

MOVING TOWARD DELIVERING “SERVICE QUALITY” - CHALLENGES FACING PUBLIC ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS IN ZIMBABWE

Rosemary Sibanda
Department of Library and Information Science, National University of
Science and Technology (NUST)
Email: rsibanda@nust.ac.zw

Abstract

Engulfed by the growing realization that improving service quality is very essential for business survival and effective competition, especially with the recognition that what cannot be measured cannot be managed, a radical change in service organizations such as airlines, banks and hotels has been pronounced by investments in research to determine what their customers want in every dimension of service quality. Despite such challenges, information providers at the public archival institutions do not seem to have embarked on any service quality exercises as evidenced by lack of scholarly work focused on service quality. It is against this background that this article will explore how public archival institutions in Zimbabwe, using the National Archives as the primary setting, can measure service quality; thus critically examining service quality determinants from information providers and customers' perceptions and expectations; and the managerial implications of such explorations.

Keywords: Archival Institutions, National Archives of Zimbabwe, Service Delivery, Quality of Service

Introduction

Engulfing the world all over in the 1980s to the present has been the growing customer discontent with the quality of both services and goods (Lovelock 1996). Following this engulfment has been equally growing realization that improving quality is very essential for business survival and effective competition, especially with the recognition that what cannot be measured cannot be managed. This has led to a radical change which has seen many service organizations such as airlines, banks, hotels and rental car firms investing in research to determine what their customers want on every dimension of service including on-going measurements of how satisfied their customers are with the quality of services received. All this hub of activity has seen service quality as the most researched area in services marketing to-date.

These changes have heralded a related and equally important issue of service quality to the providers of information services in the public archival institutions in Zimbabwe. Around the world, the whole purpose, structure, behaviour of the public services are being questioned radically (MacDonald 1994: 63). The word “quality” has now entered the lexicon of the various factions in the political and social battle over the future of public services. In fact, in Zimbabwe, the

newfound concern for “quality” has been part of the move to restructure public services along quasi-commercial lines and is closely connected with the idea of “value for money”. All these moves have espoused the need for quality and service in the public sector in Zimbabwe.

Despite such challenges from customers, the government, competitors and the realities of marketing, providers of information services in public archival institutions in Zimbabwe do not seem to have embarked on any service quality exercises. Also apparent has been the utter lack of scholarly work focused on service quality, a pointer to public archival institutions to move toward delivering quality of service. Engrossed in archival traditional notions of quality based on conformance to custodianship, archival standards and confidentiality, providers of information have not been active in replacing the notions by a new imperative of letting quality be customer driven, which has enormous implications for accessibility to information and management in archival institutions. As Lovelock (1996) rightly points out, “you cannot manage what you do not measure”.

It is against this background that the major purpose of this article will be to explore how public archival organisations in Zimbabwe, using the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ) as the primary study setting, can measure service quality. The article will also critically examine service quality determinants from provider and customer perspectives and managerial implications of such explorations.

Given the traditional notion of quality in the public sector generally, and in archival institutions in particular, lack of scholarly work focused on service quality in Zimbabwean public archival institutions and the challenge by the Government of Zimbabwe that NAZ be run along quasi-commercial lines, such an analysis will assist NAZ to move towards delivering quality service. This analysis will also assist in opening avenues for further in-depth research on identification and measurement of relevant service quality dimensions in archival institutions in Zimbabwe and the managerial implications of such findings.

Background

Most reactions from the public about what archives are have elicited responses that they are dirty places where old and dusty files are kept. Such misconceptions would equally lead to questions as to why such an area of “scholarly interest” would be perceived as “dull, uncreative [and], of limited intellectual scope” (Bradsher 1988:1).

In order to appreciate the service quality concept in archival institutions, a brief discussion of the issues involved in service quality measurement and the involvement of the topic over the years, and a brief overview of the definitions of service quality will be given. Indeed several definitions of service quality have been suggested in the literature. Some authors have defined service quality as

meeting the needs and requirements of customers (Murdock, Render Russell 1990; Smith 1995). The concept of service quality, in essence, however, has been looked at in the academic world as the difference between expectations and perceptions of outcome (Du Plessis and Moola 1997). The right quality is achieved when expectations are fulfilled, needs satisfied and demands met – of customers.

Of paramount importance, given the intangible nature of services firms, is that customers develop realistic and accurate expectations, and that service providers, in turn deliver these services at or above the level of those expectations. And if service quality is to be the cornerstone of service organizations' strategies, organizations must have the means to measure it. The instrument that has been predominantly adopted in the literature and will be discussed in more detail under the literature review section of this article is SERVQUAL. Service quality has been conceptualized as a gap analysis between customer expectations and perceptions (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry 1985; 1988; Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry 1994). For the purposes of this article, the instrument adopted in service quality measurement was SERVQUAL. The scale uses five dimensions, namely tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy.

The archives industry

To illustrate the nature and the functions of archives services in national or international contexts, a brief survey of types of institutions, the services offered and the competition within the industry may be useful.

Archives categories

There are distinct categories into which archives fall and these can be viewed in the following senses:

The first sense in which the term archives is used is to denote recorded information accumulated in the course of official governmental activity, that is, in the case of public archives; or in the course of a private organization's activity in the case of private archives. Archives, in that sense, be they from public or private institutions and organisations, are, no longer needed to conduct current business but are preserved, either as evidence of origins, structures, functions, and activities of organisations or because of the value of the information they contain whether or not they have been transferred to an archival institution. Information in archives, in this sense, is of fundamental and continuing value for administrative, fiscal, legal, evidential, or information (historical) purposes.

The second sense in which archives can be viewed is the information recorded or received by private individuals and employees of a governmental entity or private organisation or institution, and not created or received during the course of conducting official business. This is generally contained in what are termed

personal papers. While archives grow out of some regular functional activity, individuals or families accumulate personal papers in pursuance of their personal, professional and private concerns. The line between organisation records and personal papers is sometimes difficult to define. The distinction is especially important when legal problems of what is, and what is not a record are considered. While personal papers belong to and are subject to the disposition of an individual, records are generally subject to laws and regulations or corporate policies and procedures that authorize their disposition at a specified time and in a specific manner.

As Bradsher (1988) points out, while archives are records not all records are archives. Archives are the small core of records with enduring value, no more than five percent of the volume of all public records. It is this enduring value that distinguishes archives proper from records in general. All records have value to somebody. However, generally only those of sufficient value, as determined by archivists, are retained as archives, and then only as long as their value is of an enduring nature (Bradsher 1988: 4).

The third sense in which archives can be viewed is to denote the building, part of the building or storage area in which archives are housed. These institutions are either publicly or privately funded. These institutions, whose function is the preservation and administration of archives, are known as either "archives" or "manuscript repositories" depending on the type of material they contain or how it is acquired. "Manuscript repositories" are responsible mostly for personal papers and artificial miscellaneous collections such as historical manuscripts acquired by purchase or donation primarily for cultural and educational purposes. "Archives" are responsible for the archival records of the organisation or institution of which they are a part. They also serve as the archives of their own or some other institutions. In common usage the terms "archives", "archival institutions" or "archival repositories", are generally used to denote entities maintaining archives and manuscript collections.

Archives are maintained by most national governments, Zimbabwe being no exception. Other official bodies also maintain archives, for instance, institutions of higher learning, as do business, religious, labour, ethnic, patriotic, charitable, political, educational, fraternal and social organisations. Archives, personal papers and historical manuscripts are also found in large quantities in libraries and historical societies. Archives are maintained in hospitals, museums and wherever it is important to retain indefinitely those non-current records of the greatest historical value and of the greatest potential use to their creators and other researchers interested in documenting and understanding the past, dealing with the present, and preparing for the future.

Competition

Competition, especially in public archives owned by the state like the National Archives of Zimbabwe, is not pronounced. In a sense they can be considered as

monopolies in that they store state-generated information exclusively housed and managed by them. For quite some time, most of them have been classified as non-profit agencies. The work and structure of the state-owned archives are also guided by legislation. The legislation, thus, is likely to affect the control of access and the design of the records series: an issue which has been the major source of many records management problems.

Archives characteristics

Within the archival sector, there are characteristics that cut across various aspects. Archives whether public or private are created in the normal conduct of business by particular entities and maintained in a definite arrangement usually related to the actions that resulted in their accumulation. The most basic characteristics of archives and all archival principles derive from the following facts:

“Respect des fonds” or “provenance” principle

Since archives of a particular entity are accumulated as a direct result of its functional activities, they are intended to reflect the policies, functions, and transactions of that entity alone; hence the “*respect des fonds*” or “provenance” principle, which relates to, (for archival management purposes) the maintenance and grouping of the archives of one entity separate from those of others, thereby respecting the natural body of documentation left by the creating entity and reflecting its work.

Sanctity of the original order principle

Sanctity of the original order principle pertains to the organic character of records. As a transaction progresses, records relating to it grow naturally. The principle has had an impact on the archival management of records due to its emphasis on retaining their quality of reflecting accurately what has gone before, why and how. Taken out of the sequence, or arranged in a manner different from that in which they are created, archives tell an incomplete or inaccurate story.

The legal principle

From the third characteristic, which is the official character of archives, flows the archival principle that archives must remain in the custody of their creator or its legitimate successor in order to ensure that no tampering takes place by unauthorized individuals. The legal implications are the assurance that archives will be acceptable at a court of law as evidence of a transaction.

Uniqueness

Unlike books, which are mass-produced for cultural and educational purposes, archives are unique in that they are essentially single file units created or accumulated in connection with a specific business or administrative transaction. A destroyed copy of a book can be easily replaced yet if archival file units are destroyed, other copies of the documents in them might exist, but it is unlikely

they would be maintained in the same sequence or context.

Thus maintaining archives according to these basic principles provides evidence about the nature of their creator; preserves the values arising from their organic characteristics; provides evidence as to how and why they were created and used; protects their integrity, and allows for them to be arranged, described, and administered efficiently and effectively.

The difference between archives and other reference materials, like libraries, for instance, is that the latter do not have the characteristics described above.

The National Archives of Zimbabwe

The National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ), which was used as the primary setting of this article, has most of the above characteristics. Since its establishment in 1935, the role of the National Archives comprises the following:

Records and information management

The Records and Information Management Programme is key to the accomplishment of NAZ's mission statement. Its major objective is the controlled creation, use, maintenance and disposal of records throughout their life cycle so as to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the record creating agencies. It is against this background that the chosen five provincial record offices in Harare, Bulawayo, Mutare, Gweru and Masvingo perform their records and information management functions. [1] Besides being the receiving point for all government departments, parastatals and local authorities wishing to deposit their records, the Record Centres train the registry operatives on how best to create, use and maintain and dispose of their records.

Public archives and research

The research sector is responsible for making the actual archives of the state available to people. Government records that have been scheduled for permanent preservation are transferred to the Public Archives and Research section when they are over 25 years old. These records are arranged, inventoried and indexed according to the principles of archival science pointed out earlier in the article. This section also deals with postal and telephonic research. "The public are gradually realizing that the archives exists not so much to do research for them but make material available to them and to help them to be able to do the research themselves (or researchers hired by them)" (National Archives of Zimbabwe 1995:6).

The National Reference Library

The main function of the National Archives Library is the acquisition for permanent preservation of a copy of every book published in or about Zimbabwe, regardless of subject, form or language. Locally published material is acquired by legal deposit and material published outside the country is acquired through

purchase and donations. The library also administers the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) scheme.

Besides the main functions mentioned above, the technical section which consists of five technical units, is responsible for collecting and preserving audiovisual materials for historical purposes; ensuring the implementation of the Archives' automation programme; repairing and restoring all forms of hard-copy documentation such as archival files, books, periodicals, manuscripts, maps and newspapers; and collecting and preserving oral testimonies from a wide variety of people, which contribute to Zimbabwean history. The functions of the technical section are more of what Lovelock (1996) describes as "backstage activities" hence this article will not address them in detail. Besides, most of them do not exist at the provincial offices, and for the consistency of this study, it was proper to leave them out.

Literature review

Against a background of expanding and intensifying competition, increasing client sensitivity, increasing cases of malpractice suits, globalization of services and standardization of service quality strategies and the recognition that what cannot be measured cannot be managed, emphasis on the need to develop valid and reliable measures of service quality has not only increased but has drawn a lot of debate that has seen many studies and researches in the services marketing literature. More recently, led by developments in information technology and the intensity of competition, the debate has become more strategic and complex and has advanced to include leading-edge concepts. These include creating customer value, the profit consequences of service quality, and targeting the service needs of the most profitable customer segments (Zeithaml 2000). The focus has been serving the customers more effectively and shifted from short-term transactions to life-long relationships and retention marketing. This strategic approach has led to the overall repositioning of company structures and systems to become more customer focusing, that is, working backwards from the point of contact to communicating, enabling and delivering the service promise to individual customers. This focus has not been limited to profit-making organizations only, but has extended to various types of organizations, hence the emphasis on "improving service quality – achieving high performance in the public and private sectors" (Milakovich 1995).

Thus, it is against this background that service quality is the most researched area in services marketing to date (Lovelock 1996) since the groundbreaking work of Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1985; 1988). Indeed most of the literature in service quality in the field of marketing has its foundation on continuing contributions of Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1985; 1988), whose conceptual framework (the Gap Model) and a measurement instrument, SERVQUAL, have been predominantly used for assessing service quality. SERVQUAL, as the most widely used instrument to measure service quality, is a

22-item perception/expectation gap instrument made up of two sections. The first section measures expectations by asking customers what they expect of aspects of service delivery. The second section asks customers to evaluate specific aspects of a company. In this way, scores are generated per individual item, per dimension and for the company as a whole. The developers of SERVQUAL stress the need for the basic “skeleton” to be adapted to fit the required needs of the user.

Measuring service quality seems to have posed difficulties for academics and practitioners because of the unique characteristics of service tangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability. However, researchers have tried to conceptualize and measure service quality. The contributions and discussion as stated in this article are centred on the SERVQUAL scale created by Parasuraman, Berry and Zeithaml (1985; 1988). They conceptualized service quality as a gap analysis between customer’s expectations and perceptions and suggested that service quality could be measured using SERVQUAL on a scale composed of five dimensions. SERVQUAL has been widely used by both academics and practitioners in various service industries such as entertainment (Crompton and Mackay 1989; Fick and Ritcie 1991); health care (Brown and Swartz 1989; Babakus and Marigold 1992); education (Rugorti and Pitt 1992; Hampton 1993); services in general (Bolton and Drew 1991; Heskit *et al* 1990; Zeithaml *et al* 1990); IS modified version of SERVQUAL (Pitt *et al* 1988); dimensions on measurement of service quality from the perspective of the internal customer (Pitt *et al* 1999); the major role played by non-verbal communications; theoretical comparison of the determinants of service quality between developed and developing countries (Malhotra *et al* 1994; Mattila 1999); to mention a few aspects in the trend of service quality measurement to date.

Notwithstanding its growing popularity and widespread utilization, SERVQUAL has been subject to criticism and heated debate in service quality literature since the early 1990s. Du Plessis and Moola (1997) have summarized the theoretical and operational criticisms of SERVQUAL. One of the outstanding criticisms related to the relevancy of using expectations and difference scores (the P-E operationalisation of service quality). Some authors argue that difference scores do not provide any additional information beyond that already contained in the perceptions component of the SERVQUAL scale (Babakus and Boller 1992). Incobucci *et al* (1994) noted that while conceptual differences scores might be sensible, they are problematic in that they are notoriously unreliable. They also suggest that expectations might not exist or be formed simultaneously with service consumption.

Another issue raised on the incorporation of expectations measures is that they may attract a social desirability response bias (Babakus and Inhofe 1991). Some authors argue that customer assessments of continuously provided services may depend solely on performance. They proposed to use performance-only measures as an operationalisation of service quality (Bolton and Drew 1991).

Cronic and Taylor (1992) found that a performance-based measure of service quality explained more variance in an overall measure of service quality than did the P-E scale. Boulding *et al* (1993) have rejected the relevancy of any expectations-based measure, suggesting that service quality was only influenced by perceptions.

However, despite the abundance of literature on service quality definitions and measurements, the measurement of service quality has concentrated on retail setting (Finn and Lamb 1991), hotels, airlines, professional services (Brown and Swartz 1989) and no scholarly work has focused on public archival institutions. The closest scholarly work to archival institutions has been on assessing service quality in a library setting (Heron & Altman 1998) and service quality assessment in the private and public sectors (Milakovich 1995). Other than these, no scholarly work has focused on service quality in public archival institutions in Zimbabwe, especially with particular reference to the National Archives of Zimbabwe.

Methodology

Given that this study is among the first empirical works in Zimbabwe and specifically at NAZ, a decision was taken to focus the initial investigation generally on public archives and specifically, on customer-information service providers' perceptions and expectations of the quality of service at NAZ. The information service providers selected for this study were professionally qualified archivists and records management officers; with the understanding of the tasks and nature of service in processing, arranging and describing the archives; and doing all the other practical work processes needed to facilitate information provision to the customers.

Nineteen NAZ information service providers from the provincial branches in the country, namely: Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru, Masvingo and Mutare were the population of the study. This distribution of the surveys influenced the representativeness of the responses in that at least all provinces offered research services and records management services, amongst other functions at NAZ. Each provincial archivist was also requested to provide names and addresses of customers who visited the respective provincial offices in the month of June, thus constituting the subpopulation of the customer sample. This preferred subpopulation of customers also influenced the statements selected for customer response as those were tailored to the interests and knowledge of the subpopulation surveyed.

Procedure

Each sample customer either received in the mail a questionnaire with a cover note explaining the purpose of the study and requesting the customers' cooperation in the survey or where possible, questionnaires were directly

delivered and collected from the customers to avoid the mailing expenses involved and response delays. In cases where questionnaires were mailed, postage paid envelopes were provided. This was followed by telephone interviews in some instances. Questionnaires assured customers of the confidentiality of the information provided and customers were also given the option of not revealing their particulars.

Each information service provider also received a questionnaire identical to the one received by the customers. The difference was in the introductory instructions. Information service providers were asked to respond to the items of the questionnaire the way they believed their customers would respond. This procedure, besides accommodating the dimensions of the SERQUAL instrument which have been adopted, also allowed for a direct comparison between the customers' perceptions and the information service providers' perception of their customers' views. The interactive nature of the services provided at NAZ highlighted the need to examine both parties' perceptions, that is, the customer and the information service provider, since both were directly involved in the service encounter.

It should be noted that the service providers' perceptions and expectations most directly affect the design and delivery of services offered, and customers' perception, on the other hand, more directly determine evaluation of the services offered. Thus both customers and information service providers' perceptions and expectations in evaluating service quality are essential. Gaps between customer expectations and perceptions of service quality may enable information providers to determine the extent and the implications of the gaps between the two.

Measures

The adapted SERVQUAL instrument's measurement dimensions were:

- Tangibles (appearances of physical elements).
- Reliability (dependable, accuracy, performance)
- Responsiveness (promptness and helpfulness)
- Assurance (competence, courtesy, credibility and security)
- Empathy (easy access, good communications and customer understanding) (Parasuraman *et al*, 1988).

Observations on various services provided by NAZ; the mission statement and strategic planning documents containing statements about service at NAZ; discussions with information service providers in archival institutions; and past research on provision of service quality in information sectors, for instance, in libraries, assisted in item generation of statements represented on the questionnaires. Items on value, that is, measuring the expectations and perceptions against "the cost (time, effort or money)" of going to the Archives "instead of doing something else" and the value in what the customer would otherwise do if the services were not available (Hernon and Altman 1988: 52) were also included. As Hernon and Altman (1988) point out, researchers have

moved from the literal meaning of fulfillment or satisfaction and now pursue the concept of customer experience. The issue of satisfaction, thus, is also linked to the concept of service quality, but expectations should be confined to those that the Archives are prepared to meet. Indicators of satisfaction, in this study, therefore included the willingness to return or to use the service repeatedly, to recommend a service to others, to support a service or to advocate its support to others. More details are given in the questionnaire at Appendix I.

A five-point Likert-type scale, with 1 representing “strongly disagree” and 5 “strongly agree” was used to rate the service quality provided by NAZ as perceived and expected by customers and service providers.

Due to the magnitude of this research and the constrained resources (time and costs), instead of computing the overall gap score by totalling the mean gap score for each item on a comparison between customer’s expectations and perceptions, items considered as important indicators of various aspects of service quality were identified from the questionnaire.

Results

Summary data on responses to questionnaires is shown in Exhibit 2. Of the 1066 customers sampled, 890 responded; a response rate of 83%. Since the questionnaires were distributed through various archival branches within the country, the summary data show the response by regional office, factor and individual item.

Section A generally served to measure customers’ perception of the objectives and functions of the National Archives. Factor (a) was considered as an important indicator of this aspect. The results suggested a significant inconsistency in objectives and functions as perceived by customers and the service providers at the institution. Follow-up interviews, especially with the service providers indicated that the Records Centers have been perceived as a dumping ground for old, dusty files considered costly to keep and no longer useful in the respective customers’ firms’ daily transactions. This point was further confirmed by responses on factor (b).

In Section B factor 1(a) measured responsiveness of the Archives, that is, the promptness and helpfulness in the provision of services as expected by the customers. This was compared with the responses in Section C, factor 4(a), which measured customers’ experiences. Results showed that the expected speedy delivery of services at the Archives was a contrast to what customers actually experienced. Interviews held with the service providers at the Archives further confirmed the delays in provision of requested services due to shortages and in some case inexperienced members of staff; and the grounded fleet of Archives vehicles. A cursory examination of responses under Section B on items that measured such dimensions as security (factor 3(d), confidentiality (factor 3

(e), accessibility and appropriateness, and communication (factors 1(d), 2(b) and 3), indicated high expectations ratings by customers. Follow-up interviews, however, showed a different picture especially in Section C on customers' experiences. Items on lack of communication through workshops and training of registry staff from the depositing organizations; distribution of brochures; general advice and assistance on packing of records and visits to the depositing departments was attributed to lack of resources to carry out such duties by staff at the Archives.

Implications

A cursory analysis of the summary data of this study and the few graphic presentations deduced from the collected data identify inconsistencies between customers' expectations and experiences of services provided at the Archives. The inconsistencies also exist between information service providers and customers' perceptions of service performance. For the management team at the National Archives, addressing such inconsistencies would lay the foundation for formulating strategies and tactics to ensure consistent expectations and experiences.

Adapting the SERVQUAL measurement instrument and indeed the very process of generating items for the questionnaires described earlier in this study should assist management at the National Archives to identify important aspects of service quality expected by its customers. Thus, as the external starting point for service quality improvement, measuring and monitoring customer expectations and perceived services on an ongoing basis would entail a marketing responsibility at the Archives. The challenge for management would be that service quality measurement must stay close to the customer, and yet the customer's requirements are a moving target.

As pointed out earlier in this article, the Zimbabwean government has initiated a move that all government departments be commercially run like private companies. Presently most public agencies still lack the capacity to simultaneously increase productivity, reduce costs and motivate public employees to provide service to customers in a timely, polite, efficient and effective manner (Milakovick 1990a). The Zimbabwean public sector in general, and NAZ in particular, have not been exceptions. Besides the lack of simple satisfaction surveys at the National Archives, there is not even a suggestion box or a clearly defined complaint procedure for customers. Such service quality measurement exercises would generate interest in the application of service quality concepts and techniques, thus providing a model for quality-driven, customer-focused change in public management practices.

The fact that the National Archives has never embarked on this kind of study is a possible indicator that the institution has not made major strides to identify its customers' expectations, in terms of service quality. With no suggestion boxes in

sight in all the provincial centres; an utter lack of marketing research orientation most probably influenced by adherence to the archival principles; the identified inconsistencies in this study further confirm the likelihood that the Archives provide services that do not seem to match customers' expectations. Stated simply, providing services that customers perceive as excellent requires that the organization knows what customers expect.

From the results of this study, it is obvious that there is need for management at the National Archives to work towards altering the information service providers' behaviours and expectations in order to address the causes of the identified inconsistencies. This could be done through in-house training focusing on provision of services to customers in a timely, polite and effective manner, thus enhancing professionalism. It should be noted, however, that there are indications of mass exodus of professional staff at the Archives due to poor remuneration and general low morale, a tip in the iceberg in unidentified employee perceived obstacles to improved service. Given this kind of environment, especially against the background of the harsh economic climate in Zimbabwe, the short-term tactics that could be considered by management would be to first identify "internal service quality" to help answer "why" service quality is what it is and then based on that, motivate the staff; create an organizational sense of belonging and teamwork; and appreciation of efforts in excelling in one's work through such awards as "the worker of the week". Indeed, every effort in "internal marketing" should be made to motivate and create customer-oriented instead of the present low- morale, task-oriented information service providers.

There is a need also to alter customers' expectations and perceptions. Before initiating any new program to alter customer perceptions, management should learn more about the customers' expectations and experiences. Insights from customer surveys, focus groups and research are likely to provide a valuable information base for programs to alter customers' expectations. Major means of altering customers' expectations would be through educational, (for instance workshops) and/or promotion communication (for instance, the distribution of brochures and relevant information). This would also entail conducting key customer studies, creating customer panels, researching what customers want in similar industries, other countries, tracking satisfaction with individual transactions, engaging in comprehensive customer-expectation studies like the one under review. In view of the financial constraints faced by the organization, simple and inexpensive collection of data such as placing suggestion boxes at convenient places within the building can be helpful. If compiled, analyzed and fed back to the employees who can correct problems, complaints can become an inexpensive and continuous source of adjustment for the service process (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry 1994).

Other approaches would include creating "Friends of the Archives" associations whereby a group of voluntary customers' panels would participate in advising on

Archives services, amongst many other activities. This will enable management at Archives to obtain in-depth, timely feedback and suggestions about service quality from experienced customers who cooperate because of the “membership” nature of the panel. The limitations of such panels/associations, however, are that they may not be projectable to the entire customer base; might exclude non-customers and panelists may assume the role of “expert” and become less representative of the customer base perceptions and expectations.

Limitations of this research

Additional research is needed on evaluating service quality in public archival institutions in Zimbabwe. The data from one institution, that is, the National Archives should not be construed as representing the entire archival sector service quality aspects in Zimbabwe. However, the study does provide a test of the usefulness of adapting the SERVQUAL measurement instrument in evaluating service quality at the National Archives. More insight would have been gained though if this study had identified specific gaps and hypotheses to be tested. The data analysis would have been more significant had the overall gap score been computed by totalling the mean gap score for each item on a comparison between customers’ expectations and perceptions. Although the study, through the adoption of SERVQUAL, provides a good foundation of how to begin measuring both expectations and perceptions at the Archives, the limitations are the criticisms of the tool cited by many authors and these have been highlighted in the literature review section.

Conclusion

Archival institutions have loyally adhered to the archival principles in the provision of their services. Could such principles be the main barrier to the utter lack of research and the application of the service quality concept to archival institutions? Cook (1999) points out that the information supply concept has at least changed the attitude of some archivists to their work. This is the perception that archival management resembles other information work in obeying the basic principles of information theory. But can information “within the specialist area” at the Archives and regulated by government legislation be provided as a commodity to a body of customers at the National Archives?

What is however apparent from this study are the identified inconsistencies in the perceptions and expectations of the information providers and customers at the National Archives. Such inconsistencies inevitably require strategies and tactics for attaining congruency in expectations and experiences since such discrepancies highlight poor service quality. Adherence to archival principles will only make archival institutions expensive warehouses not accessible to their customers. Moving towards delivering service quality is indeed a challenge facing public archival institutions in Zimbabwe, particularly the National Archives of Zimbabwe.

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Endnotes

1. The Chinhoyi Records Centre in Mashonaland West was not yet fully operational at the time that the study was conducted.

Appendix I: Questionnaire for collecting data for the study

Instructions to respondent

To help determine whether the National Archives of Zimbabwe has been able to provide you with quality service in its Records Management and Public Archives and Research Section, please answer the following questions. Circle the number that best describes your expectations and perceptions on the services provided.

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

SECTION A

Factor 1

(a) The Records Centre at the National Archives of Zimbabwe is a place where all records that are no longer useful to my organisation are transferred.

1 2 3 4 5

(b) The cost of storing records in my organisation's office accommodation can easily be avoided by sending the records to the National Archives.

1 2 3 4 5

(c) As soon as the records in my organisation are reasonably inactive, they should be sent to the National Archives of Zimbabwe.

1 2 3 4 5

(d) Records should be transferred to the Records Centre as soon as the rate of reference to them has diminished to a point where it is causal rather than regular.

1 2 3 4 5

(e) Where records from my organisation are located at the National Archives and how retention periods are determined is not of any importance to me as I consider that to be the responsibility of the records management officers at the National Archives.

1 2 3 4 5

(f) The term "records" means correspondence files, forms, reports, requisitions, vouchers, maps and any other written or graphic material containing information used in transacting the business of an office.

1 2 3 4 5

(g) Records should be packed in boxes in numerical, chronological or alphabetic order depending on the filing system of which that part forms. Records should be packed anyhow.

1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(h) Where possible, the contents of the box should be confined to the records of the same type.

1 2 3 4 5

SECTION B

Factor 1

(a) I expect a speedy file issue and reference service to be provided.

1 2 3 4 5

(b) I expect information service providers to advise me on any matters regarding creation, storage, destruction or preservation of records.

1 2 3 4 5

(c) I expect information service providers to advise me clearly on any matters

regarding the creation, storage, destruction and preservation of records using the terminology I understand. 1 2 3 4 5

(d) I expect records management officers to regularly hold seminars, visit registries, inspect and examine my organisation's records. 1 2 3 4 5

Factor 2

(a) I would like to have more information on records management related literature available in my organisation. 1 2 3 4 5

(b) I would like to have brochures available from the National Archives explaining procedures regarding storage, destruction, preservation and transfer to the National Archives of my organisation's records. 1 2 3 4 5

(c) I would like to have brochures available giving clear instructions on how to deal with problems likely to be encountered in records management. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

Factor 3

(a) Where records are concerned, records officers should make all recommendations with regard to the retention or destruction of my organisation's records. 1 2 3 4 5

(b) Where records are concerned, records officers should give all the advice relating to the filing, maintenance and preservation of my organisation's records. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(c) National Archives access to my organisation's premises for the purposes of inspecting and examining its records should not be restricted. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(d) I expect my organisation's records to be securely kept. 1 2 3 4 5

(e) I expect my organisation's records that have been transferred to the National Archives to be strictly confidential to my department and that they should not be referred to by any other department without the written authority of my organisation. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(f) I view the Archives as a logical extension of my organisation's registry and its existence purely to serve semi-current records. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

SECTION C:

Factor 1

(a) Records management officers listen to what I have to say about my organisation's records/files. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(b) Records management officers usually give me enough information about the state of my organisation's files / records. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(c) Records management officers are careful to explain what I am expected to do. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(d) Records management officers inspect and examine the nature and state of my organisation's records thoroughly before making recommendations with regards to the retention or destruction of the records. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(e) I have complete trust in the National Archives records' officers. 1 2 3 4 5

1 2 3 4 5

(f) Records management officers show real interest and concern in the affairs of the organisation's records management system. 1 2 3 4 5

(g) I have full attention of the records management officers when I ask for advice on records management system. 1 2 3 4 5

(h) The records management officers treat me with respect whenever I visit the National Archives or when they carry out records departmental surveys. 1 2 3 4 5

(i) The records officers always explain to me the reasons for the inspection and examination of my organisation's records/ files and how they arrive at making recommendations with regard to the retention or destruction of my organisation's records. 1 2 3 4 5

Factor 2

(a) Information service providers take warm and personal interest in me when I make enquires and requests about my organisation's records. 1 2 3 4 5

(b) The officers are very friendly and courteous. 1 2 3 4 5

(c) The staff is very flexible in dealing with my records/files requests and enquiries. 1 2 3 4 5

(d) National Archives staff always act in a professional manner. 1 2 3 4 5

(e) Information Service providers are interested in serving National Archives' needs more than my organisation's. 1 2 3 4 5

Factor 3:

(a) The service providers at the National Archives are better trained than the average records management officers in other institutions 1 2 3 4 5

(b) Compared to other records management officers, the National Archives officers make fewer mistakes. 1 2 3 4 5

(c) The National Archives records management officers have the latest knowledge in records management, for example, electronic records management. 1 2 3 4 5

(d) The records management officers at the Archives give me choices when it comes to major decisions regarding the management of my organisation's records. 1 2 3 4 5

(e) Once the records management officers have trained me on records management, it is easy to use the system in my organisation. 1 2 3 4 5

(f) There is a lot of support from records officers on the records management system whenever requested. 1 2 3 4 5

Factor 4:

(a) When coming to collect requested files, the records management officers rarely make me wait and they usually retrieve the records on time.

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (b) I am usually kept waiting for a long time when at the Archives to collect files. | | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (c) The National Archives offices are conveniently located. | | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (e) The information service providers always make the records available on request. | | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (f) Most of the time, requested records are missing at the National Archives. | | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (g) Appropriate records are always issued out on request. | | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (h) Records have to be returned to the National Archives because the requested references do not correspond to the requested records. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| (i) I am very satisfied with the overall services provided by the National Archives. | | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |