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Organising Haute-Cuisine Service Processes: A Case Study

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One of the essential aims of service process organisation is to increase the added value for the customer, thereby increasing customer satisfaction and stimulating consumption. In a haute-cuisine context, customers typically have a higher degree of uncertainty as they often lack the experience of receiving and judging quality in a haute-cuisine setting. This article reports on the application of service process organisation in a haute-cuisine restaurant. The case study shows that there is a significant need to reduce back office activities so that interaction with the customer or customer-facing processes can be increased. This can increase the added value for the customer and can result in higher profits for the restaurants as the customer is either willing to pay higher prices or to consume more. Routines should be implemented that align with segmentation and customer data, while undergoing a retraditionalisation of the service through know-how and interaction. Only interaction with, and integration of, the customer adds significant value that can be further expanded by providing an atmosphere where customer and co-customer have the chance to interact.

The discrepancy between innovative ability and profitability typically characterises function-oriented businesses in that the Tayloristic work model divides labour as a means of increasing efficiency. This work model inevitably faces the challenge of reacting quickly enough to macroeconomic changes. Michelin-starred restaurants, for example, often rely heavily on talented chefs who provide knowledge and intellectual capital (Johnson et al., 2005). In most cases their success 'depends entirely on the skills and culinary excellence of the

restaurant's celebrity chef' (Johnson et al., 2005, p. 171). Lüth and Spiller (2003) further note that the competitive advantage derives particularly from the national — and in some cases, international — reputation of the chef, whose name is both a mark of individuality as well as a sign of the overall quality of the restaurant and its culinary products. One-star restaurants, however, have considerable constraints since they face much higher competition along with a lower customer perception of exclusivity (see Figure 1), thus revenue has to be generated through up-selling (Lüth & Spiller, 2004).

This implies the need to use up-selling techniques and implement value-adding service processes that will stimulate the guest's willingness to pay. Yet, guests have by nature a high degree of uncertainty in the fine dining segment,

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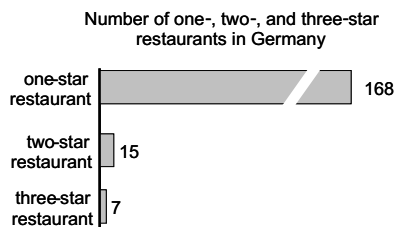


Figure 1

Degree of exclusivity — number of one-, two- and three-star restaurants in Germany.

Source: Michelin's Guide Rouge, 2006, Germany.

because the risk of consumption increases due to high prices. Second, word of mouth recommendations are only conditionally available as the trading arena of these restaurants is either supraregional or national. Moreover, the average guest's sensory ability is generally not sufficient to discern differences across a range of haute-cuisine restaurants, let alone restaurants from different levels (Lüth & Spiller, 2004). Restaurant guides, such as *Michelin's Guide Rouge*, are thus indispensable consumer aids and are crucial marketing tools to reduce uncertainty (Snyder & Cotter, 1998). Listed restaurants thus become Buchananian club members with a licence to charge premium prices (Sandler & Tschirhart, 1997). Nevertheless, membership of this exclusive club can be a significant drawback for restaurants; one-star restaurants that lose their star, for example, are often forced to compete with the entire market (Snyder & Cotter, 1998). As a result, a research question can be formulated:

- Can service process organisation and standardisation be successfully applied to haute-cuisine restaurants to help to create a competitive advantage by increasing added-value for the customer?

The Process Organisation Concept

Process-oriented organisational design or process organisation is the continuous

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structuring and improvement of business processes under consideration of process targets and efficient flows (Vahs, 2005). In order to establish a sustainable process view among all stakeholders, however, organisations have to go through a 90-degree shift from vertically structured to horizontally structured process organisations (Osterloh & Frost, 2003). Only then is it possible to competitively differentiate the core processes (Conti, 1993; Tennant, 2001) that will result in perceivable benefits for the customer. The haute-cuisine customer may then be willing to pay more for the unique use of incomparable resources that are inherent parts of the service delivery (Bieger & Laesser, 2003). In addition, the so-called support processes (Conti, 1993) can be benchmarked and considered for outsourcing decisions, because they do not directly benefit the core processes. It is important to note, nevertheless, that process adjustments should always be made under the aspect of value for the customer (Bieger & Laesser, 2003). Segmentation by complexity of tasks and customer groups can therefore help to ascertain the relevant values within these segments (Osterloh & Frost, 2003) since added value is created at every stage of the service experience (see Figure 2).

As Figure 2 demonstrates, the sum of resource quality and process quality equals the outcome quality that is often seen as service quality. All three dimensions are inextricably connected to and influenced by each other. Consequently, a holistic approach for the application of process improvement techniques should be applied. Subsequently, added value becomes pragmatic and significant because quality is considered as performance at reasonable cost-levels (Crosby, 1986; Garvin, 1988). Added value is significant because it is directly linked with customer satisfaction that 'arises when the basis factors are negatively disconfirmed, performance factors are positively evaluated and delight factors are perceived' (Matzler,

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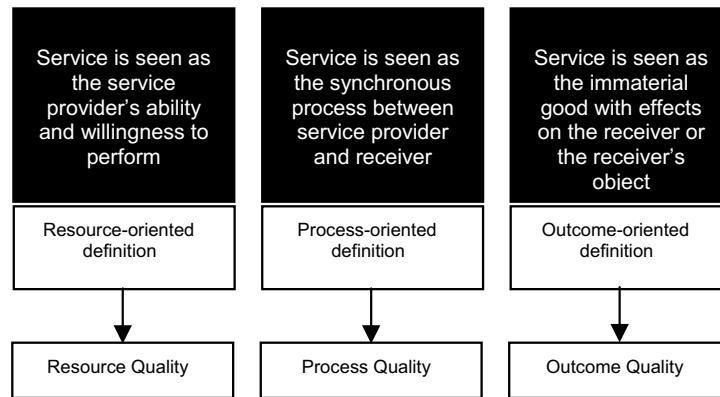


Figure 2

Service definitions and qualities.

Source: Corsten (1993, p. 765) and Tenberg (1999, p. 32) based on Donabedian (1980, p. 355).

Pechlaner, & Siller, 2001, p. 448). Process organisation further aims to improve the face-to-the-customer and to increase the time spent with the customer by reducing back office activities. It is useful to note that process standardisation is often confused in the literature with promoting conformity, rather than flexibility. Reassessment of the routine sets of back-stage activities does not bring direct value to the customer and in turn little or no profit to the business.

Standardisation

While standardisation targets routines (i.e., the consistently occurring activities of a process) through anticipatory problem-solving that results in a generalisation of activities (Hill, Fehlbaum, & Ulrich, 1994) it is, nevertheless, a sound approach for process improvements in the haute-cuisine sector. Complex customer-focused processes, like those typically incorporated in haute-cuisine restaurants, need resources that allow for empowerment and freedom of decision (Hill, Fehlbaum, & Ulrich, 1994). In this regard, the standardisation of resources in a haute-cuisine restaurant should be characterised by routines that are independent from employees and give most

of the control to the organisation, thus increasing the process stability and quality (Hill, Fehlbaum, & Ulrich, 1994) of its resources, or supplier dimension (Bieger & Laesser, 2003). Management should therefore focus on their human potential (i.e., soft skills and human resources) through best practices in recruitment and selection (Mörschel & Beyer, 2004). Conversely, the material potential (i.e., material resources of the assets) should imply obvious and predefined applicabilities (Mörschel & Beyer, 2004). Both subdimensions should fulfil the expectations of the customer, who perceives value through know-how, employees, equipment and image (Bieger & Laesser, 2003; Meyer & Mattmüller, 1987).

At the resource level, process organisation implies a customer dimension that is underpinned by the customer's ability to integrate in the service process (integration potential) and the customer's possibility to interact with other guests (interaction potential; Bieger & Laesser, 2004; Meyer & Mattmüller, 1987). In this context, a service provider should only standardise its resources as long as it provides the right human and material potentials, is located in the right environment, and allows the customer the possibility to integrate in the service delivery

and to interact with other customers. Pompl and Lieb (1997, p. 19) found that in order to assess the quality of processes in gastronomy certain criteria need to be considered; these include a material dimension (i.e., the exterior, employees, and other guests of the restaurant), competence (i.e., expert knowledge and skills), communication skills, courtesy and customer appreciation, safety provision (i.e., familiarity with the process and the safety during the use), availability (i.e., the degree of effort to reach the service provider), and the removal of service defects (i.e., customer satisfaction can, for example, be secured through indemnifications or discounts).

It is also obvious here that material and human parameters are of interest, as customers perceive quality in what is visible to them in material and human shape. Consequently, to standardise the process dimension while providing high process quality, a business should operate in a regulatory environment and customer segment that allows for standardisation. In other words, the degree of complexity, difficulty, customer integration, and customer interaction is commensurate with, and thus relies on, the material and human requirements and qualities that will effectively provide process stability over the length of the service provision. Fließ and Möller (2002) state that, within the value creation process, the combination of internal and external production factors transform the outcome to a product of decisions made up of resource and process dimensions. It can therefore be argued that the outcome is only standardised when the interfaces between the activities are standardised (Eversheim, 1995); however, the level of individuality and the quality of the service should indicate if the standardisation was successful (Mörschel & Beyer, 2004; see also Lovelock 1983, 1991). While the outcome state is per se immaterial, the customer cannot evaluate the quality *ex ante* the service production, but *ex nunc*

or *ex post* the service act (Corsten 1997a). Service quality might be a result of the outcome dimension, but it nevertheless needs the resources and processes for evaluation (Mörschel & Beyer, 2004). The crux for the service provider is that even noninfluential factors play a role in the perception of the outcome (Pompl & Lieb, 1997). The customer brings uncertainty to the service provider because the guest's perception of the outcome quality is not only perceived through a material product such as the food, but also through the overall experience (the immaterial). This includes the contact with other guests as well as the guest's own wellbeing. In order to overcome such customer-induced uncertainty, restaurants should consider the possibilities of standardising the external market (Corsten, 1996; Gersch, 1995). This can be achieved through market segmentation and an analysis of the diffusion rate (Engelhardt & Freiling, 1995).

Market Segmentation and Diffusion Rate Analysis

Through market segmentation, a restaurant can focus on homogeneous customer groups and can therefore decrease uncertainty (Backhaus, 1999; Mörschel & Beyer, 2004). Segmentation could be targeted at demographics, psychographics, and observable buying patterns (Meffert & Bruhn, 1997). The standardisation of services through a homogeneous customer group can then help to individualise the service for each target group. Consequently, the higher the diffusion rates the higher the chances for standardisation and the faster the realisation of de facto standards (Mörschel & Beyer, 2004). On the one hand, transaction costs are by nature higher the more specialised the service, which leads in turn to a higher degree of uncertainty (Osterloh & Frost, 2003; Picot, 1991); while on the other hand, production costs depend on the transferability of the implicit and explicit knowledge of an organisation.

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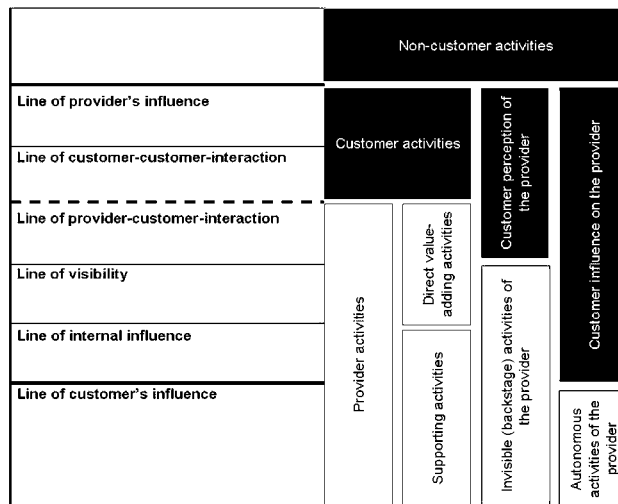


Figure 3

The six-lines-service-blueprint.

Source: Möller (2005, p. 11), adapted from Kingman-Brundage (1995).

Accordingly, knowledge that is only implicitly transferable is hard to standardise and is often an inimitable competitive advantage and should, as far as possible, be integrated in the core processes (Osterloh & Frost, 2003). This raises the question as to whether it is possible to outsource certain activities in order to increase the face-to-the-customer and so improve the process quality and customer satisfaction alike. Outsourcing under the transaction cost approach is therefore only expedient for simple processes that are more amenable to standardisation and constitute little risk for the value chain. By taking production costs into consideration, it becomes obvious that only activities that are explicitly transferable, and which do not affect the inimitability, are suitable for outsourcing. However, both approaches underlie a dynamic evolution; meaning that current trivial activities can become future competencies (Osterloh & Frost, 2003).

Methodology

As-Is-Process-Analysis

As a way of providing a visual framework for an as-is-process-analysis, a case study

was mapped according to the service processes relevant to the restaurant setting. First, the so-called process level one, or the macro processes, were identified and then fragmented into a process level two, respectively into microprocesses. Lastly, a third process level was established for micro-process activities, which consist of the single activities necessary for the fulfilment of both micro and macro processes (see Figure 5). In order to visualise these processes, the technique of blueprinting was used to conduct the as-is-analysis. First introduced by Shostack (1984), blueprinting is a method that helps to visualise processes and highlights the interaction points with the guest (Frauendorf & Wengler, 2003). Zeithaml and Bitner (1996, p. 277) describe it as 'a picture or map that accurately portrays the service system so that the different people involved in providing it can understand and deal with it objectively regardless of their roles or their individual points of view.' The six-lined service blueprint (see Figure 3) adapted by Möller (2005) was used in this case study.

Table 1
Description of the Six Service Lines*

Service Line	Description
Line of provider influence	Customer talks about the service provider/organisation with others (word of mouth)
Line of customer-customer interaction	The moment in which a customer interacts with another customer during the service delivery and after this respective service delivery (word of mouth)
Line of provider-customer interaction	The moment in which customer and provider have a bilateral interaction; and the separation of customer from provider activities
Line of visibility	The activities on this line are visible to the customer
Line of internal interaction	This line separates all value adding activities from support activities
Line of customer influence	The separation line between customer induced activities and autonomously planned service provider activities

Source: * Möller (2005, p. 12).

The blueprint shows that all activities from the line of internal interaction to the line of provider-customer interaction are value-adding activities. But the customer's perception of the provider is evaluated above the line of visibility and is influenced by customer-to-customer interactions. Given the transferability of implicit and explicit knowledge within a standardisation framework, blueprinting is an ideal tool for restaurant process analysis as it allows for the possibility to plan and design new processes by shifting certain activities between the lines (see Tables 1 and 2; Kleinaltenkamp, 1999).

Guest Questionnaire

A guest questionnaire was developed as means of gathering quantitative data about the satisfaction and importance level of the microprocesses outlined in the preceding section.

The questionnaire (see Table 3) was delivered in German, English and French and used a 5-point Likert scale that asked for the satisfaction and importance of the main interaction processes of the service delivery. The importance of the process had to be given in relation to the overall perception of the visit. The final question was used to ascertain the total ranking of the ten proposed processes. In other words, respondents were asked to rank the most important, second

most important and so on, using each number ranking once. This questionnaire thus allowed for a more meaningful comparison to be made in relation to all processes.

To-Be-Process-Analysis

In order to conduct a to-be-analysis from the blueprint the 'Turtle Method' was used, because it showed good results in communicating facts, risks, interfaces, and interdependencies to employees and thus increases transparency. The turtle method is very easily structured and requires inputs and outputs of the processes. Information concerning material resources, human resources, existing know-how and performance indicators has to be allocated accordingly (see TÜV Süd, 2004, pp. 1-3).

This method was then followed by a SWOT analysis of each of the single processes. The derived opportunities were used as recommendations for action.

Service Processes in Haute Cuisine

Three aspects make haute-cuisine services complex: the indifference of the service act, the difficulty of evaluation, as well as the need for experience of foregone services (Garhammer, 1988; Herder-Dorneich & Kötz, 1972), because service processes very often tend to be arbitrary sequences of activities based on past

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Table 2
Effects of Switching Between the Six Service Lines*

Service line	Effect of switching
Line of provider influence	The service provider can increase or decrease the contact with the guest and so influence its reputation
Line of customer–customer interaction	The service provider can increase the contact among customers if this contact increases the value for both customers
Line of provider–customer interaction	The service provider can externalise certain activities to the customer to increase the interaction or vice versa in case the customer does not want to be integrated
Line of visibility	The service provider decreases uncertainty and can increase value for the customer by increasing the visibility of the service; the visibility should only be decreased in case it does not provide any value or an internal activity should be kept hidden
Line of internal interaction	Internal interaction should only be increased if several persons need to be involved in an activity; a decrease of internal interactions (backstage activities) shows that the service provider aims to increase the contact with the customer
Line of customer influence	The service provider can increase or decrease standardisation: by increasing customer influence the service provider can achieve individualisation, which is then meaningful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • when customer preferences or service requirements are heterogeneous • when it creates additional value, results in an increased willingness to pay • when the task is very customer-specific • when the customer has a lot of know-how • when the internal resources are flexible enough by decreasing the customer influence the provider aims for increased standardisation, which is only advisable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • when it has a positive effect regarding the uncertainty of buying decisions • when the aimed standards are common in the market • when the service production is very obvious • when the efficiency can be increased by economies of scale • when the service is consumed by masses • when a high modularisation of the service is possible

Source: * Möller (2005, pp. 17–19).

experiences and subjective judgments (Ramaswamy, 1996). While there is generally a low level of activity for the guest, it is vital that the guest is willing to integrate (Hilke, 1989); however, Bieger and Laesser (2003) criticise current process management concepts for having an invented customer orientation, because they do not appoint the most important consequences of creating a real service relationship with the customer.

On the basis of Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons' Service Encounter Triad (2004), Bieger and Laesser (2003) developed a concept that relates the added value exchange between service provider/contact personnel, consumer and co-consumer — as opposed to the service organisation, contact personnel and consumer

triangular exchange. In consequence, this means the better the interaction among stakeholders, the better the service productivity. The production value is therefore shown in the transformation of transactions into relationships (i.e., sustainability of existing interactions) and in the creation of new interactions. The animadversion on operational management models that do not integrate the value and cooperative relationship between stakeholders is therefore apposite, particularly because restaurant services, and in particular haute-cuisine services, need forerun and feedback processes. An increase in service productivity can be achieved through an increase in interaction processes, followed by a value-based and organisation-specific process design (Bieger & Laesser, 2003).

Table 3
Questions in the Guest Questionnaire

Questions
1a: Did you book a table in advance?
1b: How satisfied were you with the overall booking procedure?
1c: How important is the booking procedure for the overall perception of your visit?
2a: How satisfied have you been with the welcome and seating?
2b: How important is the first contact in the overall perception of your visit?
3a: Did you have an aperitif?
3b: How satisfied were you with the recommendation and service of the aperitif?
3c: How important is the recommendation of the aperitif in the overall perception of your visit?
4a: How satisfied were you with the help concerning the choice of dishes?
4b: How important is this help in the overall perception of your visit?
5a: Did you have wine?
5b: How satisfied were you with the recommendation and service of wine(s)?
5c: How important is the recommendation of wine in the overall perception of your visit?
6a: How satisfied were you with the service of the food?
6b: How important is the service of the food in your overall perception of your visit?
7a: Did you have cheese?
7b: How satisfied were you with the recommendation and service of cheese?
7c: How important is the recommendation of the cheese in the overall perception of your visit?
8a: Did you have a liqueur, tea or coffee?
8b: How satisfied were you with recommendation and service of the liqueur, tea or coffee?
8c: How important is this recommendation in the overall perception of your visit?
9a: How satisfied were you with the billing and payment process?
9b: How important is the billing and payment process in the overall perception of your visit?
10a: How satisfied were you with the attendance when leaving?
10b: How important is this last contact in the overall perception of your visit?
11: Please rank the following processes after the importance of the overall perception of your visit. <i>Please allocate the numbers 1 to 10 to the following processes:</i> Booking of the table Reception and placing Recommendation of aperitif Recommendation of food Recommendation of wine Serving of food Recommendation of cheese Recommendation of liqueur, tea or coffee Billing and payment Attendance when leaving

While added value for the provider means customer loyalty, the consumer perceives added value as enrichment that leads to a reuse of the service. Thus direct contact with the guest must be seen as a source of knowledge that turns contact personnel

into 'knowledge workers' or 'knowbodies' (Probst & Knaese, 1998, cited in Bieger & Laesser, 2003, pp. 21–22). These types of employees do not only gain knowledge about existing customer wants and expectations, but also have the chance to create

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Table 4
The Most Relevant Customer-Facing Processes

Process
The reservation process: the booking of a table
The reception process: the welcome and seating
The aperitif recommendation and service
The recommendation and help concerning the food choice
The recommendation and service of wine
The service of the food orders
The recommendation and service of cheese
The recommendation and service of liqueur, tea or coffee
The payment process: billing and monetary transaction
The exiting process: guiding out and bidding farewell

new wants that can increase the profitability of the restaurant. Service productivity is thus not only a transaction output (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2001) but also one that is based on knowledge input. Consequently, a bottom-up approach is central when integrating a

process management approach in haute-cuisine restaurants (Bieger & Laesser, 2003; Picot & Franck, 1995). Bieger and Laesser (2003) categorised these value creation phenomena in three categories. First, added value is in proximity with process orientation, meaning that stakeholders directly link the contribution of customer-facing processes with productivity and perceived added value. Second, the basis of haute-cuisine services is the value of the consumer's experience of the interaction plus the satisfaction (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). That is to say, the quality in the eye of the guest is not only perceived through the material components of the service delivery, but also through the various ways of performing the service, especially the emphasis on a differentiation of the service culture (Bieger & Laesser, 2003, p. 26). Lastly, value can be generated through customer retention and service recovery (Bieger & Laesser, 2003; Boshoff & Leong, 1998; Taylor, 1991; Varela, 1992).

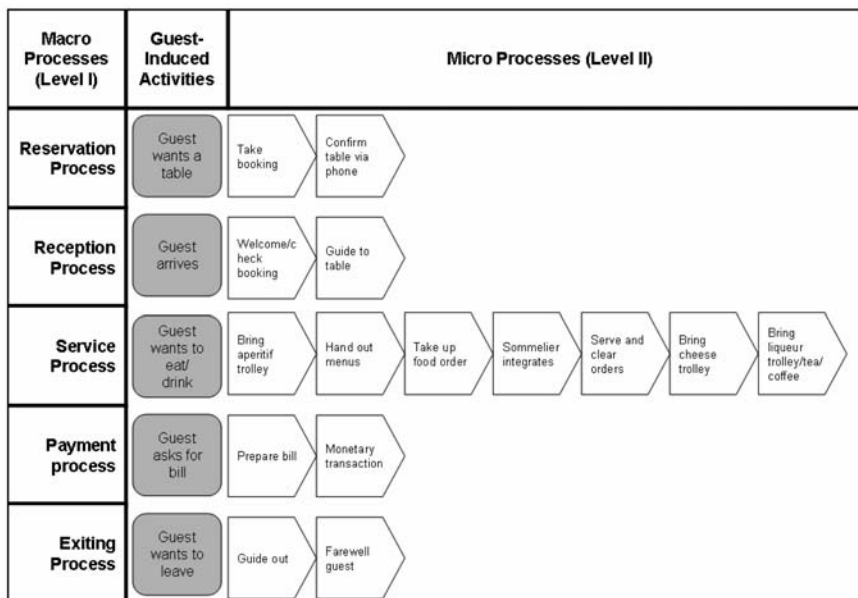


Figure 4
 As-is-service-process-map

Case Study As-Is-Process-Analysis

The following process map of the case study restaurant was analysed (Figure 4).

It was further identified that the following processes are the most relevant to the customer, because they are direct customer-facing (Table 4).

On the basis of the guest questionnaire (see Table 3), the top ten customer-facing processes were identified as being the most important to the customer (Table 5).

Case Study To-Be-Process-Analysis

The most important process identified by the customer in this study — that is, wine service — was considered to be a useful process through which to demonstrate the improvement potential of process organisation techniques. In this regard, during the as-is-analysis the blueprint of the process looked as follows.

After analyses of the process by means of the Turtle method and SWOT analysis, the blueprint (Figure 6) highlights aspects that have the potential to bring operational and organisational improvements. During the observation it was

Table 5
Customers' Ranking of the Most Important Customer-Facing Processes

Rank	Processes
1	Wine
2	Reception
3	Food choice
4	Reservation
5	Serving
6	Aperitif
7	Cheese
8	Exiting
9	Payment
10	Liqueur, tea or coffee

revealed that only one sommelier was available and that expert recommendation could only be given in the German language. Furthermore, it was found that many of the activities on the line of internal interaction are needed, as the sommelier should be visible to the guest and to generate revenue. The analysis suggests that if most of the nonvisible activities were internally outsourced to a steward who works on a lower cost base this

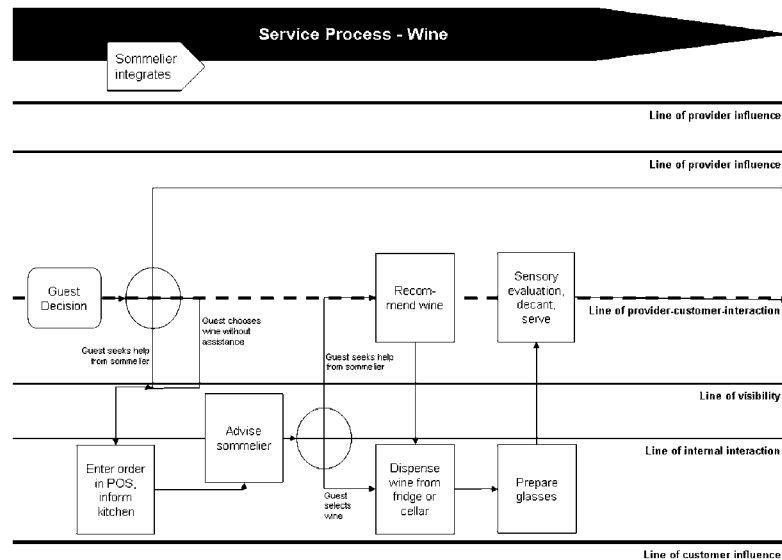


Figure 5
As-is-wine-process.

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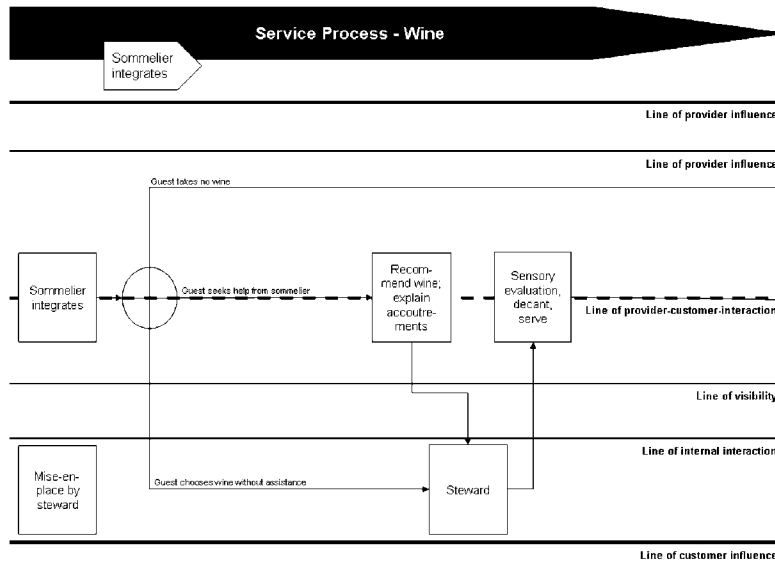


Figure 6
To-be-wine-process.

would allow the sommelier more opportunities to have one face-to-the-customer. It goes without saying that no continuous up-selling of wine occurs when all customers are saturated, but the quality of the service can be increased through expansion, interaction and integration. The consumer's overall perception of quality can also be enhanced through detailed information about the provided tangibles — for example, the use of handmade wine glasses and their advantages over ordinary glasses.

While process organisation is widely known in other industries, it is still new to the hospitality industry. This case study showed that even within the best of class organisations, improvements through process organisation bring out potentials and significant improvements.

Conclusion

Customer-facing processes are the core processes of haute-cuisine restaurants (Bieger & Laesser, 2003; Davenport, 1993; Weth, 1997). The processes are, however, organisation-specific and reach

their competitive advantage only when they are integrated into the restaurant's specificities (Bieger & Laesser, 2003; Kaplan & Murdock, 1991). In haute-cuisine services, added value thus equates to being close to the customer insofar as the dynamics and uniqueness of the added value comes from the respective specificities that integrate all the parties involved. Customer commitment and interaction-based processes are therefore major characteristics of a process oriented haute-cuisine restaurant. It is thus not customer satisfaction per se, but customer commitment that leads to customer loyalty and distinguishes core service processes from production core processes (Tapscott & Caston, 1993). Value occurs precisely when interaction occurs, which shows that service quality is the value produced through interaction and can be evaluated through mutual loyalty (Bieger & Laesser, 2003). The interactions between the stakeholders are immaterial and are difficult to imitate. The competitive advantage of haute-cuisine restaurants therefore

lies mainly in a dynamic and differentiated design of interactions, which are manifested in individualised, guest-centred interactions (Bieger & Laesser, 2003). The interactions and value creation can be increased by a retraditionalisation through know-how (Bieger & Laesser, 2003); however, as long as the customer has the chance to choose another provider, it is important to keep in mind that the service process is neither fully utilised nor fully process-oriented (Bieger & Laesser, 2003 after Hamel & Prahalad, 1990) and can potentially lead to a deconstruction of the value chain (Evans & Wurster, 1997).

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