

Don't Forget About the Frontline Employee During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Preliminary Insights and a Research Agenda on Market Shocks

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the way services are delivered. In this editorial, we shine a light on how frontline service employees are coping with the changing work environment. Leveraging insights from a critical incident technique data collection, we identify challenges related to employee morale, interfacing with service consumers, and transformational negative events. We then offer suggestions for future research on these topics. Moreover, we discuss how the business model transformations caused by COVID-19 could impact the role of technology in future service interactions as well as new challenges related to demand planning. We hope this editorial can serve as a platform to positively impact future research on how service is being delivered amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and future market shocks.

Keywords

COVID, service employee, organizational frontlines, pandemic, critical incident, co-creation

In a very short window of time, the COVID-19 pandemic has shocked global markets and transformed the ways consumers, employees, and organizations interact. As a result, individuals, employees, and organizations are left reeling to cope with the health risks associated with the medical crisis and corresponding regulations governing previously unstructured routines. In this editorial, we focus on frontline employees (FLEs) who are struggling to cope with the physical and mental demands of the new normal that now force safety concerns into already overwhelming boundary spanning roles (Berry et al. 2020). To this point, the popular press is replete with examples of consumers boiling over against new regulations and taking aggressive action against these employees who are already operating on the fringe. In extreme examples, FLEs have been shot, physically assaulted, and routinely face verbal abuse by the consumers who they wake up to serve (e.g., Associated Press 2020). While these are extreme and largely isolated examples, they are indicative of the implications of COVID-19.

Given the transformational effects of COVID-19, research is needed to understand how FLEs are coping with the pandemic, identify best practices to support these employees, and forecast how employees' lives might be transformed as markets continue to reopen. Through this editorial, we hope to capture the voice of the FLE and integrate their experiences with existing service research principles to provide a platform for future research. In the following sections, we introduce the approach we took to get calibrated on the current state of the front line, provide evidence of current market realities, and offer insights for future research.

Our Approach and Initial Insights

To understand the impact of a market shock like COVID-19 on FLEs, we began by recruiting story narratives using the critical incident technique from 100 FLEs with varying degrees of employment (e.g., working full time, furloughed, laid off). In calibrating the sample, we chose not to focus on health care workers. While much of the media and academic attention has focused on first responders and healthcare personnel (see Adams and Walls 2020), other FLEs operating on a more traditional front line have also had their worlds transformed (Berry and Stuart 2020). We refer to these FLEs as the *forgotten front line* and they consist of traditional frontline service workers (e.g., retail, hospitality, and personal service employees) who have received relatively less attention in the popular press and elsewhere. As part of the data collection, we captured their overall outlook and asked them to detail a specific work experience since the COVID-19 pandemic started. Then, we supplemented these narratives with responses from 100

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Table 1. Research Agenda.

Core Themes	Research questions
Employee morale and outlook	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How do market shocks negatively impact frontline employees (FLEs; both long and short term)? – What factors contribute to employees thriving versus struggling during remote service operations? – What impact does market shock duration have on employee resilience and what can firms do to buffer effects on employee resilience and morale? – How can firms maintain employee loyalty during furloughs? – Will employees expect added benefits (e.g., sick leave, increased hourly compensation) to continue following a market shock? – To what extent can a market shock enhance service team cohesiveness or tear teams apart? What organizational factors can impact these outcomes?
Impact of consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – What impact do consumers who ignore guidelines (e.g., public health orders) have on employees? – How does increased salience of consumer behavior impact employees' ability to do their jobs and manage burnout? – What can employees do to accommodate consumers with varying preferences for social distancing and other changes in service? – What type of training is needed to prepare employees for their new roles as referees between consumer and consumer conflict? – Does employee safety emerge as a primary driver of job satisfaction?
Transformational negative events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How can firms best respond to aggressive consumer behavior to support employees and other consumers? – What are the effects of extreme customer deviance on employee stress, job/life satisfaction, and organizational commitment? – Is it possible for exceptional recovery and handling of transformational negative events to engender even more loyalty among service employees?
Technology/information systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How do FLEs accept their new roles in the cocreation process? – To what extent does increased consumer adoption of technology have on employee roles and productivity? – What impact does technology infusion and adoption have on employee satisfaction? Do these effects differ based on customer orientation and other traits? – Will trial of new service technologies accelerate business model transformation in services and have a long-term influence on demand for human employees?
Demand planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Does delaying service booking and purchases alter consumers' expectations of employees? – What are the negative (less demand) and positive (less uncertainty) effects of prebooked service on employee stress and satisfaction? – To what extent can flexible scheduling of employees better meet the emerging service demand models? – How can firms offset loss of variable wages (i.e., tips) to support employees? – Are new business models or pricing needed to offset changes in service demand?

consumers who discussed recent service experiences to provide a new lens on how FLEs might be impacted by changes in consumption expectations and behavior.

Across both samples, narratives were read and analyzed independently by each member of the author team and, based on these results, we developed a research agenda. One challenge we faced in developing this editorial is the vast expanse of opportunities for service researchers to jump in and support the conversation surrounding frontline workers. Moreover, the constraints of an editorial forced us to employ a very basic presentation of the qualitative responses, but given the importance of shining a light on the forgotten front line, we have taken the liberty to highlight a subset of the experiences provided by our respondents.

Three areas of focus emerged from our analysis of the open-ended responses: (1) employee morale, (2) managing the social servicescape, and (3) transformational negative events. In addition, there is a need for research to improve our understanding of how employees' roles might change as service organizations implement new routines as a result of the pandemic. We believe that (1) the adoption of new technology on the front lines and (2) demand planning may

transform how employees on the front line provide service. In the sections that follow, we present brief supporting evidence and insight on each theme and propose future research questions to extend service research during and after a shock like COVID-19. A summary of these themes and future research questions can be found in Table 1.

Supporting Service Employees During a Market Shock

Several themes consistently emerged when reviewing employee responses regarding current service operations. In the following subsections, we highlight three areas, but considerable research is needed to understand the full impact of COVID-19 on employees.

Employee Morale

Every day as a key worker, I feel anxious and stressed. When I finish for the day, I suffer from a headache and sheer exhaustion, I

am in constant contact with the public who can be very impatient and sometimes rude. (53-Year-Old Female, Social Services, Working Full Time)

I feel quite helpless with the situation to be honest. I am currently on employment insurance because my place of employment has shut down, and I am taking things day by day. Coronavirus has just killed my father, and I am really upset beyond just my financial and work status. I am pretty obsessed with getting the newest news of what is happening around the world and try to stay informed multiple times a day. I am scared to go back to work (48-Year-Old Male, Retail, Unemployed Due to the Pandemic)

To baseline employee morale, we had FLEs comment on a recent service experience and to share their thoughts and outlook on the world. Overall, FLEs are quite conflicted, and the one constant is most are facing a heightened amount of stress. Employees who are still able to work full time indicate gratitude for having the ability to continue working when so many are out of work, but they routinely highlight the increased stress in their work lives and express concern about the limited compassion being shown by consumers and supervisors. The opening anecdotes capture the current state of much of the forgotten front line.

In line with these comments, more research is needed to understand how FLEs are coping with the increased stress associated with working in boundary spanning roles during the pandemic. Past service research has examined drivers of employee satisfaction (e.g. Parish, Berry, and Lam 2008), but the COVID-19 pandemic generated stress and uncertainty in an unprecedented manner. Are there certain factors that make workers more or less prone to burnout during the market shock and can firms or consumers take action to alleviate some of these emotional and physical outcomes? On the other side, FLEs who are out of work were routinely more pessimistic in their outlook. They are nearing breaking points emotionally and as much as they would like to get back to work, they understand that returning will offer new challenges. More research is needed to understand how firms can best support furloughed employees to keep their morale up and ready to reengage as service operations open again.

Finally, we found a silver lining in the FLE responses. There was a group of employees who were optimistic about the future due to new work from home options, starting new jobs created by the market shock, or simply spending more time with family. Working from home cuts out long commutes and other stressful office environments, thus making the new work environment more appealing. While many traditionally face-to-face service roles have been moved to remote delivery, more research is needed to understand the effects of these transitions on employee effectiveness, efficiency, and welfare.

The Impact of Consumers

I work in a retail environment and we deal with customers on a one on one basis for the most part. One day at work, an elderly customer came in wearing a face mask and was doing some shopping. This customer was sick and started coughing all the time, and showing signs of being very sick. I was shocked that this person

was out shopping and exposing people to possibly [the] [C]orona? And then the shock turned in to fear, and wanting to just go home. (48-Year-Old Male, Retail, Temporarily Not Working/Furloughed)

I am tired of having to go to work right now. Every time I go to work, I feel like I am putting my life at risk because we have customers coming in without protective gear like face masks and they do not observe the 6 foot social distancing rule at all. If I didn't have to work I would quit today because I feel that my company and customers alike are not doing enough to protect employees. (33-Year-Old Male, Real Estate, Working Full Time)

In the presence of the market shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, FLEs have had new responsibilities thrust upon them and have been asked to implement new rules that are not universally well-received by consumers. One issue that was consistently raised throughout our data was new challenges introduced by service consumers who are struggling to adapt to new policies. Employees noted how some service consumers are quick to ignore requirements on social distancing and employees are uncertain how to manage this deviant behavior. In addition to the challenge of coaching consumers to abide by these new norms, both employees and consumers in our samples noted increased levels of stress trying to manage interactions between consumers. While other consumers have been a source of emphasis in prior service research (Brocato, Baker, and Voorhees 2012), the need for FLEs to intervene in consumer-to-consumer interactions has traditionally been very low. During the pandemic, employees are frequently finding themselves refereeing interactions between consumers, which adds another layer of stress to their already challenging jobs. More research is needed on how employees and organizations can best manage these new social dynamics to ensure both employee and consumer welfare. Moreover, these new norms will undoubtedly impact how cocreation and coproduction are experienced by consumers.

Finally, there is also some hope for how consumers can positively impact FLEs during a market shock. Some FLEs noted that positive gestures and behavior by consumers made them feel no longer forgotten and they felt a renewed sense of pride. Employees noticed increased gratitude in the forms of expressions of thanks and tips from some consumers and others noted that their jobs had new meaning as they felt they were playing a more important role in the lives of their consumers. More research is needed to understand the extent to which these positive consumer touchpoints can impact employee personal welfare and behavior and if these types of gestures can impact employees similarly as routines return.

Transformational Negative Events

I had a customer invade my personal space when I explained that he would need to wait for someone else to leave before he could enter. He was unhappy (putting it mildly) and started to shout and swear at me, name calling, and eventually pushed passed me Naturally, I was very upset and [I] felt physically threatened. (37-Year-Old Female, Retail Employee, Working Full Time)

A few weeks ago, when the panic buying was chaotic and powdered baby milk was flying off the shelves, a customer came up to the till to be served. He had two cartons of baby milk and I politely told him he could only have one carton due to the restrictions of one item per customer. He began to get angry towards me and accused me of preventing him from feeding his baby. I felt attacked and hurt . . . I went into the back office of the shop and cried . . . (26-Year-Old Female, Retail, Working Full Time)

Building on the new, routine challenges of providing service during the pandemic, many FLEs endured transformative negative events. FLEs are the face for many organizations and as such endured the brunt force of negative emotion and behaviors from consumers. We found that while the majority of consumers were well behaved, understanding, and caring in light of the less than ideal circumstances, some consumers acted out in deviant ways toward the FLEs. At times, this led to both aggressive verbal and sometimes physically abusive behavior. Some consumers acted out of frustration over new procedures or lack of availability of products and services. Other employees were forced into the role of rule enforcer as some consumers refused to follow rules and protocols set in place to protect the consumer. This role of enforcer was new and unwelcomed by these FLEs. Not only did it add to their emotional stress, it at times led to violence. Consumer deviance has received attention in past research (Fombelle et al. 2020), but again not in the presence of a market shock. Future research needs to understand both the short- and long-term impact that market shocks have on the mental and physical well-being of FLEs. How does a transformational event(s) of being verbally or physically assaulted impact or permanently transform the employee? How does accepting the role of enforcer impact the FLE? What can service firms do to recover during these negative events to support employees and can service firms reduce the likelihood of these events?

Forecasting the “New Normal” for the Front Line

In addition to the need for more research on the overall welfare of service employees during the pandemic, research also needs to understand the evolving roles of service employees as restrictions are lifted and markets reopen. Integrating responses from employees, consumers, and market trends, we identified two areas that might impact FLEs in the future. We think there could be fundamental shifts in the adoption of technology and demand planning that will result in employees serving new roles on the front line.

The Role of Technology on FLE Job Roles

Technology infusion on the front lines is constantly changing the role and lives of FLEs. Prior to the market shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was already movement toward

self-service and artificial intelligence (AI) delivered service (Huang and Rust 2020). With the implementation of new technology, the traditional role of FLEs has been gradually changing over time. For instance, roles that were once exclusively manned by FLEs, such as managing checkout, have slowly been replaced by self-checkout lanes, financial services are handled remotely or via automated tellers, and firms are quickly expanding online and remote service offerings. However, in the presence of a market shock, like the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the FLEs can change overnight. The adoption of these new technologies by consumers was quick and drastically forced into use. Future research should seek to understand which of these workplace changes are sustainable and what prior practices will return once the market shock subsides. Some of these changes have provided cost savings and efficiencies in service delivery. In other situations, it has resulted in backlogs and massive slowdowns. Research should not only seek to understand how this transition happens but also examine what kind of impact this has on both the employees who need to accommodate new technology infusion and even cope with the reality that their old roles have been replaced. How do FLEs accept their new roles in the cocreation process? Are employees as productive as before? Are they more or less satisfied with their jobs? Are new processes more profitable to the firm?

Demand Planning

A final issue that emerged from our investigation was a shift in service bookings in personal services and hospitality sectors. In many regions, regulations are forcing a “reservations-only” service model and these mandates are coupled with a shift in consumption behavior. Specifically, consumers in our sample regularly mentioned that they would delay booking their next airfare, lodging, and other future service experiences because of uncertainty created by COVID-19. If consumers continue to delay their planning for services, FLEs and organizations will need to be more adaptive and infuse more strategic flexibility into their business models. These type changes have an interesting mix of implications for FLEs. On one hand, the requirement for prebooked service allows for more calibrated expectations on how many consumers need to be accommodated, but it also truncates overall demand and reduces earning potential for variable wage workers. As a result, these shifts in service models will require employees to adjust their expectations and could impact their ability to earn wages at the same rate as they could pre-pandemic. More research is needed to understand how employees are reacting to these new booking policies and consumer demand. Will service employees experience increased stress due to more uncertainty surrounding the number of consumers who might show up for service as routine as a haircut, dinner, or hotel stay? Will delayed bookings require more flexible and dynamic staffing models for service employees?

Universal Implications

Market shocks fundamentally disrupt the provision of goods and services and can have crippling effects on FLEs. In this editorial, we attempt to shine a light on fruitful areas of research to improve understanding on how employees are coping with COVID-19. In the prior sections, we outline research topics that we believe are critical to address to better understand how service firms can manage operations during the pandemic and react during future market shocks. As we developed this research agenda, we tried to focus on how service researchers could provide insight into the welfare of FLEs, however, there were some universal areas that span a range of front line issues too. First and foremost, markets are changing dynamically and longitudinal studies are needed to truly understand the effects of a market shock. The overall well-being of employees will naturally evolve over time, but these changes are going to be much more acute during and coming out of a pandemic. In addition, we call for service researchers to branch out of the for-profit sector. More research is needed to understand how constituents are interacting with not-for-profit and public services. The COVID-19 pandemic has required record demand for public services while simultaneously handcuffing employees at public agencies and nonprofits to perform their services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed service markets, and service research is needed to help inform how employees are handling everyday encounters and coping with the market shock. Beyond the challenges created by COVID-19, a variety of other market shocks, such as natural disasters, civil unrest, terrorism, and war, unfortunately occur globally on a regular basis and also need the attention of future service research. As a simple exemplar, while we were developing this editorial, civil rights protests swept across the world to shine a light on racial injustice, which, in addition to obvious broader concerns, has directly impacted the front line of services. We hope this editorial can help researchers identify bridges between their existing research programs and opportunities to apply their knowledge to this critical area of service research.


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