GOING 'ABOVE AND BEYOND'

In stressful customer interactions

Rosen College researchers Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu and Dr. Youcheng Wang, along with a collaborator, have undertaken vital research to identify critical factors which heighten employee stress within the hospitality industry. Their research focuses specifically on the stresses associated with 'boundary-spanning' roles, where an employee is required to meet the expectations of both the organization and the customer. The research team go beyond previous attempts at understanding stress, utilizing motivational and emotional theories to shed new light on the nuances of hospitality stress. They also identify stress-protective factors that managers can leverage to reduce the negative impact of stress and motivate employees to go 'above and beyond' in their customer service.
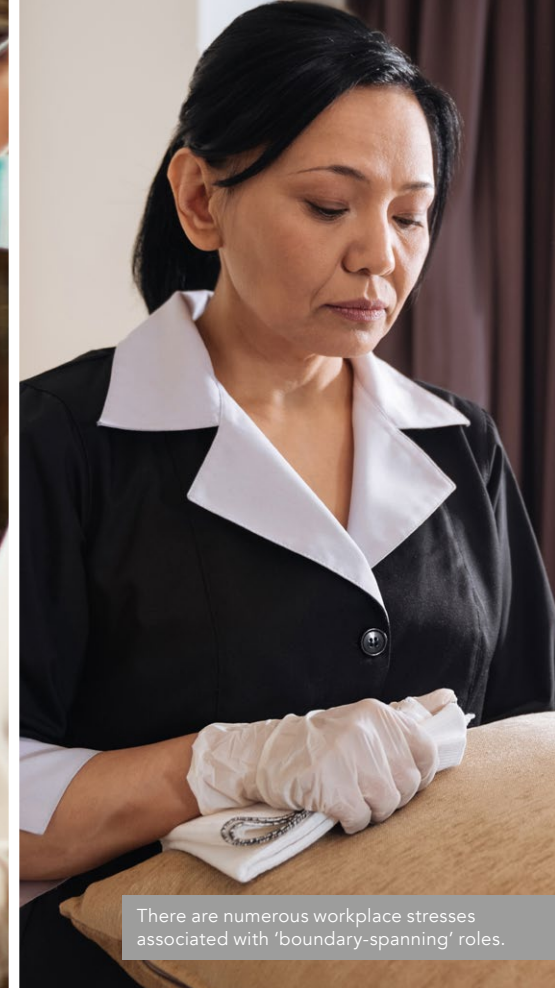
There are numerous workplace stresses associated with 'boundary-spanning' roles.

Hindrance stressors can be emotionally depleting for employees.

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G reat customer service lies at the heart of a successful hospitality business. But how do we equip managers and employees with the knowledge required to understand and influence positive customer interactions? How can managers encourage employees to go the extra mile in meeting the expectations of customers, particularly employees who are positioned in roles with high demands? How does stress impact an employee's customer service and job-related behaviors, especially in relation to boundary-spanning roles?

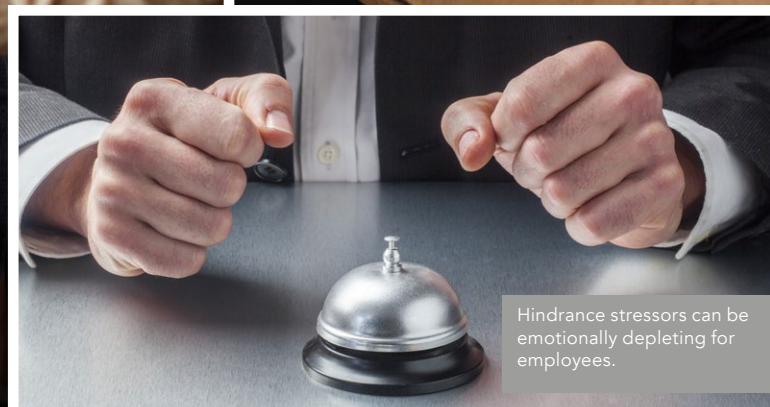### EMPLOYEE STRESS IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY

Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu, Dr. Youcheng Wang and their collaborator believe these research questions are vital in achieving service excellence within the hospitality industry. The researchers explain that "boundary-spanning" behaviors are those job-related behaviors that involve interactions between an internal employee who represents the organization and a person external to the organization. This specific point of interaction carries with it the potential for high stress encounters, as the employee is required to respond in a way that mediates between the interests of both the company and the customer.

Successful boundary-spanning behavior for an employee within these positions requires responsiveness, courtesy, and flexibility; understanding customer requirements and expectations; dealing with complaints; influencing people within the organization to respond to customer complaints; and representing the organization positively, as an ambassador, while interacting with the customer.

In some instances, the customer's and the organization's expectations may be in conflict, which can in turn trigger "role conflict" for an employee. Dr. Fu and Dr. Wang say that role conflict can be classified as a "hindrance stressor" in the work environment, as it entails a demand or circumstance that inhibits the employee in achieving their goals. This stress may be heightened in situations where the employee does not have clarity in relation to expectations about how they should respond. This "role ambiguity", or confusion about how to respond and meet expectations, can add to the already present occupational stress known to be associated with the hospitality industry, commonly resulting from long and irregular hours, and high workloads.

Extensive research on the negative impact of hindrance stressors within the work environment has shown that these kinds of stressors can be emotionally depleting for employees and negatively impact on work performance and engagement. By closely studying these hindrance stressors, the research team have shed vital light on possible routes towards mitigating the emotionally and motivationally detrimental impact of workplace stress.

EMOTIONS AND PERFORMANCE

Transactional stress theory proposes that negative stress arises when a person feels that they do not have the resources to meet the demands being made upon them. Good stress, on the other hand, arises at a level that challenges the employee but within a context where the employee perceives themselves to be able to deal with the work demand. Challenging stress, at the right level, can impact positively on employees and result in improved performance. The researchers say there has not been an extensive amount of research conducted in relation to frontline employees within the hospitality industry. It is therefore important to assess whether the stress these employees face could be viewed as 'good stress', and whether this motivates and energizes an employee to deliver excellent service.

The researchers utilize affective events theory to propose that events within the work environment trigger internal feelings that directly influence an employee's workplace behaviors (broadly speaking, this may have an adverse effect on their engagement and performance). The emotions triggered by the work environment may be deemed positive emotions (such as enjoyment or interest), or negative emotions, such as anger or distress. These emotions in turn impact an employee's interactions with customers.

For this reason, frontline employees are often encouraged to display positive emotions when interacting with customers. Understanding the motivational factors that are likely to encourage employees to display positive emotions requires an understanding of motivational behavior. Intrinsic motivation theory links an individual's performance and motivation to their inner states in relation to individual personal goals and growth orientation. Intrinsic motivation has been linked to positive emotions, passion, and goal achievement. Prior research has also shown that intrinsic motivation can protect against stress and that the best frontline employees are often intrinsically motivated.

MODELLING PATHWAYS OF EXCELLENT PERFORMANCE

Dr. Fu and Dr. Wang developed an intricate

> *CHALLENGING STRESS, AT THE RIGHT LEVEL, CAN IMPACT POSITIVELY ON EMPLOYEES AND RESULT IN IMPROVED PERFORMANCE.*

model that would explain the influence of stress on the behaviors of frontline employees within boundary-spanning jobs. The research team wanted to understand how hindrance stressors, such as role conflict and role ambiguity, impact these behaviors, and whether there might be buffering or protective factors that could reduce this negative stress.

They therefore built a conceptual model, drawing on prior research, with key factors including role conflict, role ambiguity, and intrinsic motivation as important influences on boundary-spanning behaviors. They hypothesized that role conflict negatively influences emotions and positively influences negative emotions. They also hypothesized pathways of influence (both positive and negative) for role ambiguity on emotions, meaning uncertainty about a role would have a direct impact on employee emotion.

The model incorporated predictions about the influence that emotions (positive and negative) would have on boundary-spanning behaviors. In addition, they importantly hypothesized that heightened intrinsic motivation would reduce role conflict, role ambiguity, and negative emotions, and that intrinsic motivation would ultimately enhance positive emotions.

TESTING THE MODEL
To test the model, the researchers designed an online questionnaire which incorporated items from existing assessments of intrinsic motivation, role conflict, role ambiguity, emotions, and boundary-spanning behavior.

> *INTRINSIC MOTIVATION HAS AN IMPORTANT BUFFERING EFFECT IN RELATION TO ROLE CONFLICT, ROLE AMBIGUITY, AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS.*

They collected data using the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform (which has been shown to yield reliable samples for research studies). They tested out their questionnaire in a pilot study to assess the questionnaire items and dimensions for internal consistency and to confirm the validity of the measurement scales. This enabled them to refine the questionnaire before launching the main study.

A total of 680 participants completed the questionnaire, from which 557

questionnaires were considered usable and included in the data analysis. The demographic composition of the study included a more or less equal split across male and female genders. Most had worked in their current position for three years or less and just over half of the respondents were aged between 25 and 34. A variety of roles were represented amongst the participants, including waiter/waitress, bartender, front desk clerks and receptionists, concierge, housekeepers, cashiers, supervisors, and duty managers.

The questionnaire data was analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques and confirmatory factor analysis to verify the constructs and structural relationships of the factors included in the model. The scales were also statistically assessed for reliability and validity, and structural question modelling was applied to test the model.

The data analysis confirmed all the predictive relationships which the research team had hypothesized within the model. Hindrance stressors, specifically role conflict and role ambiguity, had a negative influence on the employee's positive emotions. These

stressors were also predictive of negative emotions for employees, and these negative emotions in turn had a negative impact on boundary-spanning behaviors. By contrast, when employees were experiencing positive emotions, this positively influenced boundary-spanning behaviors. The research also demonstrated that intrinsic motivation has an important buffering effect in relation to role conflict, role ambiguity, and negative emotions, and that intrinsic motivation enhances positive emotions. This research suggests that employees who have higher levels of intrinsic motivation seem better able to cope with difficulties within their roles, while still going beyond expectations to meet customer needs.

This research has important implications for understanding the impact of emotions on employee functioning within the hospitality industry. The findings of this study can be used by management to design the work environment in a way that reduces negative stress, by reducing role ambiguity and role conflict. Providing training to employees on emotional regulation and management could also better equip employees in boundary-spanning roles to manage the inherent role stress. In addition, focusing on intrinsic motivation as a key attribute when interviewing and selecting employees for hospitality jobs, may help support employee resilience in boundary-spanning roles. In this way, Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu and Dr. Youcheng Wang assert that managers can empower employees to go above and beyond in delivering excellent service to customers.

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu and Dr. Youcheng Wang have researched factors which create stress in boundary-spanning hospitality roles.

CO-AUTHOR

Dr. Jiaxin (Sylvia) Wang, Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin University

REFERENCES

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

How could managers reduce role conflict for hospitality employees in boundary-spanning roles?

❚❚ To help reduce role conflict for hospitality employees in boundary-spanning roles, hospitality organizations should aim to reduce stressors in the work environment. A well designed organizational structure and effective management intervention would be helpful to this end. Explicit job descriptions, effective supervisor–subordinate communication and employee feedback loops are all valid for helping buffer high-contact employees' role-related stress. Managers can also guide their employees to manage emotions at work. The greater effect of positive emotion indicates its ability to induce desirable employee behaviors, such as helping a colleague in need and/or keeping up with organizational goals. For example, role play training exposes employees to unexpected service encounters which may involve hindrance stressors and require emotional processing. ❚❚

Managers can empower employees.

Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu

Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu holds a Ph.D. degree in Tourism Management from Purdue University, a Master's degree in Marketing Science from Johns Hopkins University, and a Bachelor of Arts degree from China's Peking University. Prior to her academic appointments, Dr. Fu possessed several years of industry experience in market research and marketing communications.

E: Xiaoxiao.Fu@ucf.edu   T: +1 407.903.8229
W: https://hospitality.ucf.edu/person/xiaoxiao-fu/

Dr. Youcheng Wang

Dr. Youcheng Wang is the Dean and preeminent chair professor in destination marketing at the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at University of Central Florida and a fellow of the International Academy for the Study of Tourism. His research and consulting interest focuses on hospitality marketing and management, destination marketing and management, customer relationship management, information search behavior, collaborative strategies, and technology management.

E: Youcheng.Wang@ucf.edu   T: +1 407.903.8011
W: https://hospitality.ucf.edu/person/youcheng-raymond-wang/