

Frontline Employees' Informal Learning and Customer Relationship Skills in Macao Casinos: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This study uses qualitative methods to better understand how the informal learning of frontline employees influenced their customer relationship skills in dealing with patrons at gaming tables, in the hope of achieving positive customer experiences in a competitive environment in Macao. As casino operators need to get their employees to work after limited formal training, they might find that their emphasis on formal training might be insufficient to provide patrons with customized service in Macao. In this context, the concept of informal learning, which is determined and directed by learners themselves to further improve what they have learned from their formal training, is likely to be of special significance in Macao.

Because dealing jobs in Macao casinos are restricted to local citizens, some Macao citizens have joined the industry primarily to take up relatively well-paid casino jobs

Based upon a constructivistic framework, this study used semi-structured interviews to gather data from 49 frontline employees. The study relied upon the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework to analyze qualitative data. Data analysis suggested that informal learning among frontline employees would lead to four strategies: (i) to be polite and respect patrons; (ii) to uncover patrons' emotional status from their body language; (iii) to manage patrons' emotions in their gaming pursuit; and (iv) to self-regulate emotions to the demands of a service encounter.

Keywords: informal learning, frontline employee, Macao, formal learning, employee training, human relations

Introduction

With Macao's gaming liberalization in 2001, six gaming licenses have yielded 33 casinos in Macao (as of 2010) from under 17 in 2003 (DICJ, 2010). All are competing in a fierce and expanding business environment. Not only is the competition intense in the number of choices a patron has in terms of casinos, it is also fierce when competing for employees.

Because dealing jobs in Macao casinos are restricted to local citizens, some Macao citizens have joined the industry primarily to take up relatively well-paid casino jobs (as indicated in Table 1). Hence, those joining for pay alone might be ambivalent about the nature of the work itself and lack the required personality and customer relationship skills in dealing with casino patrons.

Table 1
Average Monthly Earnings Including Double-Pay and Bonuses as of 4th Quarter 2010

| Industry | Amount in USD ^d |
|--|----------------------------|
| Manufacturing ^a | 811 |
| Wholesaling and Retailing ^b | 1,537 |
| Hotels and Restaurants ^a | 1,277 |
| Finance ^a | 2,330 |
| Gaming^c | 2,000 |

Note. Source: Survey on Manpower Needs and Wages (DSEC, 2010).

^aRefers to 3rd quarter 2010 since survey on Manufacturing, Hotels, Restaurants, and Banking & Insurance is conducted every 1st and 3rd quarter of the year. ^bSurvey on Wholesaling and Retailing is conducted every 2nd and 4th quarter of the year. ^cSurvey on Gaming is conducted every 2nd and 4th quarter of the year. ^dThe exchange rate for Macao dollars to US\$ is 8.0134 to 1.

With the robust demand for frontline employees (FEs) and a limited formal training approach that is primarily focused on gaming-oriented skills, some FEs might find themselves less than well-equipped with the requisite customer relationship skills in their workplace. Of course, since casino FEs are in direct contact with patrons, their training and their learning should be related directly to the improvement of their service encounters. Although many scholars have indicated the benefits of informal learning – most notably the improvement of an individual’s work performance (see, for example, Leslie, Aring, & Brand, 1998) – little attention has been paid to the informal learning of FEs in casinos in Macao. In fact, most of the employee training courses in Macao appear to focus on technical skill enhancement, such as blackjack dealing skills. As such, this study focuses upon formal and informal learning approaches, and how these approaches might benefit Macao gaming operators. For the purposes of this article, formal learning refers to learning in which learners are removed from the day-to-day work to engage in formal, intentionally planned educational activities such as lectures and discussions, whereas informal learning occurs through work activities and includes networking and coaching (Eraut, 2004; Straka, 2004).

This study focuses upon formal and informal learning approaches, and how these approaches might benefit Macao gaming operators.

Literature Review

Customer Experience and Service Quality

In marketing literature, experiences are often used to refer to a certain group of services including travel, restaurants and hotels, and at the core of these services is hedonic consumption (Hirshman & Holbrook, 1982). The experience concept is also used to add value to patron services, for instance in hotel services and airline services. As such, companies like Ritz Carlton and Singapore Airlines focus not only on traditional service issues, but also on creating highly favorable patron experiences (Berkley & Gupta, 1995).

As Johnston and Clark (2001) indicated, a service experience is the service encounter and/or service process that creates the patron’s cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses, which in turn result in a memory. Some of these service experiences are especially favorable (e.g., a restaurant patron receives a steak cooked to his or her liking and then engages in a pleasant conversation with the waiter, and finally indicates to the waiter that he or she will return the following weekend) while others

are particularly unfavorable (e.g., a patron receives his or her steak undercooked, the dialogue between the patron and waiter is minimal, and the patron informs the manager that he or she likely will not return) (Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2000). Both tend to stay in the patron's long-term memory.

What distinguishes the excellent from the average companies often has to do with these experiences, and not only a value for money outcome or cognitive assessment (Johnston & Clark, 2001). Consistent with this thinking, Berry, Carbone & Haeckel (2002) emphasize "managing the total customer experience." Moreover, Wong (2004) found that customers' negative emotions have a stronger effect on satisfaction than do positive emotions, while Sierra, Heiser, and McQuitty (2009) suggest that patrons who have positive experiences at one service location tend to develop loyalty toward the same service brand at other locations. Hence, it is crucial for organizations to manage patrons' emotions to remain competitive and financially successful (Stauss & Neuhaus, 1997).

Managing Customer Emotions in the Era of Customer Sovereignty and Organizational Competitive Success

Frontline employees (FEs) essentially become the embodiment of the organization, and hence can be considered corporate "hardware" and an important part of what the patron consumes. To build upon this thinking, the attitudes, behaviors, and skills of FEs can influence customer perceptions of customer service in their social interactions with patrons (Bowen & Schneider, 1985; Ekinci, Dawes, & Massey, 2008).

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In today's competitive environment, when one service company starts attracting patrons on the basis that "the customer is the king," other companies are also pushed in that direction. Although management often stresses that FEs should take "ownership" of staff-client interactions (Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, & Tam, 1999), FEs technically own nothing but their labor power. The trick for FEs is to be "both deferential and authoritative" (Benson, 1986, p. 159), to direct behavior but to convey the impression that the patron is in charge in their service delivery process.

Since FEs are in direct contact with patrons, they create and maintain the kinds of patron relationships that generate positive emotions and favorable service experiences. As such, management not only needs to recognize FEs' eminent role in ensuring service success, but also to ensure that these employees know how to take control of interactions with patrons in the workplace to ensure that the "point of balance" between patrons' importance and efficient task completion has been achieved (Korczynski, 2001; Rieder, Matuschek, & Anderson, 2000).

Further complicating matters here, Hall (1976) found that different cultures may vary in their approach to social interactions. For instance, social interactions in Western countries such as the U.S. and Germany tend to be explicit, direct and intimate, whereas the same interactions in an Eastern environment like China involves a variety of implicit messages, and subtleties of word choice can be especially important. In today's rapidly globalizing world, more and more staff-client interactions are multinational and multiethnic, and this has created additional challenges for FEs in their social interactions. The limited work on staff-client interactions in different cultures tends to focus on organizational and personal factors (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Kivelä & Chu, 2001; Lanjananda & Patterson, 2009). Faced with patrons from all over the world in an era of customer sovereignty, FEs need to understand the broad tendencies of the predominant cultures of their customer base.

Regardless of FEs' difficulties in achieving a balance between patrons' supposed sovereignty and efficient task completion in a globalizing world, from an organizational perspective, maintaining patrons' positive emotions is crucial as retaining patrons can save money by reducing the additional cost of finding new patrons. In fact, Zeithaml,

Berry, and Parasuraman (1996) have suggested that a long-standing relationship with current patrons has a positive effect on profitability through additional sales to that patron, and diminished resistance by patrons to paying higher prices. Since managing customer emotions becomes vital to competitive success, there exists the need to provide FEs with the skills and motivation to be able to deliver a high quality, professional service (Reichheld, 1996). Based upon this, there is the need to initiate research to explore how FEs learn to improve their customer relationship skills in their workplaces.

Formal Learning and Informal Learning in the Workplace

For the past few decades, the most frequent solution to improving employees' performance has been to send them to formal training programs, such as classes, conferences and computer-based training. In recent years, critics have claimed that formal training does not prepare employees to keep pace with the constant change that occurs in today's workplace (Hartley, 2000) and does not provide employees with sufficient real-world experience to develop proficiency (Sheckley & Keeton, 1999). Green (1999) has specifically indicated that in workplaces, much of the required knowledge or relevant skills is hard or impossible to codify, and therefore such knowledge cannot be taught within the setting of formal education.

Watkins and Marsick (1992) offer a theory of learning in organizations that distinguishes formal training from informal learning. Formal training occurs in the absence of action; learners are removed from the day-to-day work to engage in formal, intentionally planned educational activities such as lectures, discussions, and role plays. On the other hand, informal learning is typically regarded as being "part of the job" or a mechanism for "doing the job properly" (Boud & Middleton, 2003). Informal learning occurs through work activities (Eraut, 2004; Straka, 2004), and includes "self-directed learning, networking, coaching, mentoring and trial-and-error" (Watkins & Marsick, 1992, p. 291). Formal learning can be likened to riding a bus with a driver who serves as the instructor. Since the route is preplanned, the educational process is largely the same for everyone. On the other hand, informal learning is more like riding a bike, in that the individual determines the route and pace (Cross, 2007).

What do Workers Informally Learn in their Workplace and How?

The conceptual framework for informal learning is grounded in experiential learning theory, pioneered by Dewey (1938) and later expanded on by the work of Kolb (1984) and others. Schugurensky (2000) suggested that there are three forms of informal learning: (i) self-directed learning, which is both intentional and conscious without the assistance of an instructor or facilitator; (ii) incidental learning, which is an unintentional but conscious process that takes place in the course of doing work; and (iii) socialization, which refers to the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors or skills that occur during everyday life and that is both unintentional and unconscious. Informal learning in this study refers to learning which takes place in the work context and that is not formally organized into a program by the employer (Dale & Bell, 1999). Informal learning may be planned or unplanned, structured or unstructured, but usually incorporates a degree of consciousness about the learning that is taking place.

Various scholars have indicated that much learning in organizations occurs through informal means (Eraut, 2004; Livingstone & Sawchuck, 2005). In fact, Eraut (2004) even suggests that there is little that people *cannot* learn at work. Such learning includes:

- (i) task performance involving fluency, skills and collaborative work;
- (ii) awareness and understanding, like understanding of colleagues, contexts, one's own

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Informal learning may be planned or unplanned, structured or unstructured, but usually incorporates a degree of consciousness about the learning that is taking place.

- organization and problem risks;
- (iii) personal development such as handling emotions, building and sustaining relationships, and the ability to learn from experience;
- (iv) teamwork including collaborative work and problem-solving;
- (v) role performance including supervisory role, delegation and crisis management;
- (vi) academic knowledge and skills like research-based practice, theoretical thinking and using knowledge sources;
- (vii) decision-making and problem-solving involving group decision-making, and decision-making under conditions of pressure; and
- (viii) judgment including quality of performance, priorities, and levels of risk.

Even if there is little that people cannot learn at work, the informal knowledge learned in the workplace is in some ways different from knowledge learned from formal education. Matuski and Hill (1996) indicated that the informal knowledge learned from experience can be tacit, difficult to express, and codify while the formal knowledge from formal education tends to be explicit and can be easily codified into text or diagrams (Nonaka, 1991). In addition, Bontis (1998) indicated that tacit knowledge is contained within the individual members of the organization and such knowledge is often more valuable -- but less accessible. Bontis (1998) further suggested that organizations needed some type of structure to capture this knowledge and transfer it to explicit knowledge, so that the knowledge becomes accessible to others.

With the significance of informal learning, Gerber, Lankshear, Larsson, and Svensson (1995) have discovered that workers at a similar level in different workplaces and workers with different levels of responsibilities learn in their careers or jobs in a number of ways (Gerber, 1996). Some scholars found that the learning strategies of informal learning include observation of others (Hara, 2001), working in teams (MacNeil, 2001), reflection (Doyle & Young, 1999; Hara, 2001), and action learning (Miller, 2003). Other strategies include formal and informal networking (Doyle & Young, 2001), mentoring (Coyle & Ellinger, 2001), seeking information from co-workers (Lohman, Wang, & Woolf, 1996), application of past learning and experience (Coyle & Ellinger, 2001), and intuition (Coyle & Ellinger, 2001). Reading (Fenwick & Hutton, 2000), field trips (Cseh, 1999) and research (Sawchuk, 2001) are other strategies used along with informal trial and error (Raffo, Lovatt, Banks, & O'Connor, 2000).

The range of ways of informal learning indicates that workers are rather broad-minded in their approaches to learning in the workplace. This further suggests that workers have the capacity to take control of the ways by which they informally learn in their work in order to achieve better learning outcomes. This is not to deny that management should support and encourage workers to engage in informal learning, but the prime responsibility for such learning can be with the workers themselves. Based upon this, different individuals exposed to the same learning environment will achieve different levels of skills, depending on their interests, motivations, and aptitudes (Skule, 2004).

Even though much has been written about the informal learning that adults engage in their workplace, most of this writing is quite generic and does not offer sufficient specific guidance as to the learning that occurs in different workplaces in different industries. Although the literature does provide a useful start to appreciate the nature of the concept of informal learning, its general nature does not allow the unpacking of employees' understanding of the concept of informal learning in their workplaces and its influence on their work performance. The research undertaken for this study involves such unpacking with regard to the ways in which informal learning influenced the customer relationship skills of FEs in dealing with patrons at gaming tables in casinos in Macao, in the hope of creating the "correct" emotional climate to achieve positive customer experiences.

Methods

As of year end of 2010, there were 33 casinos associated with the six gaming

franchisees in Macao, employing about 33,300 FEs (DSEC: Gaming Industry, 2010). These 33 casinos excluded hotels which only had areas for slot machines with linked jackpot games due to the limited opportunities such machines had for interaction with casino patrons. All FEs interviewed were full-time workers who worked directly with patrons in the delivery of gaming services at gaming tables, with the following qualification. The definition of FEs includes front desk workers holding Macao identity cards for table games such as baccarat and blackjack, including dealers, dealer-inspectors, supervisors and pit managers, but it excludes imported foreign workers. The latter are a minority and their inclusion would have broadened the scope and complexity of the research at the cost of depth. The interview protocol can be seen in Appendix A.

The researcher, with the constraints on resources and time, limited the study to approximately 20% of the casinos, i.e., six casinos. These six casinos were associated with four of the six gaming franchisees. Detailed descriptions of the casinos are not possible due to a promise of confidentiality made to the management of the casinos concerned. Without such a promise, access would have been denied. The casinos surveyed were full-service hotel-casinos, with the same major types of table games and similar non-gaming amenities. Some of these casinos catered to low- and middle-income clientele while others catered to middle- and/or upper-income clientele. In total, the researcher interviewed 49 FEs from these casinos.

Table 2 reveals the distribution of the number and proportion of FEs grouped under different gaming franchisees, interviewed by the researcher as of the year end of 2010.

Table 2

Number and Proportion of Frontline Employees Grouped Under Different Gaming Franchisees as at 2010 Year-end

| Franchisee | Number of FEs Interviewed | | |
|----------------|---------------------------|----------|--------------|
| | Frequency | Subtotal | Percentage |
| A1 | 10 | | |
| A -- A2 | 8 | 25 | 51.0 |
| A3 | 7 | | |
| B -- B1 | 10 | 10 | 20.4 |
| C -- C1 | 6 | 6 | 12.2 |
| D -- D1 | 8 | 8 | 16.3 |
| Total | 49 | | 100.0 |

Note. The number after the alphabet indicates a specific casino associated with a specific gaming franchisee. A1, A2 and A3 mean that the frontline employees interviewed came from three different casinos associated with gaming franchisee A.

Table 3

Gender of Study Sample

| Gender | Frequency | Percentage of Study Sample | Percentage of Study Population as at |
|--------------|-----------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | | | 2010 Year end ^a |
| Male | 20 | 40.8 | 43.0 |
| Female | 29 | 59.2 | 57.0 |
| Total | 49 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Note. ^aSource: Survey on manpower needs and wages: Gaming industry (DSEC, 2010).

Table 3 indicates that the sample included 40.8% males and 59.2% females; these figures were close to the percentages of FEs in all casinos in Macao as at year-end of 2010, suggesting that the perspectives of the study sample should not be gender biased.

Table 4

Positions Held by Study Sample

| Positions | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Dealer | 17 | 34.7 |
| Dealer-Inspector ^a | 6 | 12.2 |
| Supervisor | 19 | 38.8 |
| Pit Manager | 7 | 14.3 |
| Total | 49 | 100.0 |

Note. ^aThis position does not exist in all casinos. They are more experienced dealers who take up supervisory work and sometimes work as dealers.

Table 4 demonstrates that about 46.9% of interviewees were dealers and dealer-inspectors while 38.8% were supervisors and 14.3% were managers. Since the primary objective was to probe how the informal learning of FEs influenced their customer relationship skills from their range of experiences in dealing with patrons at gaming tables, all categories of employees in direct contact with casino patrons at gaming tables were selected for involvement. While dealers and supervisors worked together at gaming tables in their service encounters with patrons, the inclusion of pit managers offered a more complete picture of FEs' informal learning processes.

Table 5

Age Distribution of Study Sample

| Age Range | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|--------------|
| 20 to < 30 | 22 | 44.9 |
| 30 to < 40 | 19 | 38.8 |
| 40 to < 50 | 8 | 16.3 |
| Total | 49 | 100.0 |

Table 5 shows that 83.7% were within the 20-40 age range. Macao's gaming franchise liberalization in 2001 boosted the number of FEs from just below 10,000 in 2003 to 33,300 at year-end 2010 (DSEC: Gaming Industry, 2010), suggesting that about 70% of FEs had less than seven years of experience in dealing with casino patrons at gaming tables in Macao. Table 6 reveals that about 45% of the interviewees had more than 5 years' experience in interacting with casino patrons, an indicator of the balance between more experienced and less experienced FEs in the research undertaken for this study.

Table 6

Working Experience of Study Sample in Dealing with Casino Patrons at Gaming Tables

| Number of Years | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------|
| 1-5 | 27 | 55.1 |
| 6-10 | 15 | 30.6 |
| 11-15 | 1 | 2.0 |
| 16-20 | 2 | 4.1 |
| >20 | 4 | 8.2 |
| Total | 49 | 100.0 |

Regarding educational attainments, Table 7 reveals that, with the exception of the undergraduate category, the study sample had better educational attainment than that of the overall employed population in casinos in Macao at 2010 year-end, with about 70% holding senior secondary education credentials (among the overall employed population, 28% boasted senior secondary education credentials).

Table 7

Educational Attainments of Study Sample

| Educational Attainments | Frequency | Percentage of Interview Sample | Percentage of Employed Population at 2010 Year-end in Macao ^a |
|-------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------|--|
| Pre-primary Education | 0 | 0.0 | 4.5 |
| Primary ^b | 1 | 2.0 | 17.4 |
| Junior Secondary ^c | 7 | 14.3 | 27.2 |
| Senior Secondary ^d | 34 | 69.4 | 28.2 |
| Undergraduate ^e | 7 | 14.3 | 22.7 |
| Total | 49 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Note. ^aSource: Employment survey (DSEC, 2011). ^bPrimary education refers to 6 years of education and the interviewee might or might not have finished the whole prescribed coursework. ^cRefers to the 3 years of education after primary schooling. ^dRefers to the 3 years of education after junior secondary and the interviewee might or might not have finished it. ^eRefers to the 4-year university programs and the interviewee might or might not have completed the program at the time of interviewing.

Data Collection

In order to gain an understanding of the perspectives of FEs in their informal knowledge creation from the range of experiences they had encountered, an in-depth interview-based study was undertaken. Engaging in dialogue with participants enabled the researcher to elicit personal descriptions and subjective perspectives on their informal learning processes under the assumption that their perspectives were “meaningful, knowable and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Due to the researcher’s civil servant status, he was legally prohibited from entry into the casino gaming areas. In addition, the keen competition among casinos in Macao meant that the researcher’s collection of such company documents as company staff policy or memoranda to staff, which can indicate “people’s sensations, experiences, and knowledge which connote opinions, values and feelings” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 216), were not available because of commercial confidentiality. These conditions forced a reliance on interview data. The semi-structured interview was selected to capture the complexities of the interviewees’ individual perspectives and experiences.

For the purposes of this project, the researcher worked with the Macao Gaming Teaching and Research Centre. This centre, established in accordance with the Chief Executive’s dispatch no. 268/2009, offers casino management training courses, provides in-service training, and promotes academic research in the gaming area. Based on the Centre’s network, the researcher emailed twenty casinos with which the Centre has established some working relationship, asking for interviews with their experienced FEs. Upon the receipt of a favorable reply, the researcher made telephone contacts with the supportive casinos to obtain agreement to participate in the research project. The researcher repeatedly emphasized the need to interview more experienced FEs, and that the decision as to who would be interviewed rested with casino management – which could, of course, lead to some bias.

Prior to the confirmation of the participants for the interviews, one casino requested that the researcher could neither know the name of participants nor contact them at a later date for confidentiality issues, another requested the researcher to sign a

document promising the confidentiality of the data secured from that casino, while another one specifically asked to have each interview reduced to an hour because of its manpower shortage. Given that such public holidays as Christmas, Easter, and Golden Week in mainland China (seven-day national holidays) are peak periods for casinos, the researcher needed to schedule interviews outside these holidays. Such interview arrangements took, on average, about three months to have the FEs interviewed during 2009 and 2010.

Each interview was sufficiently long for rapport to be established between the two parties. The interviews ranged from 45 to 105 minutes, depending on the richness of the interviewee's information. Although the intense competition among casinos and FEs' shift arrangements had rendered the researcher unable to conduct longitudinal interviews with the same participants to trace their informal learning processes over an extended period of time, a wealth of data were gained from the individual interviews. A pleasing aspect of the interviews was the number of participants who had positive comments concerning their interviews. At the end of the interviews, they stated that they were delighted to have the opportunity to express their perspectives, hoped that their data could be helpful to the study, and asked when the study would be released and whether there would be a Chinese version published.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using two methods. First, the quantitative data were analyzed by calculating descriptive statistics for the sample. Second, qualitative data from the individual interviews were audio-taped, transcribed and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework for the inductive analysis of qualitative data. The three interacting activities: (i) data reduction, which "sharpens, sorts, focuses, discards, and organizes data in such a way that 'final' conclusions can be drawn and verified" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.11); (ii) data display, which involves reducing the information into appropriate and simplified "gestalts or easily understood configurations" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.11); and (iii) drawing and verifying conclusions, which is to draw meaning and check conclusions from displayed data, ultimately in the form of propositions, were the procedures that formulated the cyclical process in this analytical model. The components of the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework and an illustration of their interaction are shown in Figure 1.

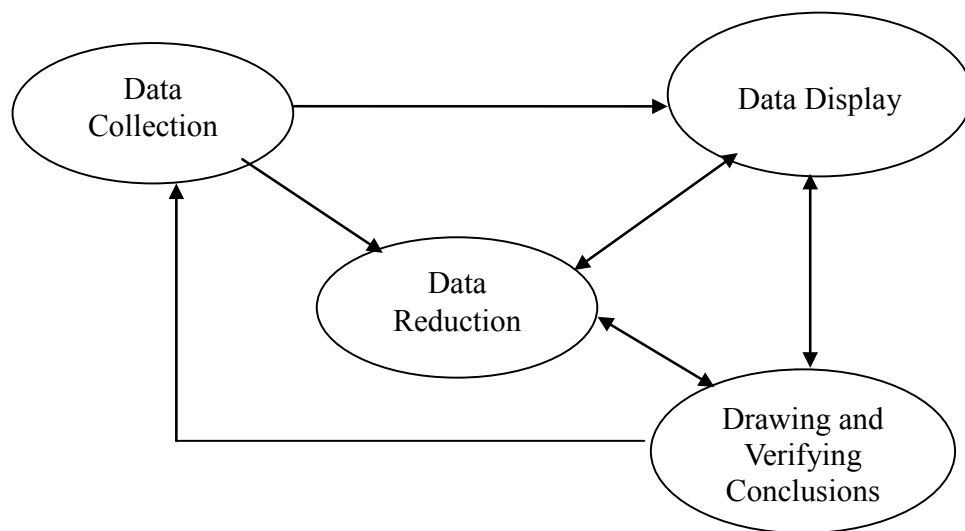


Figure 1. Components of data analysis. Source: Miles & Huberman (1994, p. 12)

Following the Miles and Huberman (1994) framework, the researcher coded the answers in a way that reflected higher order concepts, leading to the identification of

categories and issues pertaining to the central research question concerning the influence of informal learning on FEs' customer relationship skills in casinos in Macao. During the coding process, the themes that emerged in each FE's interview were compared across individuals to identify common beliefs that were held simultaneously by different people in the same organization and across organizations. The recursive process of qualitative data analysis continued until no new sources of information or themes emerged from the data and clear patterns on FE's informal learning processes had emerged and were integrated.

Closely linked to coding was memo-writing. Memos were detailed notes of ideas about the data and the coded categories written next to the interview transcripts. The researcher wrote memos throughout the analysis to record his own reflections/remarks in the margins, finding themes and patterns to help in the conceptualizing and explaining in the latter stages in order to ensure that data were not detached from the context.

With the researcher's attempt to take on the task of identifying and making explicit patterns that appeared to exist but remained unperceived by the study sample, he utilized an iterative analytic process to check for recurring themes and regularities as well as contrast patterns both in each FE's accounts and across their responses. This effort led to the development of a coherent set of explanations and the generation of propositions in the form of strategies which FEs have informally learned from their range of customer relationship experiences.

Below, Tables 8 and 9 provide an illustration of how the researcher grouped together common raw data codes and quotes which formed the basis of creating labels for the next level of themes, which were then subsequently grouped to form even higher order themes.

Table 8

Sample of Interview Transcripts: Script A

| CODES | SCRIPT A | MEMO |
|--|--|---|
| | <p>Sometimes your customers are difficult or intoxicated, sometimes they will have some negative emotions, especially when they lose their money. How would you deal with them? How would you correctly interpret the voice of a customer?</p> | |
| <p>OBSERVATION -gamblers' hometown -gamblers' behavior</p> | <p>I observe gamblers and see whether there are some major characteristics in their practices or behavior. For example, I'll see where these gamblers are from, are they from the northern part or southern part of China? If they are from the northern part, they tend to be rougher and it is very important not to get them annoyed.</p> | <p>Cultural differences may lead to different gamblers' behaviors</p> |
| <p>KNOWLEDGE -gamblers' type & behavior</p> | | |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| <p>JUDGMENT</p> <p>-gamblers' type</p> <p>-gamblers' mood</p> <p>-gamblers' gestures</p> <p>-appropriate action</p> | <p>I also observed their behavior at the table.</p> <p>People who are quiet at tables, can generally be handled with relative ease because people of this kind usually don't have many requests.</p> <p>Moreover, we should be alert enough to feel something from gamblers' speech or tone when they grow so irritated or dissatisfied that they can't control their temper, or start to take</p> | <p>FEs need calm demeanor</p> |
| <p>KNOWLEDGE</p> <p><i>Understand the meaning of gamblers' behavior</i></p> | <p>some actions like getting up from their seats or trying to pick up some objects like ashtray, plastic cups, paper cups or whatever within their reach. Before reaching this point, I have usually made some signals to the pit manager that there are some troublesome gamblers. In this case, the pit manager would keep an eye on the gambler and come right away if the situation deteriorates, probably with the guards to help him to settle the case.</p> | <p>FEs good at reading facial expressions</p> |
| <p>PROFESSIONAL SERVICE NEEDED</p> <p><i>Gamblers' awareness of casino operations</i></p> | <p>Gamblers very clearly know that we are not qualified to deal with them, so they usually like to tell us to refer their cases to someone higher in the organizational hierarchy, like the pit manager, to give them a definite reply.</p> | |
| <p>JUDGMENT</p> <p><i>Response based on knowledge & experience</i></p> | <p>On the other hand, if dissatisfied gamblers keep quiet and say no more in response to your feedback, it means that your response is going to work and it'll probably need some more time or just a few praises or jokes to make things work.</p> | |

Table 9
Sample of Interview Transcripts: Script B

| CODES | SCRIPT B | MEMO |
|--|--|----------------------|
| | <p>Sometimes your customers are difficult or intoxicated, sometimes they will have some negative emotions, especially when they lose their money. How would you deal with them? How would you correctly interpret the voice of a customer?</p> | |
| <p>OBSERVATION</p> <p>-Gamblers' facial expression & gestures</p> <p>-Gamblers' behavior</p> | <p>From gambler's reaction like their unfriendly expression in their eyes, scolding people or throwing chips and other things around the table, you know that they're difficult customers and you need to keep quiet. If he scolds, just treat him as if he scolded the game or the cards.</p> | <p>Calm demeanor</p> |

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| EMOTION | At times, some customers wanted to take advantage of their frightening actions and | very important |
| REGULATION | took away their cards. You had to be firm, strong and tough in your position and don't get frightened. They may throw things around or try to challenge the rules. You have to tell them right on the spot that they are not allowed to do so. At times, you might have | |
| <i>Gamblers may test the waters</i> | | |
| JUDGMENT | gamblers who always stared at you with blinking eyes while rubbing their cards with their fingers, you would know that something might go wrong and needed to pay more attention. Gamblers are not allowed to tear the cards or throw them on the floor. If they do so, I'll advise them. Given that this is the limit of my authority, I'll report it to my superior, the pit manager, if such gamblers still persist in their behavior. | Some gamblers may want to cheat |
| -Interpret gamblers' challenging behaviors | | |
| -Appropriate action | | |
| EMOTION | | |
| REGULATION | | |
| -Politeness | | FEs need practical & emotional support |
| PROFESSIONAL SERVICE | Basically speaking, if you treat your customers well, they will treat you well too. Sometimes the attitudes of some employees may not be good, but they think they have good attitude and this may exasperate the gamblers. For example, if you can suddenly greet your Korean customers with some Korean words, they will feel very happy. Customers come to Macao to gamble from distant places. If they get unhappy, there're always some reasons unless they are very picky or demanding customers by nature. | |
| -Politeness | | |
| -Able to say gamblers' dialects | | |
| -Create joyful atmosphere | | |

Results

This section presents the findings that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts. This analysis focused upon providing answers to the central research question on the ways that informal learning influenced the customer relationship skills of FEs from their range of experiences in dealing with patrons at gaming tables in casinos in Macao, in the hope of creating the "correct" emotional climate to achieve positive customer experience. Where a direct quote is given, a simple code that accords with the sequence number of the interview which provided these words follows the code. For instance, (43) indicates the 43rd of the 49 interviews conducted. The findings can be categorized into four strategies:

1. Politeness and Caring Attitude

Many interviewees reiterated the importance of politeness and a caring attitude to make patrons feel respected. FEs can make patrons experience customer sovereignty by raising questions like whether they need something hot if their drinks get cool, whether they need an ashtray if they hold a folded cigarette box in their hands, or whether they need to have the air-conditioners adjusted if they move the collar close to their neck. The following quotes are representative on this issue:

When I was new, I primarily focused on my gaming skills without paying much attention to customers' feelings. Of course, I got blamed for a number of instances and I've learned that I need to always say sorry for my inadvertence, impoliteness or mistake. When I take a break, I need to wish them good luck before I leave. If they show signs of impatience at my pace, I have to apologize and say that I am a novice dealer and will try my best to do better, or I'm slow because I'm inexperienced and afraid to make mistakes. Try to wish gamblers good luck. Remember to smile and be friendly to them (24).

When I was new, I mechanically answered 'yes' or 'no' when asked by customers. Later I learned from experienced staff that we could show them due respect and caring attitude. This not only creates good impressions on customers, it also helps when troubles arise. Of course, I need to adjust a bit to suit different situations. (9)

In the casino world of customer sovereignty, polite attitude and pleasing words could be powerful tools since giving significant "face" to casino patrons not only can help force patrons to observe the house rules, but can also create an amiable environment for problem-solving if arguments arise. One interviewee summed up this point well:

Most customers know about the house rules. They do not observe the rules because they want to show that they have 'faces' in casinos. We should be polite and gentle in speech. Even if customers are wrong, we need to talk to them in a very gentle and polite way asking them to help us achieve something. According to my experience, very few customers won't observe our rules if we repeatedly ask them to be cooperative as we have already given much 'face' to them. (36)

Casinos provide a rich environment where FEs can learn what it means to be considerate and informal learning is the prime means of building and improving the customer relationship skills of FEs referred to in the above statements.

2. Detecting the Emotional Status of Patrons

In the casino world of customer sovereignty, FEs learn that they can detect the underlying emotional state of patrons through close observation of gestures, body language, or facial displays of patrons after several rounds of a game, as illustrated by the following representative quotes:

Try to find out patrons' personality, and this can help you in dealing with them. For instance you can ask the gamblers whether ... they are tourists, and you'll know whether they are the quiet ones. Sometimes patrons ask to close the door and switch off the TV and you'll know that the patrons do not like to be disturbed. If a customer asks you for tea, or tells you that there are not many customers around, you'll know that he likes to chat a bit. (21)

We can get some ideas about their personality from the short chats. We can try to obtain a response by asking them one or two questions. If they said something negative straight away, you would know that this customer would not listen to others easily. (35)

By reading patrons' gestures and facial displays, FEs can interpret clues that reveal much about patrons' basic personality, and modify their service delivery in an attempt to take control of the staff-client interactions while making patrons experience a sense of sovereignty. In addition, close observation of patrons' gestures and facial expressions can be done tactfully to avoid complaints. Typical quotes on this topic included the following:

It's important to note their movements and eyes. However, you need to ensure that they do not know that you're watching them, otherwise they'll feel that they're targets and will raise complaints against you. (14)

Workplace informal learning offers flexibility in FEs' fundamental tasks in understanding patrons' emotional status, and considerable experience is needed to master the skills to interpret various elements of patrons' body language and facial displays. Such informal knowledge, acquired over time, benefits FEs to manage patrons' emotions for successful staff-client interactions.

3. Managing Patrons' Emotions at Gaming Tables

After detecting patrons' emotional status, FEs are better positioned to manage patrons' emotions with cues gleaned from patrons. Verbal communication can play a crucial role. FEs can be playful by telling jokes, exhibiting an amazed look at the gaming outcome, or praising patrons for not following their advice. The following quotes suggest some possible tactics:

Gamblers often request a specific card and may cry, "My 12 needs a 9!" If the card drawn is a 6 or 8, I can say, "Sorry, I was out of 9s, but that should get you close enough to win." (12)

If the gambler loses, I would show a facial display pretending to get surprised at the gaming outcome. I think this practice works, and gamblers won't easily get their temper out of control. (34)

If a gambler has lost some rounds, ask him to stop for a while with a caring attitude. Though to be honest, even with such words, they often will not listen. (14)

In baccarat, when I turn over my card which is 8, I would try to stand on the patron's side, calling out 9 in the hope of getting the card he wants. If mine is 9, I try to call out 9 for him in the hope of getting a draw. What I can do is to say such words in the hope of appeasing the cold atmosphere. (44)

The above FEs' responses appear to be purposeful and situationally appropriate, consistent with the study of Gwinner, Bitner, Brown, & Kumar (2005). Such responses would not be possible without making sound judgments on particular contexts.

To further attract patrons, many casinos in Macao have established loyalty programs offering complimentary services. The following comment demonstrates a FE's understanding and actions regarding patron's emotions:

Two customers with an average bet of (US\$500 to \$700) had played for three to four minutes. They asked the public relations staff for a comp room. The staff replied that their points were not enough and asked them to play longer. The guests argued that they were regulars. I apologized and said that was the house rule. They retorted, "What kind of rules?" I advised them to play longer to win more as a comp room cost just US\$125. I said, "Boss, play a bit longer and you can earn more points. With your big bets, it'll take just a few moments. Besides, there's no reason to lose these benefits to the casino. I'll ask the PR staff to help you join our membership. If you're really short of some points, I'll ask the manager to give you the room as you're our regulars." They felt okay and played for some time. After a few minutes, I gave them free coupons for meals and they were surprised. They played for about two hours and I asked the PR to check their points which were more than required. In front of the guests, the PR said that the guests still needed some points, and I asked the PR to give them a favor. The PR gave them a comp room at last. (42)

This FE's creativity, judgment, and situationally appropriate actions were crucial to managing patrons' emotions in the desired direction. Apart from the emotional labor to manage patrons' emotions, FEs can also engage in offering advice or adjusting dealers' posture, with hopes of helping patrons win (even if such a win only happens through luck). Two representative quotes were:

I may discuss his strategy of betting and advise on bets that give him a higher chance of winning and the reasons for changing from his usual strategy, in order to show we care about him. (46)

If patrons lose, we'll try to make them win by asking the dealer to stand a bit left or a bit right, or to turn over the cards with left hand or right hand. (30)

If the gaming table is "cold" with losses, FEs can manage patrons' emotions in a direction that does not hold them responsible for bad outcomes. For instance, FEs can displace blame onto other gamblers but such tactics require considerable skills, as the following quote indicates:

I was dealing to a table full of gamblers. The player at third base decided to stay on her 16 when I had a 7. Before moving on to my own hand, I asked the gambler, "Madam,

no card, are you sure?" She repeated her request to stay and I proceeded to hit my own hand with a 4 and then a 10. As I collected the bets, I shook my head and rolled my eyes at third base, in an attempt to shift the responsibility to her. (12)

Hence, FEs are active agents in discerning cues gleaned from patrons and judging appropriate tactics to manage patrons' emotions. On the other hand, there are occasions that necessitate a regulation of FEs' *own* emotions in the face of mismanaged staff-client interactions.

4. FEs' Regulation of Their Own Emotions

While interacting with patrons, FEs have to manage their emotions to create the "correct" emotional climate. Typical comments supportive of this perspective were:

Our bottom line is that patrons can take advantage of our staff verbally, but they cannot physically hurt our employees. We try to channel their negative emotions into other areas. (21)

My superior, who accompanied several patrons in, reminded me that they were friends of the boss and told me to let them play their own way. It seemed to me that we sometimes had no rules and I just followed what he said. Sometimes I felt being like a machine, doing what they had "inputted" me to do. (27)

While keeping quiet and showing no emotion is one approach to emotion regulation, some other tactics include surface acting (for instance, expressing the organizationally-desired emotion and concealing felt emotion), or deep acting (e.g., really feeling the way one is trying to express) (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1998). However, because of Macao patrons' increasing understanding of the gaming situation, they can often detect feigned sincerity if FEs surface act. Hence, deep acting appears necessary to achieve improved interactions, as indicated by the following quote:

If customers have lost a number of rounds, I would advise them to think carefully before they bet because the pattern of the outcome does not seem to suit them. We need to talk to them in a sincere way because gamblers can tell whether you really mean what you say. So, it's better for you to be sincere in words otherwise you're going to add fuel to the fire. (44)

This comment implies that FEs need to adapt their own emotional state to what is required in a particular situation, and to really feel the way they are trying to express. On the other hand, if a FE shows symptoms of emotional distress when patrons direct obscenities at them, for instance, a common tactic is switching the dealer. A typical quote reveals this tactic:

It happened that a dealer retorted to the guests and the supervisor was afraid of getting involved, so the manager came and consoled the dealer and moved the dealer to another table. With this change, it's easier to resolve the situation. (48)

Switching the dealer can not only avoid a hostility, it can also distract the patron's attention away from the target if supplemented tactfully with playful jokes or finding humor in the situation. In this way, FEs can still retain control while giving a great deal of all-important "face" to patrons. Of course, significant informal knowledge and skills are involved in taking steps to avoid customer confrontations like these. Although the acquisition of such customer relationship skills can take considerable effort, they have long-term advantages for FEs, as the following quote indicates:

If they [FEs] have the heart to offer good customer service, they will get an extra level of security and also are unlikely be on the firing list. By doing so, they'll have greater chance of getting praise and promotions in this competitive environment. (42)

Conclusions

This article has illustrated four strategies which FEs have learned from their range of experiences in dealing with patrons at gaming tables in casinos in Macao: (i) to be polite and give respect to patrons; (ii) to understand patrons' emotional status from their body language; (iii) to manage patrons' emotions; and (iv) to self-regulate emotions to

reflect the demands of a service encounter. It is evident that Macao FEs can improve their service encounters with casino patrons by making better decisions on appropriate tactics, by perfecting the requisite customer relationship skills, and by tactfully applying them to the demands of different service encounters, based on their informal knowledge accumulated over years in their workplace. Nevertheless, given the self-directed nature of informal learning (in which the learner determines what, where and when to learn), the professional service of FEs to manage patron emotions to achieve positive customer experience is often affected by their own interests and motivations (Skule, 2004).

A number of HR problems in Macao stem from the mandate that dealing jobs in casinos in Macao be restricted to locals, and that these locals are given relatively higher salaries. As a result, local operators have complained that some Macao citizens who lacked the required personality and who were ambivalent about the nature of casino work have joined this industry. Because of the robust demand for FEs, most have had limited formal training primarily focused on gaming skills, and have not found themselves well-equipped with the requisite customer relationship skills. Since casinos in Macao are starting to experience intense competition as a result of gaming liberalization in the region and around the world, FEs are now faced with pressure to manage patron emotions to achieve positive customer experiences. If it is true that formal training does not provide employees with sufficient real-world experience to develop proficiency (Sheckley & Keeton, 1999) and does not prepare employees to keep pace with the constant change in today's workplace (Hartley, 2000), informal learning becomes especially crucial to help Macao's FEs acquire all-important customer relationship skills. After years of work in casinos in Macao, the experienced FEs have accumulated their informal knowledge on customer relationship skills through repeated applications and reflections.

Given that informal learning is the prime means of building and improving the customer relationship skills of FEs, casino management should focus upon the development of informal knowledge of FEs in casinos in Macao. However, this informal knowledge is often hidden at the individual level, and often inaccessible by casino management and other employees (Skule, 2004). The tacit nature of informal learning poses a major challenge for casino management, and it appears that there is much work ahead for casino managers in Macao when considering the creation of structures that can turn this type of individual "asset" into organizational and corporate assets.

Limitations

Given that the semi-structured interview was the sole means of data collection, the researcher requested an empty back-office room where privacy and comfort were assured so that participants felt free to express their opinions without the fear of being overheard. Since the researcher was not allowed to contact the participants after the interviews, the researcher tried to ensure that he correctly understood their perspectives by raising questions during the interviews, but ambiguities certainly might still exist. To further reduce problems in this area, the researcher asked some stakeholders to comment on findings and interpretations in relation to their own personal experiences, as a check on the credibility of those findings.

The data collection process depended on the verbal self-reporting of participants, on the assumption that they were cognizant of their underlying motivations and were articulate enough to express their own ideas. However, it could certainly be the case that they were unaware of their underlying motivations. In addition, as the interviewees worked at only six casinos, the perspectives in this study cannot represent all possible perspectives. Although the findings may not apply generally to all FEs in casinos in Macao, the audit trail, findings and examples of analysis that led to those findings should allow readers to

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make their own judgments as to whether the findings can apply to other situations with which they are familiar.

Recommendations for Future Research

Since this study involved primarily self-reporting by participants and the researcher was unable to track the FEs over an extended period of time, an important focus for future research will be longitudinal approaches. Although the researcher exercised care to ensure that he correctly understood the FEs' perspectives at the time of the interview, future studies could gather longitudinal data to monitor whether, for instance, there are discernible long-term effects of informal learning activities. However, the potential barrier of commercial confidentiality is likely to remain a major hurdle to such research in Macao.

Since the pool of FEs was chosen by casino management, this study represents only some incidents in some casinos in Macao and cannot be generalized to the entire casino industry. As such, future research across a broader range of casinos and participants is recommended.

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Appendix A
Informal Learning of FLSWs in Casinos in Macao
Interview Questions

1. According to Dale & Bell (1999), informal learning includes learning which takes place in the work context and is not formally organized into a programme or curriculum by the employer.
 - a. What do you think informal learning in gaming industry will include?
Probes: reflective dialogue, receiving feedback from superiors or others, learning from mistakes, learning by experimenting, observation, searching the web or some others. Only raised as probes if participants do not raise these points in the initial discussion.
 - b. Can you give me an example of learning by receiving feedback from superiors or colleagues?
Probe: Can you think of another example?
 - c. Can you give me an example of learning from mistakes?
Probe: If no example, can you give me an example of a friend (or other FLSWs) learning from mistakes?
 - d. Can you give me an example of learning by observation?
Same probe as above.
What is another example?
- 2a. You have a number of new customers from different places and they all have different characters and personality. Sometimes your patrons are difficult or intoxicated, sometimes they will have some negative emotions, especially when they lose their money. How would you deal with them?
 - b. Tell me about successful examples.
 - c. How did you learn to deal so well with this situation?
 - d. Probe to extend and/or clarify what was said by the interviewee.
 - e. Any failure cases?
 - f. Why do you think it failed?
 - g. Probe to extend and/or clarify what was said by the interviewee.
- 3a. It is said that good customer service relies heavily on confidence, courtesy and communication. You are expected to know how to greet your customers, diagnose customer problems, demonstrate customer empathy and communicate effectively with guests. How would you learn to achieve that?
 - b. Any examples?
Probe on: reflective dialogue, receiving feedback from superiors or others, learning from mistakes, observation or following dominant beliefs and practices within the company.

Personal Information:

1. Gender: Male Female

2. Position held by Interviewee:

3. Age:
A. 20 to 30 B. 30 to less than 40 C. 40 to less than 50 D. 50 or more

4. Working Experience (in years) in dealing with casino patrons at gaming tables:
A. 1 to 5 B. 6 to 10 C. 11 to 15 D. 16 to 20 E. more than 20

5. Educational Attainment:
A. Pre-primary education
B. Primary
C. Junior Secondary
D. Senior Secondary
E. Undergraduate

