



Service recovery through empowerment? HRM, employee performance and job satisfaction in hotels



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ABSTRACT

This study tests the argument that human resource management in hotels enhances service-recovery performance and job satisfaction through empowering front-line employees to respond to service failures. After an initial phase of qualitative interviewing, dyadic data were gathered through a large-scale survey in thirty hotels in Sri Lanka. The results of structural equation modelling show that the HR practices and management styles adopted in this context help to develop job competence, which is then related to service-recovery performance and job satisfaction. However, they show that service recovery is carefully stage-managed and 'staircased' in this hotel context with empowerment strongly related to hierarchical level. Empowerment to address service failures is important in these hotels but it is deliberately graduated according to rank. While employee training shows benefits for both parties, greater job autonomy would enhance the well-being of these service workers.

1. Introduction

It is well known that service encounters contain intangible aspects, including how customers are treated by service staff, contributing to variation in quality (e.g., Zeithaml et al., 1985). This reality has led to a longstanding interest in the causes of 'service failure' and how firms might repair the damage through 'service recovery' strategies (e.g., Gronroos, 1988). Even though service failure generates dissatisfied customers, the argument is that effective service recovery can address this dissatisfaction and potentially enhance customer relationships (e.g., Sajtos et al., 2010). According to Michel (2001, p. 20), 'service failures are inevitable, but dissatisfied customers are not'. A common argument in the services marketing literature is that management should foster the empowerment of front-line service workers so that they are enabled and incentivised to respond to service failures (e.g., Ashill et al., 2008; Babakus et al., 2003).

However, we have a very limited understanding of the extent to which this general prescription is endorsed by management in specific service industries and how, in reality, it is implemented. Our goal in this study is to provide the first quantitative assessment in the hotel sector of how human resource management (HRM) connects to service-recovery performance (SRP) through the medium of employee empowerment. We use a sample of Sri Lankan three-to-five star hotels and incorporate job satisfaction in our analytical model to throw light on

how management could improve the mutuality of employment relationships in these hotels (Boxall, 2013; Peccei et al., 2013). The paper is structured in a conventional manner. We begin with the literature and our hypotheses, then explain our research methods and results, and finish with our discussion, limitations and conclusions.

2. Service recovery, employee empowerment and HRM in hospitality

Service-recovery strategies encompass the actions taken by managers and front-line employees in response to service failures (e.g., Michel, 2001; Patterson et al., 2006). These strategies may involve various responses, including acknowledgement of the problem, apologising, explanation of the problem, rectification, and offering compensation (e.g., Patterson et al., 2006; Prasongsukarn and Patterson, 2012). The service-recovery process typically requires immediacy, listening carefully to the customer problem and making a good response with a sense of personal care (Boshoff and Allen, 2000; Michel et al., 2009; Ogbeide et al., 2017).

A key point in arguments about how to manage service failures turns on the fact that the nature of the service failure, and the actions that are needed to satisfy complaining clients, cannot always be pre-determined (Bowen and Lawler, 1995). A service employee's job is to some extent unpredictable, requiring personal judgment in attending to

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the problems that arise. This implies that a certain level of employee empowerment is needed to manage service failures (e.g., Babakus et al., 2003; Bowen and Lawler, 1995). According to Lashley (1999, p. 172), ‘the intangible element of the service encounter requires some form of employee participation, even in highly standardised and Tayloristic situations’. From the employee side, when they have little or no control in dealing with service failures, and, frustratingly, when they are held personally responsible by a customer, job dissatisfaction can ensue and undermine employee loyalty (Boshoff and Allen, 2000; Michel et al., 2009).

An important first step in bringing a systematic investigation to the role of psychological empowerment in any particular environment involves unpacking the concept itself. Arguably, three of the dimensions defined by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) are particularly important in whether an employee feels enabled and entrusted to respond to a service failure: job competence, job autonomy and job impact. The concept of job competence has evolved from Bandura’s (1989) theories of self-efficacy and constitutes an individual’s belief in their capabilities to perform a task successfully. In the case of service failure, this means a confident understanding of how to respond to it. It is possible, however, to know how to respond when service has failed but to have little authority to act, so one is not actually very empowered (Bowen and Lawler, 1995). Job autonomy is therefore a critical dimension, relating to the employee’s freedom to make decisions about their work (e.g., Breugh, 1985). This factor lies at the heart of commonly accepted notions of empowerment: people are only empowered when they can exercise some choices around how they perform their jobs.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) also theorise a dimension concerned with job impact. This can be explained as the extent to which individuals can influence results in terms of ‘strategic, administrative or operating outcomes’ in their workplace (Spreitzer, 1995, p. 1444). It is possible, then, to experience a reasonable degree of autonomy but to make little impact because one’s area of control is not terribly consequential. In Thomas and Velthouse’s (1990) conception, there is a fourth dimension, which is concerned with the extent to which the employee finds the job meaningful. We do not, however, consider this essential because it is possible to have high levels of autonomy and impact without personally feeling that the work is highly meaningful.

In terms of the hospitality sector, Lashley (1998, 1999, 2000) has conducted a series of qualitative studies that address an important set of questions about the nature of employee empowerment: who does management decide to empower and to what extent? His case-study research shows quite a degree of variation in the meaning of empowerment and the practices used to promote it. In restaurants in which the service offer is highly standardised under a strong brand and strict operating procedures, there is little employee empowerment but there is more when greater customisation is fostered in the intangible elements of a restaurant experience. We need, then, to exercise considerable care in getting to know what empowerment means and which kind of model of HRM serves it in the specific hospitality context.

In relation to hotels, Lloyd et al. (2013) have conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of eight hotels in London and Glasgow, split between 4 and 5-star hotels and 2 and 3-star hotels. The former, of course, have larger, higher-quality rooms and more impressive amenities. Lloyd et al.’s (2013) focus is on room attendants and they show that in the luxury hotels these workers are required to carry out a more extensive process of room cleaning: ‘the tasks at upper market hotels were highly prescribed, with room attendants being required to follow strict guidelines and routines’ (Lloyd et al., 2013, p. 265). This indicates very little empowerment at the level of the room attendant, at least in terms of normal service operations.

One qualitative study that considers what happens when things go wrong – i.e. when service failures occur – is Haynes and Fryer’s (2000) study of a New Zealand five-star hotel, which had become somewhat dated and vulnerable to new competition. They consider service workers more generally and describe an upgrade by management of

both hotel amenities and service intangibles. This was supported by better training and internal communication, a more frequent and developmental approach to performance appraisal, and allowing ‘greater discretion in solving guests’ problems’ (Haynes and Fryer, 2000, p. 245). In respect of the last of these, they comment that:

A practical example of the empowered approach arose when a staff member complained that he could not get guests a drink when they waited for their room to be made up. Front office staff were quickly reassured that they are able to do this (p. 245).

It is possible, then, to imagine that the managers of higher-starred hotels will make some moves towards a more expensive model of HRM in order to support their claims to high quality and their premium pricing (Boxall and Purcell, 2016). As Lloyd et al. (2013) indicate, this might actually entail more extensive standardisation of front-line roles but it could, equally, incorporate some forms of greater employee empowerment, as in Haynes and Fryer’s (2000) case.

With this backdrop, our interest lies in evaluating how HRM relates to empowerment and thence to service recovery (and employee satisfaction) in three-to-five star hotels. We are not aware of any study that uses quantitative data to measure this specific chain of links in such hotels. The closest is Tsauro and Lin’s study (2004) in Taiwanese tourist hotels, which finds that the relationship between HR practices and customer-evaluated service quality is partially mediated by service-oriented behaviors (role-prescribed and extra-role). There are some studies that are comparable in terms of studying the HRM-empowerment-performance chain in other parts of the service sector. Peccei and Rosenthal (2001), for example, evaluated a management-driven change programme in a British supermarket, designed to enhance the quality of service. They showed that employee participation in ‘service-excellence’ training, as well as supportive management behavior, could enhance job autonomy and job competence and, thus, self-reported customer-oriented behavior. Similarly, Boxall et al. (2011) examined the effect of HR practices and managerial behaviors on the attitudes and behavior of cinema workers and, through them, on supervisors’ assessments of their performance. Unlike Peccei and Rosenthal’s (2001) findings, their results indicated that it was compliance behavior rather than a more discretionary, empowering form of behavior that predicted higher ratings of performance in this context. This underlined the reality that a scripted, low-involvement model of HRM was used by managers to achieve efficient delivery of standardised outcomes in this context. These two studies, then, show the importance of understanding the particular service objectives, operating systems and models of HRM in specific service contexts. They provided the primary guidance for how we developed our hypotheses and conducted our fieldwork in hotels.

3. Hypotheses

In terms of an overarching conceptual framework, our study is located within the stream of research on the ‘black box’ of strategic HRM (e.g. Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007; Boxall et al., 2011). This means we are concerned to understand how employee-related variables, such as employee abilities and motivations, function as mediators between human resource policies and performance outcomes (Madera et al., 2017). As outlined above, psychological empowerment constitutes one such set of mediating variables, which may form an important bridge between HRM and service outcomes in hotels.

Our hypotheses, then, are based on the need to relate HRM to psychological empowerment and thence to our outcomes of interest: service-recovery performance and job satisfaction. We begin with the chain of links from HR practices through empowerment to service outcomes. For example, employee training has been linked to psychological empowerment in hospitality and reward practices can be designed to reinforce employee perceptions of empowerment (Ro and Chen, 2011). In the hospitality sector, Gazzoli et al. (2012) demonstrate a link from such perceptions to customer perceptions of service quality.

So, too, do Ogbeide et al. (2017) who find that the extent to which guests perceive that service employees are empowered to make a decision regarding a complaint predicts greater satisfaction with a hospitality organization. Joining these pieces together, the argument is that relevant HR practices will relate positively to service-recovery performance through the medium of employees' psychological empowerment. We therefore hypothesise that:

H1. The positive relationship between HR practices and service-recovery performance will be mediated by employee perceptions of (i) job competence, (ii) job autonomy, and (iii) job impact.

We do not, however, simply conceive of HRM as a set of HR practices. There is an important contribution to the management of work and people that stems from how line managers enact policies, support individuals and demonstrate appropriate behaviors (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). The studies of Peccei and Rosenthal (2001) and Boxall et al (2011) both showed that management style, through role-modelling exemplary service and through encouraging and coaching team members, could have positive effects on psychological empowerment and service-performance behaviors, in addition to the impact of HR practices. We therefore hypothesise that:

H2. The positive relationship between management style and service-recovery performance will be mediated by (i) job competence, (ii) job autonomy, and (iii) job impact.

This brings us to the employee side of the equation. Employees' feelings of empowerment can have a significant influence on their attitudes and behavior (Snipes et al., 2005). As argued by self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci et al., 1989), practices that help to meet the fundamental human needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness should lead to intrinsic satisfaction. HR practices that foster a greater sense of psychological empowerment should therefore generate greater satisfaction, as Gazzoli et al. (2010) demonstrate in their study of restaurant employees. We therefore argue that the relationship between HR practices and job satisfaction will be mediated by employees' perceptions of job competence, job autonomy and job impact. If HR practices are associated with greater perceptions of these empowerment variables, we expect this to transmit into greater job satisfaction. Accordingly:

H3. The positive relationship between HR practices and job satisfaction will be mediated by (i) job competence, (ii) job autonomy, and (iii) job impact.

Again, as argued for Hypothesis 2, HRM is not restricted to HR practices, and we should expect that managers can stimulate better job satisfaction through their personal style if they enhance the psychological empowerment of their team members. Consistent with SDT (Deci et al., 1989), we expect that supportive management style will contribute to job satisfaction when it helps fulfil employee needs relating to competence, autonomy and impact. Accordingly, we hypothesise that:

H4. The positive relationship between management style and job satisfaction will be mediated by (i) job competence, (ii) job autonomy, and (iii) job impact.

We turn now to our research design and methods.

4. Research design and methods

4.1. Research context: hotels in Sri Lanka

Recognising the extensive variation in HRM across the hospitality context (Lashley, 1999, 2000), we began with qualitative data gathering, conducting exploratory interviews with 23 senior and middle-level managers in ten Sri Lankan hotels. The interviews covered the nature of service failure and recovery situations in these hotels. They explored the hotels' service goals and the typical HR practices and

management styles used to pursue them. This phase enabled us to customise our questionnaires for the quantitative analysis. All 23 interviews were transcribed, and NVivo 10 software was used for the qualitative content analysis, which involved classifying the texts systematically into codes and summarising them to identify underlying patterns. Coding identified important themes in the transcripts.

During these interviews, two types of service failure emerged: service lapses due to employee actions and core service issues such as the quality of the food or the room. The recovery strategy varied with the severity of the service failure, the most common being an apology to the guest, then an offer of complimentary gifts, and, less frequently, some form of monetary compensation or cost-bearing rectification. Exploration of specific types of incident suggested that the degree to which employees could respond to customers varied according to seniority. For example, a guest immediately complaining about the lack of a view from their room might be reallocated by reception staff to another room at the same grade with a better view. However, if such a room was not available, an upgrade without charge to a more expensive room could only be decided by the reception manager. Similarly, room attendants could commonly rectify small issues such as a lack of water bottles or a missing newspaper but would need to escalate any more substantial complaint about a room. An illustration was given of a room attendant reporting to the reception manager that a non-smoking guest had complained to them that the previous occupant of the room had evidently been a smoker. The room attendant could also discern the signs and quickly notified the front desk, who immediately organised a room change.

Consistent with their star-quality levels, then, a great deal of care was taken to validate and respond to complaints. Most hotels kept a record of service-failure incidents and maintained a database of customers' likes and dislikes, their allergies, and any service-related issues. A general manager commented that:

We need to ensure that whatever complaints that a client has to make during his stay, we want him to leave the hotel with positive memories. We don't want our guests to go back and make complaints on Trip Advisor or Holiday Check.

With this in mind, managers emphasised the goal of developing, and maintaining, an organizational culture focused on customer service. New hires were usually given at least two days of general orientation about the hotel and its policies on customer service. Each hotel department also ran a half-day mini-orientation, and hotels had employee handbooks that were provided during orientation. All ten hotels had a training manager or executive. Commonplace forms of training included soft-skills training in telephone etiquette, in English language, and in how to handle customer complaints, including listening and apologising immediately. It was typical for managers to hold daily meetings to update staff on standard operating procedures and to coach them in customer service techniques.

All the hotels had a performance evaluation system which, in one way or another, emphasised customer service and through which managers made recommendations for training or promotion. Remuneration in these star-classed hotels was above the minimum wage but recognised as low relative to alternative service jobs in banking, finance and telecommunications. However, a common practice was to distribute hotel service charges to employees, directly linked to their seniority-based salary, and to utilise employee-of-the-month awards and annual increments to recognise high performance. The amount and distribution calculations differ from hotel to hotel but one general manager stated that, at peak periods, the payments relating to service charges could triple an employee's remuneration.

The qualitative data gathering, then, underlined the importance to management of expressing a customer-service ethos in these hotels and the orientation of the HRM process to this end, both in terms of HR practices and the personal roles of managers. While we are not able to compare these hotels with lower-priced, lower-quality operations in Sri Lanka, the qualitative data suggested that HRM was taken very

seriously in these hotels, including in specialist management roles and in the general managerial effort applied to orientation, training and performance review.

4.2. Pilot study, sample and questionnaires

The quantitative study took place among employees in 30 hotels. Almost all have more than 50 rooms, with the largest having 426. The participants we targeted fell into two groups: (a) front-line service workers (including team leaders/supervisors) and (b) their direct managers. Our goal in this was to obtain all variables about the process of HRM and about job satisfaction from front-line workers but ratings of performance from the managers responsible for performance appraisal. This meant developing two separate questionnaires. Most of the service workers had an adequate standard of Sinhalese literacy but insufficient English-language skills to complete a survey in English. Therefore, our questionnaires were translated into the participants' mother tongue using forward-backward-forward translation techniques (Schaffer and Riordan, 2003).

We then conducted a pilot study in which two hotels agreed to participate. Assisted by executives we knew in the hotels, we asked 20 employees to complete the front-line worker questionnaire while four managers were asked to rate their employees' service-recovery performance in the manager questionnaire. Seven survey dyads were returned from one hotel and eight from the other, which resulted in 15 completed employee surveys and manager evaluations. Reviewing these responses, we made minor adjustments to ensure that the front-line employee questionnaire used words well understood in everyday Sinhala. The timing for completion of that questionnaire was approximately 20 to 30 min and for the manager questionnaire around 8 to 10 min.

We then approached senior management at each head office of the three-to-five-star hotel chains in Sri Lanka and this generated approval for the participation of 30 hotels in the study. The respective head offices requested each participating hotel to nominate a hotel executive to assist with the surveys. The delegated executive was directly contacted to explain the procedure.

Twenty-one hotels agreed to distribute 30 questionnaires, and nine hotels decided to distribute 20 questionnaires, which resulted in a sampling frame of 810 employees. All questionnaires were pencil-and-paper based. The primary criterion for selecting front-line employees was that they should be in contact with the customer in their daily operations and should be chosen on a random basis. Instructions were given to distribute the set of front-line questionnaires first (keeping a record of the name or employee number) and, after collecting them, to distribute the second set of questionnaires to managers to evaluate SRP. The latter were single-page questionnaires and had the hotel employee's name or ID written at the top for identification purposes.

Because the hotels did not allow the employees to fill in the questionnaires during work hours, they were given a one-week period to return the questionnaires. The time lag between the two questionnaire distributions was two to three weeks. The managerial questionnaires were then matched with the respective employee questionnaires via the names of the employees or their ID numbers. In total, 625 responses from employees, along with the respective manager evaluations (a response rate of 77.16%), were analysed. The average employee cluster per hotel was 21, and the average employee cluster per manager for each individual hotel was six.

4.3. Measures, scale validation and demographics

Since we tested the hypotheses using structural equation modelling (SEM) with latent variables, convergent validity was evaluated with adequate fit of the measurement model and standardized factor loadings higher than 0.5. Discriminant validity was evaluated by examining if the correlations among all variables are significantly less than unity.

When evaluating the reliability of the latent variables, composite reliability/construct reliability, instead of Cronbach's alpha, was examined because Cronbach's alpha assumes that the factor loadings of all items of a latent variable are equal. Following recommendations by Hair et al. (2014, p. 619), a latent variable with construct reliability above 0.6 is deemed acceptable when other indicators of construct validity are good.

4.3.1. Service-recovery performance (SRP)

SRP, defined as "the effectiveness of employees dealing with customer complaints", was measured by managers for employees in their department (Boshoff and Allen, 2000, p. 73). The 5-item scale developed by Boshoff and Allen (2000), or a shortened version of it, has been used to measure the SRP of customer-contact employees in a variety of contexts, including hospitality (e.g., Karatepe, 2012). After our initial interviews, four new items were added to the original SRP scale to thoroughly conceptualise the construct. We used the split-sample method (Hinkin, 2005) to validate the SRP scale, generating the 6-item scale noted in Appendix A. The original scale's wording of (for example) "I do not mind dealing with complaining customers" was changed to "This staff member does not mind dealing with complaining customers." The construct reliability of the scale was 0.842.

4.3.2. Job satisfaction

We adopted the Michigan Organizational Assessment Questionnaire Job Satisfaction Subscale (MOAQ-JSS; Cammann, Fichman et al., 1983) as our measure. A sample item is: "All in all, I am satisfied with my job." The construct reliability of the scale was 0.825.

4.3.3. Empowerment

We followed the studies of Peccei and Rosenthal (2001) and Boxall et al. (2011), which measured job competence and job autonomy, drawn from Spreitzer's (1995) scale. These reflect the extent to which workers feel confident they can do the job and have control over how to do it but we also measured a third dimension drawn from Spreitzer's (1995) scales: job impact, which was worded to assess the extent to which workers exercised influence in their department. These were tested as distinct latent factors in the final model. Construct reliabilities were: job competence (0.605), job autonomy (0.713) and job impact (0.775). Scale items and standardized factor loadings are given in Appendix B.

This raises the fact that the job competence dimension of empowerment showed a low reliability coefficient. In a study of employee empowerment in banking, Chebat and Kollias (2000) reported low internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.57$ and 0.56) for self-efficacy scales, as have various others (e.g., Hartline and Ferrell (1996); $\alpha = .60$). Since the standardized factor loadings of all items were above 0.5 and the fit indices of the measurement model indicated that the model fitted the data well, following Hair et al. (2014), we concluded that the job competence dimension has acceptable construct reliability.

4.3.4. HR practices and managerial styles

Peccei and Rosenthal (2001) and Boxall et al. (2011) contextualised their independent variables to ensure they reflected the specific model of HRM being applied in the situations they studied. We followed this contextualisation philosophy and formulated the items for HR practices and managerial style after conducting initial interviews with hotel management. In generating survey items, we were careful to keep statements short, simple and expressed in language familiar to the respondents (Hinkin, 2005). Several scale revisions were done to refine the questionnaire items. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree.

The split-sample method and exploratory structural equation modelling (ESEM), using Mplus (version 7.3), were then adopted to select the items for the final scales. The first round of ESEM generated three factors: a factor representing customer-service training (4 items), a

factor representing customer-service reward (3 items), and a factor representing management style (6 items). For both randomly-split samples, ESEM resulted in a good factor structure with all factor loadings above 0.40 and with an acceptable model fit. As a final step, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed on the full sample ($N = 625$), using the “Type = TWOLEVEL COMPLEX” command in Mplus to control for non-independence of residuals within clusters (i.e. both hotels and managers). The hypothesised three-factor model fitted the data well: $\chi^2(62) = 126.451$; $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.04; SRMR = 0.068. The standardised factor loadings ranged from a low of 0.57 to a high of 0.86. R^2 values were satisfactory, ranging from a low of 0.33 to a high of 0.85. The CFA provided assurance that the prior analyses of scale development were conducted appropriately and thoroughly. Reliabilities were calculated for the full sample: training (construct reliability = 0.788), rewards (construct reliability = 0.840), and management style (construct reliability = 0.841). Items for the three scales and their factor loadings are noted in Appendix C.

4.3.5. Control variable

As illustrated above, our initial interviews suggested that seniority was a key variable in the extent to which individuals could respond to service failures. Mindful that there is often a strong relationship between hierarchical position and employee autonomy (e.g. Harley, 1999), we included “job level” as a control in relation to the empowerment and SRP variables. Our sample consisted of two employee groups operating in the front-line of hotel services. These were direct service workers, who do not have any supervisory responsibilities, and a smaller group who are team leaders or supervisors carrying a higher level of authority. These two groups both deal directly with customers but are not necessarily in the same hotel departments, in the same teams or on the same shifts. While the managers and service workers/supervisors have a clear leader-subordinate relationship, service workers are not necessarily the subordinates of supervisors. Thus, for analytical purposes, we classify our respondents as ‘service workers’ (dummy-coded as 0) and ‘supervisors’ (dummy-coded as 1).

4.3.6. Common method variance

Harman’s (1976) one-factor test was used to test for common-method variance in the front-line employee data through both principal-axis and principal-component factoring. The largest factor explained 24.887% of the variance, below the critical value of 50%. Therefore, common method variance was not a concern.

4.3.7. Demographics

In the sample of 625 front-line workers, 81.6% of respondents are male. This reflects the predominately male composition of the Sri Lankan hotel workforce, including in the housekeeping department where room attendants are traditionally referred to as ‘room boys’. Some 52.6% are permanent employees, 31.8% are on a fixed-term contract and 12.3% are trainees; 76.9% had over one year’s working experience in their hotel, and 71.5% of employees are between 20 and 39 years of age. Some 76.4% are direct service workers and 23.6% are supervisors. Only 3.3% of employees held a bachelor’s degree or higher. However, 23.8% employees had gained a qualification in hospitality management from a vocational training institute such as the National Apprentice Board or a hotel school. Some 66.5% of employees had achieved the national standard of ordinary-level or advanced-level school education.

5. Results

Table 1 shows the correlations, means and standard deviations of the study measures.

5.1. SEM analysis

Missing Value Analysis (MVA) was conducted within SPSS for all the variables in the study. None of the variables showed a high number of extreme values and no patterns were apparent in the missing data. The results of Little’s ‘missing completely-at-random’ (MCAR) test confirmed that there were no patterns in the missing data ($\chi^2 = 6062.446$, $DF = 6029$, $p = 0.378$).

Testing of measurement invariance (Cheung and Rensvold, 2002) confirmed that there was no difficulty in combining the groups of service workers and supervisors into one sample (results available from the authors). We then analysed all 625 cases in the dataset using structural equation modelling (SEM) in Mplus. To control for non-independence at the individual level because the dataset was clustered around managers and within hotels, the analysis was performed with a 3-level structural equation model. The impact on errors and chi-square statistics due to the non-independence of observations was controlled (Muthén and Muthén, 2012). Missing values in the analysis were handled by using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) in Mplus. In the final analysis, 27 cases were excluded because they had missing values in the control variable, leaving a final sample of 598 cases.

The measurement model included all variables and the CFA results indicated a good fit with the sample data: $\chi^2(406) = 606.125$; CFI = 0.952; RMSEA = 0.028; and SRMR = 0.050. In addition, all standardized factor-loading estimates are higher than 0.527 and all items indicated a significant loading ($p < 0.001$) on the intended latent factor, ensuring the convergent validity of the research model. The fit statistics indicate that the full structural model fitted the data well: $\chi^2(439) = 656.741$; $\chi^2/df = 1.50$; CFI = 0.947; RMSEA = 0.029; and SRMR = 0.054. The results of the structural model are recorded in Table 2 (direct effects), Table 3 (indirect effects) and Fig. 1, (the final model). Since mediating effects are not normally distributed, the mediating hypotheses were tested by examining the bootstrapped bias-corrected confidence intervals (Cheung and Lau, 2008) generated by the Monte Carlo bootstrapping method (Preacher and Selig, 2010).

5.2. Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the three empowerment variables would positively mediate the relationship between HR practices and SRP. Training had positive, significant relationships with all three empowerment factors and the results confirmed that the relationship between training and SRP, as expected, is mediated through job competence ($\beta = 0.077$, $p < 0.05$) and job impact ($\beta = 0.055$, $p < 0.05$). While training had a significant direct relationship with job autonomy ($\beta = 0.249$, $p < 0.05$), the mediating effect on SRP via job autonomy was not, however, significant. The reward variable was positively associated with both job autonomy ($\beta = 0.197$, $p < 0.05$) and job impact ($\beta = 0.230$, $p < 0.05$), but not with job competence. It is the link from rewards through job impact that shows a positive relationship with SRP ($\beta = 0.071$, $p < 0.05$). Overall, hypothesis 1 is partially supported: training is linked to SRP via two empowerment variables – job competence and job impact – while the reward variable is simply linked via the latter.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that the three empowerment variables would positively mediate the relationship between management style and SRP. This was confirmed in the case of job competence ($\beta = 0.036$, $p < 0.05$). However, management style is negatively related to job impact ($\beta = -0.144$, $p < 0.05$) and the relationship via job impact to SRP is negatively significant ($\beta = -0.044$, $p < 0.05$). Neither the relationship between management style and job autonomy, nor the relationship via job autonomy to SRP, are significant. These results show partial support for H2: management style is linked to SRP via job competence, like training, but management style is negatively related to employee perceptions of job impact, which contradicts the hypothesis.

Table 1
Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD), Construct Reliability and Correlations among study variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Training	6.14	1.16	0.788	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2 Rewards	5.66	1.47	0.480**	0.840	–	–	–	–	–	–
3 Management Style	6.56	0.74	0.290**	0.415**	0.841	–	–	–	–	–
4 Job satisfaction	6.57	0.84	0.186**	0.219**	0.253**	0.825	–	–	–	–
5 Job competence	6.63	0.55	0.277**	0.153**	0.160**	0.317**	0.605	–	–	–
6 Job impact	4.47	1.86	0.187**	0.211**	–0.001	0.128**	0.154**	0.775	–	–
7 Job autonomy	5.83	1.31	0.298**	0.289**	0.225**	0.277**	0.348**	0.331**	0.713	–
8 SRP	5.42	1.08	0.088*	0.075	–0.004	0.025	0.150**	0.255**	0.092†	0.842
9 Job level	–	–	–0.038	0.002	–0.114*	–0.041	0.083*	0.204**	0.096*	0.180**

N = 625.

Notes: Construct reliability is recorded on the diagonal in bold. Job level is dichotomous.

** p < 0.001.

* p < 0.05 (two-tailed significance test).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the three empowerment variables would mediate between HR practices and job satisfaction. Training has significant, positive relationships with all three mediators and the pathway from training to job satisfaction via job competence is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.144, p < 0.01$), as is the pathway via job autonomy ($\beta = 0.059, p < 0.05$). The indirect effect of training on job satisfaction via job impact is not significant. The reward factor has a positive, significant relationship with job autonomy and job impact but none of the mediating relationships with job satisfaction are significant. Overall, H3 is confirmed in terms of the way that training links to greater perceptions of job competence and job autonomy and thence to better job satisfaction but not confirmed in relation to the chain that begins with rewards.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the three empowerment variables would mediate between management style and job satisfaction. The indirect path from management style to job satisfaction via job competence is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.067, p < 0.05$), while the indirect relationships via job autonomy and job impact are not significant. This partially supports H4.

In addition, the control variable of job level has a positive link with job autonomy ($\beta = 0.298, p < 0.01$), a rather large connection to job impact ($\beta = 0.568, p < 0.001$), and a positive relationship with SRP ($\beta = 0.289, p < 0.05$). In other words, those at the supervisory level perceive greater job autonomy and job impact, with the latter connected to better SRP. Job level does not have a significant effect on perceptions of job competence. Overall, the model explains 13.6% of the variance in SRP and accounts for 25.2% of the variance in job satisfaction.

6. Discussion

In this study, we examined the links from HR practices and management style to business and employee outcomes through the medium

of psychological empowerment. It has been useful to conceptualise empowerment as multidimensional because different aspects have, indeed, played different roles. Furthermore, grouping employees by rank has uncovered the way in which service workers and supervisors experience empowerment differently.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

The results reveal important subtleties in the HRM process. They show that training in customer service is consistent with employees perceiving themselves to be competent, to have some degree of autonomy and to have some impact in their departments. In addition, customer-service rewards have a positive relationship with perceptions of job autonomy and impact. However, the picture then becomes more complex and a simple theoretical story of HRM leading to maximum front-line empowerment and thence to service-recovery performance cannot be sustained. What we see is that it is through the sense of competence and of impact that training connects to managers' ratings of employees' service-recovery performance but not through a greater sense of autonomy (which is negatively related to SRP, though not at a level that reaches significance). Job autonomy, which is central to common understandings of employee empowerment, does not transmit the effects of HRM, either as a set of practices or as a style of management, into service-recovery performance in these hotels. In theory terms, then, the results imply that we need a contingent or carefully qualified model of empowerment in hotels.

To understand why this is so it helps to reflect on the role of our control variable: job level. The results demonstrate that supervisors have a higher level of autonomy and a much higher level of job impact and, not surprisingly, are rated more highly in service-recovery performance. This is strongly suggestive that service workers are trained in a highly prescriptive operational model, as in Lloyd et al.'s (2013) luxury hotels, a model that is relaxed somewhat in the case of

Table 2
Standardized Direct effects.

Variable	Job competence	Job autonomy	Job impact	Job satisfaction	SRP
Job Level	0.209	0.298**	0.568**	–	0.289†
Training	0.399**	0.249*	0.178*	–	–
Rewards	–0.120(NS)	0.197*	0.230*	–	–
Management style	0.187(NS)	0.140(NS)	–0.144*	–	–
Job Competence	–	–	–	0.360**	0.193(NS)
Job Autonomy	–	–	–	0.235(NS)	–0.154(NS)
Job Impact	–	–	–	–0.041(NS)	0.307**
R ²	0.189**	0.233**	0.170**	0.252**	0.136**

Note: Job level is a dichotomous variable, which is not standardized, while independent variables and dependent variables are standardized. N = 598; NS = Not significant.

** p < 0.01.

* p < 0.05.

Table 3
Indirect Specific Effects.

Paths	Indirect effects Unstandardized/Standardized	Mediator Variable
Hypothesis 1		
Training → job competence → SRP	0.090 [†] /0.077	Job competence
Training → job autonomy → SRP	-0.045[NS]/-0.038	
Training → job impact → SRP	0.064 [†] /0.055	Job impact
Rewards → job competence → SRP	-0.017[NS]/-0.023	
Rewards → job autonomy → SRP	-0.022[NS]/-0.030	
Rewards → job impact → SRP	0.051 [†] /0.071	Job impact
Hypothesis 2		
Management style → job competence → SRP	0.061 [†] /0.036	Job competence
Management style → job autonomy → SRP	-0.037[NS]/-0.022	
Management style → job impact → SRP	-0.075 [†] /-0.044	Job impact
Hypothesis 3		
Training → job competence → job satisfaction	0.130 ^{**} /0.144	Job competence
Training → job autonomy → job satisfaction	0.053 [†] /0.059	Job autonomy
Training → job impact → job satisfaction	-0.007[NS]/-0.007	
Rewards → job competence → Job satisfaction	-0.024[NS]/-0.043	
Rewards → job autonomy → Job satisfaction	0.026[NS]/0.046	
Rewards → job impact → Job satisfaction	-0.005[NS]/-0.009	
Hypothesis 4		
Mgt Style → job competence → Job satisfaction	0.089 [†] /0.067	Job competence
Mgt Style → job autonomy → Job satisfaction	0.043[NS]/0.033	
Mgt Style → job impact → Job satisfaction	0.008[NS]/0.006	

N = 598.

NS = Not significant.

** p < 0.01.

* p < 0.05.

supervisors to provide greater flexibility in responding to customer complaints. Those whose level of authority endows them with greater impact are the ones who can exercise greater influence. In effect, while empowerment theory has relevance for service-recovery performance in this hotel cluster, it only does so if we appreciate its hierarchical nature. It is important to service quality in this hotel context but an individual's impact on service recovery is strongly related to their level in the organisation.

Like training, management style links to service-recovery

performance via perceptions of job competence but managers appear to be working at cross-purposes to training practices in respect of job impact, which is negatively related to management style. Why might this be so? One interpretation is that Sri Lanka is a high power-distance culture (Hofstede, 1984; Chandrakumara and Sparrow, 2004). In this societal context, an authoritative style of coaching is commonly seen in the management of the routine jobs of service workers. Alternatively, or in addition, there is an industry effect: luxury hotels may foster greater empowerment for service workers but 'the scope for discretion remains

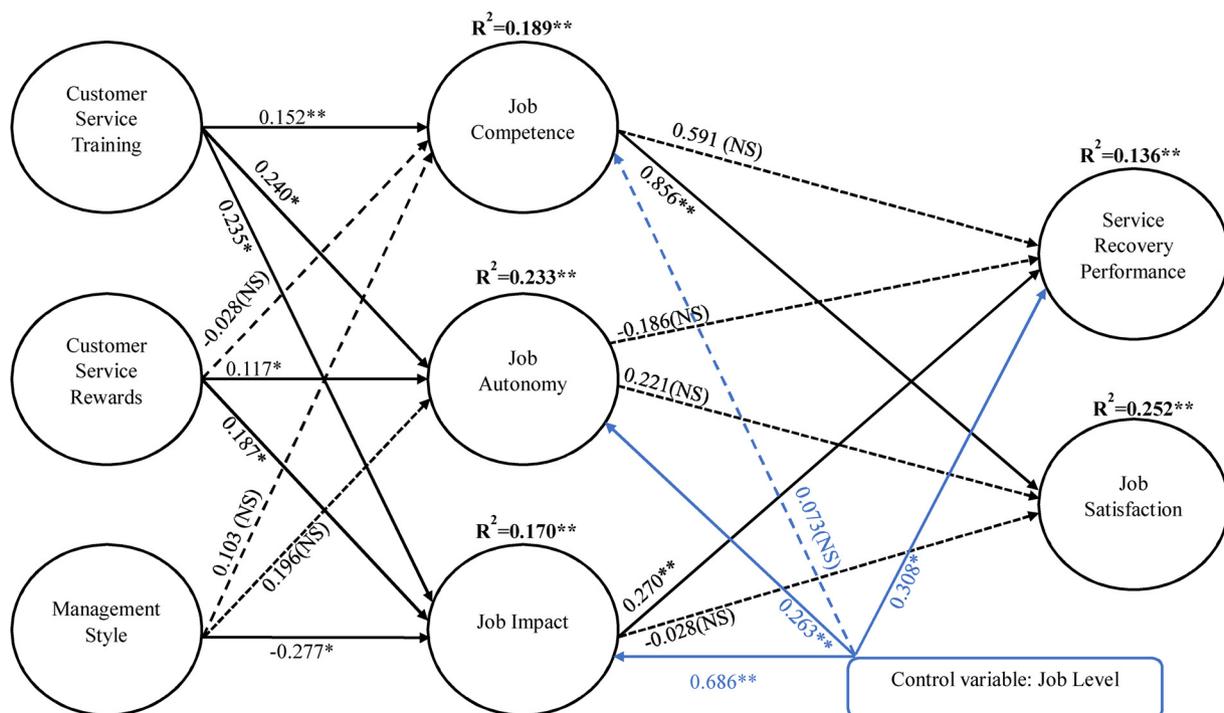


Fig. 1. The Structural Model (unstandardized direct effects).

somewhat limited' (Haynes and Fryer, 2000, p. 246) when compared with more highly skilled service industries. These are important questions for future studies and are consistent with the argument that research on empowerment in hospitality needs to carefully examine the specific business and social environment and the management models that emerge in it (Lashley, 1999).

6.2. Practical implications

What does this study tell us that would help managers to improve the mutuality of employment relationships in these hotels? We see a strong overlap of interests in the connections from training and management style through job competence to both dependent variables: service-recovery performance and job satisfaction. This is consistent with what we heard from managers in the qualitative interviews: while the training provided in the hotels was important for service outcomes, they told us that workers also saw it as enhancing their employability, including for overseas positions. There is, then, evidence of a significant degree of mutuality between hotel management and their employees around the capability dimension of mutuality (Boxall, 2013). On the other hand, we can also see where well-being might be enhanced. Training has a positive relationship to job satisfaction through perceptions of job autonomy but not to service-recovery performance. This suggests, as Guest (2017) argues, that job redesign to enhance autonomy could promote greater well-being among these service workers. The obstacle to greater job autonomy lies in the fact that current managerial philosophies do not associate greater freedom in service methods with better service performance.

6.3. Limitations

In terms of limitations, the study is cross-sectional and cannot be definitive on causal relations among the variables. In addition, we explain a relatively small amount of variance in SRP (13.6%). This suggests that a wider range of variables is needed in future studies of service recovery. On the other hand, our methods had some key strengths. These include identifying distinct employee groups rather than assuming that all employees are managed in the same way;

Appendix A

Scale items for SRP, and their standardized factor loadings (p < .000).

6-item scale used in this study	Standardized factor loadings*
This staff member doesn't mind dealing with complaining customers	0.810
I can't remember any instances where customers have left with problems unresolved when this staff member has been involved	0.688
Satisfying complaining customers is a thrill to him/her	0.656
Complaining customers this staff member has dealt with in the past are among today's most loyal customers	0.712
This staff member apologizes to the customer for poor service	0.795
Overall, I am satisfied with the way he/she handles customer complaints	0.830

*Factor loadings are based on the measurement model

Appendix B

Scale items for job competence, job autonomy and job impact, and their standardized factor loadings (p < .000)

Items	Factor loadings*
Job competence	
I am confident about my abilities to do my job	0.632
I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities	0.592
I have mastered the skills necessary for my job	0.527
Job Autonomy	
I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job	0.599

developing scales for HR practices and management style from interviews with management and pilot-testing of questionnaires; evaluating the service-recovery outcome variable through managers; measuring empowerment as a multi-dimensional construct; adopting a latent-factor model to account for measurement errors (Cheung and Lau, 2008); and testing measurement invariance to understand cross-group comparison (Cheung and Rensvold, 2002).

7. Conclusions

Using dyadic data from employees and managers in Sri Lankan hotels, this study showed that the HR practices and management styles adopted in this context helped to develop job competence, which was then related to job satisfaction and service-recovery performance. The results do not support a simple, unqualified model of HRM leading to empowerment and thence to service performance in our sample of hotels. While employee training may encourage a greater sense of job autonomy, the latter is not connected to service-recovery performance. In terms of job autonomy and, more strongly, job impact, supervisors were significantly more empowered than service workers and managers rated them as making a much greater contribution to service recovery. While all employees are carefully trained to listen and apologise to disgruntled customers, non-supervisory workers must escalate the more serious problems they encounter. Empowerment to address service failure is important in these hotels but it is carefully stage-managed and 'staircased' or graduated according to rank. Based on our sample, any theoretical position that implies that hotel management needs a high level of empowerment of front-line employees to address service failures needs to be more carefully qualified. Finally, we see in the data where mutuality in employment relationships might be enhanced. Service workers in these hotels would likely appreciate greater autonomy in how to respond to service failures if their managers would encourage it.

Declarations of interest

None

I can decide on my own how to go about doing my work	0.658
I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my job	0.749
Job Impact	
My impact on what happens in my department is large	0.602
I have a great deal of control over what happens in my department	0.817
I have significant influence over what happens in my department	0.786

*Factor loadings are based on the measurement model.

Appendix C

Items for training, rewards and management style, and their standardised factor loadings (p < .000)

Items	Factor loadings*
Customer-service training	
I received customer service training before I came into contact with customers	0.609
I receive continuous training on customer service	0.760
I have been trained to handle customer complaints	0.736
My hotel identifies its training needs by examining customer complaints	0.697
Customer-service rewards	
I am rewarded for serving customers well	0.819
I am rewarded for handling customer complaints effectively	0.927
The rewards I receive are linked to providing exceptional customer service	0.641
Management Style	
My boss recognises me for providing good service to customers	0.621
My boss shows me how to provide a good customer service	0.863
My boss offers new ideas to improve customer service	0.818
My boss is an example of good customer service in his/her daily job	0.817
My boss is genuinely committed to customer service	0.781
My boss encourages me to take prompt action to solve customer problems	0.573

*Factor loadings are based on the measurement model.

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