From Idea to Customer: How Idea Time, Idea Support, and Employee Empowerment Shape Customer Experience in a Service Organisation

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ABSTRACT

Organisations increasingly rely on climate for innovation to differentiate themselves through customer experience, yet little is known about which specific climate dimensions matter most for how customers are served. This paper examines the relationship between three closely linked dimensions of climate for innovation — idea time, idea support, and employee autonomy and empowerment — and customer experience. A qualitative single case study design was adopted, focusing on a major telecommunications organisation in Egypt. Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees across commercial and non-commercial functional units, and data were analysed thematically. The findings show that idea support, the extent to which new ideas and initiatives are encouraged and taken forward, was the dimension most consistently linked to superior customer experience, cited by the large majority of employees interviewed. Idea time, the amount of time available to think and elaborate on new ideas, showed a more divided pattern: employees in customer-facing and innovation-related units reported sufficient time to explore new ideas, while employees under sales and delivery pressure reported almost none, weakening their contribution to customer-facing innovation. Autonomy and empowerment were found to foster a sense of ownership that made employees more willing to exert discretionary effort for customers, although the degree of empowerment depended heavily on individual line managers rather than being uniformly institutionalised. Across all three dimensions, benefits were concentrated in commercial and customer-facing units, while human resources, internal communications, and enterprise units reported comparatively weaker climates. The paper argues that idea time, idea support, and empowerment operate as interdependent enablers of customer-facing innovation rather than independent levers, and that organisations seeking to improve customer experience need to institutionalise all three consistently across functions rather than concentrating them in revenue-generating teams.

Keywords: idea time, idea support, autonomy, employee empowerment, customer experience, climate for innovation

INTRODUCTION

Organisational success is increasingly determined by an organisation's ability to sustain a climate that is conducive to innovation (Ekvall, 1996; Ekvall et al., 1983). By fostering a climate for innovation, employees are inspired to generate and pursue new ideas, leading to innovative outcomes that help organisations adapt to evolving customer needs. Customer experience has, in turn, become a central differentiating factor for service organisations (Meyer & Schwager, 2007; Verhoef et al., 2009), yet the internal, employee-level conditions that translate a climate for innovation into a superior customer experience remain comparatively under-examined.

Among the many dimensions proposed in the climate-for-innovation literature, idea time, idea support, and autonomy and empowerment are consistently identified as central to whether employees generate and pursue new ideas at all (Amabile et al., 1996; Ekvall et al., 1983; Isaksen, 2007; Isaksen et al., 1999). Idea time concerns whether employees have the time to think beyond routine tasks; idea support concerns whether the organisation

welcomes and acts on what employees propose; and autonomy and empowerment concern whether employees have the freedom and sense of ownership to act on ideas once they have them. These three dimensions are conceptually distinct but practically intertwined: an idea proposed under time pressure, or one that is not supported once raised, or one an employee is not empowered to act on, is unlikely to reach the customer.

This paper narrows the focus onto these three dimensions and asks how each relates to customer experience in a real service setting. It draws on qualitative data collected from a major telecommunications organisation in Egypt to address three research questions: (1) how do employees perceive idea time and idea support within the organisation; (2) how do employees perceive autonomy and empowerment in their day-to-day roles; and (3) how, and to what extent, are these perceptions related to customer experience. The paper contributes an employee-level, evidence-based account of how these three dimensions operate together, rather than in isolation, to shape the innovations that ultimately reach the customer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Climate for Innovation

Climate for innovation refers to employees' shared perceptions of organisational practices and procedures that promote or inhibit creativity and innovation (Ekvall, 1996). Early instruments developed to measure this construct, such as the Creative Climate Questionnaire, identified idea support and idea time among the core dimensions of an innovative climate (Ekvall et al., 1983). Subsequent research has consistently confirmed that employees' perceptions of the climate around them, rather than formal innovation policy alone, determine whether they engage in innovative work behaviour (Isaksen, 2007; Oldham & Cummings, 1996).

Idea Time and Idea Support

Idea time refers to the amount of time available for employees to elaborate on new ideas; in a high idea-time environment, employees can discuss and test ideas that fall outside planned task assignments (Isaksen, 2007). Providing employees with insufficient time to think beyond a routine workload has repeatedly been shown to hinder the generation of novel ideas (Oldham & Cummings, 1996), while adequate dedicated time supports creativity and innovation (Ohly et al., 2006). Idea support reflects the extent to which new ideas and suggestions are received attentively by leaders, peers, and subordinates (Isaksen, 2007); innovative organisations are expected to support and encourage employees to experiment with new approaches to their work (Martins & Terblanche, 2003; Patterson et al., 2005). Where idea support is low, new ideas tend to be rejected, and destructive counter-argument replaces constructive engagement (Isaksen, 2007).

Autonomy and Employee Empowerment

Autonomy and empowerment are conceptualised as allowing employees the freedom to determine how to conduct their job tasks (Amabile et al., 1996). A climate characterised by autonomy and empowerment is more likely to enhance employees' intrinsic motivation, which in turn boosts innovative behaviour (McLean, 2005), and employees allowed freedom in shaping their work are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over it (Shalley & Gilson, 2004). Job autonomy has been identified as one of the main antecedents of individual-level innovative behaviour (Hammond et al., 2011; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010), enabling employees to experiment with several approaches to their work and to develop the ideas that result (De Spiegelaere et al., 2014). Empowered employees are more confident in implementation and exhibit greater self-determination in completing their tasks (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Spreitzer, 1995), and are consequently willing to take more risks and generate novel ideas (Amabile et al., 1996). In service settings specifically, empowerment has been shown to trigger a quicker response to customer needs and wants (Bowen & Lawler, 1992), to strengthen employees' engagement in service innovation (Gómez & Rosen, 2001; Sok & O'Cass, 2015), and to lead empowered employees to devote more time and effort to improving service quality and offering customers unique, innovative solutions (Luoh et al., 2014; Rafiq & Ahmed, 1998).

Customer Experience

Customer experience is widely understood as the customer's cognitive and affective response to their interactions with an organisation across the customer journey; a good experience need not be dramatic, but is one the customer finds essentially trouble-free (Meyer & Schwager, 2007). Antecedents of customer experience identified in the literature range from the service interface and store or channel environment to social environment and past experience with the brand (Verhoef et al., 2009), but comparatively little empirical attention has been paid to internal, employee-facing climate conditions as drivers of customer experience, despite calls to extend existing frameworks in this direction (Verhoef et al., 2009). This paper responds to that gap by examining idea time, idea support, and empowerment specifically as antecedents of customer experience, from the perspective of the employees who generate and deliver customer-facing innovation.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and case selection

This study adopts a qualitative single case study design to provide an in-depth, contextualised understanding of how idea time, idea support, and autonomy and empowerment relate to customer experience. A case study design was chosen because the phenomena under study — employees' lived perceptions of their working climate and how these perceptions translate into customer-facing innovation — are best understood in their organisational context rather than abstracted from it. The case organisation is a major telecommunications operator in Egypt, selected because of its consistently high customer experience rankings in the Egyptian market and its explicit organisational commitment to innovation, making it a revelatory setting in which to examine the relationship between climate for innovation and customer experience.

Sampling and participants

A non-probability sampling strategy was adopted, combining purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select participants whose roles gave them direct exposure to the organisation's climate for innovation and to customer-facing decisions, drawing deliberately from a spread of functional units and seniority levels rather than from a single department. Snowball sampling was then used to identify additional participants, by asking interviewees to name colleagues who fitted the same selection criteria and could offer further relevant insight. Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted in total, a sample size consistent with established guidance recommending 20 to 30 interviews as sufficient to reach data saturation in in-depth case study research (Creswell, 1998; Marshall et al., 2013). Thematic saturation was assessed by comparing the codes generated across successive interviews within each functional unit (Constantinou et al., 2017); recruitment within a unit continued until interviews stopped yielding codes that had not already appeared in that unit's earlier transcripts, and the final interviews in each unit produced no further new codes relevant to the dimensions reported in this paper.

Participants were drawn from Consumer Marketing, Enterprise Marketing, Enterprise Business, Customer Experience, Strategy and Innovation, Technology, Human Resources, Internal Communications, and International Services, and spanned junior employees, team leaders and managers, heads of department, and directors. This spread of units and seniority levels was designed deliberately to allow comparison between commercial, customer-facing units and internal or support units, and between more and less senior perspectives on the same climate dimensions.

Data collection

All interviews were conducted face-to-face, in an office environment during normal working hours, by the researcher personally. A semi-structured format was used, built around an interview guide of open-ended questions with an accompanying set of probes covering, among other climate-for-innovation dimensions, freedom and autonomy, idea time, and idea support; a further, separate question asked directly about the extent to which the organisation supports employees in developing and implementing new ideas. Follow-up probes

were used throughout to elicit elaboration, clarifying examples, and more nuanced responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder and supplemented with the researcher's hand-written notes; recordings were then transcribed in full, and transcripts were checked against the original recordings to verify accuracy. Most interviews were conducted in English; a minority were conducted in Arabic at the interviewee's preference and were translated into English by the researcher during transcription. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw, and are identified in this paper by role and functional unit only.

Data analysis and coding

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically using the approach of Miles and Huberman (1994), comprising iterative data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, supported by NVivo software. A provisional list of codes was developed from the climate-for-innovation literature prior to data collection, with each code given an operational definition; this list was then refined against the interview data using a first cycle of descriptive, simultaneous, and in vivo coding, followed by axial coding to reorganise and consolidate the resulting categories (Saldaña, 2012).

To strengthen analytical credibility, two rounds of independent intercoder checking were undertaken by two academic coders external to the study, following the intercoder reliability procedure described by Campbell et al. (2013). In the first round, a coder with a human resources background independently free-coded a subset of fifteen interviews; the initial match with the researcher's coding was 53%, which improved to 82% agreement after five rounds of iterative discussion and code refinement. In the second round, a coder with a marketing background coded the full set of thirty-five interviews against the established coding scheme; the initial match was 60%, improving to 85% agreement after a further five rounds of discussion. Credibility was further strengthened through triangulation (Yin, 2014): interview data were cross-checked against internal company documents, archival records, and publicly available customer reviews of the innovations discussed by participants, to corroborate employees' accounts of which innovations reached customers and how they were received.

Frequency counts and their interpretation

The counts reported in the Findings section (for example, the number of employees citing idea support, idea time, or empowerment as related to customer experience) reflect the number of interviewees whose transcripts were coded to each theme, not a count of unprompted, spontaneous mentions. This distinction matters because the interview guide did not treat the three dimensions identically: freedom and autonomy, idea time, and idea support were each listed as sub-probes within a single opening question about climate-for-innovation practices, giving them broadly comparable prompting at that stage; idea support, however, was also the subject of a separate, dedicated question asking directly about the organisation's support for new ideas and their implementation. Idea support's higher frequency count relative to idea time and empowerment should therefore be read partly as an artefact of this additional direct question, and not solely as evidence that employees spontaneously regard it as the more salient dimension. This qualification is carried through into the Discussion and is treated as a limitation of the comparison between dimensions.

FINDINGS

The findings are presented in four parts: employees' perceptions of idea time, their perceptions of idea support, their perceptions of autonomy and empowerment, and finally the relationship each of these dimensions bears to customer experience.

Idea time

Twenty-two of the thirty-five employees interviewed identified the amount of time available to think and elaborate on new ideas as an important dimension of their working climate. Results were mixed: sixteen employees reported that they had sufficient time to explore and develop new ideas, largely in the Marketing,

Customer Experience, Strategy and Innovation, and Technology units, while six employees, concentrated in Human Resources, Internal Communications, and Enterprise Business, reported that work pressure and task assignments left little room to think beyond routine duties.

> *"...we have idea time where we gather together and start thinking of new things and market challenges. It is a good opportunity where we mingle and start brainstorming new things. So, we are not just doing our routine tasks but we are allowed and encouraged to have time for thinking out-of-the-box." (Head, Enterprise Marketing)*

> *"...the dark side of the sales job is that we don't have enough time dedicated for brainstorming ideas. We are drained in our jobs and sales targets... It is difficult to do both, to be innovative and deliver your targets." (Product Manager, Enterprise Business Unit)*

This divide broadly tracked the distinction between commercial and non-commercial functions: commercial teams were more likely to have periodic strategy meetings and internal platforms dedicated to idea generation, while other teams described idea generation as an unstructured, ongoing expectation with no protected time attached to it.

Idea support

Idea support was the most widely cited dimension in the study: thirty-one of thirty-five employees spoke positively of the organisation's support for new ideas and initiatives, while three employees felt the level of support, though present, was insufficient. Employees described concrete mechanisms through which ideas were supported, including an internal idea-submission platform, a programme granting employees a day off from routine duties to develop a proposed idea, and dedicated innovation showrooms and forums.

> *"...the company really supports new ideas and encourages employees to come up and participate in generating new ideas. We have the catalyst tool, which is available for employees to propose and submit new ideas... People are overly excited to submit ideas." (Head, Internal Communications)*

> *"...we also have another one called the 'Catalyst' for generating new ideas from all employees across the company. These are effective campaigns that encourage employees to come up with new ideas." (Manager, Technology)*

A minority of employees qualified this positive picture, noting that idea support in practice depended on an employee's relationship with their line manager and on whether their function was seen as revenue-generating. Ideas originating in commercial and marketing teams were reported to receive faster and more attentive support than those raised elsewhere in the organisation.

Autonomy and employee empowerment

Nineteen employees identified the extent to which the organisation empowers them and grants them control over their job tasks as a significant influence on their working climate. Employees described being given considerable discretion in how they carried out daily responsibilities, and associated this discretion directly with their willingness to be creative.

> *"...the company encourages employees to take initiatives and do jobs in their own way with some guidance... We give our employees the freedom, autonomy, trust and encouragement to carry-out their jobs. We allow them to take their own decisions and see the success that follows. This ability to empower yields in innovations." (Head, Strategy and Innovation)*

> *"...I believe the laissez-faire way is the best for innovation. When you are empowered to do whatever to do your job in your own way, you are able to be creative and innovative." (Manager, Technology)*

Several employees linked empowerment to a felt sense of ownership over the ideas and innovations they contributed to, and associated that sense of ownership with a greater willingness to go beyond formal job requirements for the benefit of the customer. However, three employees qualified this picture, noting that the degree of empowerment they experienced depended heavily on their individual line manager rather than on a

consistent organisational policy, with some managers prescribing exactly how tasks should be performed while others left employees free to determine their own approach as long as targets were met.

Relationship with customer experience

When asked directly about the relationship between their working climate and customer experience, employees consistently described idea support, idea time, and empowerment as three of the dimensions most closely tied to the innovations that reached customers, alongside customer centricity and senior management support. Idea support was cited by thirty-one employees as related to customer experience, idea time by nineteen, and employee empowerment by ten.

> *"...climate for innovation and customer experience have a long and strong relationship... a climate that encourages employees to think out-of-the-box and innovate... that encourages and strongly supports the generation of new ideas. Employees need to feel that their ideas will be implemented and supported. Once you have this climate, you can surely innovate and, hence, provide superior customer experiences." (Head, Call Centres-Internet)*

> *"...we have monthly team meetings to discuss potential ideas and how to improve the customer care processes... this is to drive the customer experience." (Head, Customer Experience-Call Centres)*

> *"...so when you have such a climate where people are empowered to innovate, this will reflect on the customer. Empowered employees are innovative and this, consequently, reflects on customer experience... Employees are ambassadors for the customers, internally in the company." (Head, Strategy and Innovation)*

Several product and service innovations that employees explicitly linked to superior customer experience were traced back to ideas that had been given time to develop, actively supported once raised, and championed by an empowered employee acting on their own initiative — including customer-care process improvements, a self-service digital retail application, and network optimisation initiatives introduced during a period of economic instability. In each case, employees emphasised that the innovation would not have reached the customer had any one of the three conditions — time, support, or the freedom to act — been absent.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that idea time, idea support, and autonomy and empowerment function as interdependent enablers of customer-facing innovation rather than as three separate levers an organisation can pull independently. Idea support appears to be the most consistently perceived and most frequently cited of the three, which is consistent with its long-standing status as a core dimension of climate-for-innovation frameworks (Ekvall et al., 1983; Isaksen, 2007). However, the findings also show that idea support alone is not sufficient: without idea time to develop a proposal, or the autonomy to act on it once supported, an idea is less likely to reach implementation. This is consistent with the view that empowerment strengthens employees' engagement in service innovation only once they also have the discretion to act (Gómez & Rosen, 2001; Sok & O'Cass, 2015).

A recurring pattern across all three dimensions was the divide between commercial, customer-facing units and internal or support units. Employees in Marketing, Customer Experience, Strategy and Innovation, and Technology consistently reported higher idea time, stronger idea support, and greater empowerment than employees in Human Resources, Internal Communications, and parts of Enterprise Business. This pattern echoes earlier findings that organisations under revenue pressure tend to concentrate innovation-supportive practices in revenue-generating functions (Isaksen, 2007), and it carries a specific risk for customer experience: because customer-facing innovation in this study was reported to originate from employees across many functions, not only from commercial teams, concentrating idea time, support, and empowerment narrowly risks losing potential customer-facing innovations that would otherwise originate in support functions.

The dependence of empowerment on individual line managers, rather than on a consistent organisational policy, is a further point of note. This is consistent with prior findings that a work climate characterised by autonomy

and empowerment is more likely to enhance intrinsic motivation and innovative behaviour (Amabile et al., 1996; McLean, 2005), but it also indicates that where empowerment is not institutionalised, its benefits for customer experience will vary unpredictably by team rather than being reliably available across the organisation. Employees' comments linking empowerment to a felt sense of ownership over their contributions, and that sense of ownership to a willingness to exert discretionary effort for the customer, support the proposition that empowerment functions through a psychological rather than a purely structural mechanism (Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Spreitzer, 1995).

CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to examine how idea time, idea support, and employee autonomy and empowerment relate to customer experience in a service organisation. Drawing on thirty-five interviews in a major telecommunications organisation, the findings show that idea support is the dimension most consistently associated with customer experience, that idea time shows a marked divide between commercial and non-commercial functions, and that empowerment fosters a sense of ownership that translates into discretionary effort for the customer, but only where line managers grant it consistently. Taken together, the three dimensions appear to operate as an interdependent chain: employees need time to develop an idea, support to see it taken seriously, and the autonomy to act on it, and a weakness in any one of the three limits whether an idea reaches the customer at all.

For managers, the implication is that improving customer experience through climate for innovation requires more than championing any single practice in isolation. Organisations should audit whether idea time, idea support, and empowerment are institutionalised consistently across functions, rather than concentrated in commercial units, and should reduce their dependence on individual line managers' discretion by embedding empowerment more explicitly into role design and management practice.

Limitations And Future Research

This study is based on a single case organisation in one industry and one national context, which limits the transferability of the findings to other settings; the qualitative design was chosen deliberately to provide depth of understanding rather than statistical generalisability. A further limitation, noted in the Methodology, is that the frequency counts reported for idea time, idea support, and empowerment are not directly comparable: idea support benefited from an additional dedicated interview question that idea time and empowerment did not receive, so its higher count may partly reflect the structure of the interview guide rather than a purely emergent difference in salience. Future quantitative research, using a standardised instrument that prompts each dimension equally, would be needed to establish the relative importance of the three dimensions with more confidence.

A second limitation concerns common-method bias. Idea time, idea support, empowerment, and customer experience were all reported by the same employees in the same interviews, so an employee inclined to describe their organisation favourably overall could plausibly inflate both the climate variables and the perceived customer experience outcome together, producing an association that partly reflects a common source rather than a genuine underlying relationship. This risk was mitigated, but not eliminated, by triangulating employees' accounts against company documents, archival records, and customer reviews; it would be more fully addressed by future research that pairs employee interviews with independently collected customer-side data.

A related limitation is that customer experience in this study is reported entirely from the employees' perspective, not measured directly from customers. Customer-level metrics, such as net promoter scores for individual innovations, were treated by the case organisation as commercially confidential and were not made available for this research; publicly available customer reviews and archival records were used to corroborate employees' accounts where possible, but they cannot substitute fully for direct customer data. The relationships reported here should therefore be read as employees' perceptions of how idea time, idea support, and empowerment relate to customer experience, rather than as an independently verified customer-side effect.

A third limitation concerns the selection of the case organisation itself. The organisation was chosen because of its consistently high customer experience rankings and sustained market leadership in the Egyptian telecommunications sector, which made it a useful setting for observing climate dimensions already operating alongside strong customer outcomes, but also means it is a positive outlier rather than a typical firm. The interdependence between idea time, idea support, and empowerment observed here may be easier to sustain in an already high-performing, resource-rich organisation than in an average or underperforming one, and the findings should not be assumed to generalise to organisations without a comparable level of existing customer experience performance.

Future research could usefully test the relationships identified here across multiple organisations of varying customer experience performance and industries, incorporate independently collected customer-side data to address the common-method and employee-only reporting concerns raised above, examine whether the interdependence between idea time, idea support, and empowerment observed here holds, or whether one dimension can substitute for weakness in another under certain conditions, and establish whether the concentration of these climate dimensions in commercial units, observed here, is a general pattern or specific to revenue-driven service organisations.

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