

Service Quality & Citizen Satisfaction in Selected Zimbabwean Local Authorities

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Abstract: *This paper sought to establish the impact of service quality on citizen satisfaction in selected city councils in Zimbabwe. In general residents expect service provision to either match or exceed their expectations. Their perception is therefore influenced by the variability between actual service provision and expected service provision. Methodologically the study employed a descriptive survey across the spectrum of residents in the selected city councils using 22 statements from the SERVQUAL model as a measuring instrument. Results showed Reliability, Responsiveness, Empathy, and Tangibility & Assurance having a great impact in influencing citizen satisfaction levels.*

Introduction

In a global environment of intense competition and continuous change, organizations need to focus on improving the level of their services and enhance satisfaction of their customer's in-order to stay competitive and attain long-term survival. The delivery of consistent service quality contributes to the credibility and reputation of the organizations in the eyes of the public and one of the best ways to raise service level is by knowing the customers perceptions (Zemke and Woods, 1998). It is well-known that providing high quality services has a beneficial effect on the bottom-line performance for the organization. The success of local authorities is dependent by how strongly the services are offered to meet the citizens' perceptions. Rodriguez et al, (2009) pointed out that quality is an essential factor for the transformation of municipal services and critical driving force of enhanced citizen satisfaction. The concept of citizen perception is built up by citizen experiences, how they perceive the service being offered and whether they are satisfied with the experiences or not. This article sought to establish how Zimbabwean citizens perceived the service quality offered to them as residents.

Background of the study

The emergence of service quality and its assessment has attracted the attention of numerous

researchers in the past two decades or so. For many centuries, the role of service quality as a crucial factor of citizen satisfaction is widely familiar in developed countries. Service quality is one of the main issues facing operational managers (Gupta and Chen, 1995). Service quality is an approach to manage business processes in order to ensure full satisfaction of the customers/citizens which will assist in improving competitiveness and effectiveness of the service industry. For numerous decades now, an increasing number of local authorities globally have employed citizen surveys to gauge the outcomes of their service provision efforts and to get feedback from their customers (Hatry et al, 1992). Around the world and despite important differences in the approaches followed, public administration reforms have constantly been focused on the need to deliver more and better efficient public services. Quality in service is very essential especially for the growth and development of public sector enterprises (Rahaman et al, 2011). It is an area characterized by debate concerning the need for evaluating customer expectations and service quality assessment (Parasuraman et al, (1994). Efficient and effective delivery system becomes the core focus of the government of many countries due to insistence and hopes from society for local authorities giving their services up to the quality standard as expected by the tax payers (Yusof et al, 2008). Accordingly, public sector organizations have come under increasing pressure to deliver quality services and improve efficiencies (Randall and Senior, 1994 & Robinson, 2003). Factors such as lack of modern facilities, poor funding and weak leadership quality are negatively affecting the quality of public services especially in developing countries.

Service quality remains a persistent issue throughout Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Recently, the focus of Government policies on meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has increased attention on better/ quality provision of services. At present however, basic services such as water, solid waste management, sewerage and sanitation which are basic and health centered in Africa lag significantly behind those of other

developing countries and are considerably more expensive than elsewhere (Foster and Brienco,2010). Zimbabwe is not an exception for poor service delivery, the peak of service deterioration manifested in the cholera epidemic, which gripped many parts of the country, with 191 164 reported cases and 4 047 reported deaths for the period 15 August 2008- 17 March 2009 (Hove and Tirimboi, 2011). According to Gukurume (2011), service delivery in Zimbabwe was considered to have been at its best during the colonial era. The streets were clean, waste effluent and treatment systems were superb and shortage of municipal water was unheard of. However, three decades after independence, most cities and towns in Zimbabwe especially Harare, Gweru and Masvingo were struggling to deliver quality services, regardless of having eloquent and detailed vision and mission statements that should guide their operations. Of late, citizens have been demanding quality service from local government. Despite having very explicit mission statements which are positioned on the provision of quality services to all stakeholders in a transparent manner at competitive cost, most city councils are evidently failing to provide quality services to their citizenry. This article therefore sought to establish the perceptions of residents towards the local authorities' service provision.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Service quality is a critical success factor that ensures long-term continuity of an organization since it leads to higher levels of citizen satisfaction. Furthermore, the provision of high quality services has a beneficial effect on the bottom-line performance for the organization. Indeed, there is a growing body of empirical evidence indicating that providing top quality services enhances the performance of an organization (Sachdev and Verma, 2004). Despite the obvious benefits of quality service provision there has been a general disregard of this concept in the Zimbabwean local authorities. Since the turn of the millennium, there have been wide spread complaints over the general decline of quality services, despite the technical and financial assistance given to local authorities by the government and donors. This article therefore sought to obtain the perception of citizens towards the of selected city councils.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To find out the perception of residents towards service provision of selected city councils using the SERQUAL Model variables.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the perception of residents towards the service provision in selected city councils using the SERVQUAL Model variables

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Quality Concept

Service quality is perceived judgement, resulting from an assessment process where customers compare their expectations with the service they perceive to have received (Wang and Sohal, ,2002). Service quality is the overall assessment of a service by the customer(Eshghi et al, 2008). It is also the result of the comparison that customers make between their expectations about a service and their perception of the way the service has been executed (Lewis, 1983). Thus service quality becomes an important concept to understand by service providers by knowing how to measure it and making required improvements in its dimensions where appropriate especially in areas where gap between expectations and perceptions are wide.

Citizens' expectations compared to perceptions

Customers' expectation of service quality is based on the assessment of their expectations (what they feel service providers should offer) with their perceptions of the performance of the service provider (Parasuraman et al; 1988 Gronroos; 1982; Parasuraman et al.; 1985).In addition, it is imperative to comprehend and measure customers' expectations in order to identify gaps in delivering services with quality that could ensure satisfaction (Negi, 2009). Perceptions of recipients are based solely on what they receive from their service encounter (Douglas and Connor, 2003). They further linked service quality to satisfaction by pointing out that when expected service is greater than perceived service, perceived quality is less than satisfactory and will tend to move towards totally unacceptable quality; when expected service equals perceived service then perceived quality is satisfactory; when expected service is less than perceived service, perceived quality is more than satisfactory and will tend towards ideal quality (Parasuraman et al, (1985).

Citizen Satisfaction

Citizen satisfaction is based on the citizen's experience with the service provider and the outcome of the service. In order to achieve citizen satisfaction local authorities must be able to satisfy their citizens' needs and wants. Perceived performance is the evaluation of the product's

performance following the consumption experience (Patterson, 2000).

Service Quality Models

Service quality is the difference between a customer's expectation of a service and the customer's perception of the service being offered

(Parasuraman et al, 1988). A number of models were developed for assessing service quality (Saravan and Rao, 2007). This research used the model that was developed by Parasuraman et al (1988) which is commonly called the SERVQUAL model.

The SERVQUAL model dimensions

The SERVQUAL model comprises five dimensions to evaluate service quality which are;

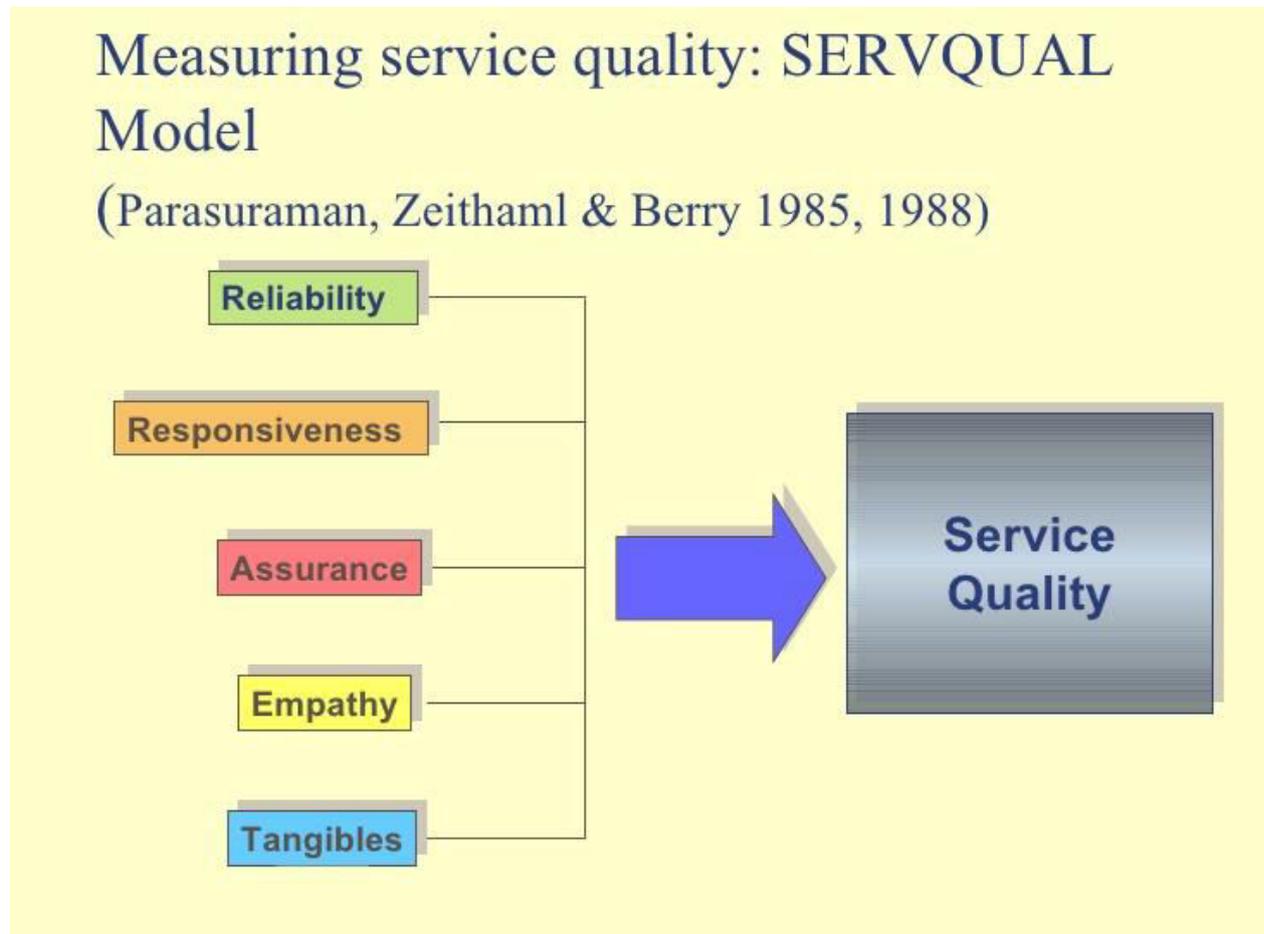


Figure 1 : SERVQUAL MODEL

Tangibility: The physical evidence of an organization including personality and appearance of workers, tools, and equipment used to provide the service. Tangibility are physical facilities, equipment and appearance of employees and management team (Iwaarden et al, 2003). It is also the ease in visibility of resources necessary for providing the service to customers, well-groomed employees and the ease in retrieving written materials like pamphlets, brochures, folders, information books that will have a favourable consequence on the level of customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al, 1985). Modern looking or sophisticated equipment and visually appealing or attractive ambience are viewed as the positive

impacts of tangibility on customer satisfaction in public sector (Ananth et al, 2011). Indeed the organizations should consciously make effort that their properties are conformed to global standards of facilities (Nankervis, 1995).

Reliability: The ability to execute the promised service dependably and accurately. It also extends to provide services when promised and maintain error-free records. In services provided to the customer, accuracy in completing orders, maintaining precise records, accuracy in billing, maintaining promised services are the basic views of reliability which is considered as the most important factor in convincing customers to retain in public services (Yang and Fang, 2004).

Responsiveness: The willingness of the staff to assist customers and provide prompt service to customers such as quick service, professionalism in handling and recovering from mistakes. Zeithaml et al (1990) defined responsiveness as the interests shown in providing prompt service to customers when required. In addition, it is the willingness or readiness of employees to provide the required customer service without any inconvenience at any time (Parasuraman et al, 1988). Consequently service providers' ability to deliver services in a timely manner is a critical component of service quality for many customers.

Assurance: This is knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence including competence, courtesy, credibility and security. In public services provided to the citizens, assurance means providing assistance in a polite and friendly manner, a well experienced and professional management team and will have favorable outcomes on customer satisfaction (Sadek et al, 2010).

Empathy: This involves the caring individualized attention given to customers. For example, an empathy training program could be conducted with the intention of helping employees relate to their

clients in a more empathic manner. Empathy is defined as the ability to take care of customer's attention individually in providing service to customers (Iwaarden et al, 2003). It is also researched that understanding customer expectations better than competitors in providing the required customer service at any time without any inconvenience strongly influence the level of customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al, 1988). Convenient working hours, individualized attention, better understanding of customer's specific needs, enhanced communication between management and customers will have a positive outcome on customer satisfaction (Ananth et al, 2011).

Functioning of the SERVQUAL model

SERVQUAL represents service quality as the difference between a customer's expectation of a service offering and the customer's perceptions of the service received, requiring respondents to answer questions about their expectations and their perceptions (Parasuraman et al, 1988). The difference between the expectations and the perceptions is called the gap which is the determinant of customer's perception of service quality as shown below:

SERVQUAL dimensions

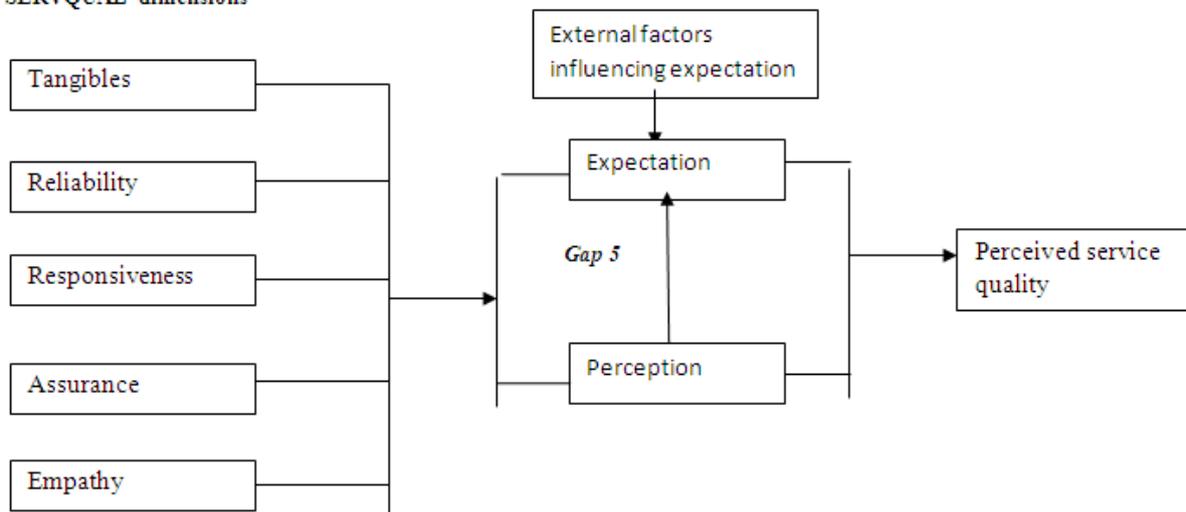


Figure 2.2: Measuring service quality using SERVQUAL model, Kumar et al (2009)

The gap 5 on the figure represents the difference between the customers' expectations and customers' perceptions which is referred to as the perceived service quality (Kumar et al, 2009). This article focused on this gap which is the difference between the citizens' expectations and perceptions of services.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used the cross-sectional survey research design where perceptions of citizens across selected city councils were measured. The selected cities were Harare and Masvingo where 1,000 home owners who were conveniently sampled and were asked to fill in self-administered questionnaires.

MEASURES

The survey used a questionnaire developed by Parasuraman et al (1988). The instrument has five dimensions which comprise 22 statements derived from the 5 dimensions of the SERVQUAL model. The questionnaire measured perceptions with a view to know how the citizens perceived the service quality offered by the two cities. The questions were on a 7-point Likert scale. The scores were coded 7 for strongly agree, 6 for moderately agree, 5 slightly agree, 4 for neutral, 3 for somehow disagree, 2 for disagree and 1 for strongly disagree.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Tangibility and Citizen Satisfaction.

The researcher sought to examine the relationship between tangibility and citizen satisfaction. The researcher used the Pearson's correlation to compute this relationship. The correlation coefficient between tangibility and citizen satisfaction was highly positive since on average our

R-value= 0.254 as our

P-value= 0.001.

Our standard p being 0.05 as the significant value means that the researcher accepted the hypotheses that tangibility has a positive relationship with citizen satisfaction. This result is in line with the research by Nankervis, (1995) who argues that indeed the organizations should consciously make sure their properties are in conformity to global standards of facilities. The respondents rated lowly councils on tangibility as most city buildings are in deplorable state & their equipment are old and antiquated.

Reliability and Citizen Satisfaction.

The researcher sought to examine the relationship between reliability and citizen satisfaction. The correlation coefficient between the reliability and citizen satisfaction was highly positive since on average the:

R-value= 0.558 as our

P-value= 0.000.

Our standard p being 0.05 as the significant value means that the researcher accepted the hypotheses that reliability has a positive relationship with citizen satisfaction.

This result is in line with the research by Yang and Fang (2004) who said that in services provided to the customer, accuracy in completing orders, maintaining precise records, accuracy in billing,

maintaining promised services are the basic views of reliability which is considered as the most important factor in convincing customers to retain in public services. The respondents had issues when it came to account bills which in most cases were highly inflated and also their workmen do not deliver on their promises.

Responsiveness and Citizen Satisfaction

The researcher sought to examine the relationship between responsiveness and citizen satisfaction. The researcher used the Pearson's correlation to compute this relationship. The correlation coefficient between responsiveness and citizen satisfaction was highly positive since on average our

R-value= 0.372 as our

P-value= 0.000.

Our standard p being 0.05 as the significant value means that the researcher accepted the hypotheses that responsiveness has a positive relationship with citizen satisfaction. A key dimension which was rated lowly by the respondents. The city authorities take time in responding to client calls for attention for example on issues to do with loss of water, burst sewage pipes & garbage collection.

Assurance and Citizen Satisfaction.

The researcher sought to examine the relationship between assurance and citizen satisfaction. The researcher used the Pearson's correlation to compute this relationship. The correlation coefficient between assurance and citizen satisfaction was highly positive since on average our

R-value=0.357

P-value= 0.000.

Our standard p being 0.05 as the significant value means that the researcher will accepted the hypotheses that assurance has positive relationship with citizen satisfaction. This result is in line with a research by Sadek et al (2010) who argued that in public services provided to the citizens, assurance means providing assistance in a polite and friendly manner, a well experienced and professional management team and will have favorable outcomes on customer satisfaction. The issue to do with confidence affects the relationship between citizens & their city fathers

Empathy and Citizen Satisfaction.

The researcher sought to examine the relationship between empathy and citizen satisfaction.

The correlation coefficient between empathy and citizen satisfaction was highly positive since on average our:

R-value is about 0.516

And our p-value is 0.000.

Our standard p being 0.05 as the significant value means that the researcher accepted the hypotheses that empathy has a positive relationship with citizen satisfaction. This result is in line with the research by Parasuraman et al (1988) who says it is also researched that understanding customer expectations better than competitors in providing the required customer service at any time without any inconvenience will strongly influence the level of customer satisfaction. The lack of personal attention was identified as a major issue affecting citizen perception.

SERVICE QUALITY & CITIZEN PERCEPTION

Overall the respondents were of the view that there was wide disparity between their expectation and the actual service delivered by the local authorities

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the interpretation of the findings from the research study, the following recommendations were made:

- I. The local authorities should make sure that they provide tangible resources that is: physical facilities, equipment and appearance of employees and Management Team are important during service provision as these have a direct influence on the level of satisfaction of the local citizens.
- II. The local authority should be reliable to the community. Accuracy in completing orders, maintaining precise records, accuracy in billing, maintaining promised services are the basic views of reliability which are considered as the most important factor on the level of satisfaction of the local citizens.
- III. Responsiveness is an important aspect when it comes to service provision. Prompt service should be the motto in city councils.
- IV. Professionalism should be one of the key values in city councils. Training employees on issues to do with assurance should be upheld.
- V. In providing services, city councils should show some level of empathy as this again has an effect on the level of satisfaction of the citizens.

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