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Are You Being Served? Self-service technologies (SSTs) and customer roles

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Think of the last time you made a trip to your local supermarket. You may well have used a hand-held self-scanner which allowed you to record your grocery items as you traversed the various aisles, and then proceeded to complete the transaction at the self-service checkout. Similarly, you may have recently used online banking to check your account balance or indeed bought a Luas ticket from the ticket vending machines.

Technology has a ubiquitous role in our lives, offering us convenience, control, immediacy and an ‘always on, always connected’ dimension. Equally, there is a *quid pro quo* for the company in terms of offering cheaper services that are delivered more speedily and efficiently, thus resulting in lower operational costs. The cheaper insurance quote that may be available online as opposed to contacting a service employee in a call centre springs to mind.

Yet, it is interesting to reflect on the level of input and participation that is required on the part of the customer. Indeed, we often serve to act as an ‘unpaid employee’ of the organisation when using such technologies. Consider the recent introduction of the new self-service beer pump, Pay @ Pump. This device is aimed at customers who are tired of waiting in long queues at the bar, and allows them to make their drink selection, process payment by swiping their contactless card at the base of the pump and position a glass to pour their selected drink. But consider the amount of work that the customer is being required to do in turn. The technology usage in these examples require the user to become adept with such processes, requiring a greater level of autonomy or “I’m in charge here” in comparison to being served by a member of staff.

In a Dublin Institute of Technology research study led by Dr Petranka Kelly and myself, 133 airline passengers were interviewed in the departure area of a major international airport, about their usage and experiences of self-service technologies (SSTs). Unsurprisingly, passengers indicated that a common motivation for technology usage was the access to cost savings and increased convenience, e.g. accessing a boarding pass on a smartphone rather than presenting a hard copy. However, a number of issues emerged that really have not been considered at length to date in the technology discourse.

The first issue that arose for airline passengers using SSTs was the perceived tension and nervousness that may arise in the interface with technology. In this regard, a number of passengers spoke about the level of attention and double-checking that they undertook when booking airline tickets and accommodation to ensure that the correct details had been entered.

One passenger referred to being “a bit nervous like that...Because if you make a mistake, it is your own mistake online”. Also, other customers spoke about their impatience with regard to the quality of the technology. For example, a passenger indicated that “when I see something [on a website] that I think is ridiculous or redundant, I would usually send them up a quick note saying...this stuff doesn’t work right, you should do it this other way”. In this case, the passenger is acting as a consultant to the company with a view to adapting the SST encounter so as to benefit future customers.

A further issue was the perception of the customer being placed under pressure by the technology itself, or by other customers. Many customers talked about zealously checking and rechecking their personal/booking details whilst making an online booking, to the extent that that the website often ‘timed out’ or they were required to start again. This feeling of “I need to hurry up, complete the transaction and beat the website” was very visible in the study. Furthermore, a surprisingly prevalent issue was the social tension that can arise if the customer using the SST feels that they are delaying other customers in the queue. A widespread example was trying to figure out how to work a ground transport ticketing machine at an airport destination, whilst being very conscious of the lengthening queue of disgruntled passengers behind them. But, in fairness, passengers who themselves had been delayed by such queues, also spoke of voluntarily helping such technology novices (“I don’t mind helping”).

In summary, this research raises a number of important questions. Do customers always welcome the increased participatory role that comes with SST usage? Do they have the appropriate skill-set to utilise these technologies successfully? Are they receiving adequate ‘training’ from the service provider? What is the role of other customers in technology encounters – to altruistically assist the novice/hesitant user or to reproach them for causing long queues?

Technology is a resource that should serve the company and the customer, and unsurprisingly, the perceived convenience and financial savings that it offers, were visible in this study. However, the study also illustrated that it has the ability to make customers feel technically and socially isolated. This is an area that needs to be further explored by service providers if they are to continue to invest in technology as an asset, as opposed to SSTs being viewed as a deterrent in the eyes of the customer.

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