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Developing front-line employees to manage negative customer to customer interactions in the retail industry: Lessons for human resource development in responding to COVID-19

Alex Kay & Catharine Ross

Abstract

This paper addresses how Human Resource Development (HRD) practitioners can support front-line retail employees in managing negative interactions between customers arising as a result of COVID-19. Drawing on research into front-line supermarket employees' management of customer-to-customer interactions undertaken pre-COVID-19, it identifies the limitations of existing HRD interventions focused on customer to employee interactions and the provision of scripts, and recommends development specific to the management of customer-to-customer interactions. In particular, it highlights the need for HRD practitioners to draw upon evidence from front-line employees when developing such interventions, and to empower front-line employees to adapt and develop responses appropriate to the specific interaction encountered.

Introduction

The COVID-19 worldwide pandemic has drawn attention to the need for Human Resource development (HRD) practitioners to support employees in managing negative customer to customer (CCI) interactions in retail environments. Mainstream media has highlighted COVID-19 as a trigger to physical contact and fighting between customers as a result of panic buying behaviour, and customer irritation with fellow customers who do not follow government guidelines with regard to wearing masks (BBC, 2020b), or fail to follow supermarket social distancing rules (Guardian 2020). Such interactions have a negative effect upon the customer experience (Lovelock, 1994; Bitner, Booms & Mohr, 1994; Harris & Reynolds, 2004; Berry & Seiders 2008; Verhoef, et al., 2010) which is pivotal for achieving competitive advantage and satisfied customers (McColl-Kennedy et al., 2015; Bolton et al.,

2014; Verhoef et al., 2009). Managing these incidents may also cause stress for front-line employees (FLEs) (Nicholls & Gad Mohsen, 2019), employees often leaving their workplace upset after trying to convince customers to follow government guidance around COVID-19 when negative CCI occurs (BBC, 2020a).

Although Baker and Kim (2018) found that customers perceive the service organization to be responsible for recovering negative CCI, and literature has mentioned the role of FLEs in managing it (Nicholls & Gad Mohsen, 2019), little research has focused upon this (ibid.). Literature on HRD to support FLEs in managing customer interactions has focused upon interactions between customers and FLEs rather than CCI, for example by giving FLEs 'scripts' or prescribed responses to manage customer to employee (C2E) conflict (Tansik & Smith, 1990). The negative CCI witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic however has further highlighted the need to equip FLEs to manage CCI as well. Through analysis of critical incidents recalled by FLEs this paper seeks to fill this gap and identify ways in which HRD may support FLEs in managing CCI.

& Reynolds 2004); pushing in whilst queuing (Grove & Fisk, 1997); and even violence between shoppers (Dorsey, Ashley & Oliver, 2016). CCI can have a positive (Harris et al., 1997; Wu, 2007) and negative (Lovelock, 1994; Bitner et al., 1994; Harris & Reynolds, 2003; Berry & Seiders 2008; Verhoef, et al., 2010) effect on the customer experience and satisfaction in the service environment, and Pranter and Martin (1991) therefore suggest that attention paid to CCI management would be as fruitful as attention historically devoted to C2E relations.

Management of CCI

Although the impact of CCI on customer service is well documented (Grove & Fisk, 1997, Nicholls, 2010; Heinonen, Jaakkola & Neganova, 2018), the management of CCI is seldom explored. When managing CCI is discussed, two main forms are identified (Nicholls, 2010): CCI strategy, which focuses on the broader organization perspective and management of the customer profile (Martin & Pranter, 1989; Martin 1995; Baron et al., 1996), and those dealing

The variety of potential CCI interactions from the great diversity of customers may for example make it even more difficult to develop standardized scripts, and thus require HRD professionals to adopt different approaches to employee development.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- What development is provided to supermarket employees to support them in managing CCI?
- How effective is this development from the employee perspective?
- How could the development be improved?

Importance of CCI

In recent years there has been a strong focus by researchers on examining the customer experience due to the competitive nature of the retail environment, Puccinelli et al. (2009) stating that understanding customer experience is vital to service workers. Research has highlighted many factors that influence the customer experience, such as the physical servicescape (Bitner, 1992) and ambience (Caldwell & Hibbert, 2002; Morin, Dube, & Chebat, 2007).

Much research has also been devoted to the C2E interaction and how it can be managed (cf. Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Harris, Baron, & Parker, 2000; Harris & Reynolds, 2004). However, there is another form of interaction that occurs that shapes the evaluation and perception of the service firm, the interaction with fellow customers (Martin & Pranter, 1989). The CCI literature has identified many different ways that customers interact, such as spoken conversation (Parker & Ward, 2000; Harris

with the tools and techniques for managing CCI. However, although the FLE role in managing CCI at this non-strategic level has 'frequent mention in the CCI literature, it has received minimal research consideration' (Nicholls & Gad Mohsen, 2019, p. 801). This is despite the fact that the literature suggests the potential of using FLEs to deal with CCI, and provide a new means of competitive advantage (Nicholls, 2005). Instead, as indicated above, most research focuses upon equipping FLEs with the tools and techniques to manage C2E interactions.

Nevertheless, these tools and techniques for managing C2E interactions may be transferable to CCI, and so merit discussion. A key technique identified is the use of scripts (Tansik & Smith 1990). Scripts are ways to standardize employees' responses when dealing with customers, in theory giving a more consistent service response (Nguyen et al., 2010). They provide a control mechanism for organizations when dealing with heterogeneous FLEs through setting out logical steps and actions to follow, for example when customers require assistance. However, the use of scripting for C2E interactions is contentious. Humphrey and Ashforth (1994) cited in Hartline and Ferrel (1996, p. 55) provide evidence that employees who 'mindlessly' follow a service script are less likely to meet the needs of the customer and more likely to make mistakes. Hartline and Ferrel (1996) identify that

managers committed to service quality should instead utilize behaviour-based evaluation when training their employees, empowering service workers to make their own decisions in regard to management techniques where scripts are not always useful. Certainly, studies into the techniques FLEs actually use has indicated that they often find it necessary to adapt formal scripts (Gatta, 2009), with more experienced employees developing their own more detailed scripts (Solomon et al., 1985).

The need to involve FLEs in developing scripts chimes with calls from evidence-based management (EBM) literature to involve a range of stakeholders including employees in developing management techniques (Briner, Denyer & Rousseau, 2009). Certainly, given that FLEs are those that are most likely to see customer interactions, using their experience as EBM suggests would allow organizations to gather vital information to inform employee development.

Moreover, not only may scripts be inappropriate, but FLEs may not feel they have the authority to deviate from them even when they recognize their inappropriateness (Bitner et al., 1994). A lack of self-efficacy, defined as 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the course of action required to produce given attainments' (Bandura, 1997, p. 5) may also prevent FLEs from adapting scripts and managing the CCI effectively. Service workers' increased self-efficacy in relation to managing customers and clients has been associated with enhanced performance (Kim et al., 2018; De Simone et al., 2018), reduced turnover intention (*ibid.*) and a reduction in employee burnout (Jeung et al., 2017). Unlike some other individual characteristics, however, it is modifiable (*ibid.*). This raises the possibility of it being increased or decreased by the development offered, for example through training which shows managers' belief in FLE's ability to manage customer interactions (Kim et al., 2018). Conversely, a failure to seek FLE input when deciding how to manage interactions may reduce FLE self-efficacy by suggesting the opposite.

The lack of research into the FLE experience of managing CCI is therefore a key problem for HRD practitioners seeking to support the management of negative CCI arising from COVID-19. The development given to FLEs to manage C2E interactions, even if appropriate in those situations, may not be appropriate where more than one customer is involved. The variety of potential CCI interactions from the great diversity of customers may for example make it even more difficult to develop standardized scripts, and thus require HRD professionals to adopt different approaches to employee development. In line with EBM approaches, therefore, this research explores FLE perceptions of the development provided to them to manage CCI and its effectiveness, and uses this to develop recommendations that service organizations can use to enhance this important aspect of HRD.

Methods

Numerous techniques have been utilized to capture customers interacting that include questionnaires (Baron, Harris & Davies, 1996); in-depth interviews (McGrath & Otnes, 1995); observations (McGrath & Otnes, 1995); and ethnographic studies (Harris & Baron, 2004). Within the services industry, previous studies have successfully used a method named the critical incident technique (CIT) to explore phenomenon related to customer interactions (Grove & Fisk, 1997; Harris & Baron, 2004; Baron et al., 1996). Critical incident technique is a 'story telling' method that 'provides a rich source of data by allowing respondents to determine which incidents are the most relevant to them for the phenomenon being investigated' (Gremler, 2004, p. 66). Nicholls and Gad Mohsen (2019) identified in their study that FLEs could accurately recall CCI utilizing CIT and were able to provide management techniques. This is therefore the method adopted in this study, which also found that FLEs were able to provide rich data and scenarios involving CCI and the use of scripting for dealing with multiple customers.

The study occurred across three stores (of a well-known supermarket chain) in the West Midlands region in the UK as part of a larger CCI study. Access was granted to the company via a single gatekeeper who had worked for the company for 17 years. There were 22 employees interviewed across three stores and they were recruited via purposive, homogenous sampling that focused on a subgroup of employees (the front-line employee) rather than the entirety of supermarket employees. The following traits were present across the sample group:

- FLEs had completed all mandatory staff training.
- Staff training was signed off by management.

The interviews were conducted across a 12-week period from Spring 2018 to the middle of summer 2018 in the store cafeteria or employee meeting rooms. Interviewees were in the age range 18-63, which is representative of the age range of the organization. There were 14 females and 8 males interviewed, which corresponds to the gender weighting of the organization's FLE demographic breakdown, with more female front-line employees across the company nationwide. There were wide and varied roles of FLEs, all of which deal with customers or are in a position to witness CCI. These roles ranged from cleaners and bakery assistants, through to managers and car park attendants. The most common role was cashier assistants, which is representative of the most common role within the company. The range of experience was also representative of the company, with one FLE who had six months of experience (the minimum amount of time required to pass the training) and an employee who had been at the company for 26 years.

Customers were recruited at the main entrance as they entered or left the store and interviewed in the customer cafeteria or meeting room provided by the organization. The interviewer explained the study, assured them of confidentiality and then offered the opportunity to participate. Around 1 in 4 customers agreed to the

interview, the main reason for declining being time restrictions. Interview questions were based on previous studies and used Flanagan's (1954) CIT techniques to help gather uninterrupted rich stories from both customers and employees, the first question asking the participant to recall a time they had interacted with another customer or witnessed CCI. A full breakdown of the interview process and questions for customers can be found in appendix 1.1. Employees were recruited in the staff cafeteria and were either interviewed in the staff cafeteria, or in the customer cafeteria for added privacy away from their colleagues and managers. The interviewer had a desk in the staff café and approached employees either during their break, before their shift or after their shift. The process involved explaining the research interests, screening the employee to make sure they fit the sample criteria and arranging a time for the interview to take place. The interviews occurred at the most convenient time for employees, which was quite often during their break or after shift. A full breakdown of the interview process and questions for customers can be found in appendix 1.1. On average, each interview lasted between 10 and 30 minutes for both customers and employees.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2013) 7 steps of thematic analysis:

1. Transcription
2. Reading and familiarization
3. Coding – complete; across entire dataset
4. Searching for themes
5. Reviewing themes
6. Defining and naming themes
7. Writing – finalizing analysis

Utilizing the 7 steps, thematic analysis allowed for patterns and trends to emerge from the data and address the research questions. Familiarization of the transcripts occurred via initial scanning and reading of the documents, following by complete coding and annotation before grouping the themes together. Once the codes had been placed together with similar attributes and contents, the themes were then labelled appropriately and written up in a more comprehensive manner. Themes were conceptualized through scrutinizing and choosing the most significant ones based on frequency and conviction, in line with the study's aims. The final stage involved actively reviewing themes to refine and streamline, removing any data that was not relevant to the study. The themes were then written up and those relevant to this paper are presented in the findings below.

Findings

Overall, three main themes emerged relevant to FLE development in relation to CCI. The first theme focused on the development of CCI training; the second, the lack of empowerment for employees to develop their own scripts, and third, the need for EBM to inform development.

Lack of development around CCI

Out of 22 employees interviewed, 16 of them said they did not receive training for specific CCI scenarios. The other employees suggested that the official training focused on general C2E scenarios that had relevance to CCI, rather than specific techniques that focused on CCI. For example, employees frequently stated that 'they receive training for dealing with one customer, but certainly not two'.



The training that they did receive for C2E encounters revolved around standardized scripting techniques, where there are ‘step by step processes to go through’, such as always offering alternatives to customers. Employees note that these techniques had to be adapted for CCI because ‘we don’t receive training for that sort of thing’. For example, during C2E encounters employees identified that they were always told to ‘provide alternatives when the item was sold out’, ensuring that customers were left with different options if their original choice was no longer available. However, employees adapted this technique to satisfy CCI scenarios, such as when customers have been hoarding items or taking the last product in stock. Employees suggested they perceived it to be a successful technique as they often phrased it to suggest they were giving the customer a better deal. For example, an incident involved a customer who was unhappy that another customer took all of the reduced products from the discount section. When confronted with the agitated customer, the employee offered different choices to the customer:

‘I offered him an alternative and was quite positive I might have even said ‘that stuff is reduced for a reason let’s get you a better one’ and then showed him a few options.’

The employee stated that customer was happy with the alternatives provided and suggested that the C2E training was adaptable for these simple types of situations where the essence of interactions is similar to C2E.

However, although C2E can be adapted at times, employees identified that this was not possible in all situations. When the CCI interaction was similar in nature to a C2E scenario, they could utilize their scripting techniques. However, C2E training could not be utilized when examples were more complex such as customers arguing or cutting in front during queues at the checkouts. Employees indicated that when these situations occurred, they would often ignore the situation because they ‘did not know what else to do’. One employee, for example, identified that they overheard an argument between customers, and ‘just tried to play a deaf ear and act like I can’t hear them’ because they ‘didn’t have a solution to the problem’. This was a common theme throughout – that employees simply disregarded the CCI if their original C2E training could not be adapted. Employees indicated they would speak to if spoken to, but try and ignore the situation, even walking away:

‘I’m not ignoring them if they speak to me ... I always respond but when I hear two customers with a problem talking I don’t always intervene because that’s a solution I don’t have. When they’re complaining about something I can’t help I don’t see the point in me responding I just ignore it or walk away.’

Another employee stated they would ‘just try and ignore

it ... pretend to be busy or something’, actively trying to discourage customers from drawing them into the situation.

In fact one employee suggested that using the scripts given for C2E could make some CCI situations worse:

‘The situations given in training are quite standard and nothing like this (CCI). Asking the customers ‘if there is anything else I can help them with’ just seems totally pointless and like I would agitate them.’

One type of CCI for which C2E scripts were often found to be inappropriate was when the CCI involved customers becoming aggressive towards each other. Employees indicated that during their training for C2E, they were told to get support from other employees when a customer became aggressive towards them. ‘One of the first things we’re told about is getting supervisors or managers involved if you feel intimidated or are being abused because they have the authority to refuse service and ask them to leave with security.’ When CCI involved customers becoming aggressive towards each other

some employees stated that they ‘followed [C2E] training protocol’ to inform security and senior management as ‘soon as possible’ to deal with the incident.

However, this is not necessarily an appropriate strategy for aggressive CCI situations. Fetching a manager or fellow employee for an aggressive customer during C2E is possible because the customer is waiting for the employee to return and should not cause additional harm. Yet, during an aggressive CCI situation the situation could

escalate between customers if they are left unattended. Employees stated that the origin of this script is a concern for the safety of the employee and involves employees getting support from security and senior members of staff, however, during CCI the safety of fellow customers’ needs to be taken into consideration. Employees therefore sometimes reported deviating from the provided script because standard training left them under-equipped. For example, a drunken customer caused a disturbance to another customer by shouting loudly. The C2E solution provided by the training was for the FLE to call for security and have him escorted off the premises, however, this employee adapted their script to keep the customer safe, using their discretion to change the script process:

‘One man came in very drunk and was being loud in the alcohol section and even a young lady said to him I don’t think you need anymore, so I got the lady to go and get security whilst I waited with him to make sure he didn’t cause a scene.’

Although security was called, the employee adapted the training received and used another customer to help manage the situation. The location of the incidents also affected the relevance of the C2E scripts provided.

One type of CCI for which C2E scripts were often found to be inappropriate was when the CCI involved customers becoming aggressive towards each other

Employees indicated that CCI incidents often occurred in areas of the store that were not covered in their C2E training, such as in the aisles, front of the store and at the end of the aisles blocking walkways, whereas their training focused on dealing with C2E in locations such as the checkouts or customer service desk. The fact that CCI interaction locations were much more diverse and occurred throughout the store often left FLEs feeling unprepared.

Lack of empowerment for employees to develop their own scripts

In spite of the fact that the scripts provided during C2E training were often inappropriate for CCI, many employees identified that they did not feel empowered to adapt the scripts and instead, as indicated above, often ignored CCI when it needed to be managed. Some employees felt compelled to use scripts even though they were inappropriate. A café assistant, with 21 years' experience noticed a positive interaction being interrupted by an employee because the training indicated they should:

'My son came in here and whilst I was tidying up to finish my shift, he took a tray over for an elderly couple. A colleague took the tray off him and helped the customers.'

When asked why the employee intervened when a positive interaction occurred the employee suggested it was universal training and general policy not to let customers carry a tray if they are struggling, further highlighting that scripting for C2E is not always suited to CCI. The interruption during the positive CCI incident was bad for the customer experience, but followed the protocols of the company set out via the training provided.

Given the wide variety of CCI possible within the service environment providing detailed scripts for every possible CCI encounter is not only highly unlikely, but not desirable for service firms. Small details, such as the demographic of the customer, may alter which is the most appropriate script or technique to use. However, many FLEs felt they were not empowered to make adaptations. If FLEs did not feel able to adapt C2E scripts, they found CCI situations a source of anxiety, stress and even embarrassment, with responses indicating it was 'the least favourite part of the job'. In contrast, employees who did alter their scripts viewed CCI in a much more positive manner. In fact, the employees who indicated they did not enjoy CCI, were the employees who did not adapt their scripting techniques and were left feeling helpless, whereas employees who felt empowered to change their scripts identified that they often 'enjoyed the challenge'. Interestingly, there were no obvious training differences between employees who felt empowered to change the script and those that did not, suggesting that other factors such as pre-existing skills sets, personality, and level of self-efficacy may be relevant.

The need for EBM to inform FLE development

Employees who did feel empowered to deviate from scripts and techniques given during training or to develop their

own, drew upon their previous experience to do so. Some FLEs reported finding distracting customers from the initial CCI situation to be an effective way of managing the situation. For example, a customer was blocking an aisle with their trolley and was going to block other customers from passing around them. This situation could be heightened due to the COVID-19 pandemic where customers do not want to touch a fellow customer's trolley due to spreading of the virus, whereas employees could step in with disinfectant spray. In this example, an employee did step in and physically move the trolley out of the way but tried to distract the customer by asking how their day was and if they were ok, hoping they would not notice they were being moved out of the way for other customers. When prompted further the employee stated:

'I just quite politely ask them to move and make a light-hearted comment about something in their trolley or about something in general. That sort of gets their trust and then I say 'you don't mind If we move this trolley or have this conversation at the end of the aisle do you?' and they always don't mind or apologize it is just a better way of doing it than 'can you move.'

In this instance the distraction technique did not actually manage an existing CCI but rather prevented a potentially negative CCI from occurring. As well as managing existing CCI, more experienced employees were therefore also able to spot potentially negative CCI and had developed techniques to prevent it. In addition to the distraction technique identified above, experienced FLEs also prevented negative CCI by educating customers. For example, one FLE reported that:

'If people are taking too long with their cards and money and there is a big queue I will actually start to call out down the line that "can you have your cards and money ready please to save time" and that sort of speeds the process up and prepares them so its quicker.'

The study found no evidence, however, of the organization following EBM and drawing upon the evidence gathered by experienced FLEs to develop others. Given that CCI often occurred in locations usually only visible to FLEs, this failure to use their experience to inform HRD not only left other less experienced or confident FLEs ill-equipped to manage CCI, but also made it difficult for HRD practitioners in the organization to evaluate the development that had been provided.

Discussion

The study revealed that, not only has the management of CCI been largely overlooked in the past in the academic literature, but also in the practitioner sphere by at least one major supermarket chain. Reflecting the academic literature's focus on C2E interactions (Bitner et al., 1990; Harris, Baron & Parker, 2000; Harris & Reynolds, 2004), the study showed that HRD in the supermarket chain pre-pandemic had focused upon the management of interactions between the FLEs and individual customers. This is despite the academic literature having recognized

the impact of CCI on customer service (Grove & Fisk, 1997, Nicholls, 2010; Heinonen et al., 2018) and employee well-being (Nicholls & Gad Mohsen, 2019). In line with literature suggesting that negative CCI might cause employee stress (Nicholls & Gad Mohsen, 2019), FLEs who felt unable to manage CCI reported it to be one of the worst elements of their job. However, the study also found that those who felt able to manage it found it one of the most rewarding, pointing to the potential for HRD in relation to CCI to increase FLE job satisfaction, with potential effects on engagement, retention, and performance (De Simone et al., 2018).

Developing De Simone et al (2018)'s findings that job satisfaction, engagement, and self-efficacy were positively interrelated, the study revealed that FLEs found managing CCI rewarding when they had a high level of self-efficacy, i.e. believed that they had the capacity to select the appropriate action. Conversely, it was those FLEs who lacked self-efficacy in relation to CCI, indicating that they felt 'helpless', who reported its negative effects.

This finding is particularly problematic for retail organizations facing increased negative CCI as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the study supports existing academic literature in revealing HRD's reliance upon providing scripts for FLEs to manage interactions with customers (Tansik & Smith, 1990). Moreover, and again in line with the academic literature, these scripts were mostly developed to manage C2E interactions. Not only did the provision of scripts therefore potentially undermine FLE self-efficacy which other forms of development might have enhanced (Kim et al., 2018), but also were often reported by FLEs to be inappropriate for most CCI situations, reflecting the criticisms previously levelled at script-based

development (Hartline & Ferrel, 1996). CCI situations were reported to be more varied; more complex (because of the multiple customers involved); found in a wider range of locations; and affecting the well-being of a wider range of stakeholders than C2E interactions, and therefore required FLEs to use different and more varied management techniques to enable them to respond successfully to the specific situation faced. Lacking self-efficacy, however, many FLEs reported that they avoided managing CCI or used scripts which they knew to be inappropriate. Given the severity of some of the CCI reported as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reluctance of FLEs to manage negative CCI, or the decision to manage it inappropriately, could have severe consequences not only for the customer and employee experience but also potentially their health and safety.

Conclusions and implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened attention to the existence of CCI and its potential impact upon customer and employee experience in retail organizations. In relation to our first research question, the findings of this study reveal the limited development given to FLEs pre-pandemic to manage such interactions in one supermarket chain, and highlight the importance of HRD practitioners in retail organizations developing interventions to support FLEs in managing CCI as well as C2E.

In relation to the second question, the findings indicate that the development given to FLEs focused upon C2E interactions rather than CCI, and upon the provision of scripts which were not only often inappropriate for the wide range of CCI encountered but also reduced FLE



self-efficacy to manage CCI more effectively. In relation to the third research question, therefore, the findings suggest that rather than focusing upon provision of scripts which may be inappropriate, HRD should seek to empower FLEs to make their own decisions about the most appropriate way to manage the specific interaction encountered. While others have called for organizations to be explicit about the requirement for service workers to engage in C2E and assess for relevant C2E skills in recruitment and selection, for example through realistic job previews (see for example Costakis & Pickern, 2018), we suggest that they also need to incorporate the need to manage CCI into this. In order to achieve this, however, HRD would need to follow EBM's advice to gather evidence from FLEs, as they are the ones most likely to witness CCI and are often the only ones present in the locations where much CCI occurs. EBM would also enable more experienced FLEs to suggest more appropriate techniques to those FLEs who may be less experienced or have lower levels of self-efficacy.

In addition to recruiting FLEs with the necessary skills to manage CCI the study suggests that HRD practitioners in retail organizations should also seek ways of developing FLE self-efficacy, so they feel able to make decisions in relation to the management of CCI. EBM could again contribute here as it would indicate managerial and HRD confidence in the ability of FLEs to identify appropriate strategies, in contrast to the current practice of providing scripts which is more likely to undermine FLE self-efficacy. The evidence from experienced FLEs could also be used to develop role play scenarios which again could increase FLE self-efficacy in dealing with CCI. In summary, our study suggests that many retail FLEs are likely to have been under-prepared to deal with the CCI arising as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; our hope is that by adopting these recommendations HRD practitioners will ensure that FLEs are better prepared in the future.

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Limitations and future research

CIT is a retrospective technique, which can lead to recall errors by participants (Zhang et al., 2010). This study relied on participants' recollection of incidents that may not have been accurate or truthful, especially from the FLE perspective if they felt their competence of their role was in question. Additionally, there is a potential for a biased sample due to the sampling method used when recruiting participants. Martin (1996) identified that some customers are more likely to engage and interact with fellow customers, which indicates this could occur with self-selection regarding interviews and CIT. The findings within this study are exploratory in nature and in line with other studies for the number of interviews collected (Gremler, 2004; Saunders & Townsend, 2016), however the study may not be generalizable to other locations within the U.K and in other countries. Although the GDP of the area is in line with national average, a wider spread of locations across the country would have enhanced the study and understanding of CCI. Although there were three different locations, they were all within a 50-mile radius and in the West Midlands.

Future research could address some of these limitations by utilizing alternative methods such as observations, and extending the research to a wider range of locations. Researching CCI in a wider range of companies would also enhance the generalizability of the findings as different retailers may have different customer demographic profiles. Finally, given the suggested role of self-efficacy in the effective management of CCI, it would be useful to measure the impact of different HRD strategies on FLE self-efficacy in relation to this important role.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.1 - Interview plan: Customers

As the interviews are semi-structured the questions are just a guide and varied among participants.

Before the tape

- Introductions
- Thanks
- Explain project including anonymity
- Any questions

Start tape

Data that is collected at the start

- Age
- Gender

General background questions

- How frequently do you visit this supermarket?

Personal CCI Incidents

- Can you tell me the last time you interacted with a customer in the supermarket?
- Can you please describe the incident in as much detail as possible?
- How did you feel?

- Do you actively seek out other customers to interact with or try keep yourself to yourself?

Location of CCI incidents

- Where have you interacted with other customers?

Employees role in managing CCI

- Has a member of staff ever intervened when you have been interacting with another customer? If so, can you describe what happened?
- If no, would it have made a difference if an employee intervened?
- What could they have done?

Thank you very much for your help I really do appreciate it. Anything else you would like to add?

Stops tape.

Appendix 1.2 - Interview plan: Employees

As the interviews are semi-structured the questions are just a guide and varied among participants.

Before the tape

- Introductions
- Thanks
- Explain project including anonymity
- Any questions

Start tape

Data that is collected at the start

- Age
- Gender

General background questions

- What is your job role at the company?
- How long have you worked at the company? Did you work elsewhere in retailing?
- If so, how long have you worked in retailing?

CCI Incidents witnessed

The following shall only be used if the participant is unsure about the phrase 'incident' or 'interaction'.

An incident is described as one that makes a significant contribution, either positively or negatively, to an activity or phenomenon. In terms of this research, an incident will be a time where an interaction occurred between two customers).

An interaction is classified as times you have witnessed customers interact such as face-to-face conversations, spoken about products, communicated whilst in a queue or asked about information on certain products between themselves etc.

Questions (and probes) for employees

Identifying and explaining the incidents

1. Can you describe a customer-to-customer interaction you witnessed?
 - Did it seem a negative or a positive experience based on what you heard or their body language?
2. Did you become involved? How?
 - Can you remember how you felt whilst managing the incident?
3. If they think they do not witness any incidents – is it because interactions between customers do not occur, or if they are not trained in spotting the incidents?

- If they do notice CCI occurring but do not intervene, I ask them why?'

Personal experience and training

1. Can you recall any training for CCI management?
 - Why/ Why not?
2. Has this helped you to manage CCI?
 - If yes, in what ways?
3. Has previous experience helped you to manage CCI?
 - If yes, in what ways?
4. How do you feel whilst negative CCI occurs?

Thank you very much for your help I really do appreciate it. Anything else you would like to add?

Stops tape.

About the authors



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