# The Meaning of Front Stage Employees On-Site
*A Customer Perspective*

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There are options in designing the service delivery. One of them is to decide whether to deliver the service with the front stage employees on-site or then, to deliver the service through technology without any or few employees on-site. This study is about front stage employees, specifically about their meaning to customers in everyday service encounters.

It is considered that front stage employees have a great impact on customer perceived service. Front stage employees' service mind-set, attitude and behavior, capability to timely reaction in a case of a service failure, and customer recovery are examples of attributes on service quality (Grönroos, 2007). Hence, front stage employees' impact on customer satisfaction, their role conflict and role ambiguity while serving "two masters" (a customer and a director), and employee empowerment have been popular topics in service research (e.g. Bowen & Lawler III, 1992; Chung & Schneider, 2002). These studies, however, suppose that service occurs in face-to-face interactions between customers and service employees who work on-site in the same place at the same time with customers. As we know, service encounters are occurring more and more on the Internet (face-to-screen) or in servicescapes without any employees on-site, e.g self-service hotels and post offices (face-to-space). There exist studies on pros and cons of self-service or technology-based service, but the front stage employees, and their meaning to customers in service encounters is still scarce. Do customers miss human beings or human interaction in the modern service?

Delivering the service with or without front stage employees is part of the service design. Services that are delivered with the help of technology, without any visible human resources on-site have gained popularity among service providers and customers. This development raise a question: what is the role of the front stage employees in service encounters and how can they increase customer satisfaction in a service delivery? This question is intriguing specifically in a case when there is an alternative to deliver the same service without any front stage employees on-site e.g. shopping and banking services on the Internet, or then in shops and finance offices where customers are served by service employees.

The focus of the study is on customers' perceptions of front stage employees on-site. The preliminary findings of an explorative, narrative study show that customers appreciate having front stage employees on site since they provide valuable information about products and services, they represent the service company, and especially since they provide a psychological feeling of security. In many service encounters "what-if-something-happens" situations emerge. Customers appreciate to have a feeling that there is someone on-site who can solve service problems, and someone to whom one can turn to in any case if problems occur.

This study contributes to service design, specifically to operationalization of service concepts (Cook et al., 2002). Service providers' priority is to provide quality service in the eyes of the customer, to gain customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Service productivity is, however, the other side of the same coin (Gummesson, 1995; 1998). Operationalization of service concepts with the help of the technology without any front stage employees on-site is productive to service providers, and moreover, at its best it can even increase customer satisfaction. Technology-based service is accessible and flexible, and often inexpensive to customers (Meuter et al., 2000). However, can technology-based service contribute to customer loyalty and build a relationship, solve customers' problems and empathize with different customers?

This study is at its preliminary phase, and more empirical data will be gathered. This study counts on social constructionism, and the interest of the study is on customers' constructions of the research phenomenon (e.g. Gergen & Gergen, 2009). Hence, empirically the study counts on customers' narratives on service experiences with or without front stage employees (e.g. Riesmann, 2008). Although this study is still at its preliminary phase it provides already now ideas for future research. First, the cultural differences between Nordic and Southern European countries on delivering the service through technology or through human interaction is an idea for a study, Second, front stage employees' future roles in service encounters is another idea for a study. Third, a study on the meaning of front stage employees on-site from the service provider's perspective is an idea for a study. Fourth, priorities on technology-based or human interaction-based service encounters in different customer age-groups is an idea for a study.

Key words: front stage employee, service encounter, service design