1 Introduction

The increased use of information technology in the workplace has a substantial impact on how people work and can affect employee well-being and job satisfaction significantly. Customer service is impacted by the increasing amount of ICTs that are used both directly in the provision of customer services as well as indirectly in performing other customer-related work tasks. Customer service in itself has attributes that can support or reduce employee satisfaction and well-being at work. Interaction with customers often functions as a resource for service-oriented employees, but customer service can also be a source of stress and dissatisfaction. For example, exaggerated customer expectations, customer aggression, and interruptions caused by customers have been found to have a negative impact on employee well-being (Dorman & Zapf 2004). In addition to this, the digital work environment and the digitalisation of customer services pose new challenges. Increasing digitalisation can bring new resources to customer service work, but it also places new demands on employee well-being and satisfaction.

ICTs can support customer service work processes and employee well-being by providing, for example, new tools for easier and quicker ways to access, organise, analyse, and store information. ICT-enabled asynchronous communication enables various ways of communicating, sharing, and collaborating – regardless of time and location. This can make work more effective, as it provides employees with more opportunities to engage with customers, partners, and colleagues. The use of ICTs can also increase the employees’ control over their work by providing more flexibility in time and location, as the performance of work tasks is not necessarily tied to a desk in an office. (Day, Scott, & Kelloway 2010) This can be a major change in customer service work, especially since tasks related to customer service have traditionally been quite tied to a certain place and time.

The increased use of ICTs at work can also reduce employees’ satisfaction with customer service work, as well as their well-being at work and job satisfaction in general. In the digitalising work environment, the continual expectation to learn and adapt to new technologies may increase the workload and cause stress (e.g. Day, Scott, & Kelloway 2010; Tarafdar, Pullins, & Ragu-Nathan 2014a; 2014b; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008; Wang, Shu, & Tu 2008; Salanova, Llorens, & Cifre 2013). The need for up-to-date technology skills not only concerns employees; customers are also expected to take on new technologies. This can increase workload and employee strain, as customers may need more support and guidance as the service process changes. The number of technologies used at work, constant changes in ICTs, plus malfunctions and usability problems may increase the risk of lowered well-being and satisfaction (e.g. Day, Scott, & Kelloway 2010). Less-than-ideal usability and malfunctions can hinder customer service work significantly by, for example, causing delays in the work process or even preventing customer service for periods of time. Possible usability problems with the customer interface may also be a nuisance for employees as it can increase their workload. In addition, the amount of information coming through various channels is often difficult to manage and can result in information overload (Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008). The complex digital work environment may also inflict constant interruptions, which are associated with, for example, a higher workload, frustration, and stress (Mark, Gudith, & Klocke 2008). Additionally, a high workload, especially in a digital work environment, can easily lead to extensive multitasking, which can reduce concentration and increase strain (e.g. König, Oberacher, & Kleinmann 2010; Stephens & Davis 2009; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008).

In addition to the strain caused by technologies used at work, the lack of face-to-face or other more personal interaction with customers can decrease employee well-being and satisfaction. This is
especially a concern in fields and positions that have traditionally emphasised personal relationships with customers. (Tarafdar, Pullins, & Ragu-Nathan 2014a; 2014b) Furthermore, communicating with customers and partners through computer-mediated communication channels may be challenging and increase the risk of miscommunication, especially since different groups and individuals can have differing practices (Day, Scott, & Kelloway 2010). The use of various communication channels may also increase expectations of constant connectivity and availability, which can decrease a sense of control over one’s work and blur the line between work and free time (e.g. Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008; Day, Scott, & Kelloway 2010; Demerouti et al. 2014). The increased use of computer-mediated communication in customer service work might make it more difficult to set boundaries on when to be available to customers.

2 Methodology and data

This paper is part of the two-and-a-half year (2015–2017) study “Enhancing productivity, customer experience and well-being at work through information ergonomics”. The project is funded by Tekes – the Finnish Funding Agency for Innovation. The aim of the project is to study how information ergonomics can be developed to enhance well-being at work and thus also productivity and the quality of customer service work. The study is carried out as action research. The research data for the whole study consists of survey questionnaires, the collection of log data, psychophysiological measures, and group discussions carried out and recorded during nine workshops. Three organisations and 36 participants are taking part in the study. The participating organisations represent the industrial, financial, and insurance fields.

In this paper, we examine employees’ experiences and satisfaction with customer service work in the context of the digital work environment and information ergonomics. The question we seek to answer is: What kinds of factors affect employees’ satisfaction with customer service work in the context of the digital work environment, and how?

The empirical data consists of group discussions carried out in nine workshops. Each participating organisation held three workshops. The total number of participants in the study was 36 (13, 13, and 10, respectively), but not all participants were able to attend all three workshops – the number of participants in single workshops varied from seven to 13. In each workshop, participants engaged in group discussions covering aspects of their work in the context of the digital work environment and information ergonomics. In each organisation and workshop, there were both employees who mostly worked with external clients and those who mainly worked with internal clients. Customer service work was discussed as a whole, including both external and internal client-related work. The group discussions were recorded and transcribed. The method of qualitative content analysis was applied to the workshop research data.

3 Preliminary findings

In the preliminary analysis, three main themes were identified as substantial factors affecting employees’ satisfaction with customer service work: 1) functionality and usability of technology, 2) the multitude of tools and multichannel communication, and 3) the customers’ know-how and attitudes. The three themes are discussed briefly below and selected quotations from the transcribed discussions (translated from Finnish to English) are provided.

3.1. Functionality and usability of technology

In the discussions, the participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of functioning ICTs in customer service work. The number of ICT malfunctions was perceived to be quite high, and even complete system errors were not uncommon. The participants quite often experienced delays in their work as the applications used were unresponsive or their computers needed rebooting: “Outlook
goes offline or doesn’t respond or something like that all the time.” This usually caused feelings of frustration and tension, and hindered the process of customer service work. The participants also brought up how the digitalisation of customer service processes has in some ways made customer service work more vulnerable to lapses. Since most of the tools used at work are interconnected, even small errors in one application can halt the whole customer service process: “We have many systems that we use at our work, so the functioning of the whole chain is very important. If there’s one part that’s down, the whole case won’t go forward.” The usability and user-friendliness of technology was also brought up in the discussions. The participants perceived some of the tools to be somewhat difficult to use. They also find some of the tools’ features to be too rigid and insufficient for their needs in customer service work or other customer-related tasks: “We were talking about our [ticketing tool], how it’s so rigid, and it’s also a bit unclear how it looks to the customer when I’m answering a ticket […] . It’s really messy and inflexible, the whole system.”

On the other hand, when ICTs function smoothly, and the participants are using tools with a high task-suitability and ease of use, they are mostly satisfied with customer service work. The digital work environment was perceived as supporting customer service work by providing some level of automation, as well as tools and features that help in organising and managing customer-related information.

3.2. The multitude of tools and multichannel communication

In the discussions, the participants commented on the abundance of tools and communication channels they utilise in their work. The number of tools used or available for use was perceived to be quite high and sometimes the tools have overlapping functions: “The number of tools is only increasing […] and the current ones will be used beside [the new ones] for a long time.” The overlap was perceived to increase the amount of information and even workload. Often various tools need to be used to accomplish a single task. The participants considered this to be sensible when the task at hand is complex and the use of multiple tools is obviously needed. However, they feel irritated when the features of the tool used do not support the performance of a relatively simple task, and instead they need to, for example, gather customer-related information from different tools and channels.

The participants perceived multiple tools and communication channels to promote the need for multitasking. Many of the participants mentioned that they usually have various applications open at the same time and switch between them: “You’re jumping back and forth between the document and the system all the time.” When doing customer service work, they often need to have various applications and documents to hand to get the work done. The participants also discussed the interruptions caused by computer-mediated communication, and especially the multiple communication channels used. The participants described how they often engage in communication through e-mail, instant messages/chat, and Lync/Skype. In addition, they often check customer tickets using ticketing tools, and some of them are also obliged to check multiple email inboxes, since many use group emails in addition to their personal email. Much of the communication occurs while engaging in other work-related communication or performing other work tasks (i.e. multitasking). The communication-induced interruptions come from both colleagues and clients, causing a decline in concentration and a need to re-orient oneself. This was found to be especially distressing when working with cases that are urgent or require maximum attention: “Too many applications, many of which can interrupt the work that you need to get done just at this moment […] and then it can get interrupted for a long time.”

However, the participants largely prefer computer-mediated asynchronous communication over more traditional forms of communication (especially telephone calls). The participants were mostly pleased that the digitalisation of customer service work has significantly reduced the number of phone calls, as they perceived the calls to be an even bigger interruption: “Well, it’s of course [positive] that we don’t get telephone calls, so it doesn’t interrupt our work.” The participants stated that even with its downsides, asynchronous computer-mediated communication provides them with
a better opportunity to try to control and structure the communication flow, as the messages do not always have to be answered immediately like phone calls: “Our [ticketing tool] makes it possible to plan like, okay, I'm not going to answer those today, I'll answer them tomorrow if the schedule allows,” and “When it comes to time management, especially with email […] you’re more of the master if you want to be.” In addition, the participants find that computer-mediated communication tools make the documentation of customer communication easier since messages are easily saved and can be accessed again when needed: “[I] often use email to do summaries as it leaves a document.” For the same reason, electronic documents are also mostly preferred over more traditional paper documents.

3.3 Customers’ know-how and attitudes

The participants also discussed the impact of their clients’ know-how and attitudes on their work in the context of the digital work environment. The participants mentioned that customers do not always know what channel to use or do not know how to use the accurate communication channels when contacting employees. This was seen partly as a problem caused by multichannel communication and partly as a shortage of customer know-how and sometimes even a matter of the customers’ attitudes: “Customers should really send emails to the correct email address. For example, they shouldn’t send them to my personal email, because we have group emails. I have been struggling with one client for almost a year now and they still don’t send it there [to the group email].” Customer messages in the wrong channels can at times cause problems and delays as the customers’ cases go unnoticed. The participants also stated that clients do not always know the appropriate way to communicate through different communication channels; even writing coherent emails was perceived to be difficult for some clients: “In the worst cases, it might be that you can’t even find out the problem from the message."

The problem of customers providing inadequate information when communicating through digital channels was also discussed. The participants find that many clients do not know what kind of information is needed for their case to proceed and they have to send multiple messages back and forth to get adequate information. This often takes time and increases the workload: “If the information coming from the customer is incorrect, it takes us more worktime when we have to figure it out.” Even though the participants did not miss telephone calls in general, they did state that it is usually easier to get the information needed right away when talking on the phone with clients. They hoped the tools they were using could be developed so that they include some sort of structured form to instruct clients on how to provide adequate information.

The participants also discussed how the digitalisation of customer service work has changed customers’ expectations and attitudes. The participants felt that the introduction of the new communication channels has raised customers’ expectations of being served right away. This has led to clients sending multiple messages or submitting multiple tickets concerning the same issue if their initial message is not answered right away: “There was a ticket I didn’t respond to right that second, so the client left a second ticket about the same issue and then soon left a third ticket.” This increases the amount of communication and information flow for the employees, and sometimes – contrary to customers’ and employees’ wishes – causes delays in the service process. The participants also commented that customers often seem to think that all of their issues are of high importance and should be addressed immediately. This was perceived to be a problem especially when using communication channels that allow customers to classify the urgency of their issue, which often leads clients to report all of their issues as urgent. This sometimes makes it difficult for employees to separate truly pressing matters from the less urgent ones. The constant expectation to answer immediately also increases feelings of time pressure and strain, especially when it accumulates: “Customers are of an opinion that everything should get done this second. And when it can’t be done, it would be important that the client-induced pressure could somehow be distributed a bit more evenly.”
4 Discussion

In this paper, we looked at factors affecting employees’ satisfaction with customer service work in the context of the digital work environment. The findings presented in this paper are preliminary and the qualitative data from the workshops will be exposed to more extensive and in-depth analysis later. However, the preliminary analysis highlights some interesting issues affecting employees’ satisfaction with customer service work in the digital work environment. Even with the constant development of ICTs and the fuss around digitalisation, ICT malfunctions and usability problems still seem to be major issues hindering work processes. Multiple tools and communication channels (some even overlapping in function) used while doing customer service work seem to increase multitasking, interruptions, and the fragmentation of tasks. However, asynchronous communication and electronic documents are mostly preferred over traditional telephone calls and paper, as they are perceived to be easier to manage and increase the possibility of having more control over one’s own work. Employees are not the only ones needing to adapt to new tools; customers may also have problems using new communication tools, which also has an impact on the employees doing customer service work. Interestingly, it seems that the digitalisation of customer service work could also be increasing customers’ expectations, which can significantly affect employees’ satisfaction with customer service work.

References


