

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR EVALUATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PROFESSIONAL FIRM SERVICE QUALITY AND CLIENT SATISFACTION IN BUILDING PROJECTS

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Conceptual model helps the researcher to explore variables of study and their clear interactions. Therefore this study aims at proposing a model of a relationship between the professional firm service quality and client satisfaction in building development projects. This is because client satisfaction remains an important factor in the development of engineering and building consulting services. In today's competitive service market, attaining client satisfaction is very crucial for the continued survival and economic stability of consulting firms. The model is built on the concept of service quality and its effect on client satisfaction. The fundamentals of Servqual theory in addition to competency profile and communication within the consulting arm of building projects constitute the independent variables of the model. The Attribution theory constructs constitute the moderating variables of the study. The proposed model focuses on the relationship between soft service qualities, hard service qualities and the client satisfaction variables of architectural quality, technical quality, functional quality, timeliness of service delivery, cost of services and supervision at implementation stage. The findings will be useful to assist consulting firms in enhancing competitiveness and improve project deliveries in the present global challenges.

Keywords: Competitiveness, Consulting services, Service industry, Knowledge economy, Building consultants, Nigeria.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the knowledge economy, professional services are important drivers of the economic activities and to achieve client satisfaction they face the challenges of organizing and managing their resources in a competitive manner. This is in line with the study of de Jong (2007) who describes “*professional service firms as organization whose core business consists of independent, highly educated and skilled people performing knowledge work and providing non-routine services to other firms or institution in close interaction with client representatives on a temporary basis.*”

Professional services in building projects are interconnected and complement each other (Brandl 2010). The services are provided by architectural, engineering and quantity surveying firms. Their activities are largely based on knowledge acquired by the human capital of the firms. The success of both public and private projects is

largely dependent on the quality and capabilities of the human resources deployed to perform these technical and design related activities for the clients (Sporrong 2014).

Therefore, there is a need for continuous development and training of the competencies and expertise. The project organization presents opportunity for this through cross project planning and innovations (Koch and Bendixen 2005). The projects determine what they learn and at what proportion. Therefore the type of project and clients become very vital. Critical decision of such clients becomes a pivotal for the concept of client satisfaction itself. The service practitioners provide information flow consisting drawings, specifications, contract conditions, explanations and clarifications which is the basis of all activities in a project. All construction works originate from the flow of this information, and any delay or inefficiencies there from slow down decision-making ultimately causing delay in project delivery. Thus it can be seen that the service quality of these professionals cannot be over-emphasized.

Trend in construction and service industry is moving towards higher quality. With rising expectation, business transformation, there is awareness of the need by building clients to demand for service providers to raise standard. Quality is now the cornerstone for service providers to widen their client base.

ServQual model is the most commonly used theory of customer satisfaction. The model defines service quality (customer satisfaction) as the differences between the customer's expectations and experiences (Parasuraman *et al.* 1988). It is most well known models of perceived service quality which are based on the disconfirmation paradigm. It assumes that customers have certain preconceived expectations of a product or service before actually consuming it. Customers compare the perceived performance of a product (service, goods) with some performance standard. Customers are satisfied when the perceived performance is greater than standard (positively disconfirmed). Dissatisfaction is perceived when the performance falls short of the standard (negatively disconfirmed) (Forsythe 2007). Dissatisfaction may also be described as the level in which the quality observed by the customer no longer corresponds with the customers' expectations.

Ismail *et al.* (2012) establish three underlying theories of service quality and are: Service quality is more difficult for the customers to evaluate than goods quality; quality evaluations are not made solely on the outcome of a service, but also involve evaluations of the process of service delivery; service quality perceptions result from a comparisons of customers' expectations with the actual service performance. A measure of service quality is usually referred to as customer satisfaction (Vincent *et al.* 2008). Hence measuring customer satisfaction leads to identifying ways to improve customer service quality.

2 SERVICE QUALITY

As perceived by clients, service quality is the extent of discrepancy between expectations and performance. Expectations are the desires and the needs of the client. The performance refers to the client's evaluation of the service provider. Ensuring service quality is meeting or exceeding the expectations from the service (Ismail *et al.* 2012). To manage service quality a clear understanding of what service means to the client is very vital. This measure of service quality is referred to as a client satisfaction.

The European School of thought led by the work of Gronroos (1984) is the pivot on which the concept of service quality revolves. In the concept, service quality is viewed from the technical and functional quality. The technical quality considers if service meets client expectations while the functional quality measures the perception of the client about the production and delivery of the service (Razavi *et al.* 2012)

The American School of thought is built upon the fundamentals of the work of Parasuraman *et al.* (1994). This view regarded as the most prominent has been adopted by a number of researchers in the field of service quality. The study conceptualized service quality as the overall assessment of the difference between perception and expectation of service delivery.

In the model, ten dimensions of service delivery that are generic and relevant to services in general were identified. These dimensions are tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding the customer and access. Factor analysis was used in later studies to condense the dimensions into tangibles, reliability, responsibility, assurance and empathy (Parasuraman *et al.* 1991).

Tangible refers to the physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel while reliability is the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately. Responsiveness is the willingness to help customers and provide prompt service. Assurance refers to courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire confidence, while empathy is the individualized care the firm provides its customers.

Competence is the skill, expertise and professionalism with which the service is executed. Communication is the ability of the service provider to inform the stake holders appropriately in a way he or she would understand.

Professional services are required on an irregular basis. In most cases client experience is very little if any, and these types of services possess a unique set of characteristics (Sonne 1999). Therefore, two elements of the service production processes are categorized as perceived soft process quality and perceived hard process quality.

According to Sonne (1999), soft quality refers to the interaction process between the client and the service providers. Examples are communication and interaction which corresponds to client treatment during service production and includes functional reliability. The hard quality covers non-interactive issues (e.g., professionalism, skills, and physical resources) used in the process of printing technical solution.

The above division of soft and hard quality is consistent with authors who contested that interactive and non-interactive functions should be considered separately in professional services. This is because the nature of consultancy service is characterized by a high degree of complexity about the technical level. This means that the outcome quality of professional services is influenced by his technical ability and partly by the interaction between the consultant and the client. The perceived outcome quality of the service determines the level of client satisfaction (Sonne 1999).

2.1 Service Quality Theory

Technical and Functional Quality Model of Gronroos (1984) emphasizes that an understanding of the client perception of the quality and the way quality is influenced is important for firm to remain competitive. To this end the author indentified three

components of service quality which are technical quality, functional quality and image. The Spreng and Mackoy (1996) model tries to enhance a better understanding of perceived service quality and client satisfaction. It highlights the effect of expectations, perceived performance desires, desired suitability and expectation disconfirmation on overall service quality and client satisfaction. Oh (1999) proposes his model as an integration of service quality, customer value and customer satisfaction. Forsythe (2007) on the Disconfirmation of Expectation Model demonstrates how customer satisfaction is affected by the combination of the performer's level of expectation. It holds that satisfaction increases where the performance perception is deemed to be greater than expectations. This is referred to as positive disconfirmation. On the other hand, when a performance perception is lower than the customer's level of expectation, it results into decrease in satisfaction called negative disconfirmation.

3 ATTRIBUTION THEORY

The concept of attribution theory deals with the idea of assigning causality to either external or internal factors in carrying out a responsibility also forms part of the framework development. External and internal attribution assigns causality to an outside force or to an internal force, respectfully. It gives reasons for people to understand their successes and failures. The theory locates attributions in dimensions of internal/external, stable/ unstable and controllable/uncontrollable (AWE 2005).

4 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SERVICE QUALITY AND CLIENT SATISFACTION

Amos-Abanyie *et al.* (2014) in their study concluded that in today's sophisticated, large-scale, risky and adversarial construction project environment, the evaluation of a relationship between the services of professionals and client satisfaction is very crucial. It was deduced empirically that the concept of perceived quality is the bedrock of client satisfaction and acceptance of product, and the service outcome. This means service quality is significantly related to customer satisfaction. This demonstrates that a linear relationship exist, meaning that higher level of service quality is related to customer satisfaction. That is to say that the practice of satisfaction is grounded on meeting the needs of the client.

5 METHODOLOGY

This study is part of an ongoing PhD research work, and it uses explanatory method in seeking explanations of the observed phenomenon of interest. It tends to identify causal factors and its outcome on the concept of client satisfaction in the consulting sub-sector of the building projects. The model is being developed from an extensive review of past researches using service quality theory and attribution theory.

6 THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR THE STUDY

Conceptual model helps the researcher to explore variables of study and their clear interactions. In this model, client satisfaction is conceptualized as a function of the professional services quality of the consulting firms. The enabling conditions are the internal controllable factors and external uncontrollable factors influencing the

performance of the firms in a given environment (as shown in Figure 1) drawn from the concept of attribution theory.

These influence the quality of both hard and soft quality services and are operationalized to form the set of independent variables. The interaction process between the client and the service providers covering areas of communication, cooperation, ability to keep contracts, deadlines is categorized as soft process. The hard process covers the skills, physical resources and technical qualities deployed towards providing technical solution. The outcome quality is the final document or service the client receives.

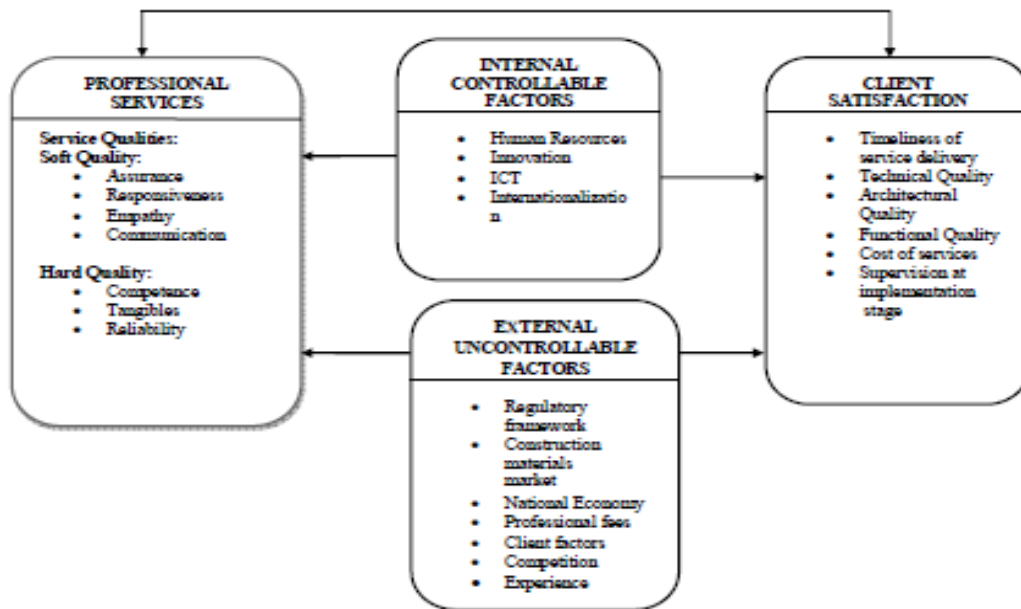


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model for evaluating the relationship between professional firm service quality and client satisfaction in building projects.

The framework also draws from the conclusions of other researchers (Sonne 1999, Amos-Abanyie *et al.* 2014) that in today's sophisticated, large-scale, risky and adversarial construction project environment, client regards competencies and experience of service providers as very significant factors that relate to the actual service quality in meeting their satisfaction. This often influences clients' decision in team selection for future projects. The perceived outcome which represents a part of the model is operationalized as the client satisfaction measures. The following are the client satisfaction measures: Architectural quality measuring the aesthetic appearance of the completed building project; timeliness of service delivery which relates to the deliverables being timely, detailed and comprehensive; technical quality, functional quality relating to flexibility in design and fitness for purpose of the project; cost of services which deals with comparing budgeted cost with actual, price of service relative to quality, quality relative to price of service. Supervision at implementation stage involves control of progress of work, control of quality of material and workmanship incorporated in the work, and completeness of site records (Figure 1).

7 CONCLUSION

A conceptual model is a theoretical construct from validated scientific research representing an explicit situation in the real world being investigated. Therefore, this descriptive model represents a position through which the variables of the study can be visualized. It also suggests the relationship of the variables of the study. The idea is that the model can be used to evaluate the concept that professional services can be related to the service outcome using causality internal controllable factors and external uncontrollable factors as moderating variables. These factors are deemed to influence the service quality dimensions as independent variables and equally influence the client satisfaction as dependent variables.

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