

EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE: ITS EFFECT ON SERVICE QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

From a survey of a matched sample of bank employees and customers, it was ascertained that the employees' perception of the organizational climate [OCLIM] is positively associated with the customers' perception of the overall service quality [SQUAL] but not with the customers' perception of the employee service quality [EQUAL]. This implies that service firm managers should regularly survey their employees to determine their perceptions of the organization, and take necessary remedial measures to correct any misperceptions.

OPSOMMING

'n Steekproef onder bankamptenare en kliënte toon dat amptenare se persepsie van die organisatoriese klimaat (OCLIM) positief korreleer met kliënte se persepsie van algehele diensgehalte (SQUAL), maar nie met kliënte se persepsie van die amptenare se diensgehalte (EQUAL) nie. Dit impliseer dat diensfirma-bestuurders hul amptenare se persepsies van organisasie gereeld moet monitor, en die nodige regstellende stappe moet neem om wanpersepsies reg te stel.

In service organizations, organizational dynamics have a direct impact on the people the organization serves, as well as on employee performance and attitudes. Every organization has its own unique traditions, culture and ways of getting things done, and this includes how customers are treated. Situations may vary from organization to organization; however, there are some common and identifiable features of organizational environments that serve to support quality customer service. Thus quality customer service seems to thrive in some environments and wither in others.

The intangibility of services makes it difficult for management, employees and customers to assess the service output and service quality. Consequently, an organization's overall "atmospherics" or feel of the setting is very important in shaping front-line employees' attitude about the process and outcome of service delivery. Thus, in the absence of direct control of the service encounter, it is posited that organizational practices and procedures that communicate service as top priority may succeed in delivering high quality service.

After defining relevant concepts and briefly reviewing the literature, this research examines the service employees' perception of the organizational climate and matches this with the customers' perception of the service quality.

CONCEPTUAL DEFINITIONS

Organizational Climate

Some researchers (AL-Shammari, 1992; Sandelands, 1994) contend that climate deals with organizational characteristics which are perceived by the individuals; anything in the organization which members interpret or attach meaning to in their attempt to make sense of the organizational environment. Although it may be argued that there are similarities between the constructs "organizational climate" and "customer orientation", it is necessary to stress that the service climate [OCLIM] is a perceptual process regarding the whole organization, whereas, customer orientation focuses on the individual employee and his behaviour towards the customer.

Overall Service Quality

Since the nature of services, particularly its intangibility, has restricted attempts to conceptualize service quality, the concept "perceived quality" has been suggested as a means of con-

ceptualizing service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Since perceived quality is based on what consumers regard as quality rather than tangible cues of quality, service quality is generally thought to be the result of a comparison between expected service, and an evaluation of the service actually received during service delivery or encounter. For the purpose of this research, service quality [SQUAL] is defined as the extent to which the customer's expectations are met or exceeded.

Employee Service Quality

Since services are intangible, in many cases the only tangible evidence (or cue) available to compare quality and performance in a service transaction is the contact person with whom they interact (Mohr and Bitner, 1995). Furthermore, since the contact employees contribute to service excellence by delivering on the promises of the firm, the customers' perception of the service in terms of delivery is important in their perception of the service outcome. In this study, employee service quality [EQUAL] refers to the customers' perception of the service delivery process.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Schneider, Gunnarson and Niles-Jolley (1994) assert that employees and customers observe what happens to them [and around them], and draw conclusions about the organization's priorities. Some researchers (Zemke & Bell, 1990; Julian and Ramaseshan, 1994) claim that service organization employees have face-to-face contact with customers and this type of work seems to result in increased stress and strain because employees try to meet conflicting demands from management and customers. Schneider and Bowen (1995: 19) claim that management can potentially manage employee stress by establishing a climate in which the employees desires to give good service are made easier and encouraged; "a climate in which service, as proved by management word and deed." Furthermore, Mc Nabb and Sepic (1995) have argued that critical elements of the organizational climate are the individuals' perceptions of the organization, and that it is these perceptions which govern employees' behaviour. These researchers maintain that climate directly influences behaviour within the organization, and with the organizations' external customers.

According to Brown (1995:2), climate is a relatively enduring quality of an organization that is "experienced by employees and influences their behaviour." Furthermore, Sandelands (1994:18) contends that climate deals with organizational characteristics which are perceived by the individuals; anything in

the organization which members attach meaning to, in their attempt to make sense of the organizational environment.

Over the years, several explanations have emerged about the dimensions that constitute the organizational climate construct. Tyagi (1982:242) identified four general organizational climate variables, namely, job characteristics, leadership characteristics, organizational characteristics and work group characteristics. In this study, the emphasis is on the job and organizational characteristics (see Appendix).

Several researchers (Gronroos, 1990; Schneider and Bowen, 1995) concur that a strong service orientation reflected in the organizational climate is likely to lead to higher quality in service delivery, which in turn will lead to higher perceived service quality from the customer's point of view.

Since services are intangible, in many cases the only tangible evidence (or cue) available to compare quality and performance in a service transaction is the contact person with whom they interact. For example, an insurance agent influences the consumer's perception of the insurance agency, as well as the insurance being sold. Because service quality is in the delivery, it is the interaction between the service deliverer and the consumer that determines service quality for the consumer. Furthermore, in service industries the contact person influences the customers' perception of the organization, since the contact person is often the main cue for the customer regarding the service being sold. Gronroos (1990) argues that a service orientation enhances the functional quality dimension of customer perceived quality, and it probably also supports the production of good technical quality.

In view of the (brief) literature reviewed, a survey was undertaken among a sample of bank employees and customers. The objective was to validate and administer instruments to measure the organizational climate, employee service quality and overall service quality, and to analyze the data so as to permit statistical inferences from the hypothesized relationship.

METHODOLOGY

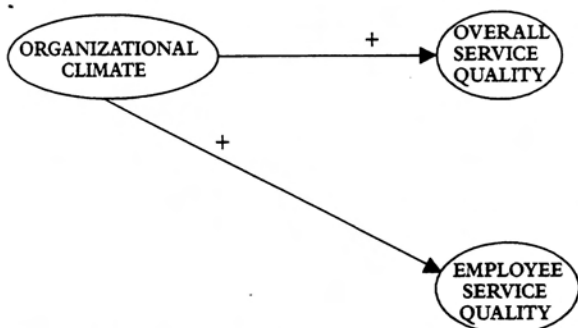
Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature, the following hypotheses are postulated:

- H1: The organizational climate as perceived by the service employees is positively associated with the overall service quality as perceived by the service customers.
- H2: The service employees' perception of the organizational climate is positively associated with the customers' perception of the employee service quality.

In terms of the latent variables the hypothesized model is depicted in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
HYPOTHESIZED RELATIONSHIP:
ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE-SERVICE QUALITY



Sample and Sampling Procedure

A survey was conducted among a random sample of 210 bank employees and 1050 customers of three major commercial

banks in South Africa. A combination of convenience and judgmental sampling (Meidan, 1996) was employed to select 210 front-line bank employees (excluding tellers) who had meaningful encounters with bank customers. Each employee was requested to distribute a total of five questionnaires by selecting every third customer with whom they interacted for at least five minutes (Naumann & Giel, 1995).

Branch employees were briefed about the research during regular staff meetings and requested to distribute the customer questionnaires. A covering letter explaining the purpose of the research, together with self addressed, stamped envelopes was provided.

Data Analysis

The computer programme SAS PROC.CORR (SAS Institute, 1990) was used to assess the reliability of the research instruments as well as to perform initial data analysis. To determine the validity of the measurements, the computer programme BMDP4M (Frane, Jennrich & Sampson, 1993) was used to perform a maximum likelihood factor analysis with a direct quartimin rotation (Jennrich & Sampson, 1966) of the unrotated factor matrix.

The hypothesized relationships were empirically evaluated using the computer programme RAMONA (Browne & Mels, 1990). RAMONA which is an improvement on LISREL, not only tests for significant deviations from zero for all parameters, but also provides for measures of fit of the data to an hypothesized model. By specifying an analysis based on sample correlation matrix with maximum likelihood estimation, the hypothesized model was fitted to the observed data.

Research Instruments

To measure the employees' perception of the organizational climate, a 22-item, five point Likert scale with anchors of (5) strongly agree and (1) strongly disagree was developed based upon an adaptation of Schneider and Bowen's (1995) and Kelley's (1987) organizational climate scales.¹ Kelley's (1987) scale was developed around the exploratory research by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985).

Since recent research (Buttle, 1996; Nel, Pitt & Berthon, 1997) has uncovered a number of deficiencies in the SERVQUAL scale (Parasuraman, et al., 1988), an alternate scale [named SQUAL] based on the 22 items of the SERVQUAL instrument was used. The SQUAL scale combines expectations and perceptions into one measure by asking customers whether certain aspects of service quality exceeded or fell short of expectations. This approach has been recommended by Carman (1990), Cronin and Taylor (1992), and Parasuraman et al. (1994). Service customers were asked to rate each of the 22 items on a scale ranging from 1 (worse than expected) to 5 (better than expected).

To measure the customers' perception of the employee service quality (EQUAL) an instrument was developed, based on the universal SERVQUAL instrument. Customers were required to think about their interaction with the bank employee and indicate their agreement with each of 16 items (EQ1-EQ16) on a five point scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. A high score would indicate that the respondent perceives the employee service quality as being high.

A 5-point scale was used because the pre-test revealed that respondents could not make fine mental distinctions with respect to whatever was being measured. This strategy is supported by Parasuraman (1991) who asserts that for accurate measurements, a large number of scale positions are needed only when a single-item scale is used, rather than when a multiple-item scale is used, as was the case in this study.

¹See Appendix.

Reliability of Measures

Stepwise Reliability Analysis (Wille, 1996) was performed on the various measuring instruments using the computer programme SAS PROC.CORR (SAS Institute, 1990). In Stepwise Reliability Analysis (SRA), individual items are deleted from the various measuring instruments if this action improves the overall reliability of the particular measuring instrument as measured by its Cronbach's coefficient alpha (Cronbach, 1951). The process was repeated until all the measuring instruments possessed an acceptable level of reliability.

Due to the fact that the latent variables organizational climate, employee service quality, and overall service quality had too many measurements, it was decided to reduce the number of individual measurements by averaging individual measurements to generate adapted measurements. The final OCLIM instrument which comprised of 13 items was refined as follows: $OC1 = (OC3 + OC4 + OC7) / 3$; $OC2 = (OC8 + OC9 + OC10) / 3$; $OC3 = (OC1 + OC12 + OC16) / 3$; $OC4 = (OC17 + OC18 + OC21 + OC22) / 4$. The final SQUAL instrument comprised of 17 items refined as follows: $SQ1 = (SQ3 + SQ6 + SQ7 + SQ8) / 4$; $SQ2 = (SQ9 + SQ11 + SQ12 + SQ13) / 4$; $SQ3 = (SQ14 + SQ15 + SQ16 + SQ17) / 4$; $SQ4 = (SQ18 + SQ19 + SQ20 + SQ21 + SQ22) / 5$. The EQUAL instrument comprised of 15 items refined as follows: $EQ1 = (EQ2 + EQ3 + EQ4) / 3$; $EQ2 = (EQ5 + EQ6 + EQ7 + EQ8) / 4$; $EQ3 = (EQ9 + EQ10 + EQ11 + EQ12) / 4$; $EQ4 = (EQ13 + EQ14 + EQ15 + EQ16) / 4$.

The OCLIM scale returned a Cronbach alpha of 0.908, the SQUAL scale 0.961 and the EQUAL scale 0.946, all of which are acceptable since they exceed 0.7, a value favoured by most social scientists (Bless & Higson-Smith, 1995).

Validity of Measures

The measure development paradigms recommended by Parasuraman (1991) was closely followed during the development of the scales. After determining the Cronbach's coefficients' alpha, Stepwise Exploratory Factor Analysis (Wille, 1996) was performed to ascertain the discriminant and construct validity of the measuring instruments. In each step of the analysis, BMDP4M (Frane, Jennrich & Sampson, 1993) was used to perform a maximum likelihood factor analysis with a direct quartimin rotation (Jennrich & Sampson, 1966) of the unrotated factor matrix. It is evident from Table 1 that the measuring instruments possess acceptable levels of discriminant and construct validity since they loaded heavily with loadings above 0.4 (Rummel, 1967) on one factor only.

TABLE 1
ROTATED FACTOR LOADINGS*

ITEMS	FACTOR1 OVERALL SERVICE QUALITY	FACTOR2 EMPLOYEE SERVICE QUALITY	FACTOR3 ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE
SQ1	0.907**	-0.002	0.041
SQ2	0.886**	0.085	0.022
SQ3	0.960**	-0.034	-0.060
SQ4	0.910**	0.038	0.019
EQ1	-0.064	0.950**	-0.001
EQ2	-0.016	0.976**	0.023
EQ3	0.132	0.783**	-0.017
EQ4	0.138	0.758**	-0.002
OC1	0.015	0.019	0.866**
OC2	-0.053	0.110	0.740**
OC3	0.023	-0.042	0.884**
OC4	0.071	-0.105	0.858**

*: loadings above 0.4 were considered significant

** : significant

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the data of a matched response of 50 employees and 190 customers, it was ascertained that the employees' perception of the organizational climate is positively associated with the customers' perception of the overall service quality (0.149; $p < 0.05$). This finding which is reflected in Figure 2 implies that when employees perceive the banks as being supportive of customer service, this would be reflected in their encounter with customers, who will perceive the service quality as being high. Thus the data supports hypothesis H1.

This finding is supported by previous research. For instance, Schneider et al. (1994) have shown that both a climate for service and a climate for employee well-being are highly correlated with the customers' perception of the overall service quality.

It is also evident from Figure 2 that, the organizational climate as perceived by the employees is not associated with the customers' perception of employee service quality (0.120; $p > 0.05$). Thus hypothesis H2 is not supported by the data. This finding is somewhat contrary to that implied by previous research. For instance, Schneider & Bowen (1995) proposed that incongruence between the service orientation of employees and the perceived orientation of management engenders role ambiguity and conflict which in turn may impact on the employees behaviour. Furthermore, Schneider, et al. (1994) assert that the organizational climate does impact on the performance and job satisfaction of employees.

Since it is also evident from Figure 2 that the customers' perception of the employee service quality is an important determinant of the overall service quality (0.732; $p < 0.01$), it is surprising that no association between the employees' perception of OCLIM and the customers' perception of EQUAL was evident.

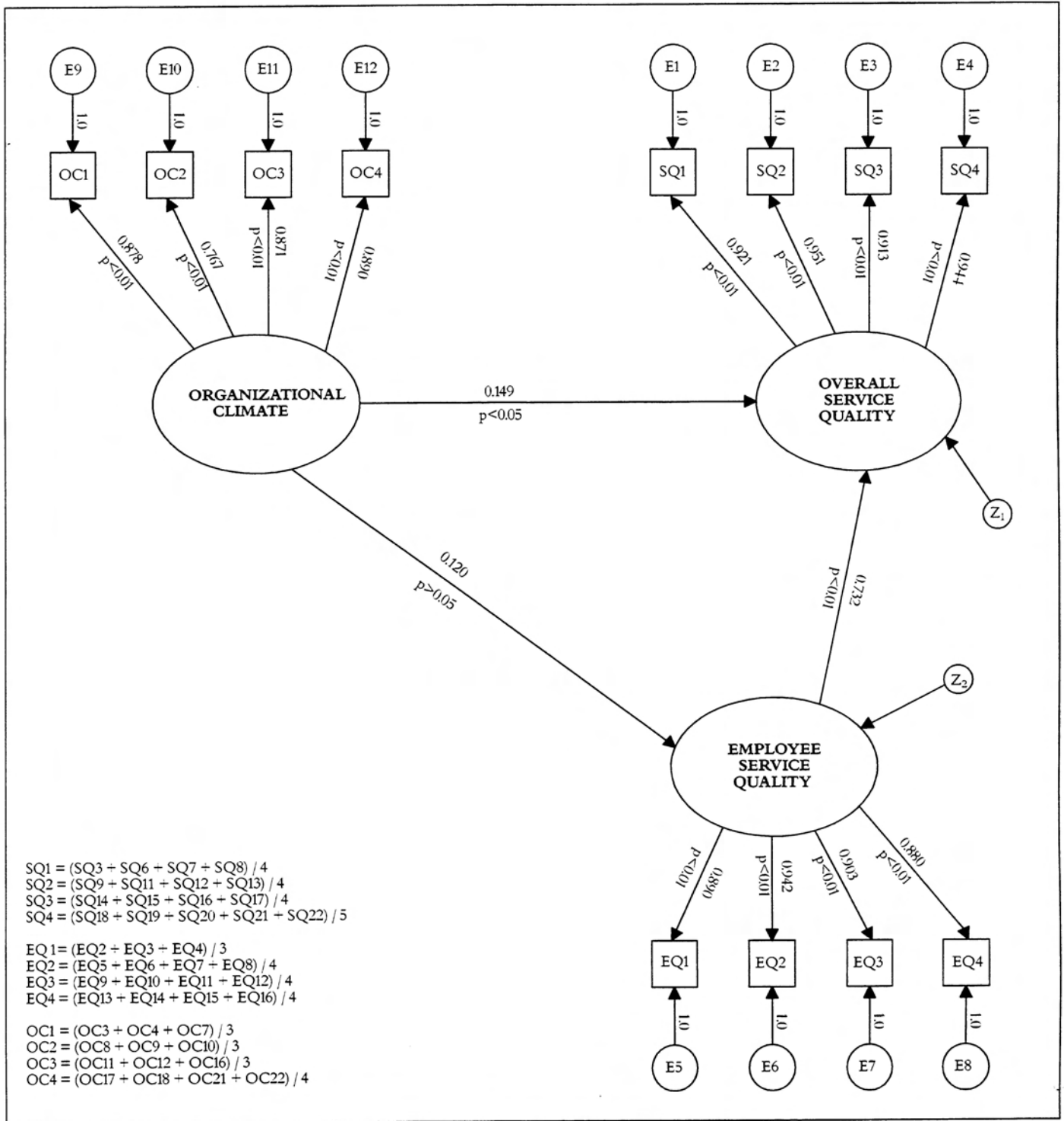
Several researchers such as Wood (1994) and Houston (1994) also concur that the climate for service created in an organization, including how the service is delivered, is critical for the service unit's effectiveness. For example, when consumers feel the service is "warm and friendly" their perceptions of service quality are more positive and loyalty to the service unit is enhanced. These perceptions which are developed as a result of interaction within the organization, provide employees with "direction" and "orientation" about where they should focus their energies and competencies. Martin (1990:16) asserts that unlike the earth's atmosphere, the atmosphere within a work environment can be controlled. "It can be made better, or worse by the actions of its leaders as well as employees."

Thus there is need to manage the organizational climate in order to make it a pleasant place to work. By means of regular surveys, service providers need to ask the following questions: How do employees see the organization? Does the organization project the image of being service or customer oriented?

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the research method used, namely mail survey, the tests of significance involving the matched employee-customer data was limited to 50 employees and 190 customers. This sample size although sufficient for the statistical tests used may have contributed to the difficulty in aggregating and matching responses across the two respondent groups.

Given a favourable research budget, customers could be interviewed immediately after their service encounter. However, this method may also not be as successful because customers who have spent time in the bank queues may not be willing to participate.



The assumed relationship between the employees' perception of the organizational climate and employee service quality should be explored further. From a methodological point of view, the data in this study was obtained from front-line employees and customers. It would be interesting to include back-office staff as well as tellers. Furthermore, to increase the generalizability of the findings of this study, future research might involve the replication of this study in a variety of service settings, industries and organizations.

It may also be interesting to ascertain how service customers view the service organization and compare this with the views of the service employees.

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APPENDIX ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE QUESTIONNAIRE

With reference to the importance that **YOUR ORGANISATION** places upon various characteristics of the service it provides, please indicate the degree of your agreement or disagreement [1 = STRONGLY DISAGREE; 2 = DISAGREE; 3 = NEUTRAL; 4 = AGREE; 5 = STRONGLY AGREE].

IN THIS BANK:

OC1	Staff should ensure that customers understand the service being provided	1	2	3	4	5
OC2	Staff should use language which the customer can understand.	1	2	3	4	5
OC3	Customers should be informed beforehand how much the service will cost.	1	2	3	4	5
OC4	It is important to honour its promises to customers.	1	2	3	4	5
OC5	Customers should be informed about what alternate services are available	1	2	3	4	5
OC6	It is important to have convenient operating hours	1	2	3	4	5
OC7	Employees should be polite and friendly to customers always.	1	2	3	4	5
OC8	It is important to have up to date equipment so as to provide good service	1	2	3	4	5
OC9	It is important to keep the customer's best interest at heart.	1	2	3	4	5
OC10	The training and preparation of the employees are important.	1	2	3	4	5
OC11	Dependable service performance is important.	1	2	3	4	5
OC12	Consistent service performance is important.	1	2	3	4	5
OC13	Prompt service from its staff is stressed	1	2	3	4	5
OC14	Convenient service locations are important.	1	2	3	4	5
OC15	The appearance of employees is important.	1	2	3	4	5
OC16	Employee honesty is stressed.	1	2	3	4	5
OC17	A reputation for good service is emphasized.	1	2	3	4	5
OC18	The development of customer confidence in the service is stressed.	1	2	3	4	5
OC19	Individual customer attention is stressed.	1	2	3	4	5
OC20	A nice atmosphere for service is stressed.	1	2	3	4	5
OC21	Customers should feel free to discuss their needs.	1	2	3	4	5
OC22	The confidentiality of the service is stressed.	1	2	3	4	5

BOEKRESENSIE

Schreuder, A.M.G., & Theron, A.L. 1997.
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Hierdie publikasie is bedoel vir 'n wye lesersmark vir wie doeltreffende loopbaanbeplanning en ontwikkeling van kardinale belang is. Dit voorsien in 'n wesenlike behoefte aan 'n geskikte voorgraadse handboek in loopbaanbestuur in Bedryfsielkundedepartemente by Suid-Afrikaanse universiteite, maar dit kan ook met vrug gebruik word in die Sielkunde, menslike hulpbrondepartemente van organisasies, asook individue in verskillende ontwikkelingsfasies wat belangrike loopbaanbesluite moet neem. Die boek is geskryf teen die agtergrond van veranderinge wat tans binne organisasies en die geleedere van die arbeidsmark plaasvind en wat in loopbaanbeplanning en -ontwikkeling verreken behoort te word. Minder werksekuriteit, minder werkgeleenthede, verandering t.o.v. organisatoriese strukture en die aard van werk, asook kontrakte tussen organisasies en werknemers is almal faktore wat 'n impak op individuele loopbaanbesluite en loopbaanbestuur binne organisasies het.

Die inhoud bestryk 'n breë spektrum toepaslike temas, naamlik die betekenis van werk; belangrike loopbaankonsepte en 'n oorkoepelende loopbaanbestuursmodel; beroepskeuse teorieë; lewens- en loopbaanstadia; teorieë aangaande die keuse van organisasies; veranderinge binne organisasies en die implikasies wat dit vir loopbane en loopbaanbesluite inhou; organisasie-ondersteuningstegnieke en toepaslike loopbaanaangeleenthede soos loopbaanankers, loopbaanpatrone, dubbelloopbaangesinne, loopbaanplato's en werksverlies. Hierdie temas is baie toepaslik en behoort almal verreken te word met die oog op loopbaanbeplanning en -ontwikkeling.

Klem word deurgaans gelê op die belangrike passing tussen

die behoeftes van die werknemer en die werkgever tydens die onderskeie loopbaanfasies en watter aksies elkeen van hierdie partye moet loods om optimale harmonie te bewerkstellig. 'n Benadering wat dwarsdeur die boek gevolg word en wat uit die loopbaanbestuursmodel voortspruit is dat loopbaanbeplanning en ontwikkeling 'n voortdurende proses is, dat die individu self verantwoordelikheid vir sy loopbaan en loopbaanbesluite moet aanvaar en dat die organisasie hierin 'n ondersteunende rol behoort te vervul. Ingeligte loopbaanbesluite kan egter nie geneem word indien die individu nie behoorlik ingelig is ten opsigte van die faktore wat verreken behoort te word nie.

Die boek is baie verbruikersvriendelik vanweë die duidelike doelwitte aan die begin van elke hoofstuk, die taalgebruik, bladuitleg en verhelderende figure, tabelle en diagramme.

Die mees resente data is bygewerk en die boek is voorsien van 'n omvangryke bronnelys wat vir die student en dosent in die Loopbaansielkunde van groot waarde sal wees. Die onderwerpindex agter in die boek is ook baie nuttig vir vinnige naslaanwerk.

Moontlike kritiek kan gelewer word t.o.v. watter temas meer of minder belig behoort te word in terme van volumedekking, maar in die geheel gesien het die boek in sy doel geslaag, naamlik om die faktore wat verreken behoort te word by loopbaanbesluite kortliks aan te toon. Horisontale dekking van die toepaslike temas is gedoen en dit staan individue en instansies vry om t.o.v. die temas van hulle keuse verdere vertikale spitwerk te doen. Die boek is 'n welkome toevoeging tot die corpus van kennis in die Loopbaansielkunde.

Geresenseer deur Prof C.L. Bester, UOVS, Dept. Bedryfsielkunde.