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**Intangibles of Service Quality  
The Neglected (Soft) Domain:  
Jordan Telecom as a Case Study**

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## **Abstract**

This article addresses the growing importance of customer care and total service quality dimensions to overall marketing performance. It reviews theory and literature on the subject, attempts to define the tangible and intangible aspects of service quality in call centres in Jordan Telecom, one of the major telecommunication organizations in Jordan.

Employees as well as managers try to maintain productivity and service delivery level at the cost of quality because of the visible and quantifiable nature of the call centres as a service provider. To effectively compete in the global marketplace, organisations must work constantly in improving the service quality they provide for the overarching purpose of creating and maintaining customer satisfaction. Hence, this paper focuses on the intangible aspects of service quality that have been neglected in evaluating the effectiveness of the total service provided to customers, and focuses on employee empowerment, moving away from the traditional production-line approach. This research study employed in-depth interviews with managers and frontline service employees, and observation. The findings identified the significance of a more comprehensive approach addressing the frontline employee's responsiveness and adaptability to meet a customer's needs and satisfaction, with implications for managers.

**Keywords:** Service quality, Jordan, Arab context, production-line approach, empowerment, tangible and intangibles of service quality, call centres

## **Introduction**

Most research to date focuses on the tangible side of service quality, neglecting the invisible and intangible side (Gilmore 2001). This article is intended to contribute by looking at the intangible side of the total service quality, where generally the tangible aspects of the service delivery process are the only dimensions considered in evaluating service quality provided to call centre customers. Specifically, this study will investigate the soft and invisible dimension of the service quality in a rather unexplored area of research in the telecommunication sector in Jordan.

According to Taylor and Bain (1999), a call centre is a dedicated operation with employees focused entirely on the customer service function. Hence, agents are using telephones and computers simultaneously where calls are processed and controlled by an automatic (electronic) distribution system. Moreover, call centres are characterized by relatively low skilled and low paid service workers responding to customer requests within a tightly controlled, and electronically monitored and time restricted system (Taylor et al, 2002). Furthermore, call centres are a major customer service interface for many organizations, and their role is to provide the first point of contact for customers to engage with their service provider (Armistead et al., 2002). However, the nature of the call centre and specific purpose of the engagement may vary considerably (Taylor et al., 2002). The rapid growth of communication services in general, and call centres in particular, signifies both the importance and the quality of service delivery to the customer. Given the growth in this service the aim of this study was to investigate service quality perceptions and management approaches in the Jordanian telecommunication system. Specifically, this study investigates the intangible side of the total service quality delivered along with the empowerment approach in Jordan Telecom as a customer service provider.

## *Literature Review*

### **The production-line approach vs the empowerment approach**

The production-line approach to services considers services as physical products in terms of standardizing the service offerings to maximize efficiency and attain consistency (Levitt, 1972; 1976). As such, the production-line approach entails simplification of tasks, clear division of labor, and specified set of rules and procedures to attain consistency and efficiency. However, in this approach little decision-making discretion is afforded to employees which enables them to feel that they can produce results for customers. Hence, employees who confidently perform specialized tasks according to established procedures believe that the service delivery system rarely fails and customers are almost always satisfied (Bowen and Lawler, 1995). This is mostly true in organizations where jobs are routine, simple, and require minimum levels of personal skill and judgment.

The advantage of this system is that the organisation controls the system and leaves nothing to the discretion of the employee (Gilmore, 2001). Nevertheless, with the accelerating need for customization (Lovelock, 1983), adaptability in response to customer needs (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996), responsiveness (Parasuraman et al., 1985), spontaneity (Bitner et al., 1990), and flexibility, service employees in service firms need to use their own self-judgment and empowerment to deliver better service quality and better satisfy their customers. Therefore, the empowerment approach in contrast to the production-line approach has been advocated by many proponents (Heskett, 1994, 1997; Bowen and Lawler, 1992, 1995; Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). As in many other service situations, call centre managers may still use the production-line approach in supervising and evaluating their employees due to the simplicity of this approach in examining well known visible job-related dimensions and skills. For example, it is easier to evaluate the number of calls handled, the duration, and the number of rings before answering, and so on. However, it is more difficult to examine the degree of responsiveness, feelings, perceptions, and courtesy exercised (Kelly, 1990) during a service delivery situation. As such, low customer satisfaction is expected due to concentration on the visible dimension of service quality ignoring those invisible and hard to measure dimensions. Notwithstanding, more attention is given to the visible aspects of the service including speed of service, number of calls abandoned, time spent talking to customers, and cost per call.

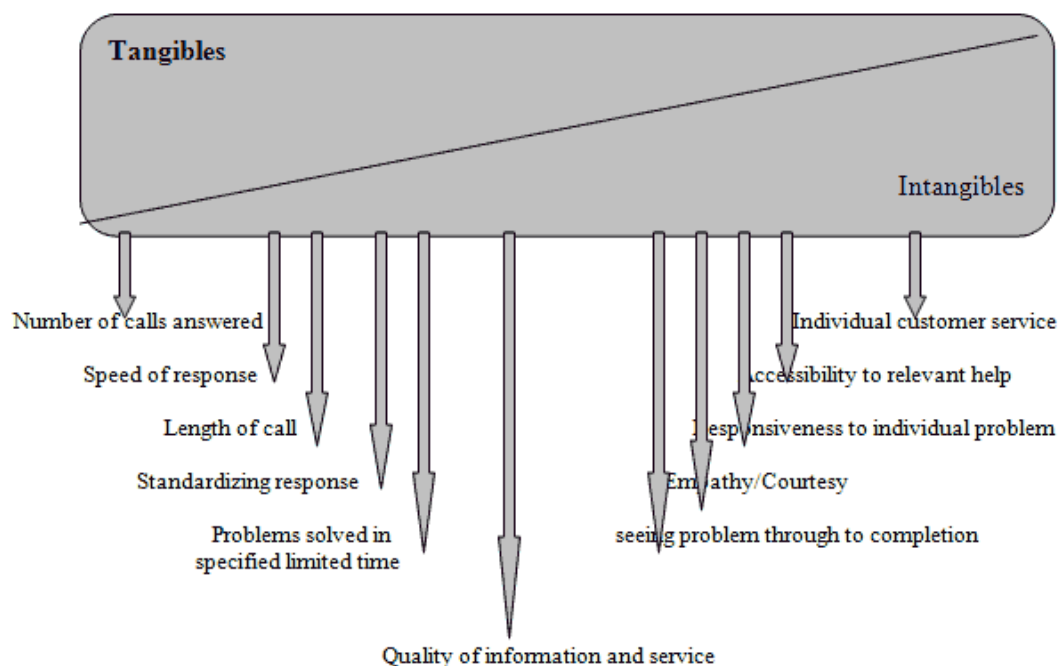
Empowerment, on the other hand, has been defined by Zemke and Schaaf (1989: 65) as “turning the frontline loose, encouraging and rewarding employees to exercise initiative and imagination: empowerment in many ways is the reverse of doing things by the book”. A more explicit definition by Jan Carlzon (1987) views empowerment as freeing someone from rigorous control by instructions, policies, and orders, and giving that person freedom to take responsibility for his/her ideas, decisions, and actions. This aims to release hidden resources that would otherwise remain inaccessible to both the individual and the organization.

According to Randolph and Sashkin (2002), empowerment does not mean absolute freedom and discretion. They argue that empowerment cannot work without setting boundaries and limits for the empowered to follow. Clear boundaries must be constructed by defining goals, roles, and values, and by designing organizational structures and systems consistent with them. Within such goals, roles, and values, employees decide how to achieve goals and respect organizational values.

Moreover, empowerment in the service sector (for example, telecommunications) is perhaps more significant due to the service features and characteristics. Throughout the 1970s the marketing literature debated over whether services and goods were sufficiently different (Fisk et al., 1993). Hence, academic and research efforts in this area resulted in the recognition that services were in fact unlike products, because of their different and unique characteristics, including intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability (Zeithaml et al., 1985; Berry, 1980; Bateson, 1977; Shostack, 1982; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Bowen and Schneider, 1985). These characteristics have significant implications for the delivery and marketing of services.

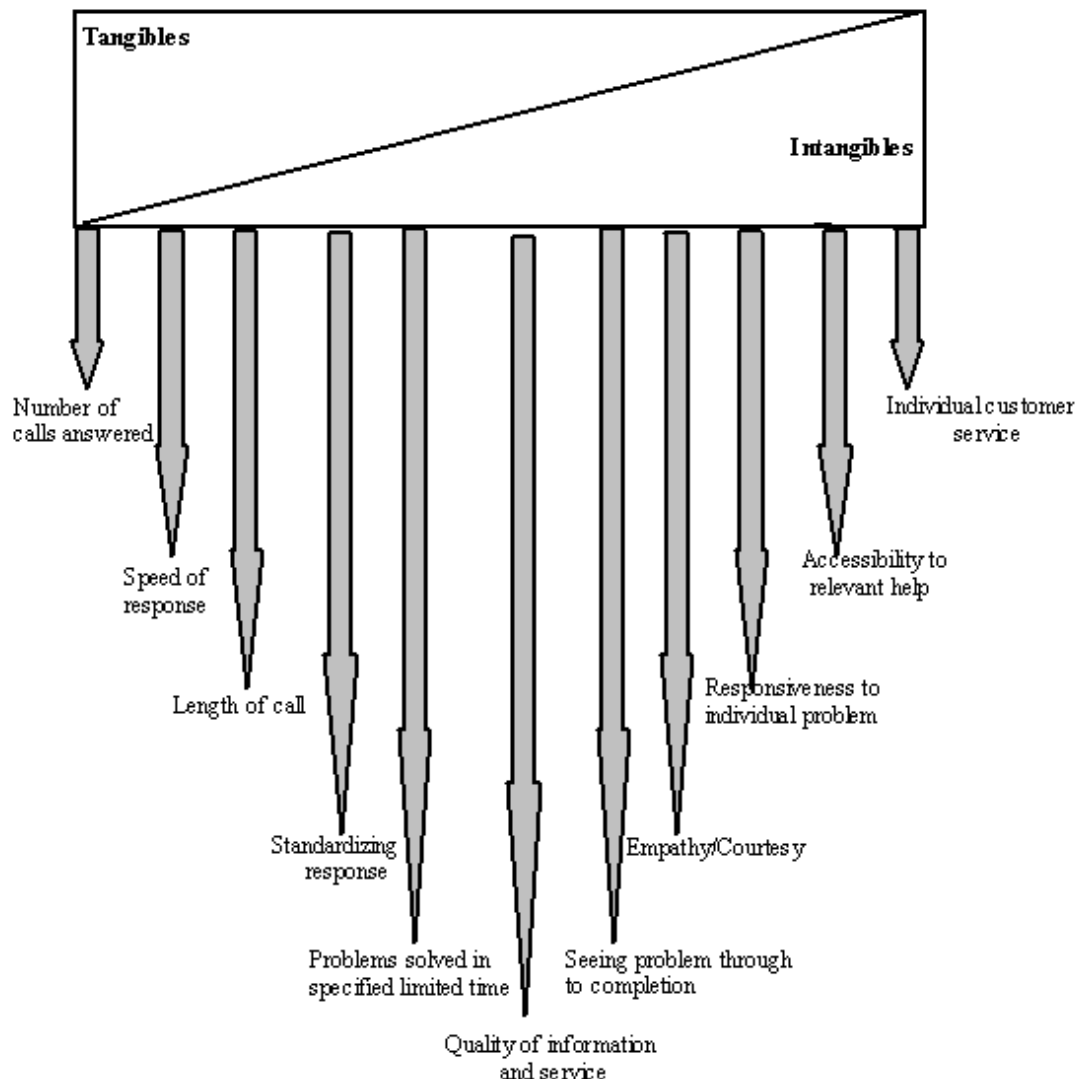
Ideally, according to Berry (1991), services are evaluated based on both functional and technical quality. Functional quality represents the intangible dimensions of the service, including feelings, perceptions, emotions, and relationships where the technical quality is related to the physical aspect of the service delivery in terms of performance and reliability standards or any tangible dimensions. However, the former are difficult to measure whereas the latter are easier to measure. These functional and technical quality dimensions are both important to the total quality of the service (Berry, 1991). Both of these dimensions are brought together in a "dimension of service quality model" (Gilmore and Carson, 1993) called the "continuum model". The scope of these dimensions range from the tangible to the intangible aspects, as shown in Figure 1. Service quality may suffer from the lack of any of these two dimensions according to many service quality scholars (e.g., Zeithaml et al., 2000). This significance of the total service quality measure including emphasis on both tangible and intangible aspects of service quality applies to call centres. Building on Gilmore and Carson's (1993) model and Gilmore (2001, 155), Figure 1 and Figure 2 (below) illustrate both the production and empowerment approaches in addition to the tangible and intangible dimensions of the service quality in call centre services.

**Figure 1:** tangible and intangible dimensions of call center service delivery.



Source: adapted from Gilmore (2001)

**Figure 2:** tangible and intangible dimensions of call center service delivery.



Source: adapted from Gilmore (2001)

These two figures demonstrate the different levels of emphasis on both the production-line and empowerment approaches on a continuum. Figure 1 ranges from emphasis on standard policy, rules and procedures on the left side of the continuum to emphasis on customized and personalized service to the customers at the right side of the continuum. The variation from production-line emphasis to empowerment emphasis in Figure 1 can be mirrored in consistent variation from tangible to intangible dimensions shown in Figure 2. For example, the production-line is consistent with tangible dimensions representing number of calls, speed of response, and length of call as a measure of the call center's service quality, whereas empowerment is consistent with the intangible dimension represented by individual customer service, responsiveness, and courtesy as a measure of service quality.

It is recommended that a combination of both production-line and empowerment dimensions must be maintained in order to provide a measure of total service quality for customers. Few researchers, however, have yet emphasized the significance of both tangible and intangible service quality measures (Gilmore 2001; Gilmore and Carson, 1993; Hartline and Ferrel, 1996). No published research to date has

investigated any service marketing or service quality issues in the communication or telecommunication sector in Jordan. Nevertheless, there are several empirical studies that have investigated other management-related areas. Therefore, the following section will discuss those context-related studies.

### ***Context-Related Studies***

Not too many studies to date have tackled services marketing research and applications in Jordan in the general sense and in the telecommunication sector in particular. Moreover, the advent of privatizing and restructuring warrants thorough investigations of different management and marketing areas. Specifically those related to service quality dimensions and problems. However, it is worth noting that there are several important studies (Al-Rasheed and Qwasmeh, 2003; Al-Fauori, 2002; AL-Azzam, 2002) that have looked at the same organisation from different perspectives. Al-Raseed and Qwasmeh (2003), for example, have presented interesting empirical research exploring the role of the strategic partners (French Telecom) in the management development (MD) process, taking Jordan Telecom as a case study. Their findings have strongly suggested that there is a positive contribution to the development of Jordanian managers by the French partner at Jordan Telecom. The management development has covered many areas including communication capabilities, trust, and co-operation among managers.

Such development might impact other areas and endeavors like marketing and service quality. This analysis is perhaps possible because the findings in this study show some tangible attention to improving quality of service provided to customers compared with that provided before the advent of the strategic partnership. However, older employees who lived the old and the new system were hard to adapt and more resistant to the new approaches and the quality programs imposed by management. As such, further investigations might be of significance in exploring the impact of management development initiatives on frontline employee development in enhancing the service quality and the service delivery processes to gain more customer commitment and loyalty.

### ***Research Method***

Over the last few years qualitative methodologies including grounded theory with in-depth interviews and observations have attracted increasing attention from marketing and management researchers (Goulding, 2001). A growing number of studies are rejecting the traditional positivist techniques and embracing a variety of interpretive approaches, one of which is in-depth interviews and observations, as conducted in this study. The use of unstructured interviews, observations, case studies, and other qualitative methods may help researchers getting first-hand data to derive implications and theory emergent as a product of a continuous interplay between analysis and data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Charmaz, 1983; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

This research involved gathering data on the call centre service quality measures of a major telecommunication company after restructuring and shifting towards more customer orientation and customer care in a new form of a strategic partnership. The qualitative study used interviews and observations in a telecommunication company with multiple call centres. The company has been transformed into a more customer oriented organisation due to expected future competition and pressures from

customers, government, and customer agencies. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of different managerial approaches on the quality of service delivery to customers within an organizational setting. The perceptions and perspectives of the people involved in the service delivery were important because previous studies of customer satisfaction only provided numbers and statistics (i.e. tangible indicators) related to whether customers were satisfied or dissatisfied with the overall service. In-depth interviews, observations and focus groups techniques were applied with frontline managers and call centre operators. Data was collected during the routine daily work of call centre managers and employees carried out in the call centre service delivery process. Interviews were conducted with call centre managers concerning call centre management approaches. Focus group discussions in each of the call centre locations were conducted to get in-depth information regarding employee perceptions of the service they provided for their customers and their perception of the degree to which the customer was satisfied about the service. In this context, Goodale and Koerner (1997) provided a good justification for arriving at customer perceptions through customer-contact employee perspectives of how customers view the service delivered. They recommend that customer-contact employees may provide an unbiased view of what their customers think of the service provider and the level of quality perceived. Moreover, observations were carried out with managers and operators. Nevertheless, the conducted observations were used to probe and explore beyond what managers and operators said they did, and gathered information about their observed behaviors and the outcomes of that behavior. In addition, "listening in" to call centre operators during the calls with their consent was also applied. This approach provided information on the actual conduct of call centre delivery: how operators handle actual customer inquiries and complaints, and sometimes how they solve their problems.

In Jordan there are two major call centres one at the capital of Jordan, Amman, with 50 operators, and one in North Jordan at the city of Irbid, with about 35 operators. A random sample of operators was selected to be interviewed individually and sometimes in a group of three to five depending on their work situation. Because call centres were sometimes unexpectedly busy and to avoid work interruption, managers restricted the interviewing process to be organized sometimes on individual basis and to form focus group discussion at other times depending on how busy the call centres were. Fifteen interviews were conducted at the Amman call centre, and ten were conducted in Irbid. Data was collected over a period of four months during the year 2003/2004. Table 1 provides a profile of interviewees, and the following section will discuss the study findings through description of the interviews and observations conducted.

**Table (1)** Interviewees' profiles

Number	Gender	Age	Position	Location A:Amman B:Irbid
1	Female	23-25	Operator	A
2	Male	40-43	Operator	B
3	Female	25-28	Operator	A
4	Male	39-42	Operator	B
5	Female	50-53	Operator	A
6	Male	45-48	Operator	A
7	Female	23-25	Operator	B
8	Male	25-28	Operator	A
9	Male	20-23	Operator	B
10	Male	30-33	Operator	B
11	Female	32-35	Operator	A
12	Male	40-43	Manager	B
13	Male	36-39	Operator	B
14	Male	34-37	Manager	B
15	Female	23-23	Operator	A

## *Interviews Analysis*

This section provides detailed analysis of the twenty five unstructured interviews. Of the total in-depth interviews conducted, only fifteen were documented in this paper as illustrated in Table 1. Because of the open ended approach of the interview, some interviewees either provided similar information or the data was irrelevant. As such, 15 interviews were useable and could be valid for documentation in this paper. Notes were taken from each interview and were transcribed and translated into English with the help of linguistic experts in both English and Arabic languages. A qualitative analysis software package called Nudist Vivo (1999) was employed to content analyze each interview transcript. Nudist Vivo is a qualitative software package intended to be used by qualitative researchers for sorting, managing and exploring unstructured data and commencing analysis.

The aim of this analysis is to effectively determine the presence of the study factors or variables. The main factors in this study were the tangible and intangible dimensions of service quality and their impact on total service quality provided to the customer through the call agent's directory service and whether the tangible elements are sufficient to provide total service quality for customers. Interviews were coded and the coding at the end of each interview is reflected in Table 1. At the end of each interview there is a sequential numbering followed by gender, age, and branch location respectively, where A stands for Amman and B stands for Irbid.

## *Findings*

### **Tangible dimension**

This dimension has been defined to include four elements (i.e. call duration, customer waiting time, number of calls answered, and rules). The detailed analysis of



the fifteen transcribed interviews has revealed that twelve interviewees conceived this dimension from different perspectives. While the call duration element has not revealed explicit or implicit indications, there is clear remark to the customer waiting time, number of calls, and rules elements. For example, one interviewee indicates that there is a considerable progress in the speed of service.

He asserts that:

“Our customers used to wait too long on the telephone until they would hang up. They used to give up waiting for an answer with no avail but now things are a lot better than before for the customer sake.

1, female, 23-25, A

This interviewee supports the importance of this tangible dimension as perceived by customer-contact employees. Call center agents can differentiate between the old system where customers used to wait on the line and hang up before their call is answered, and the new system where agents have to quickly answer calls within the first three rings of the telephone.

Other interviewees seem to criticize management overestimation of the tangible dimensions. They think that management assessment and evaluation of their performance is based on quantifiable measures rather than qualitative measures. One interviewee expressed his view saying:

.....imagine ...this year we answered 4.5 million calls and all they care about is ‘how many calls have you performed today?’ and ‘how many customers did you serve?’ but they do not care about how did I serve those customers?”

2, male, 40-43, B

This interviewee seems bored of being evaluated based on tangible dimensions. He seems more concerned with how customers are being treated during the call and how the call is being handled outside the visible and measured dimensions or rules. Although some rules and standards are well defined, there is a considerable variation to the extent to which the company had a clear definition to most rules and standards. For example, one interviewee indicated that operators have to welcome the customer revealing their names in every single call. Another interviewee asserts that the rules forced them to answer all customer requests and satisfy their inquiries no matter what they ask for. A third interviewee complains that in the name of rules, managers have the right to electronically and instantly monitor operators to check whether they give the right answer or not and this will count toward their performance. Other interviewees confine their job security to the company’s rules and standards indicating that those rules and standards hinder employee promotion and job security. In spite of this, some employees perceive the system positively. As such, one interviewee pointed out that

“By the new management, we started greeting customers, introducing our names as part of a company’s policy and this has increased the customer’s responsibility and satisfaction”

3, female, 25-28, A

It seems that customer contact employees (call operators or agents) hold different attitudes towards company policies, rules, and regulations with regards to improving service quality. The previous interviewee has got a positive attitude towards such policy of introducing his/her name to the customer before taking his request. Such policy seems to put more “responsibility on the customer” as the interviewee

explained, which means that customers would have to acknowledge and regard their call as important and their problem as serious, which is overall respected by both the customer and the employee. However, not all employees hold such positive view because we have to take in consideration other internal aspects that need to be considered collectively. As such one positive and isolated aspect like the one above might be viewed negatively by other employees when taken with other important aspects that might be neglected by managers. Hence, the following interviews can perhaps explain this:

"We don't feel secure in our jobs after the restructuring processes with the new rules and policies. We feel insecure about our future and about the company's future. The company in the government hands and care. Now we are working for a profit oriented organization- all they care about is revenue and profit"

4, male, 39-42, B

Another interviewee added:

"They don't hesitate to get rid of you any time. They feel you are a liability. Lack of job security is a fact of life now more than ever before..... There is no place for promotion for us especially those older employees who lived both the old and the new company..... There is no chance for enhancement or promotion. There is no change for our job title. We are call agents or call center's operators and this has been the name for a long time and there is no future for us"

5, female, 50-53, A

Another interviewee complained:

"How do you expect me to be so nice with the customer if the management are not nice with me. I think that there are double standards, and there is so much for favoritism and nepotism around here".

6, male, 45-48, A

These interviews seem to throw some doubts on the process of improving service quality in the eyes of customers. It seems that employee conviction in such tangible and even intangible dimensions of service quality is a major factor in the implementation process. It is nice to answer the customer with certain clichés that makes them delighted. But if the employee who produces such clichés is not delighted because of the management treatment, he/she will not for sure be convinced of such service quality dimensions and slogans like the customer is king and the customer is always right. The employee concerns, fears, and problems used to be the first thing that would jump into the surface during the interviews as conditions or antecedents that some times stand as barriers hindering service quality initiatives and efforts. Such negative perception by some older employees might be biased because of their resentment to change and lack of adaptability to the new system. On the other hand, the effect of the traditional management in a developing country like Jordan, might still be effective at the bottom levels especially in terms of communicating and articulating the new system to the frontline employees in a proper way.

Moreover, employees who felt that the system was fair and just were more supportive of the company's policies and rules, and they also expressed their concern to the intangible dimension of service quality and the importance of responsiveness and self judgment.

One interviewee explained that:

“You face some different questions some times... like some customers would ask irrelevant questions or about things that are not related to our job as phone directory agent. They ask for example about the time, the weather, and the roads if closed or open when a storm hits the area. Now we try to be responsive and answer any question we can answer. It is subject to our own self judgment and evaluation, because some customers just want to waste time, so we also know how to deal with them with minimum cost and loss. Without responsiveness and empowerment, it is hard to do that and rules don't help much.

7, female, 23-25, B

### Intangible Dimension

The analysis of the fifteen transcribed interviews suggests broad agreement among interviewees on the presence of the elements of this dimension (i.e. ability to solve customer problems, courtesy, customer satisfaction, employee responsiveness, and customization). However, although the call center rules and policies encouraged employees to only answer clear-cut questions, it is apparent that employees have the aptitude to assist customers in their problems. An interviewee indicates that:

“Sometimes I answer people who really need some help even when they cannot provide the right information to solve their problems. The rules of the call centre allow us not to answer such questions due to the lack of accurate information. An old lady called asking for a certain number three times. I understood that she was not able to recognize the phone's keys. I forced myself to explain how to locate the keys on the telephone until I made sure that she got connected”.

8, male, 25-28, A

This interviewee exemplifies a good degree of responsiveness and helpfulness to customer problems and special needs. This can illustrate how patient and empowered the employee could be in dealing with non-routine customer concerns and problems. Courtesy has been given particular attention due to the differences among customers. In other words there is a considerable variation among customers. Such variation in attitudes and behaviors forced employees not only to get along with these differences but also to adapt to the customer's ever-changing mood and humor. One interviewee indicates:

“There are differences among customers. They do have different norms and moods and perhaps backgrounds. I mean some customers are difficult and rough to talk with, others are polite and pleasant. You cannot rely on the rulebook to respond to customer needs all the time..... You need to use your mind many times. Many problems and situations are not written for us or prescribed by the organization. Any way my manager allows me to do what I think is right in such circumstances. I like him and I wish the whole system is like him....But we learned to treat the customer in a courteous manner”.

9, male, 20-23, B

Another interviewee points out:

“.....we deal with different attitudes and diverse nature and mood of customers, we have to do what is needed and we know that we should respect the customer”

10, male, 30-33, B

The call centre strategy has been revolving around customer satisfaction. To achieve this strategy, change programs have been introduced throughout the call center. First, training programs have been launched to teach employees how to satisfy customers and that the customer is king. Such programs have been developed perhaps by virtue of the strategic partnership. Hence, there were no such quality and development programs at times when the company was held as a public institution.

Some interviewees indicate that:

“.....we took training courses and sessions that focused on the customer and that the customer is king. We think this is true that the customer should be king..... I took training courses .....mostly they teach us that the customer is very valuable asset to the organisation and to all of us”.

11, female, 32-35, A

Additionally, a link between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction has been established. This link reads as “if we satisfy our employees they will satisfy our customers”. Moreover, this link creates a cause and effect relationship strategy.

One interviewee manager states that:

“We want our customer to be satisfied and we know that his satisfaction is the result of our employee satisfaction because if we treat the employee bad we think down the line that he will treat the customer bad. There is a cause and effect relationship, the effect is our bad treatment with our employees and the result is bad treatment by our employees to the customer”.

12, male, 40-43, B-manager

Another interviewee has presented a counter argument to the previous quotation:

“ Yes, the customer should be king... this is true, but not before we get to be also treated as kings and that is true only if we get to be recognized and respected by the company in different occasions!!!”.

13, male, 36-39, B

This interviewee asks the company to treat him as ‘a king’ to enable him to treat the customer the same way. And this is consistent with the Internal Marketing concept. Internal Marketing, according to scholars like Berry (1983) and Rafiq and Ahmed (1998) and many other marketing academics, posits that employees must be treated as internal customers and ordinary customers as external customers. Satisfying the internal customer, the employee, is an antecedent to satisfying the external customer.

As such, in services, it is not enough to satisfy the internal or the external customer by applying only a rigid system of rules, regulations and visible and tangible measures of service quality. Intangible measures, like courtesy, responsiveness, self-judgment and flexibility in dealing with customers is perhaps more important than using quantifiable and easy to measure criteria.

Finally, to achieve customer satisfaction the managers have introduced specific evaluation criteria to ensure employees responsiveness. These criteria have been developed via employee participation.

One interviewee manager states that:

“...employees participated in such criteria and asked them for their opinions about it. Such criteria further allow managers to listen to the callers and monitor the system to both measure employees’ responsiveness and correct errors as they occur. Some of these criteria as the interviewee manager states are: (bear in mind that these are individual suggestions and initiatives and they are not officially recommended by the whole system)

1. Degree of customer satisfaction via listening and attention (i.e. asking the customer whether he wants another service or not).
2. How much the employee is willing to take his break during the peak. This indicates that the employee is holding responsibility and commitment for his work he is a hard working. Motivated to work and to the customer.
3. Employees’ willingness to look after the company’s resources or the station that the employees are working at.
4. The degree of responsiveness to the customer by listening carefully to the customer. Being proactive and responsive to what the customer wants. Some employees give the customer what he wants before finishing the last word from his mouth.
5. The degree to which the employee is participating in correcting the directory data. The customer and the employee can feed back data about a wrong number that the management can investigate that number and take a note of it to correct it in the computer and in the directory”

14, male, 34-37, B-manager.

Another interviewee asserted that:

“We face some different questions and for the sake of customization and customer orientation, we ought to answer them. For example, some customers ask about the time, the weather, and sometimes about the traffic. ....Some ask about the holiday.... if today is holiday or not....Many customers ask about a physician phone number providing only his or her first name and area of specialist. We would look and try to find their numbers for them”.

15, female, 23-25, A

Reviewing the above views, one can see interesting individual initiatives from employees and some managers in terms of responsiveness and self-judgement to different customer needs and requests. There is however a problem hidden underneath. First, such initiatives seem to be individual and not institutionalised in the company even though the company managers preach empowerment, customer orientation and customer satisfaction all the time. Younger and perhaps new employees buy into such initiatives, and older employees understand that management don’t preach about the intangible aspects of service quality and empowerment, but appraise numbers, the tangibles and what can easily be measure. As such, old employees perhaps realize this more than younger ones and don’t buy into such preaching of total service quality and customer satisfaction because they know in advance that managers only reward what can be numerically counted (such as number of calls per day, week, month, or a year; call duration and so on). Hence, we can be sure that the intangible dimensions along with the empowerment

approach to service quality are the real neglected domain that affect customer and employee satisfaction. Argyris (1998) argued that managers don't really neglect such soft dimensions in public, but when it comes to implementation, they support the rule book and they favour numbers and tangible measures ignoring the intangible dimensions.

## *Implications*

The findings in this study indicate that management in service organisations such as call centres is more concerned with the production-line approach in considering the importance of tangible dimensions of service quality simply because they are very much linked with the bottom line in terms of numbers and measures of employee productivity. Tight command and control is in use to achieve consistency and produce results. This finding was supported in the literature. Dean (2004) found organizations attempting to meet both soft and hard dimensions of service quality, but it seems that in reality there is an imbalance between the two aspects. Moreover, Wallace et al (2000) report four Australian cases and concluded that a "sacrificial human resource strategy" is evident in these call centres whereby control and efficiency are at the expense of employee stress, turnover, and therefore quality of service delivery. Closely related findings from Singh (2000) indicated that employees maintain productivity levels at the expense of quality, simply because of the focus on the overt aspects of service quality neglecting the covert dimensions and the empowerment approach to service quality.

In this study, however, employees were confused due to the restructuring of the organisation created from the strategic partnership with French Telecom. With new Western managerial practices and philosophy, cultural change was required which made resistance and oppositions to the new system a fact of life, especially for the old employees. Old employees have been accustomed to the old ways of doing things. Therefore, it was hard for them to accommodate the obligations of the new management. This is evident in the findings. Older employees (see interviewees number 2,4,5,6, and 13 in the findings section) - those over 40 years of age - have demonstrated hard resentment towards the managerial system with negative attitudes towards the tangible and intangible dimensions of service quality. Table 3 consists of a brief illustration of the differences in attitudes between older and younger employees towards those tangibles and intangibles of service quality. The comparison shows that younger employees have different and positive perception and attitudes towards the system, the customer, the tangibles of service quality and also those intangible soft dimensions. Younger employees seem to be less resistant and more adaptable to the new system. However, this phenomenon might not last for ever. Younger employees are new to the organization, mostly hold less responsibilities, and are still eager to work and take things in positive stance, whereas older employees have been suffering for sometime with high levels of accumulated expectations.

**Table (2)** Tangible and intangible dimensions of total service quality.

Tangible elements	Intangible elements
Call duration	Ability to solve customers' problems
Customer waiting time	Courtesy
Number of calls answered	Employee responsiveness
Rules	Customization

**Table (3)** Summary of interviewees attitudes towards tangibles and intangibles of service quality

Attitudes of tangibles and intangibles	Age 20-29	Age 30-39	Age 40-55
Tangibles: speed of service rules, and numbers( call duration and number of calls handled) etc.	Positive attitudes toward the tangibles in general. (they think that the service is improving). positive towards organization's policies and rules including those related to greeting the customer.	Negative attitudes towards the tangibles, specifically about job security, rules and regulations set out by the organization.	Negative feelings towards the tangibles. They think that managers don't care about them, and all they care about is the numbers. older employees worry much about job security and don't trust management on this. and the resentment is clear all over the dimensions being discussed in terms of the tangible aspects.
Intangibles: courtesy, customer respect, responsiveness, discretion, empathy and customer respect	Positive towards the intangible aspects of service quality including courtesy, discretion, customer respect and responsiveness. " we must be responsive when dealing with our customers", more empowered. " we should not rely on the rules book in solving customer problems" empathy is clear too.	Relatively positive when dealing with customers. "we must respect our customers" but resentment is evident with regard the system. " if they want us to respect our customers they must respect us. if we want to be responsive and courteous, our managers must listen to our complaints".	Extremely negative towards the intangibles. older employees have strong negative attitudes towards the management which holds down their conviction in any improvement in the service quality and service delivery to customers .

Managers need to solve such a dilemma by helping employees adapt to the new system. Albeit the strategic partner has initiated and applied new incentive approaches to boost employee morale and commitment, more monetary and non-monetary incentives are perhaps necessary to instill new behaviors and attitudes in dealing with customers. Frontline employees such as call centre agents seem to receive less rewards and incentives than those at the upper levels. This might hinder the effectiveness of service quality programs, customer orientation initiatives and team work cooperation.

Listening-in to calls (Gilmore, 2001) indicated that customer service was sometimes lacking because customers were not happy at having to call back in order to get problems resolved. This is apparently due to the use of strict rules and standards. Call centre operators were unclear some times about choosing between trying to help customers and adherence to the company's rules and standards.

The implications further indicated that employees and customers are more inclined to accept a more flexible system. It is not bad for the organisation to set a standard operating procedure to achieve consistency in dealing with customers and to have accurate measures for performance evaluation. But, it would be necessary as well for a service provision to establish some criteria related to responsiveness, courtesy, flexibility, and customization. This requires a situation where there should be a shift in employee ability and knowledge. It means that to have flexible and courteous employees you need empowered employees who can act on their own with the sense of respect for the customer and the company's goals and objectives. Such a shift requires empowered employees with knowledge, skill, and capabilities, requiring trust and good communication between the managers and the employees.

As such, the challenge for managers is to reconsider the significance of those intangible dimensions that are being heavily ignored and considered as a neglected soft domain missing from the service quality formula. The managers have started to pay attention to those intangible dimensions. They seem to acknowledge that they are very important, but when it comes to practice they immediately focus their attention on the tangible dimensions because of their visibility and ease of measurement, and because of their short-term orientation. Similar findings have explored such a "short-termism" effect (Dean (2004), Wallace et al. (2000), and Singh (2000)). Their findings suggest that there should be a trend away from the production-line approach to one with emphasis on empowerment and discretion (Gilmore, 2001). This perhaps indicates that top management has to intervene in producing a system that encompasses both tangible and intangible dimensions with an empowered employee. This might not be a difficult task because management has already embarked on some initiatives that would make it easy to implement service quality program. A shift into a new organisation climate seems to have been underway for some time: a shift into a climate of trust, enhancing knowledge, training, communication, information flow, and incentives (see Al-Rasheed and Qwasmeh, 2003). This makes the organisation more eligible to create more responsible and empowered customer-contact employees who respect the rules with flexibility and use rules and standards as means not ends in themselves.

With such transformation, both the tangible dimensions to service quality incorporating the production line approach would work in line with the intangible dimensions incorporating the empowerment approach to produce a total, comprehensive service quality to achieve more customer satisfaction rather than using one side of the formula, that is the production line approach to attain consistency and short term results.



## *Conclusion*

The analysis of the fifteen interviews was undertaken with the primary goal of determining the recognition of tangible and intangible service elements in the interviews.

A close analysis of the interviews can reveal two patterns regarding the tangible and intangible dimensions of the service quality. Some employees, especially those who lived the old and the new system, seem to suffer and resist any changes regarding the tangible dimensions or even intangible dimensions of the service quality. They understand that it is important to be customer oriented but their priority is not the customer, it is themselves and how are they being treated by their managers. They think that the organisation is giving much attention to the customer at the expense of the employee job security, incentives, and hard work. They also oppose the system for its emphasis and concern regarding the tangible dimensions making the job too boring and too routine.

On the other hand, the other pattern is shown by the younger generation, those who have been hired after the privatization and the strategic partnership stage. This group seems to be more optimistic and realistic of the new system. They support the tangible dimensions of service quality and agree with the customer orientation efforts directed by the organization. Again, a close look at the interview notes reveals that the older employees were more resistant and inadapted to change, development and training programs.

Such contradiction and inconsistency in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of customer-contact employees between two different generations poses a dilemma and a puzzle. Managers need to pay more attention to creating a more homogenous organizational culture and a consistent system to meet employee's different concerns and ambitions in order for employees to buy in to the new customer oriented initiatives taken by the organization.

The analysis indicates that the management group in general is more concerned as expected with the tangible dimensions of service quality including call duration, customer waiting time and number of calls answered. Additionally, certain policies and clichés must be read before and after every call (name introduction and customer greeting in specific manner) which builds boredom and fatigue among customer contact employees. Hence, it seems that these elements can be easily measured and employees can be controlled and evaluated based on these aspects.

However, the intangible dimensions (employee's ability and own capability of solving customer problems, courtesy, responsiveness, customer satisfaction in a certain way and customization) have been systematically overlooked by the management evaluation system except for some individual initiatives. One first-line manager, for example, has tried to propose certain criteria as indicated above and that was just an individual effort without any systematic support from the top management.

This research suggests that the tangible elements are important and realized in this organization, but what is more important is to develop a system to reinforce and enhance the intangible elements by providing the employees with some degree of empowerment to treat customers with more flexibility, responsiveness, courtesy, and empowerment. This empowerment might extend to cover areas where the individual would participate in decision-making, job content issues, and job context areas.

The analysis clearly indicates that older employees are less satisfied than younger ones. They feel that the system is unfair in terms of promotion, compensation, wages, and salaries. They feel that their right concerning these aspects is a priority in improving the service quality and giving the customer more attention and enhanced service.

### ***Recommendations***

The findings of this study suggest that further studies are needed in order to explore the service quality domain at other organizations, particularly service organizations, in Jordan. Specifically, the issue of tangibles and intangibles of service quality is totally under-researched in the Arab environment.

Managerial recommendations would include raising more attention by management to the importance of service quality not only by surveying customer perceptions regarding service quality but also by searching the frontline employees' perceptions regarding enduring and long lasting service quality measures. Closely related is employees' empowerment, judgment, and responsiveness to customer needs and problems. As such, more attention must be given to frontline employees in terms of initiating the right motivation and incentive programs that would enhance total service quality comprising both tangible and intangible dimensions of the total service quality.

Indeed, the generalizability of this study could only be enhanced by further research not only in the telecommunication sector but also on other sectors, by conducting different methods, both qualitative and quantitative, to attain stronger validity and reliability and further generalizability.

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## Appendix

Operational definitions of major keywords

<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Operational definitions</b>
Flexibility	The extent to which employees are flexible and adaptable in dealing with customer requests and solving their problems
Responsiveness	The extent to which the customer contact employee is able to meet customers' expectations (see Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988)).
Self-Judgment	The extent to which the customer contact employee is able to evaluate and judge with certain problems with out going back the manager
Courtesy	The extent to which customer contact employees treat their customers with respect and value.
Production-line approach	Standardization of service offerings to maximize efficiency and attain consistency in service provisions. (see Levitt, 1976)
Empowerment	Providing employees with authority and discretion to meet customer needs.
Customization	Tailoring service characteristics to meet each customer's specific needs and preferences (Lovelock and Wright, 2001, p.31).