Interactive Work: A Theoretical and Empirical Approach to the Study of Service Interactions

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From an observation protocol:

Check-out at a four-star hotel. Three employees stand behind the reception counter and greet a constant trickle of guests. The sequence involves posing standard questions. Room number? Breakfast? Minibar? Internet use? Parking deck? Was everything OK? The printing of receipts goes quickly, and credit cards had been swiped already at check-in. Goodbyes and farewells. The individual check-out sequences play out in a friendly and efficient manner. Most guests have their room keycards ready, give positive feedback, and are friendly and polite.

With one check-out guest, however, there is a problem. The employee notices that the guest had used his in-room Internet connection for 35 minutes, but he claims to have used it only for five. The employee then asks, ‘Did you pull out the cable when you were finished?’ She had explained to him at check-in that the connection is terminated only when it is physically cut. The guest answers that he knew how to disconnect the cable and did so. He acted correctly, he says; the problem must be technical.

The employee offers to call the Internet provider to see if there had been a technical problem. The guest agrees. However, it is impossible to get anyone who could provide an answer. There is no more time to continue the investigation because the guest is in a hurry and wants to leave. The employee offers to clarify the issue later. The guest is told he must pay the full invoice but will receive a refund if the problem...
was a technical defect. The guest consents. He does not look satisfied but refrains from further protest and departs. By this time, a long line has formed in front of the reception counter because this check-out transaction had taken so long.

Services are more than economic transactions. In service relationships, service employees and customers or experts and clients must work together actively if the task or service is to get done. This interactive work is both highly demanding and absolutely necessary. It is demanding because cooperation has to be established and maintained under conditions that can be very tricky, as will be shown. And it is necessary because it is a central, constitutive part of the service transaction, rather than a pleasant but dispensable little extra. Interactive work is inseparable from other aspects of the work process and always involves interaction applied to an ‘object’ of joint engagement, as interestingly illustrated in the check-out case above. In order to successfully manage the check-out process, employees and guests have to coordinate their actions with each other in situations of varying difficulty. The easiest check-out is comparable to ticking off boxes on a checklist, but more difficult cases can involve complex, multi-stage negotiation processes.

Successfully completed interactive work is always a mutual accomplishment of the service provider and the customer, worked out face-to-face in particular situations. What occurs in those situations depends on what the participating actors decide on the spur of the moment and is thus never fully predictable, nor can it be fully controlled from the outside. The example also shows that interactive work is embedded within the firm and is dependent on organizational framing conditions; the service provider and the customer not only had to get through the check-out process, they also had to concern themselves, interactively, with the hotel’s specific rules about Internet access.

Our theoretical and empirical approach to interactive work synthesizes different theoretical and empirical research traditions. We elaborate our position in the sections that follow, repeatedly making reference to the case example described above. We begin by introducing a model of the service relationship, which we perceive as a relationship characterized in equal parts by exchange and cooperation (section 1). Our ‘interactive work approach’ builds, first, on a model of strategic interaction and, second, on the results and methods of qualitative social research on service work inspired by interactionism. The model of strategic interaction is a helpful heuristic for identifying problems of action that characterize service relationships (section 2). Interactionism helps