appreciation, an acceptance of mistakes, and support for personal problems.

9.1 SENIOR MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

There was a very strong feeling in all of the organisations that the management team would do all they could to help and support the front-line employees:

* You feel that the managers work for us. *(FD)*

* They treat the patrolman as a top priority - which in turn we pass on to the customer. *(RAC)*

Management was also supportive, if employees had any issues they would listen and try to sort them out. To quote one employee at Tesco:

* If you have got any problems they will sort them out. *(S-L)*

Management were seen to be both ‘in touch’ and approachable.

9.1.1 Senior management in-touch

Senior managers were seen to be ‘in-touch’ with their front-line employees and relationships in some of the organisations (First Direct, RAC and Tesco) were on an informal, even first name terms, basis.

* You can talk to anyone. I was working in another department and the director came in and he asked how are things going on in here. And I said “I work in (another department) but I have no calls coming through at the moment so I have come in here to help out” and he started asking me about (departmental) targets. Are we going to hit targets? and I said “no we are not. We are not going to hit that”. And he said “oh right”. He did ask and I told him. He said “well I spent a couple of hours with Alan Hughes (FD’s CEO) last night trying to convince him” so I said “send him over here and I will talk to him and I will convince him”. *(FD)*

* Oh yes, Graham Potts (RAC’s MD) was brilliant. It was not a manager to a patrol situation. He came across like a friend. He was not expecting me to call him sir, he would rather me call him by his first name which was good I thought. He brought himself to the ground floor and talked with us and I thought that was one of the key qualities there. *(RAC)*

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We are all on first name terms, even the top boss. It is all first name terms. It is hello [name] and it is all very open. And it is like that from the ground level right up to the top and I think that really helps. (RAC)

9.1.2 Approachable senior management

Being ‘in-touch’ could imply a one-way relationship, i.e. senior managers will come down and talk to employees when they feel a need. The feeling was, in all of the organisations, that this was a two-way flow. Many of the front-line employees said that they were quite comfortable going to talk to senior managers because they were approachable and willing to listen. This approachability was an important aspect of job satisfaction for many of the front-line employees. One RAC employee stated:

I like the work because management are approachable

You are not afraid to go up and speak to anyone, well I’m not! (FD)
The management listens to our opinions. (S-L).
What we usually do is not considered a formal procedure. But they would listen to us and try to solve the problems. For example, I reported the problem to (the line manager). If he could not help me fix it, the problem would be taken to the Division and then to the General Manager, and then even to the Director. The management would ask for one of us to present the existing problems such as asking for the resources we think necessary but we don’t have available. (S-L)
The senior team are always there to help. I have got a personnel manager who is absolutely fantastic and helps me with anything. I can go in and say “I can’t do this, can you help me?” And yes no problem. She might not be able to do it straightaway but she will spend time with me to see me so I am able to do it. (Tesco)

9.2 LINE MANAGEMENT SUPPORT

The employees’ line managers (usually supervisors or team managers) were all seen to be very helpful and supportive. Many talked in glowing terms about their line manager:

Speaking for myself, my team manager is very helpful. In general I have not ever felt really frustrated whereby I think nobody wants to help. My team manager is excellent, absolutely excellent. (RAC)

Having the right team manager is important. You have that safety net if you know what I mean. If I have not got a clue what I should be doing the team manager will know. (RAC)
The (line) managers try to be supportive. Because obviously if they have got good staff they want to look after them. (S-L)
My manager is very supportive. (SIA)
People (line managers and supervisors) don't mind being asked to help out - big things or little things. When I am on the shop floor there are things that I can’t reach on the top of the cages, it is no good trying - I do ask. Take the top two off for me. Even the managers if they are passing; you ask them and they will do it as well. (Tesco)
But that support was not infinite!

*There again I think it depends which manager you get and I think it depends if they know you as a person. I have been here several years so they have got all my work records so I suppose if you phoned in every week with a sickie I suppose they would be intolerant like anybody would.* (Tesco)

This support was seen to make the difference in terms of job satisfaction:

*As far as it can be people will bend over backwards to make it a good atmosphere. Call centres can be a dreary place. Managers are obviously key here - the sort of attributes that they have got make a difference for you.* (FD)

These line managers were seen to be approachable and also they had a particular role that seemed to make the place work well.

### 9.2.1 Approachable line managers

Line managers were seen to be very approachable

*You can talk to them. At the end of the day they are the managers but you can talk to them. They know your name.* (FD)

In some cases they were even considered as a friend:

*And if we have got issues although they are our manager they are more like friends and will talk to us and try and sort something out for us. I think that helps with the way we all work together.* (Tesco)

We are a small department so every manager knows everyone in there. And if your line manager is not there I am quite happy to talk to one of the others - all the managers are very approachable. (FD)

The rest of the management (line management) here are approachable too. (RAC)

They are all good, excellent. If I have got something I don’t agree with I will tell them. I will go to the team manager to see if they can’t sort it out. If something is upsetting you on the floor go to the team manager. It has got to be confidential and then they will sort it out. They might not be able to sort it out immediately but they will say I will come back to you. And you should be able to go to any team manager with a problem. They are all good. (RAC)

We can tell supervisors about what makes us uncomfortable. (S-L)

I can approach him easily. He has the open door policy. (S-L)

### 9.2.2 The role of the line manager

Line managers were closely involved in the front-line task. In most of the organisations line managers/supervisors did the same job as their team members. At the RAC, for example, leading patrols would do exactly the same job, and deal with the same number of breakdowns as the team members, but they would also have the additional responsibilities of looking after the team. Those additional responsibilities included responsibility for ‘performance managing' their team and coaching and mentoring team members.
Although the line manager/team leader was responsible for monitoring progress and undertaking employee appraisals (see later) the focus was on personal and team improvement through coaching and mentoring.

The team leaders or first line managers were responsible for coaching and mentoring their colleagues. They themselves would act as role models for the team and sometimes use some of the better performing team members to coach the team.

We might do role-play with the patrols. You always get the better patrols to coach the not so good patrols. The team leaders also do one-to-one coaching. (RAC)

Some employees would not hesitate to ask for help when they felt it was needed which underlines how supportive and helpful they feel managers are.

Because there are certain targets that you have to meet and you realise you did not make it you have a word with your team leader and say “I just need a bit of extra coaching”. It is the same things done over and over again that become stale. It is a new way of saying things, even bringing somebody else’s things into it so it is better. Coaching is always there. The help and the training is always there. You just have to ask. Sometimes you are struggling a bit and you need a bit of help. If I get stuck I am first to ask, because I find it easier that way. You say what you want and they will try and get it as much as possible. There is no stigma about asking for it. (FD)

9.3 MANAGEMENT BY APPRECIATION

Management by appreciation was in evidence from managers at all levels.

If you come to First Direct to work you will get positive encouragement rather than negative things. (FD)

The MD said well done! (RAC)
This was greatly appreciated by employees:

He (the manager) always gives you a pat on the back and when I receive a compliment from passengers because some of the passengers do write in without you knowing and they really appreciate the service that you have given them. (SIA)

9.4 MISTAKES ARE OK

Line managers appear to be very tolerant of mistakes and use them as opportunities to coach their employees.

Everyone makes mistakes. We learn from mistakes and that is a learning process. (SIA)

Our seniors, when they are working with us they will know what our weaknesses are, as we work very closely with our colleagues. If someone has weaknesses, they will always be told in a very nice way to give them encouragement that it can be improved. They say "you can do it", and give assurances that they can do it and give them a pat on the shoulder and all that. I think it is very good. It motivates them and also it is very important for morale. (SIA)

If you make a mistake on the system they show you how to do it right. So the help is there if you are struggling on anything, you speak to your team leader and you will get the extra help. (FD)

One thing I have always said to my patrols if you do something wrong you let me know, we will deal with it there and then. And they trust me. (RAC)

9.5 SUPPORT FOR PERSONAL PROBLEMS

The organisations recognised that their employees are real people and they have home lives which sometimes cause them problems which affect their work life. Line managers and senior managers in the organisations seemed to bend over backwards to help.

I know there are people in there who have had problems at home. And it is hard to come to work and totally focus on it. Your managers are right behind you and your team leaders are right behind you. (FD)

And supportive yes definitely. If your team leader explains why you cannot work on a Saturday any more they will sort of push it for you. (FD)

The company is extremely flexible and if I have got any problems and if there is anything going on family wise that then becomes a priority and they bend over backwards to make you comfortable with that situation. (FD)

When I needed support it was given whether at work or in private life. (RAC)

We try as hard as we can. Sometimes it is not always possible but we always do try to sort something out or offer a compromise for them. Say you had somebody who came in and needed child care or something and then they could not do it. We would try and adjust the hours for them, so it would be easier for them. We have done it for people in the past and they are so grateful that they can actually do it. They get quite nervous and think I have got to come in and I have to ask them to do this for me, they might say no or that is not part of your contract, we will try and adjust it for them. (Tesco)
9.6 SUMMARY

- The employees felt that the management team would do all they could to help and support them.
- Senior managers were in touch with their front-line employees and in some organisations the relationship was informal.
- Managers at all levels were accessible and open to approaches from front-line employees.
- Line managers were approachable and were seen to have a pivotal role, primarily concerned with supporting, mentoring and developing the front-line employee.
- Line managers were seen to deal with problems fairly and were expected to be intolerant of inappropriate behaviour.
- Management by appreciation was in evidence and mistakes were seen as learning opportunities.
- Managers understood the need for a work-life balance and would bend over backward to try to help out when employees experienced difficulties at home.

9.7 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. Do your front-line employees feel that their managers will do all they can for them?
2. Have you asked them?
3. How would you describe the relationships between managers and front-line employees?
4. How would they describe it?
5. Is it appropriate?
7. Is there any evidence of management by appreciation? Is it enough?
8. How do managers deal with employees with personal problems?
9. So what are you going to do?
10. SUPPORTIVE SYSTEMS

We asked the front-line employees if there were any systems or procedures that made their jobs more difficult than necessary. We expected that the answer to this question would be “yes” and we would be provided with a string of issues about even slightly imperfect systems. Surprisingly but invariably the answer was “nothing comes to mind”.

Just as managers were seen to be supportive and colleagues were seen to be supportive, so too were the organisations’ systems and procedures. They all felt, in the main, that they had the right sort of systems and procedures to help them deliver service to their customers, indeed the systems they had were reasonably supportive:

> If you are not sure about something we have got some technical customer service reps and we can check with them and they can take the call off you. (FD)

Staff at Tesco felt their systems were becoming simpler and quicker though queries that had to go via head office invariably took longer to resolve.

> Most of it is getting simpler I think. It is things like the cash back queries; they are dead easy and sorted within 24 hours, or less. A lot of the procedures that we have to go through are very quick, really simple. Anything that takes a lot of time usually has to go via head office. Which is where your time comes from obviously. They have got every single store in the country sending them the same things that we are sending them. So you have to explain that to the customer that it can be up to a six week wait. (Tesco)

Seven types of systems were discussed and will be covered in the following sub-sections:

- communication
- recruitment
- rewards
- training
- appraisal
- performance management
- complaint management

10.1 COMMUNICATION

Employees talked about communication primarily in terms of the interchange between colleagues - oiling the wheels of the internal supply chain to make things easier for each other and the customer. Communication, for front-line employees, was about helping each other deliver the service to their customers or pre-empt possible problems:

> They would ring me and say “look I finished this car, the member is on their way but they might break down because it was a temporary repair for instance or something like that”. We are very conscious of what could go wrong. If they have done a temporary repair and they tell the member and say look this is a temporary repair just to get you home. They ring the response centre upstairs and say if this car breaks down again make sure they get this service and that service because it is only a temporary repair. So if they did happen to break down on the way home - middle of the night - they know to send the appropriate recovery lorry and pick them up. (RAC)
We try and communicate between ourselves if we can because it makes the job easier - but sometimes it does fall down. (Tesco)

The first report suggested that communication up and down the organisation was vital in creating and supporting service excellence, however this sort of communication was hardly spoken about and was seen to be the responsibility of their line manager (team leader or supervisor).

When new things come in the supervisor will be trained and then they will train the rest of the staff on introducing new procedures and things. (FD)

### 10.2 RECRUITMENT

Many of the employees talked about why they decided to join the organisation and seemed to appreciate the recruitment process. There was agreement that these organisations tended to recruit people with the right attitude and potential rather than the experience or an ability to do the specific job.

When you recruit you can have the best person technically, the best bloke in the world in fixing cars. But he could be a lousy patrol because he can’t deal with people. You get somebody else who is a mediocre mechanic and you think we can train him to fix cars. When you come to dealing with people you have to have a natural quality about you from the word go. (RAC)

For us, 60 per cent of the core of our services is the attitude. The person’s attitude must be good. In recruiting the staff to join us in providing services, the skill counts at only 40 per cent, therefore the attitude is really important. We need to see if the applicants understand the principle of providing service. Working skills can be enhanced later through training. That is the criterion in recruitment. (S-L)

They normally probe the applicant’s attitude first. The interviewer might ask why they wish to work here. I believe the attitude comes first. We can train the trainees with the right attitude to be one of our staff in a month or two. (S-L)

We let the applicant cook. Sometimes we accepted people who know completely nothing about cooking. They might be able to learn quickly. They should possess a sense of cooking and be adroit in preparing ingredients. (S-L)

When they do the interviews they must know what you are actually like. (Tesco)

First Direct was the most extreme case where employees spoke of the organisation’s desire not to recruit people with experience in a bank.

It’s the way that they set people on. You know the staff, I think they are quite successful in employing the right person to be able to do that because there is a very wide variety of people working at First Direct. It is not even encouraged when you start here to have had any dealings with a bank at all. In fact it is almost the opposite. When I was starting there was like a fireman, a policeman, somebody who had been in the Army, a hairdresser, and a driving instructor. Not one person had worked in a bank. (FD)

The recruitment processes often tested the attitude and people (customer) skills of the employees, often using simulated phone calls or role play for example.
When I joined we had a written test then you went along for an interview and that was that. Now you have got to work on the systems and then have the verbal interview. I had to come in and be interviewed by someone but now I think they actually phone you up. They phone you back to see what your reactions are. As far as I know that is what they do at the moment. I suppose they can judge. They must be able to tell by talking - you get people with an attitude don’t you? Most of the people if you talk to them in here are really quite laid back they are not up tight. I think that is what you need. (FD)

Actually when a new patrol goes to the assessment centre and they apply to join as a patrol we obviously do role plays for that and we see them outside with a vehicle. It is not so much how they deal with the vehicle, it is how they deal with the customer. (RAC)

10.3 REWARDS

When employees were asked why they chose the organisation the answer was usually because of the pay.

I wanted to make the right choice so I asked questions with the patrolman of the AA and the RAC and I evaluated the situation and I thought well there is an opportunity to earn more money with the RAC than the AA. At the end of the day finance at the initial stage comes into it so I decided to go with the RAC and I have not looked back since. (RAC)

When asked why they continued to work for the organisation the answer was a combination of enjoying working with the people (employees and customers - see section 2) but also because of the financial rewards and other benefits. These were clearly important to the front-line employees.

They pay for us to have an annual health check. They pay for us in case we need to go to the hospital. The benefits provided here are good. There is a money saving project for us so if we felt tired and thought we have worked long enough, we need to quit, we will get a lump sum sufficient for taking care of ourselves. (S-L)

Because the hotel serves so many guests and the service charge rate is quite high so there is high probability of making a lot of money by working here. (S-L)
I think it was the stability of the company that really attracted me. (SIA)
It was the benefits they offered you, the pension, the shares, you can get a decent three course meal in the canteen for £1.25. Everything seemed right, appealing. So I went ahead and filled in the application form. (Tesco)

If we don’t meet out targets it does not affect our pay but we do get a bonus when we meet them. We also get a number of tangible benefits. Which is not a bonus but is over and above your monthly salary. For example we have got a scheme called Plus Points. You can have vouchers for cinema tickets. You can have health insurance, medical insurance, there is a range. You can have car breakdown cover. There are a lot of people work here part time, there are a lot of part time mums and you can spend your plus points in the crèche so you could end up with free child care. (FD)

The money is good. (RAC)

One certain thing is the higher service charge. Higher than other hotels I worked with. We will accumulate all the service charges to be allocated among the staff at the end of each month. It is OK. We earned both fair incomes and good fringe benefits. (S-L)
10.4 TRAINING

New recruits, or employees appointed to a new post, received a great deal of training.

The initial training was often intense but was appreciated by employees.

*It is really good. I did my training in another store when I first started but your initial training is really good, it is very intense.* (Tesco)

Oh gosh yes we get a lot of training. When I was in the call centre I had been talking to customers for two years I got six weeks training before I came here and then I came out for four weeks training. (FD)

When I first came I had not done a job like this before. And we were trained and trained and trained and we were listened to. It is the RAC who have trained me right from the start how to take calls. (RAC)

Yes we are constantly trained, the training is reviewed. We have two or three sessions a month. (FD)

We always have training such as the Shangri-La Care and the Shangri-La Way. (S-L)

Training, however, was not just for new recruits. It was a normal and natural part of work life for everyone, all of the time. All the front-line employees felt well supported and well trained.

*We have training from different people as well so you are not just getting experience from one person, you are getting experience from everybody.* (FD)

Yes we are constantly trained, the training is reviewed. We have two or three sessions a month. (FD)

We always have training such as the Shangri-La Care and the Shangri-La Way. (S-L)

They send us for training all the time. (SIA)

There is ongoing training. (Tesco)

A member of staff will accompany one trainee, one-on-one, for 2 to 3 days. (S-L)

Oh gosh yes we get a lot of training. When I was in the call centre I had been talking to customers for two years I got six weeks training before I came here and then I came out for four weeks training. (FD)

When I first came I had not done a job like this before. And we were trained and trained and trained and we were listened to. It is the RAC who have trained me right from the start how to take calls. (RAC)

Well I had excellent training when I came. Because obviously with it being a new store, we all came in together. (Tesco)

We have training from different people as well so you are not just getting experience from one person, you are getting experience from everybody. (FD)
Training was part of a routine but not seen to be ‘routine’ or lip service. It was appreciated by employees and they would often seek out retraining for themselves as part of their feeling of personal responsibility for the job. Training was one key way the organisation demonstrated its support for the individual with a focus on self-improvement.

They train us to be good airline staff. They provide us with appropriate training, recommend you for courses, and they will also recognise our weaknesses and also from there they also have you in mind to improve you on that. (SIA)

Even the trainees they have put on the job with us we make them comfortable and say don’t be afraid, they can look for us anytime, we are there to help you and it is true, we will. We respond to the situation and get them to see how we handle the customer. (SIA)

I have an opportunity to improve my (job) skills and English language. (S-L)

10.5 APPRAISAL

Appraisals were a normal part of work life, either regular, so many times a year, or ongoing. The reviews were sometimes driven by key performance measures, see next section, and also usually direct observation of the employees concerned. Importantly they were not seen as threatening and certainly not as a problem. They were seen as an opportunity to have helpful feedback on what they were doing, right and wrong. The focus was on improvement not chastisement.

We have a one to one every month and if there are any issues from either party you can discuss it. You are also given information on how you are comparing - we are all in teams, so you can see if you are above average and where your shortfalls are and you can work on them. I enjoy it. (RAC)

I am appraised two to four times a year. But for new crew it is about six times a year. We do it on board. We have to assess how they perform. It is a lot of observation. So how was the crew managing with the passenger relationship? Was she seen to be helpful? (SIA)

We do six month reviews and things like that. (Tesco)

10.6 PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

The performance measures used by front-line employees were predominantly about the things that mattered to their customers, so they had plenty of feedback from their customers about the service they had provided.

You have not got to fix the car. I could go out there tomorrow and not fix one car and get an excellent Customer Satisfaction Index (CSI) score or people would go out of their way to phone in and say I was very pleased with the service today. You would not have to touch the car. You can open the bonnet and go through the motions if you wanted to as long as you treat that person correctly and get them where they want to go - it might be chucking it down with rain and they want to go home, they want to pick the kids up, they have to go to an important meeting, as long as you sort them out, the car becomes secondary to them. (RAC)
The important point is that they felt they were assessed by their own customers (rather than their superiors). This customer-focused approach to performance management enabled and encouraged front-line employees to take responsibility for their job and assess the results of their own actions rather than having their actions ‘controlled’ and ‘checked’ by their seniors.

We are assessed by our own customers. (RAC)
The feedback we received from guests are our performance monitors that will tell us how well we are doing. (S-L)
We prepare a monthly chart by evaluation of the guests’ comments about us. We collect the guests’ suggestion forms. We will make a summary from the information we got from those forms. This will let us know how much our customers were satisfied with our service. At the end of the month we would put it in a graphic format. In that way, we would see easily whether we hit the target satisfaction rate. (S-L)

Although there was a strong customer satisfaction focus to measurement most employees were measured on a mix of customer-based measures and cost or efficiency measures.

The revenue target was set very high. The target was set at 16 million Baht a month. It’s difficult to achieve. If we made 15 millions, it would be acceptable. (S-L)

The employees understood the commercial perspective and often bonuses or other rewards appeared to be linked to achieving financial targets. Importantly employees seemed to understand how to achieve high levels of customer satisfaction while minimising costs. They knew there were trade-offs to be made, but in line with their acceptance of personal responsibility for the job, they made professional decisions about these trade-offs (this point is developed further in section 12.3)

There are targets in all walks of life and we have targets as we should be taking calls within a certain amount of time. And it is like I want to keep within my targets but I want to be concerned so if it means that I am a minute longer making a difference or whacking the job through and thinking “well I have got that job within two minutes but they don’t get found”, my own theory is that I would rather be a bit longer being thorough. And that is probably where we make the difference. (RAC)

The targets used, in the main, were team targets. This encouraged the team to work together towards common goals.

The CSI score is very important. It helps us identify where we (the team) are falling down. (RAC)
I think the other thing that makes us near the team targets - our targets for sales are not individual targets they are team targets, but the individual contribution is recognised within that so you are never on your own. If the team does not make it we all don’t make it. (FD)
We are measured as a team - we review the team figures monthly. (RAC)
10.7 DEALING WITH PROBLEMS AND COMPLAINTS

Dealing with problems and complaints was one of the topics talked about the most. It was evident that these organisations had very effective complaints procedures and the frontline employees knew exactly what to do.

Yes we do get complaints and problems. We do get issues but we have a policy where we try and deal with those as quickly and as promptly as possible. (FD)

Actually, we have steps in solving problems. There are four steps. First, we need to listen to them. We have to find out what made them mad. Second, we will apologise. The third is taking action. It is how we could make them feel better. Lastly, we would follow-up to see the results of the three steps we’d taken previously. After all, after the guests left, I need to accept the final results because I already did my best. (S-L)

To deal well with problems customers expect employees to:

- put it right - sort the problem
- do it quickly - speed is important
- provide a modest apology
- refund costs incurred
- assure it won’t happen again [3]

In all the many stories we were told, there was evidence of these key ingredients in place.

Even when a problem could not be sorted out, such as a passenger was late for an aircraft or s/he wanted a seat that was not available, the employees would bend over backwards to help. Employees realised that being seen to try was vital, rather than just saying 'no'.

If for example a customer had a Switch card and it expired at the end of February and they were buying a car on the 2nd March. No way could we get a switch card in time and the only other way for buying a car would be with a banker’s draft. We would normally charge for that service. We had actually sent her a card out at the beginning of February but she had not received it. So we had to issue it as a lost card and we needed to sort that out, and issue a free banking draft instead of charging her for it. So straightaway the customer is delighted. She knows she is going to get her car, she knows we are going to look out for the card as well and get a replacement card. So it is all sorted out for her in seconds. (FD)

The customer feels it is an inconvenience for him, that he is caught up in that situation. So we have to take time to explain so that the customer understands. (SIA)

We would tell them what we are doing and apologise - in fact everything I do I will tell him, keeping him informed so that he is very comfortable and he knows that we are doing something for him, we even explain little things like why we are moving up from our seat suddenly. (SIA)

And if they phone up and tell what their problem is they will be told the next time they come into the store, to come back to the customer service desk and we will sort the problem out. Or they come in the next day with the receipt or a week later with the receipt. And then they get the product free and they also get the money refunded. (Tesco)
We try our best to make sure that even though there is no definite solution we are trying to do something about it. If there is a way of changing the passenger’s seat we look for that. So it is about not telling the passenger we can’t do it. (SIA)

We will then explain to the passenger. First of all we must advise them that they were late for the flight. And usually their flight gate closes as soon as every passenger has boarded with the flight departing at 10.30, by 10.25 most of the passengers are already on board. The flight dispatcher will close the gate and the airbridge will be withdrawn. We cannot reinstate the bridge unless it is an emergency. We will explain to the passenger that he or she was late for the flight, and then we will say OK what we will do is to sit down and look for other alternatives. I would try and provide options. (SIA)

The front-line employees at the RAC were experts at dealing with problems and distressed customers. That was the core of their job. They also recognised that an open and honest approach was the one that worked best.

If you are direct with someone and tell them the truth they appreciate that more than you trying to fob them off with the information that is untrue. (RAC)

I always find that if you are honest with people, if you ring them up and say we have not got anybody I am sorry. (RAC)

You have to be very careful what you say to customers. As long as you explain things they are happy but it is just the way you come across being honest and open. They are not feeling then that you are trying to bluff them. That is the thing I hate. If somebody is lying to me and bluffing me I don’t like that. I would rather be open and honest about it and say this is how it is. (RAC)

Employees realised that customers who are feeling extremely dissatisfied need very careful handing:

Sometimes you go out there they may be really angry and say we were told you would be here in half an hour. You might have been an hour and they have missed an appointment or something and they are really angry when you get there. You apologise and say I am really, really sorry. Give them empathy. That is what they need, that is what they want. Hopefully they turn round and you say I am really sorry I am really busy, you got took off their job to go and do an emergency job and if you explain they normally understand. In our vehicles we have computers with the jobs in - so for instance if we have been taken off to go to an emergency job, for example a lone woman, and you say look I am really, really sorry I had to go and attend a woman stuck on her own - as long as they know the reason why people are OK. It is when you try and bluff people I think it does not always work; it is always best to be honest I think. (RAC)

Importantly, employees felt supported in whatever action they chose to take. They had the responsibility and were trusted to deal with these difficult situations. But they also had support. There was evidence of training and management support when needed.

We need to apologise and do whatever it takes to calm them down. It might be a set special fruits or a bottle of wine or some chocolates. It depends on the situation. We have to evaluate the situation and then consider what we should do for them. (S-L)

We have a section that deals with complaints, specialised in that they will see how to do deal with a service recovery to this customer. They help us deal with it for ourselves. (SIA)
10.7.1 Focus on improvement

Dealing well with customers was not the end of the matter. All the organisations had simple but effective mechanisms to log problems, suggestions or even small issues that a customer might ‘happen to mention’ [4]:

*If it is something we can feed back to the commercial department. If a customer is saying I am not happy with this or that then we need to pass it on to the commercial department.* (FD)

Everyone logs every complaint. Every issue. It starts with the person who takes the original ownership. (FD)

Just little things like people queuing right now, some people are queuing for 50 odd seconds and somebody might say you could answer much quicker. I think that is an issue to them if they expect us to answer quicker and they come on to me then I would log that. (FD)

We record the events in a daily report. (S-L)

If something happens we always raise a report. (SIA)

On customer service desk we have got an overcharge book and everything is recorded in this book. (Tesco)

Importantly the focus is on improvement not simply recovering and satisfying the customer. The employees were concerned for the continual development and improvement of the service.

*He filled out the suggestion forms to let us know what’s good or what needs to be improved. We would try to fix it.* (S-L)

Again, there appeared to be clear procedures and systems to deal with the complaint internally and drive improvements. Several key ingredients were spoken about:

- complaint passed to the person responsible
- investigation of the issue
- diagnose the root cause
- improve the situation
- inform the customer, if appropriate

Every morning we will clear out the problems from yesterday in our meeting room, with the General Manager also. The head of each department will then work on the issues and then talk to the managers in their departments, and then the staff, and suggest ways to deal with the problems. (S-L)

Well we have a process of complaints where they contact customer services, customer services then relate that complaint to the patrol manager. The patrol manager will look at the complaint and the complaint then goes to the leading patrol where the leading patrol has to do a little investigation on the complaint. From the leading patrol’s finding they report back to the manager and the manager then decides where to go with that complaint. Now if that comes down to the leading patrol like me - whatever the complaint is - whether it is ability on the patrol side or whether it is an attitude towards a customer or wrong diagnosis then I have to turn round and follow that complaint up with the patrolman. (RAC)

They (line managers) would listen to us and try to solve the problems. For example, I reported the problem to (line manager) case by case even for the not-so-important cases. If he could not help me fix the problems, they would be carried to the next level and then to the General Manager’s meeting. (S-L)
Employees at Shangri-La were particularly good at using the information to provide the guests with even better service on their next visit:

_We report to the manager the problems that happen to the guests on a daily basis, and we will use this information to solve the problem. Moreover, we have to let the guests who are experiencing difficulties know that their problem is not only being solved but the management are already informed about it also. We will then add the information about any problems to each of our guests' profile so that we can serve better the next time._ (S-L)

When the problem was straightforward employees might take immediate and personal action to fix the problem:

_If it is the point of sale label that is wrong or the shelf face label is wrong, we take that off. I would go and take it off and then let the people responsible for the labels know what I have done._ (Tesco)

_I would actually go and physically take the label off then that stops anyone else getting the product at the wrong price._ (Tesco)

### 10.7.2 Management support

Dealing well with problems and complaints was not just a role for front-line employees. They knew that as an issue became more serious managers had to be involved, indeed customers expected it, and there appeared to be good escalation procedures available to support the front-line employees when things became very serious.

_So my superior can help in a way that they will come and talk together with us to the customer. Most of the time we will get them to come to a more private room like this and we talk things over and then we know where it is going wrong._ (SIA)

_We have an escalation system that goes up to management._ (FD)

_We would collect the suggestion forms each day. A part of them would be sent directly to the GM. Sometimes if the case was really serious they might be sent to the Shangri-La International Board to the top management people and they would contact us later._ (S-L)

_Normally the manager is called over and there is a customer jumping up and down on the floor saying “I want to see a manager, I want to see the manager”. And if you go over there, and they start ranting and raving at you - you just turn round and rather than provide a splurge of excuses you say what do you want me to do for you and it puts them on the back foot straightaway. And they say oh I don’t know what to say to you now because this is not what I was expecting and they calm down._ (Tesco)

There was also an acceptance by both manager and employees that some complaints were unjustified and the customer was not ‘king’.

_There are any number of complaints and to be honest some of the complaints are unjustified. Just for example I had a customer who was complaining that we kept asking him for his password. And that was his complaint._ (FD)

_Some are genuine complaints, some are not._ (RAC)
10.8 SUMMARY

- The organisations’ systems and procedures were not only well designed but were designed with the employee (the customer) in mind.
- These customer friendly systems made life (work) easier for the employees.
- The organisations, in the main, appeared to hire people with the right attitude and potential rather than the experience or an ability to do a specific job.
- Good pay and good benefits were appreciated.
- Initial training and ongoing on-the-job training were seen as evidence of a caring and supportive organisation.
- A mix of performance measures was in evidence, in particular measures of customer satisfaction and cost. The focus of the measurement system was on personal development rather than reprisals.
- There was use of team targets with individual responsibility to the team.
- When dealing with problems and complaints the focus was on improvement, not simply recovering and satisfying the customer.

10.9 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. If we asked your front-line employees whether there are any systems or procedures that made their job more difficult than necessary, what would they say?
2. So what are you going to do?
3. Do you hire for values and train for skills?
4. Do your employees feel like they are being continually trained and supported?
5. What is the real purpose of measuring your front-line employees? Is it for you or for them?
6. How confident are your employees at dealing with complaints and do you have sound systems for driving improvements?
7. How are you going to deal with your organisation’s weaknesses?
11. ORGANISATIONAL VALUES

The first report identified that corporate values were the key drivers of an organisation’s reputation. These five organisations had each made explicit their own values and senior managers believed that they, their staff and the design of their systems were guided by those values - the values were in essence the organisations’ DNA. Table 3 provides a list of the organisations’ stated values.

Table 3 The organisations’ values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Direct</td>
<td>• Openness: honest and open with ourselves and our customers.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Respect: respect everyone’s contribution and the customer.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Contribution: working hard and smart and taking responsibility.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Responsive: listening to each other and our customers and responding promptly.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Right first time: commitment to achieving the highest standards.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Kaizen: we never stand still, we always get better.</td>
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<tr>
<td>RAC</td>
<td>• Practical: solving problems, effectively and right first time</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Willing: demonstrating a can do attitude, on the ball and going the extra mile</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Honest: being genuine, straightforward and fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Individual: involving, tailored and personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Responsible: thoughtful, intelligent and caring</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Flexible: sympathetic, rational and not rigid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shangri-La</td>
<td>• We will demonstrate honesty and care in all our relationships.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• We will do more for the customer in every customer contact.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• We will be consistent in our delivery of service.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• We will ensure our procedures are customer friendly and easy for the customer and staff.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• We will expect all executives to have a customer contact role.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• We will enable decision making to take place at the customer contact point.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• We will create an environment where our people may achieve their personal and career goals.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• We will make customer satisfaction a key driver of our business.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Singapore Airlines</td>
<td>• Pursuit of excellence: We strive for the highest professional standards in our work and aim to be the best in everything we do.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Safety: We regard safety as an essential part of all our operations. We maintain our equipment and adopt practices that promote the safety of our customers and staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Customer first: Our customers are foremost in our minds all the time. We go the extra mile to exceed their expectations.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Concern for staff: We value our staff and care for their well being. We treat them with respect and dignity and seek to provide them with appropriate training and development so that they can lead fulfilling careers.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Integrity: We strive for fairness in all our business and working relationships.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Teamwork: We work with pride as a worldwide team to achieve success together.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tesco</td>
<td>• No one tries harder for customers:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>〉 Understand customers better than anyone</td>
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<td></td>
<td>〉 Be energetic, be innovative and be first for customers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>〉 Use our strengths to deliver unbeatable value to our customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>〉 Look after our people so they can look after our customers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Treat people how we like to be treated:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>〉 All retailers, there’s one team...... The Tesco Team</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>〉 Trust and respect each other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>〉 Strive to do our very best</td>
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<td></td>
<td>〉 Give support to each other and praise more than criticise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>〉 Ask more than tell and share knowledge so that it can be used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>〉 Enjoy work, celebrate success and learn from experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11.1 EXTRAPOLATING ORGANISATIONAL VALUES FROM THE INTERVIEWS

This research was framed using open questions so it would not have been appropriate to ask employees for a list of their organisation’s values. Rather we wanted to see if the values espoused by senior managers were in evidence in the things their employees said and did and the systems and procedures that they described [4].

Our interpretation is that the values espoused by the five organisations were evident in our discussions with the front-line employees.

We have summarised the values in table 3 (above) into ten core values:

- openness
- honesty
- responsible
- respect
- flexible and willing
- focus on improvement and high standards
- concern for customers
- support for staff
- teamwork
- enjoyment

All these organisations appear to share cultures that are underpinned by these values:

- Openness - they had open and supportive managers (section 9) and in turn they were open with their customers (sections 3, 4 and 5).
- Honesty - honesty underpinned their dealings with their customers particularly when problems or issues arose (sections 5.4 and 7).
- Responsible - Section 7 documents how employees took personal responsibility for their job and managers allowed them to be responsible for their actions through appropriate performance measures (section 10.6).
- Respect - there was no shortage of evidence of respect for the customer through their genuine understanding of service excellence (sections 4 and 6). There was no shortage of respect between employees through their team working and mentoring roles (section 8).
- Flexible and willing - employees listened to their customers and had developed good customer sensing skills (sections 4 and 6.3) and did their best to go the extra mile, where appropriate, for their customers (section 5.3).
- Focus on improvement and high standards - section 10.7 demonstrated how important improvement was, especially when dealing with complaints. Employees understood the need to deal with customers and also the need to continually improve what they and others did. Their concern for high standards was evident through the performance management systems (section 10.6) and employees’ descriptions of service excellence (section 4).
- Concern for customers - the front-line employees were customer focused, witnessed by their concern to be both easy and pleasant to do business with (section 4.2) and their delivery of excellent service (section 5).
- Support for staff - employees certainly felt supported by their managers (section 9) in particular support for personal and customer problems (sections 9.5 and 5.4.1) and also felt appreciated by managers (section 9.3). There were also felt to be supportive systems (section 10) in particular helpful training and appraisal systems (sections 10.4 and 10.5).
• Teamwork - teamwork was a key ingredient in all of the organisations (section 8.2) particularly through genuinely supportive and caring colleagues (section 8.1) and the use of team-based targets (section 10.6).
• Enjoyment - although this was a value only mentioned by one organisation, Tesco, it was an emotion evident in all of the people we spoke to. They really enjoy their jobs (section 2.1).

11.2 SUMMARY

• The values claimed by the five organisations were in evidence in terms of what their front-line employees said and did.
• These values were part of the organisations’ DNA and characterised its dealing with its customers and its employees.

11.3 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. What are your organisation’s values?
2. Are they embedded in the organisation?
3. Are they evidenced by your systems, procedures and interactions?
4. Do you live and breathe the organisation’s values?
5. If culture and values are a function of what people do, what are you going to do next?
There appear to be three main outcomes of delivering service excellence. Clearly the front-line employees had a significant impact on customers, but this also resulted in employees having strong feelings towards their organisations. There also appeared to be a strong financial impact through the commercial judgment exercised by those front-line employees. Each of these were likely to create their own virtuous cycles (see figure 10).

Figure 10  The outcomes and virtuous cycles
12. IMPACTS: CUSTOMER, ORGANISATIONAL AND FINANCIAL

12.1 IMPACT ON THE CUSTOMER

Front-line employees in these five organisations enjoyed what they did. They felt well supported and enjoyed working with colleagues. Their enthusiasm for their jobs and their enjoyment of the job rubbed off on their customers.

*Being a good place to work if you are coming in and having fun I think it comes over from us to the customers that we are having fun at work. It is a nice experience for them.* (FD)

*If we felt that we had a good time serving our guests, we can pass on the happiness to the guests also.* (S-L)

*All the customers say what a friendly place it is. They say all the assistants are nice and friendly and helpful.* (Tesco)

This created its own virtuous cycle. By delivering excellent service and helping their customers, their customers expressed their appreciation. This in turn confirmed and reinforced their understanding of service excellence (what their customers appreciated) and encouraged employees to continue delivering it.

12.2 IMPACT ON THE ORGANISATION

Employees felt these were great places to work and as a result they had strong emotional feelings, such as pride and trust, towards the organisation. This in turn helped create an internal virtuous cycle which in turn supported the service culture and the organisational values reinforcing the commitment and enjoyment of managers and colleagues.

*I do have that feeling because most of my friends are still working with less reputable hotels like three or four-stars. They still don’t have a chance to be at my level. That makes me feel kind of proud.* (S-L)

*It is a great organisation to work for.* (FD)

*I like First Direct because there is a very good positive attitude. Both here and for customers in particular. I have worked in a lot of other organisations and here you don’t get all the hassle.* (FD)

*What the RAC provides is really quite special.* (RAC)

*We live together as a family. This place is another home of mine, because I spend my life here everyday. It makes me always want to continue being here. If I moved, things must be changed. Moreover, the benefits the hotel offers to us are fine. Overall, we live as siblings. This is an appealing aspect keeping me work here for long.* (S-L)

*SIA is a great way to fly.* (SIA)

*Tesco looks after its employees.* (Tesco)
12.3 FINANCIAL IMPACT

Front-line employees knew that delivering excellent service was important; to quote one RAC patrol:

*At the end of the day it is excellence of service which is what we depend on.*
(RAC)

These employees understood that their actions in delivering service would have long-term revenue implications in terms of lost or loyal customers.

*We try to do more than what our guests expect. They will absorb the appreciation little by little and they will be able to remember us eventually.*
(S-L)

They (the staff) are very aware of shareholder requirements as well as profit. I think by offering good customer service you are maintaining profit level, you are maintaining business, good customer satisfaction and recommendation. Recommendation to us is one of our key recruitment tools, we do very little advertising compared to the other banks. (FD)

*Sometimes there will be a customer who says I won't fly with you any more. So these are the customers that we want to bring back.*
(SIA)

It is our responsibility and when you do something good they never forget. They keep remembering and when they remember they tell their friends and this is word of mouth that carries you very far and service is something that cannot be measured and you give as much as you can to make people happy. (SIA)

Importantly they were well aware that some decisions were costly and they weighed up the commercial aspects of the decisions they took. These front-line employees were not simply staff members reacting to management rules and procedures. They applied commercial judgements in their own jobs and understood the financial consequences of those decisions. This virtuous cycle nourished the feeling of personal responsibility which in turn supported excellent, cost-effective service.

*As a patrolman if I can go out and complete that job for that customer rather than having to get a second resource out, I have done an excellent service for that customer, and for the organisation.* (RAC)

The employees even questioned decisions taken by managers which they felt were not commercially necessary. But as the following First Direct employee says - it is a question of balance.

*He said, “well I am going to write in and ask for £25”, and we did actually end up giving him £25. I took issue with this because I felt that it was absolutely not worth £25 compensation. It is sometimes a difficult balance, satisfying the customers and making money for the organisation. We have to have both of these in mind.* (FD)
12.4 SUMMARY

- The provision of excellent service was appreciated by customers, and their appreciation was appreciated by the employees, which reinforces their behaviour.
- This feedback reinforced strong views about the organisation, which in turn reinforced the organisation’s values and cultures.
- Employees understood how to deliver excellent service cost effectively. They were allowed to exercise commercial judgement and appeared to use it prudently.

12.5 QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. Are your cycles virtuous or vicious?
2. Do managers’ and employees’ actions reinforce desired culture and values?
3. Do you allow front-line employees to make commercial judgements? If not how can they provide cost effective service?
13. **THE VIEW FROM THE FRONT-LINE**

This study had three objectives:

1. What does service excellence mean to the people who deliver it?
2. How do they go about delivering it?
3. What are the conditions that enable and encourage them to deliver it?

A summary of the answers is contained in figure 11.

Figure 11  Service excellence: The view from the front-line

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13.1 **WHAT DOES SERVICE EXCELLENCE MEAN TO THE PEOPLE WHO DELIVER IT?**

To the front-line employees service excellence simply means ‘helping people’. These ‘people’ are both customers and colleagues. The previous study [1] reported that service excellence means delivering the promise, dealing well with problems and complaints, with a personal touch and providing the extra inch. The front-line employees in these outstanding organisations knew that they could make a real difference through personal interaction. They were deeply concerned with the way service was delivered, i.e. the softer, interpersonal side. Excellent service may be about being easy to do business with, but outstanding service is about being easy and pleasant to do business with.
13.2 HOW DO THEY GO ABOUT DELIVERING IT?

In terms of delivering excellent service these front-line employees had developed personal interaction into an art form. They delivered their promise in the style of the organisation's 'personality' which seemed to be embodied in the way they worked. Despite the size and complexity of the organisations these employees realised that their personal interaction with a customer could make a difference and they often used friendly banter with the customers to develop their relationships with them.

13.3 WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS THAT ENABLE AND ENCOURAGE THEM TO DELIVER IT?

There were four key enablers of excellence that made it easy and indeed possible for them to take responsibility, act professionally and deliver excellent service to their customers. Good colleagues were essential, people with whom they shared their working lives, who they knew would support them and with whom they shared a genuine commitment for their customers and the organisation they worked for. Team leaders, line managers and senior managers provided them with a great deal of support, through mentoring and coaching, and support with personal issues. Management by appreciation was much in evidence. All the organisations' systems and procedures were user (employee) friendly and made it easier for people to do their jobs. Finally the organisations' values underpinned their cultures - what people did and how they did it. These values were ingrained in behaviours.

Additionally these enablers resulted in several virtuous cycles. Because employees were given responsibility and they enjoyed what they did, this enjoyment rubbed off on their customers, which in turn improved the rapport and bond between them. The front-line employees also had strong feelings towards their organisations and this bond both further underpinned and strengthened the organisation's culture and values. The final virtuous cycle was a financial one. Many of these front-line employees exercised considerable commercial judgement based on their understanding of the financial consequences of their decisions. As a result excellent service was delivered cost effectively.

13.4 SECRETS OF SUCCESS

The aim of this research was to shed some light on how the people responsible for actually delivering service to customers go about delivering excellent service, also how they manage to keep doing it day after day, week after week and month after month. The purpose was to try to distil what makes organisations with a reputation for excellent service so successful and provide us with an opportunity to share the secrets of their success.

In summary:

- These employees knew what excellent service meant to their customers.
- A clear and shared service personality helped staff understand how to deliver the service.
- Providing the extra inch was a natural inclination and employees knew how much a difference it could make.
- Team working was a key ingredient of success.
- Managers were very supportive of front-line employees. They were approachable, open and helpful with a concern for individuals’ development and their personal situations.
- Mentoring was a key element in employees' personal development.
- Management by appreciation underpinned the supportive culture.
• Systems and procedures were designed with the employee (the customer) in mind.
• These organisations hired for values and potential, and trained for skills.
• The complaints systems were concerned with improvement not simply recovering and satisfying the customer.

Many of these secrets for success are neither new nor surprising [5][6], but serve, we hope, to reinforce what we know and believe to be good practice. However, we hope we have provided a few new insights, written here in the form of suggestions, that will challenge even the best service providers to make a difference.

### 13.5 TWELVE SUGGESTIONS FOR MANAGERS

1. Redefine service (internal and external) as ‘helping people’ - “We are encouraged to talk to the customer and to discover what they need and try to offer them the best solution”.

2. Encourage employees to treat the customer not do the job - “The customer is first, not the car. I think that is the secret to our success - we are treating the person, not the vehicle.”

3. Encourage personal interaction between front-line employees and customers - “I think that is the secret, we treat people as individuals” - excellent service is about being easy to do business with, outstanding service is about being easy and pleasant to do business with.

4. Encourage banter between employees and customers (and managers and employees) allowing them to use their own personalities - “We just chat to them basically, that is it, we just talk to them. We don’t do anything more or anything less than that”.

5. Help employees deal with difficult customers - supportive processes are required.

6. Encourage the notion of front-line service professionals - allow them to display their professional skills, this helps make potentially routine jobs challenging, exciting and enjoyable - “A flat battery is a flat battery but every customer is different”.

7. If you want your employees to ‘represent’ the organisation they have to feel professional and be responsible for what they do. Employees have to be trusted to do the job, manage their performance, and develop themselves - with the help and support (rather than control) of managers.

8. Employees should be provided (and want to be provided) with customer and financial feedback to help them maximise satisfaction and minimise the costs to the organisation.

9. Employees know how to deliver excellent service cost effectively and will do it if you let them.

10. Organisational values are the result of what people do and how they treat each other, not what’s written on a poster. Values are the organisation’s DNA and need to be embedded in all activities; selection, recruitment, training, and dealings between people.

11. Excellent service creates virtuous cycles reinforcing customer appreciation, organisational culture and the provision of excellent service.

12. The right employees, nurtured and supported in the right way, deliver superior customer service and, as the previous report demonstrated, shareholder value.
REFERENCES

BREAKTHROUGH RESEARCH

Completed research undertaken as part of the Institute’s research programme has already resulted in the following publications:

- **The Future of Customer Service**
  A study of key trends and challenges facing customer service in the UK carried out with Bain and Co, one of the world’s leading strategy consulting organisations. The report gives organisations - and managers in particular - food for thought in the key areas of recruiting and developing the right staff and the vital role of technology in delivering service excellence.

- **Trusting the Internet: Developing an eService Strategy**
  Written in association with the London Business School, this report provides a blueprint for delivering service excellence on the web. Ten key steps are identified to help organisations develop effective eService strategies to provide added-value services to Internet customers.

- **Emerging Skills for a Changing Economy: Evolution of the Customer Service Professional**
  Written in association with the Centre for Organisational Effectiveness at the University of Bournemouth Business School, this report examines longer term trends in customer expectations and customer service, and the implications for the roles and capabilities of those employed primarily to deliver customer service.

- **Service Excellence = Reputation = Profit: Developing and Sustaining a Reputation for Service Excellence**
  Written in association with the University of Warwick Business School, this report finds that companies regarded as ‘being easy to do business with’ are more likely to achieve bottom line benefits than organisations that do not have such a reputation. The report offers new insights into how organisations provide customer service excellence, including developing a particular service personality or style; the need for ‘adult’ relationships between managers and staff; top to bottom training; and the way organisations can achieve both consistency of service and a flexible approach.
  * Discounts available for bulk orders.

- **The ICS/TMI National Complaints Culture Survey 2001**
  This report presents the results of a survey of almost 4,000 customers and employees across nine industry sectors about the readiness of organisations to handle customer complaints effectively. The report highlights changes from the 2000 survey and areas that organisations need to address.

- **The ICS/TMI National Complaints Culture Survey 2000**
  Comprehensive research into the complaints culture in the UK reveals that many organisations are ill-equipped and unable to handle customer complaints effectively. The report points the way towards the ‘huge potential for improvement’ across all sectors.

All these research reports are available from the ICS. Members receive a 20% discount off the list price. You can order by calling the ICS on 01206 571716, by email: enquiries@instcustserv.com or by using the order form on the Institute’s website: www.instituteofcustomerservice.com Please include £1.50 postage and packing per order.
AND FINALLY...

The Institute of Customer Service hopes that you have found the information in this report useful and will give you food for thought in raising standards of customer service within your own organisation.

Your views and feedback are important and if you have any comments or issues arising from this report that you would like to share with us, please get in touch.

Also, if you would like information about the seminars based on these two Service Excellence reports please contact the ICS.

You may have other questions regarding themes for future research projects, or how to take part in our National Complaints Culture surveys, or perhaps you want more information about the benefits of joining the Institute and how to become a member.

Whatever your interest we will be delighted to hear from you. Call the ICS on 01206 571716 or email: enquiries@instcustserv.com
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