Conceptual Paper

The Usage of Training in Front-line Employment and Its Implication towards Workers and Employers in United Kingdom

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1. Introduction

The increase of employment opportunities in the service-related industries continues to play an important role in the UK economy. According to the European definition, service products are known as “...entities over which ownership rights cannot be established. They cannot be traded separately from their production” (Eurostat, 2009, p.2). The companies involved does business activities involving the retail sector, public sector, financial sector, business administration and other service-related industries. With the expansion of service employment, training has been used by employers to improve skills of front-line workers, especially in areas of communication and customer service. This essay will discuss on the relationship between training and skills in front-line employment, and how does that affect workers as well as employers in general. It will also determine whether training is an instrument of control.

Keywords: Front Line employment, Workers, Employees, United Kingdom

2. Theoretical Grounding

Surviving as well as staying on top of the game has been one of the major forces for service provider to continuously building and maintaining a loyal customer base (Alexandrov, Babakus and Yavas, 2007). Usually, they come up with different types of business strategies and developed service products for their customers via face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions between front line employees and customers (Emad & Tahreer, 2013). During this time, an employee plays his or her parts by meeting requests and expectations of a customer through interpersonal relationship and skills. As customers always judge a company through how well is their service quality, frontline employees have to deliver a positive first-time impression and build good rapport with customers (Emad & Tahreer, 2013). According to Hocutt, Bowers and Donavan (2006), a successful company is the one that manages to handle customer’s complaints promptly and effectively. Complaints happened when customers failed to receive the expected service delivery. Therefore, the quicker management takes action and corrects the failure, the
better, as this will ensure customer's loyalty to the company. Considering the fact that frontline employees are the ones who have direct interaction with customers, they are usually the ones who got to know about the service failure. Following the standard operation procedure of a service delivery, a front line worker must use his or her skills and abilities to handle a complaint by customers (Emad & Tahreer, 2013).

3. Front-line employment

Now, when we refer to frontline employees, we are actually referring to the employment in United Kingdom (UK) which includes both public and private sector. In the UK economy, skills are crucial in many ways particularly in creating quality workforce and it becomes the key determinant of labour productivity (output per worker or per hour worked). In a research done by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) in 2010 showed that skills too, when measured, has a strong relationship with national economic performance, wealth and prosperity (UKCES, 2014). Increase of skills through higher investment in education and workforce training leads to a stronger economic growth (UKCES, 2014).

Service industry is evolving and most companies constantly change the ways to do business in order to gain customer loyalty. To meet the requirements of customers, front-line workers need to have a mix of skills, carried out in an adequate manner. They need to have business skills to understand the nature of service industry and knowing how to meet client’s expectations (Knapp, 2010). Besides that, they also need to have technical skills such as basic computer knowledge and software literacy to support certain technologies or specific products requirements (Knapp, 2010). Self-management skills such as organizational, stress and time management skills are some of the requirements needed to help workers finish their job effectively, to avoid burnouts and to enjoy job satisfaction (Knapp, 2010). Another important skill that should be highlighted here is on soft skills. To deliver great services, front-line workers need qualities such as good verbal communication skills, active listening skills, problem-solving skills, teamwork skills and also writing skills (Knapp, 2010).

Nowadays, employers find it hard to look for people who have the right mix of skills. To fill in front-line positions, the individuals selected must possess strong soft skills such as interpersonal skills. This is due to the reason that an individual may have technical skills needed to assist today's advance technology or the self-management skills to succeed in the ever changing service industry but then, he or she may lack in empathy or patience. Companies usually like to hire people with positive attitude rather than negative attitude because when someone is positive, they tend to have a genuine and soft approach when helping others especially customers and team members. Females are likely to have these soft skills than their male counterparts because it is in their very nature to possess feminine traits that could be directly linked to perceived soft skills.

While most companies stress on the importance of hiring individuals with strong soft skills, it does not mean that other sets of skills such as technical, business and self-management skills are not as equally as important. Managers must realize that having the correct person with the correct skills can be their source of competitive advantage. In order to enjoy and gain more profits from their business activities, all these skill sets must be taken into considerations. (Knapp, 2010). Now the question is, does training only done for the sake of profits or for the sake of employees, or for both?

Service industry features tangible or intangible output of the product (Nickson, Warhurst & Dutton, 2006). Tangible products include accommodation, food and drinks while intangible products are the services provided by the service deliverer to the customer. Mariott, Disney and Ritz-Carlton are some of the successful companies that managed to build up their reputation due to the excellence they had in delivering great customer service (Nickson, et al., 2006). Frontline service employment came into light in 1990's when researchers such as Macdonald (1993), Paules (1991) and Pierce (1995) studied the role of frontline workers in displaying emotions at work (Belanger & Edwards, 2013). It all started by Hochschild in 1983 when he studied emotional labour of flight attendants when delivering service to customers. His
studies has helped many to understand the relationship between manufacturing and services, such as routinization, systems of labour control and the usage of technology on work organization (Belanger & Edwards, 2013). Due to the fact that airline industry among other 'service interactive' industry such as hospitality and tourism deals with company's image and branding, there has been an emergence of aesthetic labour (Nickson, et al., 2006). Although there has been an ongoing debate whether aesthetic labour can be called as skills, and how to train such 'skills', many employers agree that it has been an important criteria in the service industry nonetheless (Nickson, et al., 2006).

If aesthetic skills are considered as one of the remunerable skills, then clearly those who are working in that field should be receiving higher pay, similar with those who deal with high emotional labour. People of higher soft skills are in more advantageous position because these are the skills that they are borne with and do not acquire by many. If we were to follow the human capital theory, yes people who have higher soft skills should receive more reward because they are more productive and able to capture more customers, thus bringing more profits for the organization (Handel & Levine, 2006). For instance, part of the selection and recruitment of flight attendance, besides having great personality skills are having pleasant and attractive physical features. With just one smile, can greatly affect the customer's overall experience therefore, ensuring brand loyalty to the airline company. Brand can be felt through the communications and interactions with customers. Sometimes, flight attendance has to face with demanding passengers but they have no choice but to 'service with a smile'. Such condition can create a lot of stress and internal conflict of flight attendance. In my opinion, those frontline workers should be compensated more.

According to Nelson (1994), another concern arises when most workers find themselves trapped in a routinized and deskilling jobs that hinder them from enjoying good pay structures, job security and social benefits similar to lower skilled forms of employment such as in manufacturing industry (Lindsay & McQuaid, 2004). Even so, this lowly paid and less skillful kind of employment has become famous among younger people and women (Hatt, 1997). Besides that, Talwar (2002) mentioned that in a research done by an American showed how 'fast food' work or frontline occupation in fast food industry gets lesser access to better job roles as a result of being at the bottom of the service economy (Lindsay & McQuaid, 2004). This kind of service work does need some skills to a certain extent but because such job roles equate lower in status, workers also have to be satisfied with fewer financial control and social benefits. (Lindsay & McQuaid, 2004). If this situation prolong, it makes it harder for the workers to climb up the jobs ladder.

4. **Job polarization**

Job polarization is the term used to describe the changes of the workforce towards low and high skill occupations (Tuzeman & Willis, 2013), or when middle skill jobs become lessening. Some of the reasons to explain why polarization happened include the increasing international labour trade, advancement in technology and weakened labour unions (Tuzeman & Willis, 2013). Because of these factors, the demand and the supply side of the labour have been affected therefore affecting workers responses and the types of jobs available at that time. For example, middle class workers such as clerical, administrative and other routinized tasks have been replaced with a cheaper computer aided technologies. These improvements in technology sees other routinized tasks that still needs human touch being outsourced for a much cheaper labour costs. However, machines can help highly skilled professionals such as computer programmers to increase their productivity and at the same time cannot substitute lower skills occupations such as truck drivers or office cleaners. These two situations which shows changes of the workforce has leave the demand for middle skill occupations to be decreasing.

5. **Skilling and deskilling debate**

Over the last centuries, the work paradigm of Taylorism and Fordism has become widely known by many and has invited much criticism in which one of them was by Harry Braverman (McNally, 2010). Braverman's thesis on deskillling explored the likelihood of
technological usage, management tools and techniques to control over labour intelligence. The fundamental basis of his thesis claims that by using technology and management tools, employers gain control over employees by continuously subdivide and routinize their labour process (McNally, 2010). For example, when a company installed software on enterprise content management system, an employee loses their freedom from performing tasks freely to being confined with a simpler and scheduled form of duty. This incident occurred repeatedly until it turns skilled labour into unskilled (deskilled) labour. The cutback from this theory is that workers have to bear costs of losing their skill, have higher chances of being replaced and have limited knowledge on the wider work process (McNally, 2010).

Despite the negative connotation that deskilling brings, Braverman’s analysis also shows that when companies utilizes technology as means of controlling the work process, some frontline employees benefited positively. Computerization indeed turn some group of people into skilled administrators, hence the term reskilling or upskilling. A few authors supported the claims by saying that with the introduction of advance technology and computerization, it does not make intellectual worker less skilful in the same way it does to manual labourers (McNally, 2010). Despite the negative connotation that deskilling brings, Braverman’s analysis also shows that when companies utilizes technology as means of controlling the work process, some frontline employees benefited positively.

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6. **Training as a part of managerial control**

Control takes in different form. Hage and Powers (1992) shared their views on complexification, a process in which the level of education of a worker increase and technology becomes more advance until it supersedes rationalization (Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire & Tam, 1999). This process embodies deskilling, economics of scale and mass production. There have been claims by researchers that higher-skilled work has begun to take form in organizations that practice organic-professional network (Frenkel, et al., 1999). This kind of network is likely to be based more on expertise, personal knowledge, and social connections, rather than a position (Frenkel, et al., 1999). There are four types of work system that had been identified by Herzenberg and Wial in 1998. Firstly, "tightly constrained' employment applies to workers that work under 'seagull management’ or tight managerial control and highly routinized work (Frenkel, et al., 1999). Secondly, "semi-autonomous” employment such as receptionist and customer service representative allows worker to have some freedom in solving problems or have some job discretion (Frenkel, et al., 1999). Thirdly, "unrationaled labour-intensive” employment includes work that does not have much rationalization by technology with low supervision, like truck drivers and child care workers (Frenkel, et al., 1999). Lastly, the fourth type of work system is “high-skill autonomous” employment where its characteristics are low-volume with work customization by skilful and highly qualified workers such as artisans, technicians and lawyers (Frenkel, et al., 1999).

7. **Labour Process: Production Line Approach**

Labour process or managerial strategies such as production line approach are applicable in the service industries as it can improve efficiency, quality and uniformity (Levitt, 1972). As what he said, highly centralized, controlled, organized and intricately engineered process in manufacturing will result in products with uniform quality and features. Therefore, to achieve them he suggested clear division of labour, simplification of tasks, substitution of equipment
and systems for employees and lastly little decision making discretion given to employees (Levitt, 1972). In other words the systems were designed by management and employees carry out the tasks.

One of the best examples to illustrate this process is from one of the famous fast-food chain, McDonalds. Workers have to follow procedures right from where their first interaction with the customer starts when they want to order food, until the customer leaves their counter. Usually, they were given a script for greetings, thanking the customers, and asking them to come again in the future. They also learn how to ‘assemble’ the burgers, buns on top and bottom with patties in the middle. That leave us with the question is there any discretion or complexity left for frontline workers? Empowerment concern the amount of discretion or decision making that an employee is allowed to make when issues arises at workplace (Ashill, et al., 2008). By giving a certain amount of freedom, employees felt empowered and are more committed to service quality. What happened in workplace is an entirely a different thing. Frontline workers are assumed as having low skills with minimal control over what they are doing. If their work requires none of that, then the prospects of being paid better is further diminishing.

Production line approach uniform and standardize the customer service interactions with customers, making it easier for the organization to control them (Levitt, 1972). The process is also easy to learn thus, allowing workers to be quickly trained and start working. In Bowen & Lawler’s (1992) view, production line approach is very useful as it is low in cost, efficient and can create high volume service operations with high customer’s satisfaction. After McDonald’s success in implementing such conditions in its organization, other fast food chains suit to follow, especially in replicating such environment (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). The fundamental idea of fast food industry can be known as Fordism in which “production of standardized products using equally standardized and inflexible technologies (such as the assembly-line), standardized work routines based on Tayloristic minute division of labour and deskilling of tasks” (Mayhew & Quinlan, p. 263).

8. Implications of Training towards Front-line Workers and The Management

Korczynski (2002) said that many who are involved in customer’s service or frontline employment has the same routinized and standardized activities. Mostly, employers or managers govern worker’s actions, behaviour and the way they interact with customers. This is a kind of management control to ensure adherence to routines (Bach, 2005). Smaller forms of tasks makes it easier to control and easier to be taught to any new employee because deskilling does not require highly skilled labour. Therefore, workers feel that they do not have the right to question or negotiate with the employer (Bach, 2005). Telephone call centres are one of the examples to illustrate management control upon workers. To a certain extent, control can restrain workers from forming their own judgment, creativity, spontaneity and self-expression, all characteristics that makes service delivery more personal and fulfilling (Bach, 2005). As a result, job satisfaction and boredom occurs and such feelings can be seen in their emotions and facial features making service delivery less successful.

Job training is needed, whether formal or informal to equip employees with the skills and capabilities that they need to perform their work effectively and efficiently. One the job training takes place on the job at a much lower cost than other types of training methods. Types of training varied according to the specific job for instance technical training, interpersonal training or developmental training. In order to satisfy and adhere to customers’ satisfaction and needs, most employers focus on customer service training (Sims, 2001). However, friendliness, excellence in communication, understanding and multitasking are some of the soft skills that are naturally inherent. These skills will be difficult to be trained, but not impossible. If managers empower their frontline employees and give a little bit of authority in decision making, there will be higher chances of success in service delivery.

In 1997, Becherman and his colleague found three general patterns that show what drives management towards training (Ashton & Felstead, 2001). The first one is incidental learning where training takes place informally through incidental, learning on-the-job. There
are no formal investments being made by the company as management and employees believes that this method is a form of inward-looking business strategy (Ashton & Felstead, 2001), yet informal training usually are not recognize or and carries no qualification. Evidence says that 40 per cent of UK organizations did formal training on their employees but only to comply to specific rules and procedures for example, testing of new equipment in health and safety. Event-triggered training was the second approach of formal training that takes place during a specific event such as when management brings in new technology or work reorganization (Ashton & Felstead, 2001). This approach is almost similar to the first approach where 40 per cent of UK employers let modern training takes place in the organization.

The third approach is known as 'commitment to a learning organization' where the organization sees training as an ongoing learning for the business to experience. Formal budgets were also allocated for formal process of training with high involvement from senior management (Ashton & Felstead, 2001). As what I can conclude from the piece of information that I have, evidence suggested that although many companies across countries such as in Canada, German and Singapore have taken a positive approach in training their employees, but most training partakes in the level of higher skills. In UK however, a large group of employers showed little interest in training and development and only and it seems to have not much involvement towards training middle skills and lower skills occupation such as frontline employment.

According to Ashton & Felstead (2001), many companies do not spend much money on training or unable to see the benefit that training brings to the company. He said that while some of the bigger companies have started to pump in more money towards skills and training development for the frontline workers, many are still reluctant to do so due to limited resources such as capital. In UK, training is conducted only when there is demand from the customers or when government imposed rules and regulations (Ashton & Felstead, 2001). Training is distributed unequally among employees where importance is being made from the highly educated employees (managers, professionals and technicians) to the lower educated (Ashton & Felstead, 2001). For example, companies allow highly educated employees to be trained rather than employees of lower qualifications or lower skills because they see less worth in such investment. Another factor that affects managers’ decision on training is from the wage distribution. In this case, training will be less likely for frontline employees since their wage is lesser. Other factors include size of the company, flexibility of labour market and involvement of trade unions (Ashton & Felstead, 2001).

Barriers to effective training can be caused by several combined reasons such as advance technological changes, management views and training and also approaches to organizational design (Aswathappa, 2005). The most common reason is when companies are not willing to spend some of their revenues to train employee particularly frontline workers. This is because labours of lower skills as such frontline employees are assumed to be undeserving, especially when training has become part of the measures to control employees. If employees get trained, their basic skills improve and they have higher chances to improve their overall worth value. Skilful employees have higher chances to be snatched away or job hopping from one company to another if they think that they should get higher pay from the current employer. In a way, employees have the upper hand in controlling the employer. Conclusion

As a summary, service industry features tangible output of products such as accommodation, food and drinks while intangible products refer to the services being offered by service provider to the customers. Part of the nature in service industry includes emotional labour, and the emergence of aesthetic labour which draws much attention due to its importance in frontline employment. Skills can be categorized into business skill, technical skills, self-management skills and soft skills. Soft skills particularly can become one of the main sources of competitiveness to an individual because these are the skills that are inherent, not easily acquired. One of the ways to develop skills is through learning. Training is conducted with the intention to make employees to be more skilful and knowledgeable but the underlying intention is actually to control the employees. In my opinion, soft skills training does not have
much impact in the short term but if we look at long term, it might improve employee’s wellbeing and life outlook. Organization imposed some form of rationalization and standardization with the intention to control frontline employees. This leads to a sense of fear and emotional conflicts because they need to adhere to customers’ needs and expectations but at the same time comply with rules and regulations of the organization in delivering quality service. However, only a certain group of employees such as technicians, managers and professionals are put to train and frontline employees are usually not selected because they are the lowest of the ladder.

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