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## **CRITICAL INCIDENT DIAGNOSIS OF ONLINE SERVICE FAILURES IN HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT INSTITUTIONS**

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### **Abstract**

The World had almost come to a standstill with the outbreak of Covid-19 Pandemic. In those testing times, service failures that were quite common in manufacturing sectors could also be seen in education and academic settings. The ongoing pandemic had posed innumerable colossal challenges before us. Adapting this New Normal, the service encounters in this digital world become more challenging. With this, online service failures in such Institutes may go unnoticed and complaints may remain unregistered, and no reporting of critical incidents may be done. Disgruntled student if encounters an online service failure; though not report a critical incident but may spread bad word of mouth which may hamper goodwill of the Institution. A maiden attempt is made to write a case study to identify online “service failure” incidents from the Higher Educational Management Institutions [HEMIs] and to further provide a basis for strategies related to service recovery. Staff response to “service delivery” “system failure”, “staff response” to “students' wants and requests”, and “unprompted and unsolicited” acts are the three main kinds of service failure in education used in this study. 40 critical incidences from 30 students from three HEMIs in rural Maharashtra [India] were grouped using these categories.

According to the findings, majority of critical incidents that are reported are for the service delivery system failures.

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Online Service Failure, Service Recovery, Disgruntled Student, Critical Incident.

## **Introduction**

A “service failure” is a service performance customer's expectations are not met, and that ultimately results in customer unhappiness. The measures taken by an organization in response to a service failure are referred to as “service recovery”. Higher education is a service industry that can tremendously benefit from the application of marketing ideas to “service recovery” (Iyer & Muncy, 2008). More research into the application of services marketing concepts to the “higher education” service business is needed (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). When services fail to meet the customer's expectations, it is referred to as “service failure” (Park and Park, 2016). Students consider these services of institute are inextricably related to the person who delivers the service on the behalf of the educational institute. With increased enrollment in higher education, institutional facilitation services are forced to bring changes in academic counselling, extending support to students when it comes to finances.

## **Literature Review**

### **Service Failure**

“Service failures” occur when a “service provider” fails to satisfy “customer expectations”, and recovery plans, which describe the activities done by the “service provider” to overcome the “failure incidence” (Hazée et al., 2017). Failures occur in “online settings” due to a lack of information, functionality, and system attributes (Tan et al., 2016). According to Azemi et al., 2019, it is critical to report these breakdowns if “customer expectations” are to be met. For this, it is also important to implement appropriate “service recovery”. He also believes that, if “service failure”

is handled in a better manner then it can be of significant value in improving customer post-recovery satisfaction and retention.

### **Types of “Service Failure”**

“Service failures” vary by industry, but there are some common problems that can be seen across all sectors of the service industry. The number of articles in which other researchers identified causes of “service failure” is limited (Amir et al., 2016). The kinds of service failures that the informants encountered were different, but they all fell into one of six categories: (a) delivery issues, (b) Web site design issues, (c) payment issues, (d) security issues, (e) product quality issues, and (f) customer service issues (Betsy & Sheron 2003). The service encounter in “higher education institutions” (HEIs) is a function of both goods and service-related attributes. For instance, students, are given written material or course material as a result, but the teacher also interacts with them in practical manner. Silber et al., 2009 feel that, such service contacts between teachers and students could be considered as positive or negative. “Service failures” are classified into two kinds, according to Chuang et al. (2012): outcome and process. As a result, “service providers” must know the two types of failures since this knowledge and understanding will help them assess or determine the cause of a “service failure”. Further, these “service providers” may be able to react appropriately thereby compensating for the damage or pain they have experienced.

### **Classification of the Causes of the Service Failure**

Bitner et.al (1990) have identified 3 groups of service failure. First being “employee response” to “service delivery” “system failures”, “employee response” to “customer needs” and “requests”, and “unprompted and unsolicited” “employee actions”. For the investigation of “service failures” using “CIT” Bitner et al. (1990) is considered as forerunner.

### **Employee Response to “Service Delivery” “System Failure”**

There are three types of failure in a “service delivery” system: “unavailable service”, “unreasonably slow service”, and other “core service failures”. The term

"unavailable service" states a service that is missing or unavailable. "Unavailable service", in the context of "higher education", refers to a service that would have been given or scheduled according to the plan or program schedule, but is missing or unavailable. A class that is may be cancelled or that a teacher does not turn up for a class previously scheduled and for which students were present. "Unreasonably slow service" describes a situation in which service professionals take an unusually long time to do their tasks (Bateson and Hoffman, 2016). In education sector, "Core service failures" mean all facets of services that usually fails to meet "basic performance" that is expected of it.

### **"Employee Response" to "Customer Needs" and "Requests"**

The main point if this category is that student needs may be either unspoken or apparent, and it pertains to service errors brought on by staff members' responses to or treatment of student demands (Mattila and Ro, 2008). For instance, if a student scholarship is abruptly dismissed, leaving the student with little time to find other ways to pay for his/her living expenses, implicit needs in the setting of HEIs may not be addressed. The four categories of explicit needs include "customer preferences" "special needs", "customer errors", and "disruptive others". A change in the schedule to accommodate a sporting event may be termed as a student preference, but when a student has a specific request, such as the institution's language or medium of instruction, that may be referred to as a special need. A lost book owned by the institute library or a lost meal coupon may be termed as an error on part of student. As far as disruptive students are concerned, the teachers are asked to reprimand those disturbing the class.

### **Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions**

Employee behaviours that are unanticipated when dealing with students are referred to as unprompted and unsolicited employee activities. Their actions do not comply with the organization's or the customer's policies, nor are they permitted by the business's service delivery model (Mattila and Ro, 2008). Lack of focus and strange behaviour are examples of unprompted employee conduct. Employees who are not paying attention can be termed as similar to attitude issues. In terms of

attitude and personality, Harris (2013) explains that having the proper attitude is crucial for providing excellent customer service. According to Du et al. (2010), service personnel's demeanour can offend customers, and occasionally remedial measures may not be sufficient to save a poorly performed service experience. Indifferent behaviour could be a sign of rudeness and arrogance. Employee behaviour can be regarded a reason for good relationship with customers. The service can be improved if good awareness of this done (Timm, 2011). Many studies reveal that actual issue is with employees being clueless about their behaviour. A study made by Groomroos (2007) also states that employees if behave in an unfriendly manner may impact service quality in an adverse way. Apparently, this may even affect the profitability of the organization.

### **Methodology**

The current study is case based and related to higher education. The CIT is basically a method to gather vital facts that concerns behavior in defined situations. CIT is not rigid but a flexible set of principles which must be "changed and adapted" as situation needs. When a participant reports an incidence, that can be called as an incident. And for that to be critical, the involved participant must be self-assured that the event had a fundamental association with the outcome (Rosala, 2020).

The CIT (Edvardsson and Roos, 2001) is a method for investigating moments of truth. CIT proponents claim it is the most effective approach for acquiring information regarding unique service encounter situations (Munteanu et al., 2010). The goal of employing the CIT is to learn more about the root causes of service failure. According to Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2015, the CIT has been used in several studies to evaluate service failure. The "CIT questionnaire" is advantageous as it students can share their individual experiences throughout time (Chahal and Devi, 2013). This strategy was used to interview those students only who answered a CIT questionnaire. They were asked to recall a particular instance (if any) of "service failure" in the Institute. The questions were drafted based on a study by Bitner et al. CIT (1990).

As a result, for the present study the following “open-ended questions” were posed to the students:

Q.1 Have you encountered an incident in the Institute that made you dissatisfied?

Q.2 If yes, describe the incident in the Institute that made you dissatisfied?

Q.3 To which of the following service encounters was the incident related?

a) Teaching b) Examination c) Library d) Administrative Office

Q.4 Explain where and when this incident occurred?

Q.5 Did you approach or complain the concerned regarding the incident?

Q.6 If yes, explain what was said during the incident?

Q.7 Were you satisfied with the response given by the concerned?

For the present study, 30 students from three HEMIs in rural Maharashtra [India] were used as a “sample size” and the number of reported incidences were 40. The “sample size” for CIT related studies could be considered from “9 to 3,852” (Gremier, 2004). Grouping of the incidents was done in 4 subcategories viz. teaching, exam, library, and administrative office. All these subcategories were further put into three “service failure” categories viz. “staff response” to “service delivery system failure”, “staff response” to “students' wants and requests”, and “unprompted and unsolicited” acts (Bitner et.al., 1990).

## Results

The present study also attempted to cover “gender distribution” of the respondents for each “age group”. This is reflected in Table I. The Fisher Exact test was applied as the sample size of the study was small. The tests revealed that there is no significant difference in gender across age group of the respondents.

### Gender \* Age Distribution

		Age			Total
		20- 22	22- 24	24- 26	
Gender	F	6	1	0	7

M	5	1	1	7
Total	11	2	1	14

### Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.091 <sup>a</sup>	2	.580	1.000
Likelihood Ratio	1.477	2	.478	1.000
Fisher's Exact Test	1.269			1.000
N of Valid Cases	14			
<b>Note: Fisher exact test= 1.000</b>				

The above table interprets that “Fisher exact test” failed to confirm noteworthy differences in the “gender” regarding “age distribution” of the participants involved in the study (p value > 0.05). For example, the number of male respondents was equivalent with the number of female respondents. It was noted that there was no significant difference related to age distribution. It can be said that most of the respondents were under the age of 25 (85%).

### Critical Incidents

The number of dissatisfied incidents were found to be 20. The same were grouped under four categories viz. teaching, examination, library, and administrative office. All these incidents were further put under three sub-categories of service failure i.e. “service failure” delivery system termed as “Group I”, unfulfilled “needs and requests” termed as “Group II”, whereas; “Group III” was related to “unprompted and unsolicited employee action”.

**Following table represents the “dissatisfied incidents” that were reported.**

<b>Sub-categories</b>	<b>Dissatisfied incidents</b>
Teaching	“Teacher starts his online lecture before scheduled time and doesn’t admit students to class once started. Though feedback was given by the students, there was no improvement in this.” (CI1)
Examination	“The concerned person does not respond properly when queries related to exam are asked to him.” (CI16)
Library	“Request for reference books of specialization was made. Instead, e-books were provided which was not expected.” (CI19)
Administrative Office	“When I went to pay the fees, the office staff did not help and was rude in behaviour. (CI6)

**Table II**  
**Critical Incidents**

**Table III: Frequency of Dissatisfied incidents**

Altogether number of incidents for the current study were found to be seven, two, ten and one for teaching, examination, administrative office, and library respectively. Considering groupwise, two groups viz. Group I & Group II administered same number of incidents i.e. Nine incidents equally. Group III has a smaller number of incidents reported i.e. two. In the library category, only one incident was reported, and the same was identified in the Group I category viz. “service delivery failure system” category. The study revealed that not a single incident was seen to be reported for “Group II” and “Group III” in “library category”.

Table III shows the frequency of 20 dissatisfied incidents that were convened under four “sub-categories” which were recognized as Group I, II & III.

**Area \* Group Crosstabulation**

Count

		Group			Total
		G1	G2	G3	
Area	Admin	5	0	5	10
	Exam	0	1	1	2
	Library	1	0	0	1
	Teaching	3	2	2	7
Total		9	3	8	20

**Note:** “Group I”: “Service delivery system failures”; “Group II”: “Unfulfilled needs and requests”; “Group III”: “Unprompted and unsolicited employee action”

It is observed that, under administration category five critical incidents each under Group I & Group III were reported. No critical incident related to administration was seen to be reported under Group II. The incident in this category included rude behaviour of office staff when student visited office to pay fees which could be related to “unprompted and unsolicited employee action”. Remaining incidents reported in the same category were that the students were made to wait by the office staff to get the information when students requested the same. This could be put under Group II.

When it came to the exam category, it is found that there was not a single incident that was reported for the Group I. However, Group II & Group III had one incident reported each (10 percent). The incident reported in Group II category was that students did not receive the information that they requested which accounted to 5 percent. Another incident that was reported and put under category III was unprompted and perplexed behaviour of staff when students had queries regarding filling of exam form. This incident also accounted for 5 percent.

Among all the incidents reported, library was the only category to get only one incident reported and that too only in Group I category. Whereas no incident related to library was reported in Group II & Group III category. The one incident that was

reported was related to the absence of books for the course of business analytics. This could be termed as service delivery system failure where library service fails to meet expected performance.

Lastly, the teaching category witnessed seven critical incidents in total, which accounted for 35 percent of total incidents reported in all categories. Not a single group went unreported for incidents as Group I reported three incidents and Group II & Group III reported two incidents each.

So, the incidents reported in Group I were found to be service delivery system failure, where students complained of not scheduling classes on time. Another incident being teaching failure and not meeting teaching expectations of students. Group II incidents reported are related to “employee response to customer needs and requests”. These were like turning down requests made by students for the study material or not clarifying their doubts regarding the choice of specializations, rather gave them confused answers. This also accounted for 28 percent of all incidents reported in same category i.e. teaching. For the said teaching category, students reported rude and arrogant behaviour of staff which could be termed as unprompted and unsolicited response from the teaching staff and could be put under Group III. Here, the incident was related to rude behaviour of teacher in class. The students reported that the respective teacher raised voice during an online class when they informed her about the disturbance in listening. They reiterated that teacher started to reason them unnecessarily. These accounted for 28 percent of all incidents reported in same category i.e. teaching.

### **Discussion & Implications**

Service failures are evident in all sectors and higher educational institutions (HEI) are not an exception. It is highly challenging to deliver an error-free service. When it comes to HEI, the service failures as discussed are in the form of service system failure that is related to teacher not scheduling the class on time; employee’s response to unfulfilled needs and request like not clarifying doubts of students regarding the choice of specialization and a failure related to unprompted and unsolicited employee action like reasoning by a teacher during an online class. The

present study reflected that it was Group I (Service System Failure) that reported the majority of critical incidents. It is found that a similar study conducted in Durban, South Africa (S.K. Msosa & J.P Govender, 2019) has the same kind of finding. The number of incidents reported in Group III (Unprompted and Unsolicited Response) were found to be the second largest, as students encountered dissatisfaction due to lack of empathy on part of staff especially administrative. The first encounter the student has is always the administrative office. Hence, student should get a good impression of the Institute first through the office itself. The institute should train the staff to be empathetic and courteous. However, the findings revealed that it was Group II that witnessed the “smallest number” of “critical incidents” in all categories (Admin, Exam, Library and Teaching) included in the study. Further, HEI need to critically analyze these reports and should focus on empathetic behaviour of staff and strategies to increase their engagement at workplace to reduce resentment among students.

### **Conclusion**

The study provides comprehensive framework to study critical incidents reported in HEI. The current study has attempted to address the issues in HEI in the form of critical incidents in various categories viz. Admin, Exam, Library and Teaching. Issues related to critical incidents resolved on time may in a way help HEI to deliver service though not error-free but at least the one that may minimize the number of critical incidents.

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