

Avoiding the Dark Side of "Service with a Smile"

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Research Note

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No one likes a grumpy customer-service representative. "Service with a smile" is synonymous with good customer-service and brand experience. So much so that the term "emotional labor" has been coined to describe the aspect of service work in which employees are paid, in part, for displaying certain moods. Employers often require customer-service representatives to be cheerful, friendly and, if need be, sympathetic in order to promote spending and encourage customer loyalty. That said, research suggests that strict guidelines on employee emotions can hinder a company's path to high performance.

People frequently experience a wide range of emotions during a given workday but limit their expression in the interest of professionalism. Service workers, however, are often forced to control their emotions in a fashion that goes well beyond conventional norms of businesslike behavior. Unfortunately, they may experience emotional exhaustion and burnout as a result, and ultimately abandon their jobs.¹ In fact, service industries in the United States and Europe suffer from turnover rates almost double those of other industries. (See Exhibit 1.) This level of employee churn can be costly both in terms

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of productivity loss and recruiting and training expenditures, making emotional labor a matter of organizational financial health as well as employee health.

As part of Accenture's efforts to identify the components of high performance, this research note explains the mechanics of emotional labor and identifies managerial interventions to reduce its costly effects.

The Mechanics and Costs of Emotional Labor

Research suggests that people can manipulate their emotions in three ways: by suppressing genuine emotion, by "surface acting," or through "deep acting."² The first activity is straightforward: an employee might suppress or hide

his or her irritation with a demanding customer, for example. In contrast, surface acting involves actively faking emotions. For example, an employee might plaster on a smile and feign geniality while still feeling irritated on the inside. Finally, deep acting describes the process of actually trying to change one's internal mood to match job requirements. For example, an employee who arrives in an irritable mood might spend a few minutes thinking happy thoughts or briefly chatting with a coworker in order to truly feel cheerful and helpful.

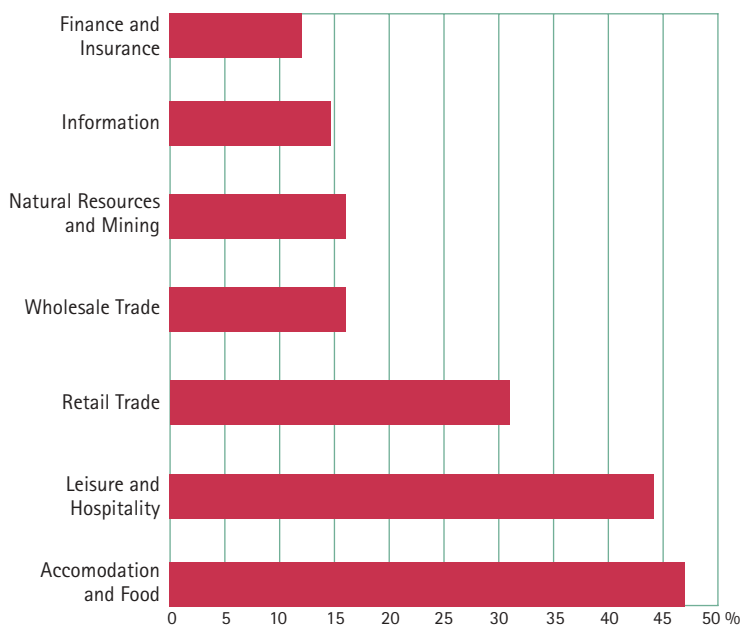
The stress and strain of emotional labor comes from a mismatch between an employee's internal emotions and the emotions he or she must express in the job. The feelings of emotional dishonesty caused by this difference contribute

significantly to employee emotional exhaustion, physical complaints, job dissatisfaction and, ultimately, disengagement.³

In addition to the disturbing psychological and physical toll emotional labor may take on employees, organizations may also suffer. Burnt-out, dissatisfied employees are less productive and less effective with customers. Emotionally exhausted employees also use more sick time, increasing health care and other costs associated with absenteeism (such as the expense of having to hire temporary workers, for example). Burnt-out employees bring down the morale of those around them, lowering coworkers' performance and productivity. Emotional labor has also been linked to employee turnover. When the conditions of emotional labor are particularly

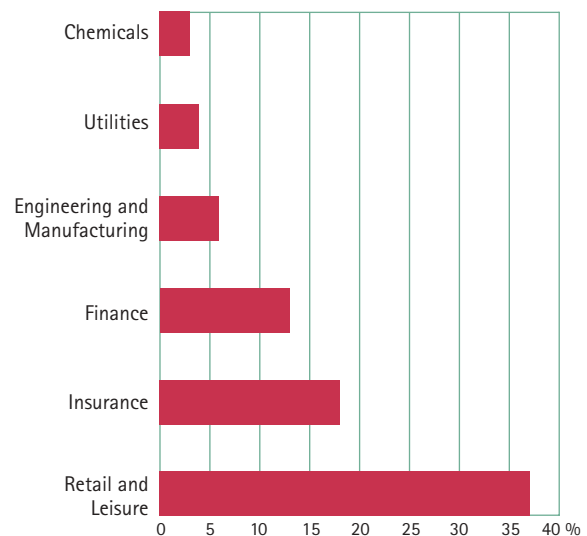
Exhibit 1: Average Annual Employee Turnover Rates

Voluntary Turnover In the United States, 2003-2004



Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Total Turnover in Europe, 2002-2003



Source: EP-First 2002-2003 HR Index Benchmarks

stressful, companies experience higher turnover and thus higher hiring and training costs. Companies need to factor in those costs before imposing behavioral guidelines on their employees.

Promoting Healthy Emotional Labor

Managers can take several steps to harness the emotions necessary for effective customer service while at the same time reducing the stress that can lead to burnout and turnover.

1. Align the requirements for emotional expression with customer expectations.

More exuberance is not always better. A large Canadian convenience-store chain spent millions of dollars on a training initiative to increase eye contact, smiling, and pleasant conversation during customer interactions.⁴ However, research on the training's effectiveness revealed that customers in busy convenience stores do not want pleasant conversation; they want to quickly purchase their items and leave. By requiring a stronger emotional response than was necessary, this company learned a costly lesson.

2. Hire employees with a predisposition for the required emotions.

People who genuinely feel positive emotions are obviously a better match for customer-service positions than those who have to fake it. For a position requiring cheerfulness, managers should seek to hire people who demonstrate a predisposition to be happy. Including a personality test that measures extraversion or positive affectivity (that is, a tendency to be cheerful) in the selection process is a useful way to accomplish this task.

3. Encourage and train employees to "deep act."

Because the stress of emotional labor is the result of a mismatch between felt and required emotions, deep acting—in which the employee really does improve his or her mood—is a more effective emotional management strategy than surface acting. Employees who are not feeling positive should be encouraged to do things that lift their mood, such as visualizing a cheerful event in their lives, decorating their workstations with personal items like family photos, briefly socializing with coworkers, or stretching at their workstations. By lifting their mood, they are able to meet the job's emotional requirements better than they would if they had to go through the day with a fake smile or tone of voice marked by forced cheeriness.

4. Lead by example.

Managers play a large role in setting the mood and tone of the work environment and should ensure that the atmosphere is congruent with the emotional requirements their employees must meet. Leading by example is a good way to do this. For example, managers whose employees need to remain calm and cheerful in the face of customer complaints should model the desired behaviors when dealing with difficult employees or work situations.

5. Avoid "overscripting" your employees.

Employees who feel pressure to follow a detailed script are more likely to feel inauthentic and stressed. Also, a highly scripted employee is more likely to be seen as disingenuous by customers. Companies should allow employees some room to express the required emotions in their own way. In the late 1990s, the Safeway supermarket chain came under fire for its strict requirement that cashiers make eye contact with and

smile at every customer.⁵ Female cashiers reported increased sexual harassment from male customers who misinterpreted this extra customer-service touch as flirting. If Safeway had allowed its cashiers more control over their expressions of friendliness, it might have helped them avoid being misread by customers and saved the company from embarrassing legal trouble.

Emotional labor is a part of daily life—even employees outside of service industries have to manage the way they interact with bosses, colleagues, and clients. For many, however, everyday emotional management is often under their control and at their discretion. This is not the case with employees who have to face customers, either in person or over the phone. Companies on the path to high performance understand that the answer is not to eliminate all emotional-expression guidelines: emotional expression is an important part of customer service. The key is to employ guidelines that line up with customer expectations while mitigating the potential for damaging emotional suppression or surface acting. Instituting better practices for hiring and training and creating the proper work atmosphere are essential. Service with a smile need not be service with a fake smile.

About the Author

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Notes

- 1 Joyce E. Bono and Meredith A. Vey, "Towards Understanding Emotional Management at Work: A Quantitative View of Emotional Labor Research," in C.E.J. Härtel, W.J. Zerbe, and N.M. Ashkanasy, eds., *Emotions in Organizational Behavior* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005).
- 2 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (University of California Press, 1983).
- 3 Bono and Vey.
- 4 Robert I. Sutton and Anat Rafaeli, "Untangling the Relationship Between Displayed Emotions and Sales: The Case of Convenience Stores," *Academy of Management Journal*, September 1988.
- 5 John Webber, "Smile 'Til it Hurts: Communicating Customer Relations to Employees," *Communication World*, October-November 1998.

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