

Original Research Article

Measuring Tabuk Municipal Services Quality

Abstract

This study evaluates service quality in Tabuk Municipality, and aims to identify employee constraints to providing better service. The study used SERVPERF presented by Cronin and Tayler (1992) to explore client perceptions of the service quality provided by municipal Tabuk. Interviews with Tabuk Municipality employees were then conducted, which focused on issues raised in the questionnaire analysis. Statistical analyses revealed a positive relationship between the tangible dimension and quality of service. Interviewees indicated that municipal employees require additional training to improve their skills in working with the public. Moreover, employees viewed incentives as an important avenue for improving the quality of services provided.

Key words: service quality, public sector, customer, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Nowadays, public administration reforms have been reoriented towards consumers due to increasing awareness about the quality of services they receive. Given large technology improvements and the growing increase in the population in Saudi Arabia, the public sector is under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their services are being continuously improved. The municipalities in Saudi Arabia (including Tabuk Municipality, the site of this study) were established to provide services to the public, including public sanitation, establishment licensing, etc.

The objectives of this study are twofold:

1. To examine the quality of municipal services provided by Tabuk Municipality from the client's point of view.
2. To analyze the constraints employees face in providing better services to their clients.

The instrument Service Performance (SERVPERF) presented by Cronin and Tayler (1992) was used to evaluate service quality. This instrument consists of five dimensions: tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. In the second section we will review the literature about service quality. The third section will describe the methods and methodologies used. We analyze the findings in the fourth section, and provide conclusions and recommendations in the final section.

2. Review of the Literature

Much research has been conducted in the subject of service quality (SQ) since the 1980s (Mahfooz 2014; Ladhari 2008). Service Quality (SERVQUAL) consists of five dimensions: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The instrument measures perceived service quality and customer expectations, and it includes 22 items. The first dimension measures how the appearance of physical facilities and other equipment affects a customer, and is measured with four items. The second dimension assesses how organizations perform promised services to their customers and is measured with five items. The third dimension relates to how far employees are willing to go to deliver immediate services to their customer, and is measured with four items. The fourth dimension assesses employees' abilities and the degree to which they convey confidence and trust to customers, and is measured with four items. Finally, empathy is defined as the attention and consideration that is paid to customers, and is measured with five items. The instrument reveals the difference between perception and expectation.

The SERVQUAL model that was developed by Parasuram et al. is based on the gap between expectation and perception. This model has been tested in many studies in different fields. The SERVQUAL model has been criticized for its long process to measure expectation, measure perception and the difference between them (the gap of the quality of the service).

The applicability of SERVQUAL has been widely criticized, yet despite its perceived shortcomings this model is still in use. One major critique is the gap score according to Cronin and Tylor (1992). Teas (1993), and (1994) stated that the expectation are improper as articulated its definition, whereas Brady and Cronin (2001) criticized SERVQUAL because its measurement of service quality focuses on the process of service delivery and ignores service outcomes. On the other hand, Adetunji et al. (2013) stated that "Measuring the product outcome for services may be quite difficult; so service quality is usually measured through the quality of its delivery processes" (pp. 31-32). That is to say, there are many questions about using a gap score while it was difficult to define expectation objectively as they stated that it should be measured simply straight by using a perception score. Other criticism surrounding SERVQUAL includes controversy over the use of a gap score because the

process for assessing service quality requires subtracting perception and expectation. Van Dyke et al.(1999) contended there was insufficient evidence for measuring psychological constructs through a gap score.

Although SERVQUAL measurement has been widely applied in many fields, it been criticized from different researchers. Buttle (1996) pointed out criticism for SERVQUAL from both theatrical and operational side. Teaa(1993) stated that the concept of "expectation" is loose and open to many interpretations. Moreover,Ladhari (2008) stated that "expectations has been variously defined as desires, want, what a service provider should offer....." (67), which means expectation can be interpreted differently among people where it may influence the assessment of service quality.

In contrast, Cronin and Taylor (1992) and McAlexander et al.(1994) argued that measuring perception in the SERVPERF model outperforms gap scores in the SERVQUAL model, when it comes to evaluating service quality. Moreover, both Richard and Allaway(1993) and Brady and Cronin (2001) argued that the SERVQUAL model focuses on the process of service delivery whereas the quality of service measuredby the outcomes rather than its process.

Cronin and Taylor (1992) presented an alternative model to measure quality of service, the SERVPERF model, which only measures perception of service quality and uses the same five dimensions and 22 items. However, it does not measure expectation, thus SERVPERF only measures the perception of actual service that received by customer. This distinction provides a clear advantage over SERVQUAL. Adetunji et al.(2013) indicated that SERVPERF is more suitable for evaluating quality of service than SERVQUAL as indicated above. Moreover, empirical evidence presented by McDougall and Levesque (1995) showed that measuring quality of service using customer perceptions was more efficient than using a gap score to measure expectation and perceptions. Cornin and Taylor (1992) emphasized that measuring perception of quality is more accurate to assess the service quality. Cronin and Taylor 1992 emphasized that SERVPERF based on measuring actual performance of service quality, instead the gap approach.

3. Research Methodology and Design

This study is a cross-sectional descriptive study of the clients and employees of Tabuk Municipality.The data collection occurred in two stages. The first stage used a questionnaire and the second stageconsisted of interviews with employees to identify the constraints they face in improving service quality. We used a five-pointLikert scale (1= *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).The five categories of Likert-Scale are represented by values of means, this representation is displayed in table (1):

Table (1): representation of the ranges of means

Range	Representation
1 - 1.79	Strongly disagree
1.8 – 2.59	Disagree
2.6 – 3.39	Neutral
3.40 - 4.19	Agree
4.20 - 5	Strongly disagree

We collected 163 questionnaires, excluded 23 ones from them, thus our final sample was 140 participants, which was 86% of the sample size.

The reliability of the questionnaire was found to have a Cronbach's Alpha of 91%, which is considered acceptable.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

We used quantitative methods to analyze the data derived from the questionnaire to explore client perceptions of the service quality provided by municipal of Tabuk. Interviews with employees there were then conducted to explain issues raised in the questionnaire analysis:

4.1 Demographic Variables

We used a one-way ANOVA for demographic variables of participants, including social status, educational attainment, and job status.

The results of our ANOVA indicated is no significant difference in the sample regarding social status, educational attainment, and job status.

4.2 Level of Municipal Service Quality in Tabuk

The clients of Tabuk Municipality asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with five dimensions of service quality. The results (shown in table (2)) reflect the opinions of the respondents (Tabuk Municipality clients).

Table (2): Level of Service Quality in Tabuk Municipality

Dimensions	Reliability	Validity	Mean	Standard Deviation	Statement
Tangibility	0.72	0.52	3.77	0.76	Agree
Reliability	0.87	0.76	2.88	0.97	Neutral
Responsiveness	0.79	0.62	3.03	0.58	Neutral
Assurance	0.85	0.72	3.19	0.96	Neutral
Empathy	0.80	0.64	3.24	0.86	Neutral
Overall	0.94	0.88	3.72	0.84	Agree

Table (2) shows that TabukMunicipality performed at a mid-high level (agree level) in the tangibility dimension and at an average level (neutral) in the remaining four dimensions. However, the overall score is at the mid-high level.

4.3 Interview Analysis

Eight interviews were conducted with employees in TabukMunicipality. These employees were selected because they had direct contact with the public. The interview questions were constructed based on the challenges highlighted by questionnaire respondents.

One of the greatest challenges faced by questionnaire respondents was related to reliability. Five of the interviewees (first, second, third, fourth, and sixth) agreed that some of employees who meet with the public lack the skills required to deal with the public. For example, one respondent stated that:

"Meeting the public needs the one who has high skills" (P 1)

His colleague went on to say *"employees should take training courses for how to deal with the public to improve their skills" (P 2)*. Another participant said that *"employees must take training to be a professional in dealing with the public" (P 6)*, this statement comes parallel and matches the response of participants about the reliability dimension which says: employees are having required skills and experiences to provide required services, then the answer of this question came with an average of 3.61 which is in a neutral point. An employee who faces the public should have a required skill to avoid low levels of public service quality.

In the reliability dimension participants indicated that the municipality did not allow the public to file a request on their website so as to avoid the need to come to the municipality, as indicated by the second participant who

said that the "*municipality should activate the system that allow citizen follow up their inquiry online and does not come here till it ready to collect*" (P 2). In contrast, interviewee four thought the municipality should activate the system that allows citizen to apply for their service online instead of coming in. Interviewee seven agreed with interviewee four, stating that meeting the public is difficult and citizens should apply to receive their service electronically without coming to the municipality.

The above answers of interviewees, in somehow, came to the average of the questionnaire samples about the question: does the municipality improve its services and develop the process of work on a regular basis. The average questionnaire answer was 3.16, which is neutral but more closely to agree interval that start with average of 3.40.

In the reliability dimension, three participants indicated that the municipality does not have clear requirements for each service that citizens need. As a result, citizens are more likely to complain:

"The requirements in Tabuk Municipality differ from other municipalities in other regions. It should be a unified system for all municipalities and train employees to use, as it is in the labour office and social affairs. In those departments, they have a unified requirement system, the requirement here should be clear for citizen" p.4.

Interviewee four highlights the importance of clear requirements and standards, as is the practice in other service ministries. Interviewee eight indicated that managers always circulate between departments and every manager has his own vision, requirements, and standards, which often differ from previous managers:

"There are no clear requirements for citizen and for all procedures. One manager comes with his own requirements for a service, then another manager brings another requirement for the same service, which minimizes service quality." (P8)

The majority of interviewees indicated that not paying allowance for meeting public may influence employees performance, which linked to four dimensions of service quality which reliability responsiveness, assurance and empathy. The second participant said "*the thing that employees evades from meeting public because bad behavior from some customers, employees should be well trained and have an allowance for meeting public*" P.2. Meeting citizens in the service hall bothers employees, thus employees do not like to work in jobs that have direct contact with citizen or customers, especially when they do not get allowance. Another interviewee said, "*the municipality should pay incentives for those who meet public*" (P3). Interviewee six agreed, adding another reason for decreased quality of service, namely the delay in paying some of their dues, as he said that "*our*

payment for our overtime and dues are often delayed, where it takes one year to reach us" (P6). As a result, employees may not show good customer service, therefore the quality of service may decrease.

With regards to the tangible dimension, some participants indicated there is no reception at the municipality that answers questions and directs customer toward the department that is responsible for their service, therefore citizens who are visiting the municipality for the first time frequently go to many halls to find his service provider. This, in turn, interrupts employees who must respond to requests not related to their department.

Furthermore, an interviewee suggested the municipality should provide a machine that generates numbers and lets customer take their number and sit to wait their turn.

One obstacle that affects the assurance dimension is that not all employees have knowledge and understanding about all the procedures and requirements for his department services, and are thus unable to confidently answer all questions that customer ask. Interviewee eight added that when employees are unable to answer questions related to his department, this may affect the confidence of customers.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article sought to quantify the quality of service provided by the municipality of Tabuk in Saudi Arabia and to understand the obstacles to improved service provision. The data were collected in two stages. The first stage included a questionnaire and the second stage used interviews with employees to find their barriers to improving their services. The statistical analyses reveal a positive relationship between the tangible dimension and quality service, whereas the other dimensions are neutral. There were no significant differences in jobs status, social status, and education level.

The interview analysis showed that employees face several constraints. Employees need to be improve their skills in order to meet the public, which concurs with the findings of Al-Fawzan (2005), who found that Saudi employees needs to be trained to improve their skills. Al-Ali et al. (2011) stated that intensive training program should be provide to employees in order to improve their skills with in turn contribute to increase service quality level, as this is in line with Alashari (2012) result about public sector in Jeddah. Moreover, the Saudi Minister of Civil Service indicated that the Ministry of Civil Service adopted many initiatives for develop public employees skills Alryaid newspaper (2013). In this matter Idris 2007 stated that Saudi Arabia face some challenges in employees skills, as it mentioned

by Assad 2002 cited in Branine and Pollard 2010 stated that management in Arab counties have "too much centralization overbearing bureaucracy, poor communications, lack of management skills and unrealistic performance issues" (p.721). Albarahim (2013) stated employers need to activate electronic services, and that the link between the municipality and other ministries is important for improving services. Alshwaier (2010) indicated that the government of Saudi Arabia should work to activate e-government, which in turn would contribute to further development for the nation. Moreover, the results of this study show that employees lack knowledge about the procedures and requirements for fully answering customer queries, a finding that is in line with Al-Fawzan (2005), who likewise found that employees lacked the knowledge to answer customer questions. Finally, employees at Tabuk Municipality require incentives from their employer.

Limitation and further research

This study was the first to utilize the SERVPERF model in the public sector in Saudi Arabia, however it had several limitations. First, these findings are from the public sector in the Tabuk region, which may not be applicable to private or for-profit organizations. Second, the data were collected only from the municipality. Collecting data from more than one public sector might have produced different results.

Further research could measure customer satisfaction, as this study focused on quality service.

Consent

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