

CRITICAL COMPETENCIES TO PROMOTE A CUSTOMER SERVICE CORE CAPABILITY IN A HUMAN RESOURCES CALL CENTRE

RL GROBBELAAR

G ROODT

A VENTER

aven@rau.ac.za

Department of Human Resource Management
 Rand Afrikaans University

ABSTRACT

In today's information-intensive environment customer service is an important aspect that differentiates one organisation from another. This research focuses on those individual competencies which will lead to a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre. Data was obtained from Call Centre agents (n=18), supervisors (n=3) and customers (n=25) by means of five focus group-, three individual- and 25 telephonic interviews, respectively. The transcendental realism research procedure was applied within a qualitative research paradigm. Ten key competencies were identified by all groups of participants.

OPSOMMING

In vandag se inligtings-intensiewe omgewing is kliëntediens 'n belangrike aspek wat organisasies van mekaar onderskei. Hierdie navorsing fokus op welke individuele bevoegdhede tot 'n kliëntedienssleutelbekwaamheid in 'n Menslikehulpbron-oproepsentrum sal lei. Data is van Oproepsentrumagente (n=18), -toesighouers (n=3) en -kliënte (n=25) ingewin deur middel van onderskeidelik vyf fokusgroep-, drie individuele- en 25 telefoniese onderhoude. Die transcendentale realisme navorsingsprosedure is binne 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsparadigma toegepas. Tien sleutelbevoegdhede is deur al drie groepe deelnemers geïdentifiseer.

Traditionally, marketing and product development were regarded as organisations' sources of competitive advantage. However, in today's information-intensive environment, marketing and product development can fairly easily be replicated and converted into competitive requirements. Hanley (1997) is of the opinion that customer service is the only aspect that differentiates one organisation from another, especially organisations in the same industry. Service refers to all the activities that create a bond between organisations and their clients - anything an organisation does that enhances the customer experience (Blem, 1995; Harris, 2000). This definition implies that all organisations have a service component - it is the extent of this service component that distinguishes one organisation from the next. Although the word "customer" has recently been included in the vision and mission statements of many organisations, it is the *delivery* of customer service that will provide an organisation with a competitive edge (Fritz, 1997).

Due to the intensified focus on customer service, much literature is available on its definition, characteristics, importance and how it can be achieved (Sureshchandar, Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002). At the same time, much emphasis is placed on the importance of identifying customer service as an *organisation's* core capability in order to deploy and protect it to ensure competitive advantage (Hafeez, Zhang & Malak, 2002; Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). Understanding what *individual* competencies are required to establish a customer service core capability, will enable organisations to focus their energy on developing the competencies that will have the desired effect on realising their vision as well as many other benefits for the organisation (Fritz, 1997; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Sureshchandar et al., 2002). In light of the importance of customer service delivery and the impact of individual competencies on developing this aspect as an organisational core capability, it is alarming to note that little literature is available on employee skills and behaviour that should be displayed and developed to ensure that customer service excellence prevails and may be regarded as an organisation's core capability.

A number of terms relating to competencies and competence appear to be used interchangeably in literature, depending on the manner in which they are defined by the author. Ulrich's (1998, p. 6) definition of the difference between core competencies and core capability, as described below, has been used to define the difference between these terms for purposes of this research.

		Capabilities: Level of Analysis	
		Individual	Organizational
Organizational Perspective	Technical	1 Functional or technical competencies, such as individual abilities in finance, engineering, marketing, customer service, etc.	3 Core competence, such as organizational abilities in logistics, risk management, distribution, manufacturing, etc.
	Social/ Cultural	2 Social competencies, such as individual leadership abilities in setting direction (vision, customer), mobilizing individual commitment (diversity), leveraging organizations (team-work, change), personal credibility, etc.	4 Organizational capability, such as organizational abilities in speed, cycle time, leveraging intellectual capital, working across boundaries, etc.

Figure 1: Competence and capability (Ulrich, 1998)

Figure 1 illustrates how individual and organisational capabilities can be regarded from a technical as well as a social perspective. The technical approach emphasises functional orientation, whilst the social dimension requires coping with how individuals and groups connect and collaborate.

For purposes of this research, skills required by *individuals*, whether technical or social in nature, are referred to as core competencies. Core competencies, for purposes of this research, are defined as skills, knowledge, attitudes, attributes,

values (or clusters thereof) required in performing a task, and the ability to apply them in a particular context or environment (Bellis, 1999; Lindsay & Stuart, 1997; Meyer, 1996; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

The term **capability**, on the other hand, for purposes of this research, represents the collective and accumulated skills and technologies (rather than a single, discrete skill or technology) residing in the organisation as a whole, rather than individuals (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Ulrich, 1998). A core **capability** refers to those capabilities that play a more important role than others in realising the business objectives of an organisation (Hafeez et al., 2002, p. 31). According to Hamel and Prahalad (1994) a skill must meet three requirements to be considered a core capability: 1) it must make a significant contribution to customer-perceived value; 2) be difficult to imitate, thereby leading to competitor differentiation; and 3) be extendable to a wide variety of markets and products. This implies that core capabilities are those which are at the heart of the uniqueness of an organisation. It is this core capability of an organisation that drives its ability to rapidly change and innovate in response to new and changing markets and market pressures (Shippmann, Ash, Battista, Carr, Eyde, Hesketh & Kehoe, 2000).

Current literature on the competencies that should be displayed and developed to ensure that customer service excellence prevails and may be regarded as an organisation's core capability includes the frameworks of Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Spencer and Spencer (1993). These authors refer to a number of generic competencies which are required for human service professionals in a service organisation. The competencies identified by these authors are required in jobs that have a focus on helping others, rather than on business outcomes or technical processes and are discussed below. The findings of these authors reiterates the importance of the current study to investigate human resource competencies in a call centre environment. More about this, in a section below.

The five overall quality dimensions which have general applicability in the service sector, according to Parasuraman et al. (1988) are based on empirical research conducted in various service sectors, and are as follows:

Tangibles: physical facilities, equipment, and appearance of personnel;

Reliability: ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately;

Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service;

Assurance: knowledge and courtesy of employees, and their ability to convey trust and confidence; and

Empathy: caring, individualised attention the employees provide to their customers.

In the generic model of helping and human service professionals (Spencer and Spencer, 1993), the following competencies of superior helping and human service workers are evident:

Impact and influence: establishes credibility; tailors presentation, language to audience; individual influence strategies; uses examples, humour body language, voice.

Developing others: innovative teaching methods; flexible response to individual needs; belief in students' potential.

Interpersonal understanding: takes time to listen to others' problems; is aware of others' moods and feelings, understands body language; aware of others' background, interests and needs; may understand long-term situations in depth.

Self confidence: confident in own abilities and judgement; takes responsibility for problems, failings; questions, gives suggestions to their superiors.

Self control: keeps own emotions from interfering with work; avoids inappropriate involvement with clients; stress-resistance, has stamina, humour.

Other personal effectiveness competencies: accurate self-assessment, learns from mistakes; occupational preference: finds work enjoyable; organizational commitment: aligns self with mission; affiliative interest: genuinely likes people; positive expectations of others.

Professional expertise: expands and uses professional knowledge.

Customer service orientation: discovers and works to meet underlying needs; follows through on questions, requests, complaints.

Teamwork and cooperation: Solicits inputs, credits, and cooperates with others.

Analytical thinking: sees causal relationships, inferences; systematically breaks apart complex problems.

Conceptual thinking: recognizes patterns, uses concepts to diagnose situations; makes connections, theories; simplifies, clarifies difficult material.

Initiative: does more than is required in job; (responds quickly, decisively in a crisis).

Flexibility: adapts style, tactics to fit the circumstances; and

Directiveness/Assertiveness: sets limits, says no when necessary; confronts problem behaviour.

Spencer and Spencer (1993) also distinguish between threshold and differentiating competencies. Threshold competencies are described as the essential characteristics required by all incumbents of a position to be minimally effective. These competencies usually refer to knowledge or basic skills and do not distinguish superior from average performers. Differentiating competencies, on the other hand, are those factors which distinguish superior from average performers.

The findings of the research have been compared to the above frameworks and will be discussed in detail later in the article.

One environment in which customer service is of utmost importance is a Call Centre. Many organisations have established Call Centres as a key means of contact with customers. This implies that much of the contact between the organisation and its customers is via the Call Centre. Each contact with a customer is therefore of utmost importance and could affect the manner in which the customer perceives the organisation, as the customer has little else by which to judge the organisation.

The importance of being aware of the competencies required to promote a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre is emphasised when considering the integrating effect competencies have on key human resource management processes. Competencies form the basis of selection, assessment, succession planning, appraisal, training and development, and reward practices in organisations (Meyer, 1996). It is therefore of critical importance for the overall performance and, ultimately, business success of an organisation to identify the key competencies which should be used as the basis of human resource management processes in the particular environment.

The specific Call Centre environment focused on in this research is a Human Resources Call Centre. In this environment the customers are the organisation's own employees. Employees contact the Human Resources Call Centre telephonically for assistance relating to any of the organisation's Human Resources policies or procedures.

Against the above background, a question that arises is: *Which individual competencies will lead to a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre environment?*

The objective of the study is thus to identify the individual competencies that will lead to a customer service core capability in a Human Resource Call Centre environment.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design will be described in the following sections: research approach, research participants, data gathering methods, research procedure and analysis of the data.

Research approach

In order to obtain descriptive data of the individual competencies required by Human Resources Call Centres which promote customer service as an organisational core capability, a qualitative research paradigm has been followed.

In terms of research approach within the qualitative paradigm, ontology refers to what exists in the world - to the nature, form and essence of reality (Punch, 1998). For purposes of this research the ontological dimension assumed is nominalistic - where social reality is regarded as the product of individual consciousness and cognition, rather than an object of independent existence (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). Reality about the phenomenon has therefore been assumed as being that which exists in people's minds (Potter, 1996). The research has subsequently focused on obtaining insight into the individual competencies which key stakeholders regard as critical to promote a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre. The key stakeholders that contributed to this research include agents, supervisors and customers of a Human Resources Call Centre.

Epistemology refers to the science of knowing - the question of what counts as knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the known (Babbie, 1995; Punch, 1998). An anti-positivist epistemological assumption has been made by the researcher, thereby assuming that knowledge is based on experience and insight of a unique and, essentially, personal nature (Cohen et al., 2000). The interpretive paradigm applied in anti-positivist studies implies that research begins with individuals and sets out to understand their interpretations of the world around them; theory is emergent and should be grounded on data generated by the research conducted (Cohen et al., 2000).

In following the anti-positivist assumption and an interpretive paradigm, the researcher adopted an intersubjective approach, which can be described as the belief that although researchers can never be purely objective, they are not limited to pure subjectivity either. By following an intersubjective approach, the researcher has attempted to gain trust and rapport with the participants to get as close as possible to them (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Potter, 1996). The researcher attempted to develop neutral and "objective" data-gathering instruments/procedures and analytical schemes and also attempted to minimise the distance between the researcher and participants by being actively involved in the data collection process.

The anti-positivist philosophical viewpoint that has been assumed by the researcher is phenomethodological in nature.

This viewpoint advocates that behaviour is determined by the phenomenon of experience rather than by external, objective and physically described reality (Cohen et al., 2000). In following the phenomethodological viewpoint the researcher attempted to examine the phenomenon without preconceived notions or expectations (Anastasi, 1990; Potter, 1996). Instead, the researcher has aimed to understand what the participants believe are critical individual competencies required for a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre environment.

The qualitative research paradigm, and specifically the anti-positivist assumptions and phenomethodological philosophy, has been adopted by the researcher with the belief that this is the most appropriate approach with which to address the research question.

Participants

The concern with sampling for qualitative research is gaining access to relevant evidence about the phenomenon, as opposed to random sampling where each element is given an equal chance of being selected (Potter, 1996). Purposive sampling is considered the most appropriate means of sampling in qualitative research (Punch, 1998). This entails sampling in a deliberate manner with a specific purpose or focus in mind. Theory-driven sampling, where the sample is decided on ahead of the research (Punch, 1998) is the form of purposive sampling that was deemed most relevant to this particular research.

For purposes of this research, the epistemological position and phenomethodological approach described above were used in determining the research participants that were included in the sample. This implies that the selected sample included participants that are involved with customer service, specifically in a Human Resources Call Centre environment.

The key function of agents in a Human Resources Call Centre is to provide telephonic support and advice service to customers, relating to any of the organisation's Human Resources policies or procedures. Since the essence of a Call Centre agent's function is providing customer service, this group formed the core sample for the research. The researcher ensured that the agent participants were representative in terms of their length of service in the Call Centre environment, their age, gender, race and most recent performance rating.

The total group of 18 agents were divided into focus groups consisting of three to four agents each. On completion of each focus group, the researcher determined the degree to which the most recent group's data corresponded with the output of previous focus groups and determined the frequency with which certain competencies had been identified. After having conducted five focus groups, a number of recurring themes in terms of the data emerged. Upon finding that most of the themes were recurring, the researcher decided to proceed with the next step of data gathering, namely interviews with Call Centre supervisors.

The data obtained from Call Centre agents was verified with individuals that deal with the performance of Call Centre agents, namely Call Centre supervisors. Due to being directly involved with Call Centre agents' performance and also understanding what customers regard as good service, the supervisors were asked about what they believed to be critical individual competencies to promote a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre environment. The particular Call Centre used for this research employs three supervisors, all of whom participated in the research.

Customers' perceptions about what they believe to be critical individual competencies required for a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre environment

were also obtained. The researcher considered it important to understand customer expectations in terms of service delivery, and to incorporate this data with the data obtained from agents and supervisors. Customer participants were representative in terms of the nature of their queries, as well as their geographical representation. A total of 25 customers participated in the research. The researcher determined that the last number of customers interviewed appeared to provide similar data to what had already been obtained during the first few customer interviews. A sample of 25 was therefore regarded as providing a fair representation of customer expectations.

Data gathering methods

The researcher has attempted to discover perceptions of key stakeholders (providing service, managing the performance of those providing the service, or receiving the service) in terms of individual competencies they regarded as critical for customer service in a Human Resources Call Centre. The interview as data gathering technique is considered to be a good way of accessing people's perceptions and the meaning they attach to reality (Punch, 1998). In this research two forms of interviews were used to gather data, namely a *focus group interview* process and *individual interviews*, consisting of (a) interviews where there was physical interaction between the researcher and the participants and (b) telephonic interviews.

The *focus group interview* technique entails a process of facilitated group interaction rather than the question and answer approach of traditional interviews, and the role of the researcher changes accordingly to a moderator or facilitator supplying questions and topics to the group to guide the discussion (Punch, 1998). Due to being aligned with the epistemological assumptions of this research (Cohen et al., 2000), the focus group technique was considered particularly appropriate and was therefore applied in interviewing groups of Human Resources Call Centre agents. In order to ensure that the researcher was able to focus primarily on data that is relevant to the research question being discussed, an independent facilitator assisted in facilitating group discussions.

After completion of the focus groups, structured *individual interviews* with Human Resources Call Centre supervisors were conducted on an individual basis by the researcher. The purpose of conducting the individual interviews with supervisors was, firstly, to determine what the supervisors consider to be critical individual competencies required for a customer service core capability in the particular environment and, secondly, to verify the data obtained during focus groups with agents.

Customers of the Human Resources Call Centre are familiar with obtaining information by means of telephonic contact and the researcher therefore considered it appropriate to conduct individual telephonic interviews with this portion of the sample.

Applying a variety of data gathering methods to different sample groups, as described above, served as a form of triangulation so as to strengthen and enhance the information obtained in the research from different dimensions (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Potter, 1996).

Research procedure

The research procedure applied in this research is referred to as Miles and Huberman's transcendental realism, which is directed at "*tracing out lawful and stable relationships among social phenomena, based on the regularities and sequences that link these phenomena*" (Punch, 1998, p.202). The three main components of transcendental realism are data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions. Although they may be regarded as separate components of the analysis, data reduction, data display and drawing/verifying conclusions may be regarded as concurrent activities, interacting throughout

the analysis (Punch, 1998). The three components will be discussed below, with specific reference to how they were applied in the research.

For purposes of this research, the research problem was approached inductively. As such, analysis of data to identify trends and patterns was conducted after each occurrence of data collection, namely after each focus group held with Call Centre agents. The findings of the analysis of the data obtained during focus groups with Call Centre agents was used in guiding the researcher's focus in the next data gathering occurrence being the next focus group, the interviews with supervisors and the telephonic interviews with customers.

Data reduction occurs continually throughout the first, middle and later stages of analysis and as such, forms part of the analysis. The objective of data reduction is to reduce the data without significant loss of information or the context in which it was obtained (Punch, 1998).

In the early stages of analysis, data reduction is effected through editing, segmenting and summarizing of the data (Punch, 1998). During this research the researcher applied data reduction after each focus group interview with agents, by summarizing the data obtained from the particular group.

In the middle stages of analysis, data reduction was established through coding, memoing, and associated activities such as finding themes, clusters and patterns. This occurred in the research after each iteration of data gathering, in that the researcher combined and compared newly gathered data to that which had already been documented. In so doing, similarities were determined prior to continuing with the next data gathering exercise.

Conceptualizing and explaining, result in data reduction in the later stages of analysis (Punch, 1998).

The **data display** component of transcendental realism entails organising, compressing and assembling information in any way that moves the analysis forward. Data display provides the basis for further analysis and may take the form of graphs, charts, networks, or any form of diagramme (Punch, 1998). In the early stages of research, the researcher displayed data obtained in diagrams (so-called mindmaps), so as to aid the analysis of which competencies were related to others mentioned by previous groups in the data gathering process. During later stages of data gathering and analysis the researcher chose to display data in the form of tables so as to integrate data obtained during the research with information available on the topic in literature.

The reasons for reducing and displaying data, as described above, are to assist in **drawing and verifying conclusions**. Although this component of transcendental realism follows the preceding two components, it takes place almost concurrently with them (Punch, 1998). An initial conclusion in this research, which was verified throughout the data gathering process, entails the assumption of the value that top and average performing agents would be able to add to the research.

Prior to conducting the research, the researcher made the assumption that top performing agents in a Human Resources Call Centre will more easily be able to identify differentiating competencies, compared to agents who perform at an average level. The researcher was of the opinion that the average performing agents would struggle to identify what competencies are considered as threshold and differentiating. For this reason the research proposal suggested that focus groups be held with top performers and average performers respectively. However, after the first focus group was conducted, comprising top performing agents in a Human Resources Call Centre, the researcher determined that, although top performing agents are easily able to *identify* critical competencies for customer service,

they were less able to *distinguish* between which of the identified competencies are considered threshold and differentiating. Top performing agents were of the opinion that most of the competencies identified were threshold, and that very few were considered to differentiate between average and top performers. For this reason the researcher amended the initial structure of the focus groups, so as to ensure that each focus group consisted of agents that performed at different levels.

As discussed above, the three data gathering methods applied in this research are the focus group interviewing technique, the individual interview and the telephonic interview.

The first phase of data gathering entailed conducting focus groups with three to four Human Resources Call Centre agents. During each focus group the facilitator and researcher (co-facilitator) were introduced to the group. Informed consent was obtained by introducing participants to the research topic and clarifying terminology that would be used throughout the discussion, including organisational capability, individual competency, and threshold and differentiating competencies. The group was also informed that the researcher would record data throughout the discussion and that all information would be treated as confidential: no names would be attached to information reported. After informing participants of these details, consent for participating in the research was obtained from all. Prior to commencing with the discussion on the topic, the researcher also explained the time available to the group to conclude the discussion, as well as what would be done with data obtained and how feedback on the research would be provided to participants.

Each focus group was firstly asked to identify competencies which they believe are critical for agents in a Human Resources Call Centre environment, so as to enable customer service as an organisational core capability. Once the group had identified the competencies they believed to be critical for customer service, they were asked to classify the identified competencies as being threshold or differentiating. As a closing question, each group member was asked what they would highlight as the one key *differentiating* competency required by an agent in a Human Resources Call Centre in order to provide good customer service.

The researcher considered it necessary to verify the results obtained during agent focus group interviews with parties that are responsible for managing the performance of the agents, namely supervisors. Interviews with supervisors were considered necessary as they deal with both top and average performing agents and also obtain regular feedback from customers when receiving compliments and complaints about the service provided by agents. As such, the researcher regarded supervisors as having a good overall knowledge of the competencies that would lead to customer satisfaction, as well as which competencies would result in good performance.

The second phase of gathering data therefore entailed individual interviews with Human Resources Call Centre supervisors. During these interviews the researcher firstly attempted to determine what the supervisors consider to be critical individual competencies required for a customer service core capability in the particular environment. This data was obtained in a similar manner to the method used in the focus groups where the participant was asked a question about what they consider to be critical individual competencies in the particular environment. Thereafter, the researcher presented data obtained from the Human Resources Call Centre agents during the focus groups, to verify whether the supervisor considered the competencies identified by the agents to be critical for a customer service core capability. The supervisors were also asked to classify the competencies identified by themselves and the agents as being either a threshold or a differentiating competency.

The researcher considered it important to understand customer expectations in terms of service delivery, and to incorporate this

data with data obtained from agents and supervisors. The final phase in the data gathering process thus entailed telephonic interviews with a sample of the Human Resources Call Centre's customers. The researcher firstly probed the customer to determine their view on their previous interaction with the Human Resources Call Centre. Customers were then asked what they consider to be critical individual competencies required for a customer service core capability in the Human Resources Call Centre. In this manner the researcher attempted to obtain data about what the customers expect from agents in a Human Resources Call Centre.

Treatment of the data

The three main operations involved in the transcendental realism framework of qualitative analysis are coding, memoing and developing propositions (Punch, 1998). These operations will briefly be described below, and an indication provided of how they were used in this research.

Coding is the process of putting tags, names or labels against pieces of data, whether individual words, sentences or other small or large portions of data. By assigning labels to data, the researcher attaches meaning to the pieces of data. The purpose of labelling data is to index it and provide a basis for storage and retrieval thereof (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

On completion of each focus group, the researcher applied coding to the data obtained in the particular session. In so-doing, the competencies described by the agents were "labelled" so as to ensure that competencies described by more than one group could be easily identified. The researcher found this particular operation useful, as various groups of agents identified similar competencies, although they labelled them differently. By applying coding, the researcher was able to ensure that similarities between what each focus group identified, were captured.

An example of a code applied by the researcher is **interpersonal sensitivity**. Call Centre agents referred to numerous aspects of interpersonal sensitivity during the focus groups, including the ability to relate to individuals that have varying personalities and needs, and displaying empathy towards customers for their particular situation. The researcher labelled data related to the ability to understand customers and colleagues alike as interpersonal sensitivity. During further analysis of the data, coding was also used to determine whether findings of the research corresponded to "labels" in Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) five overall quality dimensions with general applicability in the service sector, and Spencer and Spencer's (1993) generic model of helping and human service professionals.

Once data had been obtained from the various focus groups, the researcher combined the data into categories created during the coding phase of analysis. This integrated information was presented to the Human Resources Call Centre supervisors to verify to what extent they agreed with the competencies identified by agents.

A similar process of coding was used to label data obtained from supervisors and customers. This assisted the researcher in identifying similarities between data provided by each participant group.

Memoing is the creative-speculating part of developing analysis. Not necessarily the second stage of data analysis, memoing is the recording of ideas that occur to the researcher while doing coding and therefore begins at the start of analysis, in conjunction with coding. Memoing may have conceptual content, as it helps the researcher to move from a theoretical to a conceptual level. Memoing is the researcher's creative means to start producing propositions (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

Memoing was applied by the researcher in this particular study by noting the frequency with which certain codes were applied after each data gathering phase. By identifying which competencies were identified by most agents, supervisors and

customers, the researcher was able to speculate about the most critical individual competencies to promote a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre. The researcher was, for example, able to identify that *resilience* was a competency that was identified as being critical by a number of focus groups and supervisors, whilst *empowering the client* was only mentioned by one focus group as being a critical competency.

Developing propositions refer to conclusion drawing and the verifying of conclusions. Although conceptually distinct from coding and memoing, developing propositions may happen concurrently with the above. The aim of this stage is to integrate what has been done into a meaningful coherent picture of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

The researcher developed propositions in this particular study by focusing on the ease with which groups of agents who perform similarly were able to identify critical competencies and

categorise these as threshold or differentiating. As already described before, this resulted in the researcher's initial assumption that top performing agents would more easily be able to differentiate between threshold and differentiating competencies. Due to the initial propositions made by the researcher, the subsequent focus groups consisted of agents that performed at different levels. This enabled the researcher to verify the initial proposition about how agents with different levels of performance related to the topic being explored.

RESULTS

Data obtained from Human Resources Call Centre agents, supervisors and clients were combined to determine which competencies these groups felt were essential to promote a customer service core capability in the particular environment.

TABLE 1
INDIVIDUAL KEY COMPETENCIES IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS

Key competency identified	Description of competency, as provided by participants
Listening and understanding	The ability to listen to and accurately assimilate detailed information in order to grasp what the customer requires.
Oral communication skills	Proficiency in the use of at least the English language to understand what the customer is requesting, as well as to provide advice in a manner which can be considered helpful by the customer.
Product knowledge and technical skills	In a Human Resources Call Centre environment, this implies a thorough knowledge of the Human Resources policies, procedures and processes of the organisation, and how they should be applied in various contexts. Although not specifically mentioned by customers, an aspect of technical skills which is essential in being able to apply knowledge of policies and procedures includes a knowledge of the telephonic and technical systems used in the environment; basic computer literacy is therefore also essential.
Networking ability	By having the necessary networks in place, the agent will more easily be able to provide an answer to the client in the expected turnaround time, as they will be in a better position to know where to obtain specific information.
Friendly tone of voice/willingness to assist	A tone of voice and general disposition that indicate eagerness to assist.
Time management skills	Customers expect quick turnaround times, both in terms of the time in which their call is answered, as well as the time in which their query is resolved. This implies that agents should be able to prioritise between taking additional calls to ensure that waiting time for customers is reduced, and following up on outstanding queries to ensure that the time taken to resolve a query is kept to a minimum. This relates to the sense of urgency that customers considered to be very important.
Portraying a professional image	This relates to the manner in which the agent assures the customer that s/he is knowledgeable and experienced through tone of voice and choice of language.
Quality orientation	Agents should be concerned with the quality of the service they provide, as customers are particularly concerned that the information they receive should be correct.
Reliability	Customers expect that agents will provide accurate information when answering their query. Furthermore, customers expect that agents will adhere to the time frame contracted with them, when needing to obtain additional information before being able to provide the resolution to their query. Customers also have the need to know that their information will be treated as confidential.
Using initiative	Customers expect an agent to resolve their query, regardless of the effort required. This often entails the agent having to "go the extra mile" to obtain additional information or research the matter more widely than usual.
Interpersonal sensitivity *	The ability to relate to individuals (customers as well as team members) that have varying personalities and needs. This competency includes displaying empathy towards customers for their particular situation.
Appropriate questioning *	The ability to probe by asking appropriate questions so as to identify the customer's specific need.
Resilience *	To be adaptable and flexible to deal with the constant changes and pressures of the work environment, including irate callers. This includes the ability to exercise emotional control, both towards clients who may ask questions which seem self-explanatory, as well as fellow team members.
Persuasiveness *	The ability to convince customers regarding the correct manner in which to approach a particular situation, given the policy and procedure as guideline. This is regarded as critical, as customers are not always willing to apply the answer that the agent provides, even though it is correct given the policy and circumstances.
Cross-functional awareness *	Understanding different roles/departments and how they interlink within the organisation. This enables the agent to contextualise the question asked by a customer and the information provided to the customer.
Understanding Human Resources practices *	Educational background and qualifications of agents are regarded as critical in a Human Resources Call Centre environment. This ensures that the agent has a basic understanding of Human Resources practices, which assists in providing answers to a customer in relation to matters that aren't necessarily addressed in a policy.
Teamwork *	To be aware of the effect that you have on your colleagues, so as to create a harmonious and co-operative work environment.
Respect for others *	Show respect towards others by treating others (customers and colleagues) as you would like to be treated.
Passion *	Demonstrate commitment and eagerness for every task.

* Agents and supervisors in the Human Resources Call Centre agreed that these competencies were essential in promoting customer service as a core capability. Although not mentioned by the customers interviewed, these may be regarded as critical competencies which enable that which customers expect.

The key individual competencies identified by all groups of participants (agents, supervisors and customers) are reflected in Table 1.

The three groups of participants in this research (agents, supervisors and customers) all identified listening and understanding, oral communication skills, product knowledge and technical skills, networking ability, a friendly tone of voice/willingness to assist, time management skills, portraying a professional image, quality orientation, reliability and using initiative as the key individual competencies required for a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre environment.

Certain competencies were identified as critical by both agents and supervisors, but weren't listed by participants from the customer group. These competencies are: interpersonal sensitivity, appropriate questioning, resilience, persuasiveness, cross-functional awareness, an understanding of Human Resources practices, teamwork, respect for others, and passion. When considering the nature of these competencies which were not identified by the customer group of participants, it could be deduced that these competencies *enable* that which customers expect. In other words: they may not be competencies that are visible to customers and would therefore not be considered critical to this group. However, to meet customer expectations, it could be assumed that these competencies are necessary within a Human Resources Call Centre environment.

During the data gathering phase, Human Resources Call Centre agents and supervisors were asked to categorise the competencies which they had identified as critical in terms of promoting a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre, as either threshold or differentiating. Table 2 indicates this categorisation.

TABLE 2
CATEGORISATION OF KEY COMPETENCIES IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS

Key competency identified	Categorised as threshold by most participants	Categorised as differentiating by most participants	No agreement as to categorisation
Listening and understanding	X		
Oral communication skills	X		
Product knowledge and technical skills	X		
Networking ability			X
Friendly tone of voice/willingness to assist	X		
Time management skills	X		
Portraying a professional image	X		
Quality orientation	X		
Reliability	X		
Using initiative		X	
Interpersonal sensitivity *	X		
Appropriate questioning *			X
Resilience *	X		
Persuasiveness *		X	
Cross-functional awareness *		X	
Understanding Human Resources practices *		X	
Teamwork *			X
Respect for others *	X		
Passion *			X

* Agents and supervisors in the Human Resources Call Centre agreed that three competencies were essential in promoting customer service as a core capability. Although not mentioned by customers interviewed, these may be regarded as critical competencies which enable that which customers expect.

Of the 19 competencies identified as being critical to promote a customer service core capability in a Human Resources Call Centre environment, 11 were categorised as being threshold competencies by the agent and supervisor participants in this study. This implies that they are considered to be essential characteristics required of all incumbents of a position in order to be minimally effective. The identified threshold competencies include the ability to listen and understand, oral communication skills, product knowledge and technical skills, a friendly tone of voice and willingness to assist, time management skills, portraying a professional image, quality orientation, reliability, interpersonal sensitivity, resilience and respect for others.

Four of the competencies were categorised as being differentiating, in that they distinguish superior from average performers. These include using initiative, persuasiveness, cross functional awareness, and understanding Human Resources practices.

Participants in the research differed about whether networking ability, appropriate questioning, teamwork and a passion for what you do should be categorised as threshold or differentiating.

DISCUSSION

A number of threshold and differentiating individual competencies required to promote customer service in a Human Resources Call Centre were identified by the participants in this study and listed in Table 1. The competencies were also categorised by the agent and supervisor participants into being threshold or differentiating, as set out in Table 2.

Table 3 provides an indication of how individual key competencies identified by participants in this research as being critical in order to promote a customer service core capability, correspond to current theoretical frameworks. For this purpose the findings of this research have been compared to three models/frameworks, namely:

- Ulrich's (1998) framework of competence and capability, as set out in Figure 1;
- Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) five overall quality dimensions which have general applicability in the service sector, as set out above; and
- Spencer and Spencer's (1993) generic model of helping and human service professionals, as set out above.

Competencies identified by the above authors are required in jobs that have a focus on helping others, rather than on business outcomes or technical processes. The focus of this study, namely a Human Resources Call Centre environment, could be considered one area in which jobs have this particular focus of helping others. The models/frameworks are therefore considered useful in comparing findings of this research.

When comparing the key individual competencies identified by participants in this research to Ulrich's (1998) model, depicted in Figure 1, it is evident that the participants in this research have identified both social and technical competencies on an individual level. Although most identified competencies can be categorised within the social/cultural perspective of Ulrich's model, a number of key technical competencies were also regarded as being critical within a Human Resources Call Centre environment.

Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) overall quality dimensions for the service sector appear to focus strongly on what individuals within the service sector should do to meet customer expectations. This model has a smaller focus on what is required within a team context to enable meeting customer needs. For this reason, competencies such as appropriate questioning,

TABLE 3
INDIVIDUAL KEY COMPETENCIES IDENTIFIED BY PARTICIPANTS, COMPARED TO CURRENT THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Key competency identified	Current theoretical frameworks		
	Ulrich's (1998) framework of competence and capability	Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) five overall quality dimensions with general applicability in the service sector	Spencer & Spencer's (1993) generic model of helping and human service professionals
Listening and understanding	Individual social competency	Empathy	Interpersonal understanding
Oral communication skills	Individual social competency		Impact and influence; conceptual thinking
Product knowledge and technical skills	Individual technical competency	Assurance	Professional expertise
Networking ability	Individual social competency		
Friendly tone of voice/willingness to assist	Individual social competency	Responsiveness	Impact and influence
Time management skills	Individual social competency	Responsiveness	Initiative
Portraying a professional image	Individual social competency	Assurance	Impact and influence
Quality orientation	Individual social competency	Reliability	Customer service orientation
Reliability	Individual social competency	Reliability	Customer service orientation
Using initiative	Individual social competency	Responsiveness	Customer service orientation; Initiative
Interpersonal sensitivity *	Individual social competency	Empathy	Interpersonal understanding; self control; other personal effectiveness competencies
Appropriate questioning *	Individual social competency		Professional expertise; analytical thinking
Resilience *	Individual social competency		Self control; flexibility
Persuasiveness *	Individual social competency		Self confidence; directiveness/assertiveness
Cross-functional awareness *	Individual technical competency		
Understanding Human Resources practices *	Individual technical competency	Assurance	Professional expertise
Teamwork *	Individual social competency		Interpersonal understanding; self control; other personal effectiveness competencies; teamwork and cooperation
Respect for others *	Individual social competency		Interpersonal understanding; self control; other personal effectiveness competencies; teamwork and cooperation
Passion *	Individual social competency		Other personal effectiveness competencies

* Agents and supervisors in the Human Resources Call Centre agreed that three competencies were essential in promoting customer service as a core capability. Although not mentioned by the customers interviewed, these may be regarded as critical competencies which enable that which customers expect.

resilience, persuasiveness, teamwork, respect for others and passion, which were identified by the participants in this research, do not appear to correspond to any one of the quality dimensions in Parasuraman et al.'s framework. It is interesting to note that most of the competencies identified by all three groups of participants in this research correspond to Parasuraman et al.'s dimensions. However, the identified competencies which did not appear to correspond with any of the dimensions are mostly those which were not identified by customer participants in the research. The tangible dimension in Parasuraman et al.'s framework was not identified as critical by the participants in this research.

Of the three frameworks from current literature used to compare this research's results to, Spencer and Spencer's (1993) generic model of helping and human service professionals appears to correspond the best to key competencies identified in this research. Most of the key competencies identified by participants in this research are also addressed by at least one competency in Spencer and Spencer's generic model.

Although most of the competencies identified by participants in this research correspond to currently available models/frameworks, the two competencies identified by participants in this research which do not appear to correspond to Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) dimensions, or to Spencer and Spencer's (1993) generic model of competencies, are networking ability and cross-functional awareness. Since both frameworks used for comparison purposes are related to generic jobs that have a focus on helping others, and do not focus on a Human Resources Call Centre specifically, it may be assumed that networking ability and cross-functional awareness are competencies that are uniquely required in a Human Resources

Call Centre environment. It is suggested that this assumption be verified in subsequent research.

The fact that most competencies identified as critical by the participants in this research can be categorised within the social/cultural perspective of Ulrich's (1998) model has particular relevance to the human resource management processes of *selection* and *training and development*. With regards to *selection* of agents for a Human Resources Call Centre environment, the findings of this research indicate that one should guard against appointing agents in this environment on the basis of their technical skills only, as this will disregard the critical social competencies identified in the research. Because social competencies have been identified as critical within the Human Resources Call Centre environment, they should be considered a critical requirement that applicants should meet in order to be considered suitable for appointment into the position. In terms of *training and development*, traditional training is often focused on developing an incumbent's technical skills. Findings of this research indicate that care should be taken to include training and development of social competencies, over and above the traditional focus on development of technical skills. This will ensure that agents within a Human Resources Call Centre environment are fully equipped to perform their role.

During the data gathering phase of the research it was identified that, depending on their level of performance, participants generally experienced little difficulty identifying critical competencies required to promote a customer service core capability, and were mostly able to categorise the identified competencies into being threshold or differentiating. The

researcher determined that participants who perform at a lower level in relation to other participants found it difficult to *identify* critical competencies required by agents. At the same time, these participants were more likely to identify factors external to themselves as requisite before they could deliver customer service. The group of participants with lower performance levels therefore appears to either have a defense reaction (cf. Freud, 1977) or to exhibit an external locus of control (cf. Rotter, 1966).

Although top performing agents were easily able to *identify* critical competencies, they could not readily *differentiate* between threshold and differentiating competencies. It is believed that this may be due to the fact that most of them already possess these qualities and are therefore more likely to consider all identified competencies as essential to providing customer service, thus categorising the bulk of identified competencies as threshold.

Recommendations

The critical competencies identified in this study should be applied by parties involved in the human resource management of Human Resources Call Centres to ensure that the critical competencies are acquired, developed, managed and retained. This will ensure that a customer service core capability is developed in the organisation, resulting in the achievement of the organisational or departmental vision and mission, which will in most cases include a drive to establish customer service as an organisational core capability.

As is clear from the comparison of identified key competencies to Ulrich's (1998) model of competence and capability, and the comparison of the findings of this research to this model, both technical and social/cultural individual competencies should be attended to.

Limitations

This particular exploratory, qualitative study was conducted in a Human Resources Call Centre environment in a financial institution, which implies that the results cannot be generalised to other Call Centres or to other service environments. It is therefore not evident from this particular research whether the competencies identified are generic to other service environments, or only apply to a Human Resources Call Centre environment.

A fairly large number of critical individual competencies were identified by participants in the current study. This may result in practical difficulties for managers of Human Resources Call Centres attempting to apply human resource management processes focused on the entire list of competencies. Working with a large number of competencies tends to result in a lack of focus, which may not yield optimal results in terms of promoting a customer service core capability in the organisation.

Suggestions for further research

Given the limitations of this exploratory, qualitative study, it is suggested that the study be replicated in other Call Centres, so as to determine the applicability of the findings in other Call Centre environments that do not necessarily focus on providing a service in terms of queries relating to Human Resources policies and procedures. Furthermore, it is suggested that the study be replicated in service environments other than Call Centres, which will determine to what extent the findings of this study can be applied across service environments.

It is also suggested that a quantitative study on the same topic be conducted, so as to confirm the findings of this study with a larger population and across service environments. A quantitative study may assist in prioritising key competencies

and eliminating some of the less critical competencies, so as to enable managers of service environments to focus primarily on those that can be considered essential.

A final suggestion for further research is to determine what actions could be implemented by managers of service environments, to ensure that the critical competencies are acquired, developed, managed and retained.

REFERENCES

- Anastasi, A. (1990). *Psychological testing* (6th ed.). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Babbie, E. (1995). *The practice of social research* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Babbie, E. & Mouton, J. (2001). *The practice of social research*. Cape Town, South Africa: Oxford.
- Bellis, I. (1999). Between the rock and the hard place. *People Dynamics* (September), 14-19.
- Blem, N. (1995). *Service, please, South Africa!* Cape Town: Juta.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000). *Research methods in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Freud, A. (1977). *The ego and the mechanisms of defense*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Fritz, J.L. (1997). There must be fire! The importance of leadership and management support. In S. Brown (Ed.). *Breakthrough Customer Service: Best Practices of Leaders in Customer Support*. Canada: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hafeez, K., Zhang, Y. & Malak, N. (2002). Core competence for sustainable competitive advantage: A structured methodology for identifying core competence. *IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management*, 49 (1), 28-35.
- Hamel, G. & Prahalad, C.K. (1994). *Competing for the future*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Hanley, M. (1997). Customer service as a basis for breakthrough business strategy. In S. Brown (Ed.). *Breakthrough Customer Service: Best Practices of Leaders in Customer Support*. Canada: John Wiley & Sons.
- Harris, E.K. (2000). *Customer service: A practical approach* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lindsay, P.R. & Stuart, R. (1997). Reconstructing competence. *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 21 (9), 326-332.
- Meyer, T. (1996). *Creating competitiveness through competencies: Currency for the 21st century*. Randburg: Knowledge Resources.
- Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A. & Berry, L.L. (1988). Servqual: A multiple-item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64 (Spring), 12-40.
- Potter, W.J. (1996). *An analysis of thinking and research about qualitative methods*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Prahalad, C.K. & Hamel, G. (1990). The core competence of the corporation. *Harvard Business Review*, 68 (3), 79-91.
- Punch, K.F. (1998). *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: Sage.
- Rotter, J.B. (1966). Generalised expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, 80 (1).
- Shippmann, J.S., Ash, R.A., Battista, M., Carr, L., Eyde, L.D., Hesketh, B. & Kehoe, J. (2000). The practice of competency modeling. *Personnel Psychology*, 53 (3), 703-740.
- Spencer, L.M. & Spencer, S.M. (1993). *Competence at work: Models for superior performance*. New York: John Wiley.
- Sureshchandar, G.S., Rajendran, C. & Anantharaman, R.N. (2002). Determinants of customer perceived service quality: A confirmatory factor analysis approach. *Journal of Services Marketing* (16) 1, 9-34.
- Ulrich, D. (1998). *Delivering results: A new mandate for Human Resource Professionals*. Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing.