FRONTLINE EMPLOYEE NETWORKS AND SERVICE INNOVATIVENESS

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Abstract

It has been a preoccupation of services marketing and innovation scholars as well as managers of service organisations, find new ways to improve frontline employee (FLE) innovativeness. FLEs, due to their high degree of customer contact, are a valuable source of market and customer insight that might lead to innovation. Existing approaches, however, have focused on individual traits for innovativeness or celebrated the 'lone genius' exemplars, which potentially ignores the multifaceted nature of organisational networks and relationships that shape the individual's innovative capacity. Our study proposes a multi-level model where network-level antecedents – an FLE's work network structure (connectedness) and composition of both front and back-of-house or internal-facing employees (IFEs) – affect network-level mechanisms – an FLE's knowledge exchange (KE) and self-governance (SG) networks. The mechanisms, we contend, help translate FLE network connectedness and composition into innovative outcomes. Our results from a social network survey at a hotel with 107 FLEs and 94 IFEs suggest that KE serves as a positive mediating mechanism for frontline service innovativeness whereas SG networks have an ambivalent or negative effect on innovativeness.

Keywords: *Frontline employee (FLE); service innovation; social networks*

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