

Bringing Focus to the Unseen: Legitimizing the Emotional Labor and Burnout of Service Workers with Recommendations for Human Resources Professionals

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Emotional Labor is a critical occupational requirement for employees performing direct (person-to-person) service work. Despite the importance and prevalence of emotional labor as an occupational requirement in service industries, emotional labor is often not recognized from a human resources perspective separate and distinct of other job duties. This conceptual article explores emotional labor as an occupational requirement and analyzes the relationships between emotional labor and burnout. Human Resources recommendations are provided for human resources practitioners and organizational management.

INTRODUCTION

Human resources functions are critical as it relates to managing human capital for organizational effectiveness (DeNisi & Griffin, 2016). Human Resources professionals work directly with management to study the job roles within organizations to ensure organizational objectives are met and qualified candidates are matched for proper job fit (DeNisi & Griffin, 2016). This process is clear as it relates to job duties that are easy to measure for completion, performance, and sufficiency.

Job duties that are intangible and difficult to measure create complications in terms of job expectations (DeNisi & Griffin, 2016; Guy, Newman, & Mastracci, 2008). This is especially true pertaining to job duties that require employees to rely on their soft skills in order to meet performance requirements (Mitchell, Skinner, & White, 2010). According to Mitchell et al. (2010), soft skills are “personal qualities, attributes, or the level of commitment of a person that set them apart from other individuals who may have similar skills and experience” (p. 44). Soft skills “characterize certain career attributes that individuals may possess such as team skills, communication skills, leadership skills, customer service skills, and problem solving skills” which are subjective in nature (Mitchell et al., 2010, p. 44). Hard skills are more objective and are easier to measure in that they are more task oriented and are considered to be easier to identify and quantify (Mitchell et al., 2010). Interestingly, complications for both job fit and job performance arise in the more subjective job duties (involving soft skills) that are intended to capture the affective or behavioral display of employee behavior. For example, this

subjectivity is exemplified in recruitment advertisements or job descriptions for service positions that seek “friendly” and “outgoing people,” which are traits that may be related to soft skills and individual personality characteristics (Mitchell et al., 2010).

The cliché saying of *service with a smile* is commonly used in service industries, and was one of the initial cues that led to the formal recognition of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). What does this cliché really mean in terms of employer expectations? How much of the emotional display of employees is over generalized, invisible/missing in terms of position descriptions, and collected in the infamous bucket of *all other duties as assigned*? Employers in the service industry ubiquitously set company standards for how their employees are expected to behave, display emotions, and deliver the service for which they are hired to perform (Hochschild, 1983). This employer expectation is referred to as *display rules* and is a facet of the occupational requirement of emotional labor (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Gabriel, Daniels, Diefendorff, & Greguras, 2015; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; O’Brien, & O’Brien, 1992).

The invisibility of emotional labor as a legitimate occupational requirement influences administrative aspects of human resources management in many ways, including the administration of job analysis, descriptions, compensation, training and development, and performance management (DeNisi & Griffin, 2016; Guy, et al., 2008). Human resources professionals are unable to address emotional labor requirements that are unseen or unrecognized by the organization and as such the invisibility of emotional labor is perpetuated (Guy et al., 2008). If the aforementioned administrative elements of human resources management perpetuate the invisibility of emotional labor, it is likely that the employee relations factors of human resources management are also impacted.

The lack of recognition of emotional labor as a job duty prevents human resources, or organizational management, from properly addressing this as a job duty through the usual mechanisms, such as training and development, to address employee job performance and support employee needs (Costakis, 2018; Guy et al., 2008; Hochschild, 1983). Commonly, service industry employers concentrate resources, such as training and development, on the service experience employees are required to deliver, without addressing the impact emotional labor display rules may have on employees, such as burnout (Costakis, 2018; Guy et al., 2008; Julian, 2008; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). This is a critical concern as it relates to service workers that are primarily responsible for delivering the service experience.

Burnout is a critical issue for employees and employers in service industries, and a key employee relations factor (Chebat & Kollias, 2000; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Research by Biron and van Veldhoven (2012) supports that “service roles [that] involve frequent and intense interpersonal contacts” in the context of job duties “are often required to engage in emotional labor” (p. 1260). The requirement for employees to alter or adapt their affective display in a social face-to-face service setting is both a mental and physical process that may lead to burnout if not regulated by the employee and supported by the employer (Costakis, 2018; Grandey et al., 2004; Guy et al., 2008). Employee burnout negatively impacts organizational effectiveness, which may include issues like “absenteeism, turnover intention, and unsatisfactory job performance” (Costakis, 2018, p. 55; Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012; Grandey et al., 2004; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). As such, it is necessary to extract emotional labor from the job description category of all *other duties as assigned*, and recognize the way in which this specific occupational requirement relates to employee relations outcomes, specifically burnout (Costakis, 2018; Grandey, Diefendorf, & Rupp, 2013).

The lack of recognition of emotional labor as a legitimate occupational requirement in service work is a human resources issue that must be examined so that employees may be prepared to engage in emotional labor in a way that meets organizational service delivery/customer experience goals and mitigates the issue of employee burnout. This article focuses on the employee relations factor of employee burnout in relationship to the occupational requirement of emotional labor in service industries through the lens of human resources responsibilities.

OVERVIEW OF EMOTIONAL LABOR AS AN OCCUPATIONAL REQUIREMENT

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) brought the emotional regulation and intra-psyche process of emotional displays in the context of work into focus, bringing forth the term “emotional labor” (p. 7). The term “emotional labor” was actually conceived by Hochschild upon hearing an airline pilot directing stewarding recruits to “smile like [they] really mean it” (Hochschild, 2012, p. ix). From a physical and psychological perspective, smiling in a way that looks and feels authentic to service recipients, “like [they] really mean it,” is a more subjective process than completing a standard task requiring hard skills (Hochschild, 2012, p. ix). Despite the subjectivity of such expectations, service industry employers set standards for how they want their external customers to experience their service, and this necessitates a physical “display” of emotion that the employee performs, which is prescribed by and managed by the employer (p. 7). Hochschild (1983) describes this requirement as “a fee for service relationship between the employee and the employer and as such this is compensable work” (Costakis, 2018, p. 13; Hochschild, 1983).

Employees must carry out their emotional labor obligations by either authenticating emotions or pretending which is an internal process involving both the body and the mind (Guy et al., 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Parajon, 2011). Emotional labor is important as an occupational requirement because an employee’s emotional displays directly impact the consumer experience. From a customer service standpoint, a primary reason service employees exist is to be helpful to the customers/service recipients by creating a service experience (Pieters, Bottschen, & Thelen, 1998). “Inevitably, customers hold certain desire expectations about their prospective interactions with service employees, and those expectations are likely to determine how they view the usefulness of service employees, and how they act and react to them” (Pieters et al., 1998, p.756). According to Pieters et al. (1998), if customers experience negative or undesirable interactions with service employees, the employer may lose potential sales, in addition to potential repeat business.

OVERVIEW OF BURNOUT

As an occupational requirement, emotional labor is not considered a positive or negative job duty as there are factors that must be considered as it relates to this distinction (Humphrey, Ashford, & Diefendorff, 2015). According to Costakis (2018) “there are opposing viewpoints in the literature regarding whether or not emotional labor is positive or negative for employees and organizational effectiveness” as it depends on the individual characteristics of the employee and the emotional regulation process he or she utilizes to meet the employer’s standards (p. 33). Like any job duty or employer set job requirement, there is variability of job performance and suitability of job fit dependent on the individual performing the work. Psychological differences (such as emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and personality) influence the experience of the employee (Abraham, 2000; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). The psychological differences of the individual may create agreement or dissonance within the employee as it relates to employer display rules (Humphrey et al., 2015).

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN EMOTIONAL DISSONANCE, BURNOUT, AND EMOTIONAL LABOR

Emotional dissonance occurs when the employees’ own emotions do not align with those that they are required to display (Bhave & Glomb, 2016; Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013; Glomb & Tews, 2004; Parajon, 2011). The individuality of the employee includes all of the personal intra-psyche and extra-psyche factors that influence his or her ability to meet the demands of emotional labor (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2015; Montgomery, Panagopolou, de Wildt, & Meenks, 2006). As such, emotional dissonance cannot be prevented from occurring, and the same employee may experience periods of dissonance and agreement with the required display rules throughout his or her workday (Costakis, 2018; Guy et al., 2008). Noting the fluctuation of an individual’s psychological state, it is

prudent to consider the impact that emotional labor may have as it relates to burnout in service work (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2015).

In the context of this paper, “burnout” is defined as an emotional state of exhaustion and/or depletion which may lead to poor job performance, absenteeism, and turnover intention (Grandey et al., 2012; Grandey et al., 2004; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Burnout and emotional dissonance may be bi-directional for individual employees tasked with the duty of emotional labor. Whether the intra-psychic processes of the individual’s thoughts and experiences lead him or her to dissonance, or the demands of the job contribute to the same, the result may be burnout (Lee & Ok, 2012). Once in a state of burnout, the employee may suffer difficulty returning to the psychological state of agreement with the emotions they are required to display, resulting in dissonance (Cheung, & Cheung, 2013). It is this conundrum that must be addressed with emotional regulation strategies.

Research supports that there is a relationship between emotional regulation strategies, emotional dissonance, and burnout (Costakis, 2018; Guy et al., 2008; Parajon, 2011). Emotional regulation strategies are the ways in which the employee processes his or her emotions to present the employer prescribed affect and display (Grandey, 2003). Existing research supports that the emotional labor regulation strategy used by the employee to achieve the employer’s display rules is related to the incidence of employee burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Humphrey et al., 2015). Two emotional labor strategies emerge from research as being the most utilized approaches to emotional regulation: surface acting and deep acting (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2012). Surface acting, or pretending, occurs when the employee simply masks his or her true emotions in order to comply with display rules (Guy et al., 2008). Deep acting, or genuine acting, is the process in which the employee attempts to authentically feel the emotion they are required to display. The strategy of surface acting requires a simple change in expression and voice to achieve a specific look or demeanor; the employee does not change his or her thoughts or feelings within. Deep acting requires the employee to delve deeper into their own psyche to elicit positive thoughts and feelings from within to access genuine empathy and considerate feelings in agreement with the display rules (Grandey, 2015). Emotional labor is the occupational requirement while emotional labor strategies are the means in which the employee carries out the work (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2015; Guy et al., 2008; Hochschild, 1983). It is important to note that, because employees are individual people, the emotional labor strategies are neither good nor bad (Julian, 2008). Surface acting and deep acting exist on a continuum, and it is possible that the same employee may wane between the two techniques in the same day dependent on the circumstances (Costakis, 2018). That being said, research supports that deep acting is the more sophisticated emotional labor strategy and is less likely to result in burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2015; Grandey et al., 2013; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Guy et al., 2008; Hülshager, Alberts, Feinholdt, & Lang, 2013). This is because it is more healthful for employees to access genuine positive emotions than to solely be fake (Guy et al., 2008). Research supports that surface acting is more likely to result in burnout due to emotional dissonance (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2012; Chebat & Kollias, 2000; Maslach et al., 2001).

HUMAN RESOURCES RECOMMENDATIONS

Human resources professionals and organizational management are responsible for providing the resources and support that employees need in order to achieve optimal workforce performance and organizational effectiveness (DeNisi & Griffin, 2016). The human resources function has many responsibilities including the duty to provide strategic advisement for core organizational issues and to address matters that disrupt or impact employee relations (DeNisi & Griffin, 2016). Recognizing emotional labor as a legitimate and compensable job function offers important insight into the professional development, training, and resources needed for performance management. Complexity of job duties is a routine factor of analysis “in the assessment of determining compensation,” and the invisibility of emotional labor as an occupational requirement prevents HR practitioners from properly compensating employees for this work (Costakis, 2018, p. 49; Milkovich, Newman, & Gerhart, 2011). Failing to prepare employees to engage in emotional labor (including emotional labor regulation

strategies), and not providing adequate compensation, is an issue for human resources practitioners as it relates to attracting and retaining quality talent (Nguyen, Groth, & Johnson, 2016).

Nguyen, Groth, and Johnson (2016) discuss that “there is also some evidence that surface acting influences withdrawal behaviors such as turnover intentions and actual turnover” (p. 617). Existing research supports that there is a relationship between turnover and emotional labor based burnout (Costakis, 2018; Grandey et al., 2012; Judge, Hulin, & Dalal, 2009; Porter & Steers, 1973). The invisibility of emotional labor as an occupational requirement must be addressed in order to manage the issues that may arise for employees and organizations overall relating to employer prescribed display rules and service expectations.

To legitimize emotional labor as an occupational requirement in service centered positions within the service industry, it is recommended that human resource professionals and organizational management do the following:

- Conduct job analyses for “front facing” or service roles. Analyze the expectations of subjective terms like *friendliness* or *courtesy* to determine what it is that is truly expected of the employee in terms of emotional display rules. Identify whether specific job duties are considered hard skills or soft skills and match training and development resources accordingly (Mitchell et al., 2010). Soft skill training curriculum should include the employer prescribed display rules in a way that addresses how employees may strengthen their soft skills in order to achieve set objectives or performance goals (Costakis, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2010).
- Identify and legitimize emotional labor in recruitment/advertisements and job descriptions. To do this, the employer must disclose the occupational requirement to perform and convey a service experience (Grandey 2003; Grandey, 2015). Emphasize the importance of demonstrating the organizationally prescribed display rules to both candidates and employees. Define and describe the ways in which their performance will be measured as it pertains to display rules and open lines of communication with employees regarding this.
- Implement a procedure for providing recruitment candidates or incumbent employees who are changing roles with realistic job previews (RJPs). This will help to establish whether or not the “fit” will be appropriate for employer and employee. “It has been suggested that RJPs lead to improvements in performance because complete and thorough information about a job” provides essential insight into employer expectations to “clarify work roles and help individuals perform at a higher level” (Pane Haden, 2012, p.163-164).
- Provide training for employees to address emotional issues commonly related to burnout. Be sure to target training around how to regulate emotions by calling upon positive experiences. Implement a formal employee assistance program (EAP) and provide quarterly trainings for emotional regulation. If an EAP is already established, review the service offerings to maximize this resource in a way that addresses employee support and development for emotional labor expectations. “EAPs have become a very important and popular institutional mechanism in many enterprises for promoting health and emotional well-being, reducing absenteeism, and improving performance” (Yu, Lin, & Hsu, 2009, p. 366). It is recommended that an EAP provider that utilizes licensed social workers and offers training or resources on the topics of stress, emotional regulation, and emotional fatigue/burnout is selected.
- Consider the complexity of emotional labor when compensating employees in service related work. Recognizing emotional labor as a legitimate feature of the job enhances service expectations for performance.
- During supervisory meetings, require that management ask the employees about their levels of job satisfaction, engagement, and general connection to the mission of the work, as these key human resources factors may be impacted by emotional labor (Costakis, 2018; DeNisi & Griffin, 2016; Grandey et al., 2013, Guy et al., 2008; Parajon, 2011). Openly discuss

emotional labor and emotional labor strategies in terms of job performance as would be appropriate for any job duty.

- Set standards for the appraisal method(s) (way in which the employer will be observing, assessing, and measuring employee job performance for emotional labor) and communicate these standards (for example: customer service surveys or behavioral observation rating scales) (DeNisi & Griffin, 2016). Be consistent in the way in which the aforementioned occurs and review the effectiveness of this measure.
- Utilize traditional performance management tools, such as progressive discipline, for employees that do not successfully meet organizational requirements for behavioral display rules but support this discipline with training and development opportunities for how the employee may clearly return to positive job performance (DeNisi & Griffin, 2016).

SUMMARY

Emotional labor is a critical occupational requirement for employees performing direct (person-to-person) service work. It is essential to legitimize this work, identify it separate and distinct of other job duties, and address emotional labor from a human resources perspective as an important and critical labor function. In order to accomplish this task, it is important to identify and convey the emotional labor requirements of service positions in addition to how those requirements will be met and measured. Failure to recognize emotional labor as an occupational requirement may result in a direct negative impact on the consumer experience (Pieters et al., 1998). Additionally, failure to prepare employees for the emotional labor requirements is likely to lead to burnout, ultimately causing absenteeism, poor performance, and turnover intention (Grandey et al., 2012; Grandey et al., 2004; Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

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