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Challenges For Service Script Implementation: Australian Service Workers Views

Syed H Rahman
University of Western Sydney
School of Marketing and International Business

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Abstract

This paper reports on the views of Australian service workers about the challenges for service script implementation. A scripted service is often mentioned as a way to overcome the inherent variability problem for service firms. One of the management challenges for service firms is the effective implementation of the scripts. In the absence of any reported research on the implementation of service scripts, a qualitative research methodology of grounded theory has been used for this research. A conceptual model of service script implementation gaps evolved during the research and through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. The findings of the qualitative research were then tested using a quantitative method of exploratory factor analysis. The key findings of the research show that the service firms use a variety of modes to communicate the scripts to their employees, with the most common ones being formal and informal face-to-face sessions between the manager and staff, electronic messaging, hard copy scripts to be read and acknowledged reading, and formal training sessions. It also shows that there are three distinct potential gaps in the implementation process of the scripts i.e. communications gaps, implementation gaps due to variability, and follow-up gaps. Based on these findings, the paper proposes an easy to grasp model of service implementation gaps that will be useful for practitioners and can help researchers to develop future research and conceptualisation in the area.

Key Words: implementation, gaps, script, service, standardisation, quality, variability,

Introduction

The translation of customer expectations into specific service quality standards depends on the degree to which tasks necessary to be performed can be standardised. Due to the inherent variability problem, it is hard for service organisations to control quality and consistently maintain a standard service offering. Some practitioners believe that services cannot be standardised and customisation is essential for providing high-quality service. In reality, many service tasks are routine, and for these, specific standards can be easily established and executed. A scripted service is often mentioned as a way to overcome the variability problem and deliver a standardised service. Scripts are cognitive structures that help guide service employees in service transactions (Humphry & Asforth 1994). Much like theatre scripts, a service script details actions that employees are expected to perform. Some scripts are highly structured and allow service employees to perform their duties quickly, and efficiently. This also helps them to ensure uniform quality and reduce variability. While a highly scripted service is not for everyone, different degrees of scripting practice is common among the majority of service firms today. One of the management challenges for service firms is effective implementation of the scripts (Bateson 1992). Both managers and service workers have a role to play in the implementation process.

Given the extensive use of scripts by service firms, it is surprising that no empirical research has been published on the implementation aspect of scripts. The purpose of this research is to begin to fill this gap in the literature. Particularly, this research focuses on the Australian service worker's views on the implementation process. This paper addresses the following issues:

(a) How do service firms implement their service scripts, and (b) what, if any, are the potential gaps in the implementation process?

Current Literature

Variability is widely identified as one of the four generic characteristics of services. Minimisations of variability and to ensure uniform service quality are key challenges for service firms. A highly structured script may help service firms to face these challenges. A service script provides detailed actions that customers and employees are expected to perform in a service encounter. Not all services, however, can benefit from tightly scripted services. Providers of highly customised services, such as medical services, cannot benefit from such structured scripts, as can providers of standardised services, such as flight attendants of airlines. More and more service firms are using structured scripts to educate their employees as well as customers about their roles in service delivery.

The script concept is well known in the field of cognitive psychology. Its potential to provide behavioural guidance in many fields, including services marketing, has been raised by many researchers (Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau 2002; Searleman & Herrmann 1994; Taylor, Cronin & Hansen 1991). According to theory a script consists of a sequence of goal-directed actions that are causally ordered (Sutherland 1995). This includes the standard conditions for entering the activity, sequence of events, roles, props, and normal outcome resulting from the activity that both employees and customers are expected to learn and follow during service delivery. Scripts are learned through experience, education, and communication with others

(Harris, Harris & Baron 2003). It is sometimes helpful to use an analogy to drama for understanding scripts. An actor's script provides lines, including actions, and goals – everything the actor needs to perform. A well-planned script should provide a full description of the service encounter. Service encounters are identified as purposive, task-oriented human interactions in which participants have a role to play. Ritualised, learned role expectations (cognitive scripts) guide the behavioural enactments affecting performance effectiveness in service encounters.

Theoretically, scripts are also known as event schemata. Script content is stored in long-term memory that is retrieved to direct behaviour whenever service employees are confronted with the same or similar situations (Erasmus, Boshoff & Rousseau 2002). Individuals differ in their ability to recall information (Johnson, Zimmer & Golden, 1987). Although some elements of scripts, when implemented, will vary from person to person due to idiosyncrasies in experiences and individual's information retention ability, have to be acknowledged and observed by all participants if satisfactory outcomes are to be generated (Johnston 2001). Much of the satisfactory outcome of service scripts will depend on successful implementation, which in turn will depend on the amount of rehearsal. Failure to rehearse a script by repeating it can cause fading and eventual loss of information.

As previously mentioned, no published empirical research on the implementation aspect of scripts was identified. However, a parallel may be drawn between competitive strategy implementation and scripts implementation, as both need collaborative efforts between managers and workers. A significant number of research reports has been published on the first. Prior studies demonstrate that powerful competitive strategies may fail due to poor execution (Guth & Macmillan 1986; Campbell & Garnett 2000; Kaplan & Norton 2001). These studies indicate that the implementation process consists of communication, interpretation, adoption, and accomplishment of competitive strategies (Noble & Mokwa 1999). Most research has focussed on interactive involvement through participation and collaborative efforts between managers and subordinates in competitive strategy implementation (Westley 1990; Noble & Mokwa 1999).

Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative research are complementary, rather than competing, research approaches. In this research both have been used. Lack of previous empirical investigation of the research problem eliminates the direct application of existing constructs for the purpose of this research. Further, the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question.

Research Procedure – Qualitative

Qualitative data, it is argued, can redress the problem of context stripping by providing contextual information; data can provide rich insight into human behaviour; and are useful for uncovering emic views; theories to be valid, should be qualitatively grounded (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed. Theory evolves during actual research and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. Because grounded theory is a general methodology (a way of thinking about and

conceptualising data) it was easily adapted by its originators and their students to studies of diverse phenomena. A grounded theory was an appropriate methodology for the first part of this study.

Patton (1990) provides guidelines for sampling and suggests that the logic and power behind purposeful selection of informants is that the sample should be information rich. To maximise variety, cross-industry respondents were selected from the communication services industry, education industry, restaurant industry, retailing industry, and financial services industry in Australia. In total for the qualitative part of the study five samples were selected, one from each industry mentioned, to conduct individual depth interviews. This involved a series of lengthy, unstructured interviews. "Unstructured interviewing provides a greater breadth of information than the other types, given its qualitative nature" (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p. 365).

The technique of laddering (Durgee, 1986; Reynolds & Gutman, 1988) has been used while conducting the unstructured interviews. In this technique respondents were encouraged to "re-live" the process they went through in the implementation of the scripts. Each of the respondents was interviewed thrice. The first interviews were mostly broad, letting the participants "tell their stories". Subsequent interviews were arranged to obtain more targeted information. As the study progressed, theoretical insights and linkages between categories increased, making the process exciting as "what is going on" finally became clearer and more obvious. Data collection at later stages was dictated by, and became directed entirely toward, the emergent model. Each interview took up to thirty minutes.

Coding of the data gathered was undertaken immediately after each interview to ensure that valuable data were not lost. Five general storage and retrieval functions have been carried out as recommended by Levine (1985): Formatting, cross-referral, indexing, abstracting and pagination. Much of these storage, retrieval and analysis functions have been carried out using the hybrid software system, NUD.IST version 3.0.

Research Procedure – Quantitative

The limitations of the qualitative methods are: (1) the results are not necessarily representative of what would be found in the population, and hence are not projectable, and (2) there is typically ambiguity in the results. In view of these shortcomings, findings through the qualitative research have been followed-up by quantitative research. The constructs and their measurement variables, generated through the qualitative research, were put through exploratory factor analysis to arrive at generalisable script implementation gap constructs. Exploratory factor analysis is considered a test of dimensionality, with the aim to produce a set of items that reflect a single underlying factor or construct (Norusis, 1992). Purifying the set of indicators is an iterative process whereby indicators are dropped that do not maximise co-efficient alpha. Exploratory factor analysis is particularly suitable where no prior knowledge of measurement is reported.

Data for the quantitative study were collected through a structured questionnaire. The draft questionnaire was tested on a small sample of five respondents to identify and eliminate potential problems. A fifteen item final questionnaire using a seven point Likert agreement-disagreement scale was used to test the variables generated through the qualitative research. Two conflicting considerations are involved in deciding the number of scale categories. The greater the number of scale categories, the finer the discrimination among stimulus objects that is possible. On the other hand, most respondents cannot handle more than a few categories. There is no

optimal number of categories. In this research a seven-point scale has been used, since respondents are knowledgeable about the objects (a large number of categories may be employed) and the correlation coefficient decreases with a reduction in number of scale categories affecting all statistical analysis based on the correlation coefficient. To assess the internal consistency reliability, a popular approach, coefficient alpha was used. The indicators of highly reliable constructs are highly intercorrelated, indicating that they are all measuring the same latent construct. To assess validity, a convergent validity method that shows the extent to which the scales correlate positively with other measures of the same construct, has been used.

The target population was defined as Australian service workers of service marketing firms that regularly use structured scripts such as communication services industry, education industry, restaurant industry, retailing industry, and financial services industry. In total 150 randomly selected respondents were interviewed using the structured questionnaire out of 370 service workers approached, giving a response rate of 40.5%. 60% of the respondents were females. A majority (72%) of the respondents were from large service firms and the rest from smaller firms, mainly representing restaurant and retailing industries. After thorough editing of the 150 questionnaires completed that involved screening questionnaires to identify illegible, incomplete, inconsistent, or ambiguous responses, all were found satisfactory and none with any missing values.

Factor analysis was applied using principal-axis factoring method, with eigenvalues set to 2 as in most instances eigenvalues of 1.0 or greater represents the maximum number of factors that can be considered stable. In this case, the cut off point of eigenvalues of 2.0 gave factor solution that explained more than 70% of the variance. Another consideration in determining the cut off point was interpretability of factors. Factors are interpreted by examining their correlations, called loading, to the *p* original variables.

Findings of Qualitative Research and the Development of Conceptual Framework

Services firms use a variety of modes to communicate the scripts to their employees. Some of the most common ones include:

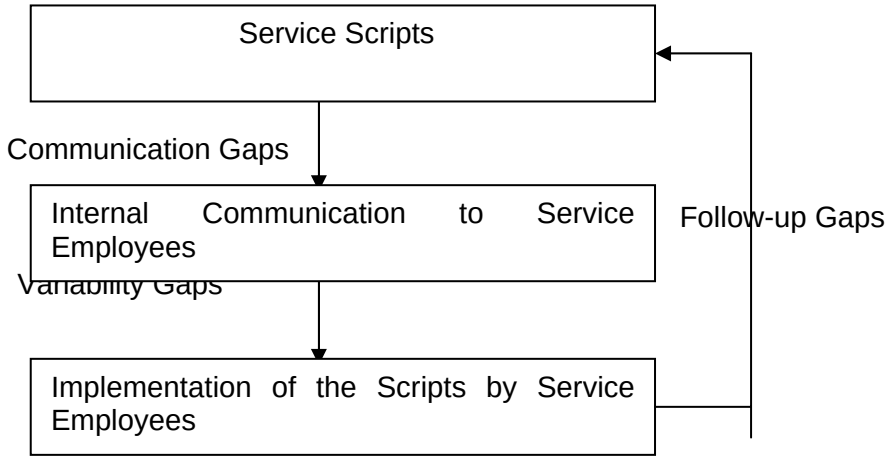
- Formal and informal face-to-face sessions conducted between the manager and staff.
- Electronic messaging.
- Hard copy scripts to be read and acknowledged reading.
- Formal training sessions.

Smaller service firms use more of the informal face-to-face sessions between the manager and staff. Larger firms occasionally use the formal training programs and face to face sessions but also quite extensively use electronic messaging and hard copy scripts for reading. Findings of this research show that different modes yield varying degrees of success in effectively communicating the scripts. However, no matter what mode is used, there are various potential gaps in the implementation process.

Using insights from the grounded theory development process, a research model was developed (Shown in Figure 1). An analysis of the interviews shows that there

are three distinct potential gaps in the implementation process of the scripts, particularly by the larger services firms. These potential gaps are communication gaps, implementation gaps due to variability, and follow-up gaps. The next section reviews the gaps, and the variables explaining those gaps, and develops some hypotheses with support from the qualitative research.

Figure 1: Conceptual model of service script implementation gaps



Communication gaps

Scripts communicated through electronic messaging or hard copies are found to be the least effective of the modes used. Some of the comments of respondents that support this are:

> *"They (management) are sending them all the time. We do not have the time to read them all" (respondent A).*

> *"Some times they ask us to sign to confirm that we have read the script. Most of the time we sign without reading or may be just casually reading" (respondent B).*

> *"I have a colleague who is very particular in reading all those scripts and following them. If the management asks us to read and acknowledge, I usually ask that colleague of mine what it is about before I sign it. I rarely read it myself" (respondent C).*

Even the formal face-to-face sessions between the manager and staff are not that effective.

> *"These meetings are mostly held after office hours. My mind does not work at that time. So, I hardly listen to what is being said" (Respondent D).*

Scripts communicated through formal training programs are found to be most effective.

> *"Usually I take the scripts that are communicated to us through training programs much more seriously. This type of program tells me that the management is serious about the issue. Recently, I attended one such program where prizes were declared as part of the implementation program. I liked that idea" (respondent B).*

In general, service workers interviewed determine the seriousness of a script, taking cues from the way the script is communicated. Choice of ineffective communication medium leads to the failure of the script to achieve the desired learning by the service worker. Thus,

H1: Ineffective communication medium is a key gap in the implementation of service scripts.

Variability gaps

Scripts are primarily used by services firms to minimise the effects of the variability problem and maintain a standard service offering. However, the results of this research show that variability can still be a problem in the implementation of the scripts. This may happen because of the variance in the learning ability of the employees or in their personalities.

> *"You give the same lesson to a group of students, but in the test some do better than the others. Same things happen with scripts. People's learning ability varies" (respondent B).*

> *"I have a colleague who is always bending rules to be very friendly with customers. This creates problems for others. I always face comments like, 'your colleague did it this way last time, how come you can not?' I guess it is not only personality problem, but also some of us do not know lot of things because they are not trained properly" (respondent C).*

In general, the respondents claimed that no matter how effectively the script is implemented, the variability problem of services will remain and full quality standardisation of services is not possible. In other words, scripts may only minimise, and not eradicate, the variability problem so inherently associated with services. Even the implementation process itself will be influenced by variability. Thus,

H2: Variability in the learning ability and personality of the service workers creates a gap in the effective implementation of service scripts.

Follow-up gaps

Often services firms fail to follow-up whether the scripts are being implemented properly or not, unless something goes seriously wrong.

> *"We are getting a lot of scripts about procedures to follow about different aspects of our customer dealings, but rarely management comes back and checks whether we are following them or not" (respondent C).*

> *"I have not seen reward for following these scripts properly nor received any punishment for not following them. We only hear from management if something goes wrong or complaints are made by customers. I guess they ask us to sign the scripts once we have read them so that they find someone to blame if something goes wrong" (respondent B).*

Not everyone agrees, however. "Most of our dealings with the customers are over the phone. Management regularly tapes such phone conversations. They say this is for training purposes, but we know they are checking whether we follow the script or not" (respondent E).

Overall, the respondents are of the view that the managers often fail to show enough seriousness in following up the implementation of service scripts. Thus,

H3: Lack of follow up of the proper implementation by managers may create a gap in the overall implementation of scripts.

Results of the Quantitative Study

Table 1 shows the univariate statistics including mean, skewness, kurtosis and standard deviation of the 15 variables. High mean (all 4.5 and above in a scale of 7) and relatively low standard deviations and skewness indicate that respondents are in agreement about all the 15 variables identified at the qualitative phase of the research.

Table 1: Univariate Statistics

Variables	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis	St. Dev.
1. There are too many scripts to read	5.4923	-0.9690	0.5042	1.2978
2. We do not have time to read them all	5.0667	-1.0232	0.3516	1.3998
3. Often I sign as read, even when I have not read it	5.3744	-1.0779	0.8440	1.2552
4. I often depend on other colleagues to know the content	5.4308	-1.0803	0.8084	1.2799
5. Often scripts are communicated during after office hour meetings when I am not attentive	4.5538	-0.4422	-0.6921	1.5477
6. I take scripts that communicated through formal training programs more seriously	5.2718	-0.9645	0.6810	1.2406
7. Some of my colleagues often fail to follow scripts	5.2513	-0.9444	0.6262	1.2624
8. Script implementation is affected by personality differences of service staff	5.2564	-0.9533	0.6307	1.2614
9. Script implementation is affected by knowledge differences of service staff	5.0462	-1.0776	0.4235	1.3784
10. Script implementation is affected by learning ability differences of service staff	5.1641	-1.0063	0.3626	1.4265
11. Management do not always show seriousness in implementing scripts	4.6256	-0.3172	-0.2150	1.1161
12. Management only takes it seriously when something goes wrong or complaints are made	5.2359	-1.0826	0.5093	1.4127
13. Most of the time there are no rewards/punishments for following/not following scripts	5.4410	-1.0907	0.8054	1.2602
14. Often management ask us to sign confirming reading of scripts so that blames may be passed on if something goes wrong	5.0667	-1.0232	0.3516	1.3998
15. Sometimes management check whether we are following scripts without our knowledge	4.5795	-0.3874	-0.2271	1.2753

Table 2 shows factors extracted with the variables that explain each of the factors. It illustrates the factor loadings relating to the fifteen variables explaining the three factors that were developed through the qualitative research and included in factor analysis. The results of the factor analysis suggest that each of the fifteen variables

has significant factor loadings. Only variable two has some cross loading with factor 2 (2.7250). Coefficient alpha for the three factors are also at acceptable levels (Nunnally 1978).

To summarise, the findings of the quantitative research supported all three hypotheses developed on the findings of the qualitative part of the research. As hypothesised, ineffective communication medium (H1) has been established as a key gap in the implementation of service scripts. It appears that service workers feel overloaded with information they receive and they are not keen in reading written instructions. They rather prefer formal occasions like training programs for such script communications. The communication gap has been explained by 6 variables. The other two hypotheses, gap created by variability in the knowledge, learning ability and personality of service workers (H2) and gap created by lack of follow up of proper implementation by the management (H3) has also been strongly supported by the findings. Service workers do take cues about the seriousness of the scripts from the way management handle the implementation process and script implementation processes not linked with reward and punishment are taken less seriously. The variability gap has been explained by 4 variables and the follow up gap by 5 variables. None of the variables established through the qualitative study had to be dropped as all of them received strong support in the quantitative part of the study.

Table 2: Factors, Variables and Factor Loadings

Variables	Factor 1 (Communication Gaps	Factor 2 (Variability Gaps)	Factor 3 (Follow-up Gaps)	Coefficient Alpha
1. There are too many scripts to read	.8992			
2. We do not have time to read them all	.4626			
3. Often I sign as read, even when I have no read it	.8795			.89
4. I often depend on other colleagues to know the content	.8487			
5. Often scripts are communicated during after office hour meetings when I am no attentive	.6544			
6. I take scripts that communicated through formal training programs more seriously	.8566			
7. Some of my colleagues often fail to follow scripts		.8453		
8. Script implementation is affected by personality differences of service staff		.8564		.97
9. Script implementation is affected by knowledge differences of service staff		.8599		
10. Script implementation is affected by learning ability differences of service staff		.8468		
11. Management do not always show seriousness in implementing scripts			.7995	
12. Management only takes it seriously when something goes wrong or complaints are made			.8323	.86
13. Most of the time there are no rewards/punishments for following/no following scripts			.8144	
14. Often management ask us to sign confirming reading of scripts so that blames may be passed on if something goes wrong			.8425	
15. Sometimes management check whether we are following scripts without our knowledge			.7912	

Conclusion

More and more service firms are using structured scripts to educate their employees about their roles in service delivery. For successful implementation of these scripts, it is essential that everyone involved understands the scripts, align with them, and execute them in the prescribed way. A consistent and continuing communication program is the foundation of successful implementation. However, the findings of this research show that there is often a serious communication gap in the implementation process of the scripts. It is evident that service workers feel overloaded with communication when they say, “There are too many scripts to read” and “we do not have time to read them all”. Also they have serious reservations about late hour meetings about scripts. It appears that service workers take scripts communicated through formal training programs more seriously than other communication modes. However, no single medium is probably sufficient to transform everyone’s understanding of the script. It must be conveyed in all communication media and vehicles and reinforced by adequate rehearsals.

A service encounter is often seen as analogous to a theatrical performance, where actors follow predetermined scripts (Grove, Frisk, & Bitner 1992). Success of theatrical performances largely depends on how well the scripts have been rehearsed. Yet, the findings of this research indicate that service organisations that claim to be using scripts are often failing in implementing the scripts. The most popular ways they implement the scripts ensures very limited rehearsal. They often fail to use effective communication modes and follow-up practices that can ensure adequate rehearsal before implementation.

This model (Figure 1) shows that service organisations, particularly the large ones, need to take extra care in implementing their scripts. Whatever, communication modes they use, adequate rehearsal of the scripts needs to be ensured. This will not only minimise the communication gap, but also help reduce the implementation gap created by variability problem. Current implementation practices of most service firms ensure very limited rehearsal of scripts. Formal training programs are probably best for effective communication, understanding and rehearsal of the scripts. But, if they cannot be organised, adequate time must be given to the service employees to read and rehearse the scripts. Management also needs to closely follow-up the implementation of it through various means including shadow shopping. Moreover, implementation requires ongoing attention – and policymakers rarely have the commitment or patience required. No matter how well developed and implemented they are, scripts can only minimise the effects of variability problem, not totally eradicate them.

This research had limitations. The use of perceptual measures by service workers represents a limitation. Although this design was appropriate considering the fact that this researcher was to find the gaps from the perspective of the people who are responsible for the implementation process, any perceptual measures potentially are subject to various forms of response bias. Although there was consistency between the findings of both qualitative and quantitative studies, generalisability needs to be considered cautiously. Although, attempts have been made to identify a wide range of variables that may create gaps in the script implementation process, there may be some other influential factors that were overlooked, including, for example, resource issue, firm’s culture, personality traits, and management style. In this study, initial steps identifying the gaps in the implementation process of service scripts and variables explaining those gaps has been taken that may prove useful for further

studies to refine the service script implementation gap model with elimination of less important and addition of new variables suggested by further research. Practitioners in the field, on the other hand, will find this model easy to understand and relatively simple to use.

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