

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Worcester		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 17 Business and Management Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Improving customer service through managing customer-to-customer interaction		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2013-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>
Dr Richard Nicholls	Senior Lecturer in Marketing	January 2013 - present
Dr Marwa Gad Mohsen	Senior Lecturer in Marketing	March 2013 - August 2016
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2017-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> No		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>Research into customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) has led to development of customer service strategy at The Hive (a large library and council services hub) and other libraries in the region. The research enabled a better managerial understanding of the complexity of the interactions taking place between customers in libraries, and an enhanced managerial appreciation of the potential for employees to contribute to the effective management of such interactions. The wider impacts of the research are social and cultural, by enabling a diversity of users (e.g. different age, social class, ethnic background, purpose of visit) to use public facilities simultaneously in a more harmonious and supportive environment. The impact of the research also extends to improving the wellbeing of employees faced with difficult CCI situations.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Traditionally, research in the area of customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) has focused on the customer's perception of CCI. Nicholls' research has been influential in shifting attention from the customer's experience of CCI to the management of CCI. Nicholls' research has focused on the frontline employee perspective on CCI.</p> <p>The research that this case study is based on focused on enabling libraries and other community hubs to solve some of the issues they face with a diverse customer base simultaneously consuming a range of services, in a variety of consumption styles, in a shared physical service setting (Reference 1 &amp; 2). These issues include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How a user copes with the physical presence of other users (e.g. the sound and visual impacts of others)</li> <li>• How users share resources in a mutually acceptable way</li> <li>• How a user copes with their perceptions of those different to themselves</li> <li>• How users view the appropriateness of the activities that other users are engaged in</li> </ul> <p>The need for effective and innovative ways to manage the interactions between fellow users of libraries and other community hubs is clear (Reference 2). There is a requirement to operate in an inclusive way that maximises the physical, mental and social comfort of users, and does not deter some groups from using the facilities. This gives rise to the concept of managing CCI, a key aspect of which is using frontline employees to detect, prevent and deal with negative CCI (NCCI) and to foster and endorse positive CCI (PCCI). The objectives of the</p>		

main underpinning research were to gain insights into how frontline employees perceive and experience CCI, and to explore how they handle CCI. Details of the two studies follow:

- **Diversity and customer-to-customer interaction:** This research (Reference1) explored the concept of CCI in terms of customer diversity. It revealed that the prevailing perspective that customer diversity was problematic for CCI was an oversimplification and that diversity could in some circumstances be favourable for CCI. The study focused upon the consequences for CCI of customers being from different age groups.
- **Managing customer-to-customer Interaction:** This research (Reference 2) focused on exploring the capacity of frontline employees to provide insights into CCI and its management. The study found that frontline employees: (i) are able to recall CCI encounters with ease; (ii) are capable of conceptualising and exploring complex nuances surrounding CCI encounters; (iii) can distinguish levels of seriousness of negative CCI and variations in customer sensitivity to CCI; (iv) vary in their comfort in intervening in negative CCI situations.

### 3. References to the research

1. Nicholls, R. and Gad Mohsen, M. (2015), "Other Customer Age – Exploring customer age-difference related CCI", *Journal of Services Marketing*, 29 (4): 255-267. DOI 10.1108/JSM-04-2014-0144.
2. Nicholls, R. and Gad Mohsen, M. (2019), "Managing customer-to-customer interaction (CCI) – insights from the frontline", *Journal of Services Marketing*, 33 (7): 798-814. DOI 10.1108/JSM-11-2018-0329

Both outputs are included in the unit's REF2021 submission, having been selected through the processes set out in the University's REF2021 Code of Practice and identified as of at least 2\* quality.

### 4. Details of the impact

The primary impact of the research has been on [The Hive](#) in Worcester, a University and Public Library, although it has also extended to other Library Services in the region. The Hive, developed in collaboration between the University of Worcester and Worcestershire County Council, was the first joint university and community library in Europe when it opened in 2012. The Hive also functions as a community hub, contains a significant exhibition space and houses a Business Centre. 150 staff (both University and County Council) work in the Hive. It attracts over 700,000 visitors per year (making it the 8<sup>th</sup> most visited library in the UK in 2019). Its event's and exhibition's programme is targeted across all age ranges from young children to older generations, so its visitor profile at any one time is very diverse.

The senior management team at the Hive approached Nicholls in 2015 to undertake a study of employee perspective on customer-to-customer interaction in the library. Management wished to address an ongoing issue with customer behaviour and the impact that was having on both staff and other customers. A report on the findings made an initial set of recommendations to amend the customer service strategy and to develop new approaches to training (Source A). Further discussion led to a significant re-orientation of the Hive's customer service strategy (Source B). This had three main elements:

- **Recruitment:** The research identified the importance of staff being able to deal effectively with CCI situations, including tense and complex triadic situations. This led to modification of employee recruitment processes. The recruitment process now includes an interactive activity that requires applicants to engage with a user of the Hive. Greater emphasis is also placed on recruiting people who have resilience, with explicit interview questions that probe for evidence of resilience.

- *Incident management:* The research demonstrated that a significant proportion of incidents in the Hive were a product of CCI. This led to the development of a new approach to how staff managed behaviours (Sources C and D). This included improvements to the way in which incidents were logged so that characteristics of incidents could be noted and used to help determine training priorities (Source A).
- *Training:* The Hive has redesigned and rebranded its customer service training (Sources D and E). The new training approach has a strong focus on preventing negative CCI. It was recognised that there was a need for the early detection of situations which might negatively impact other customers. This involves awareness of what is happening and its wider impact on those in the environment. At the heart of the new training are regular training sessions, held several times a year, for all staff where real scenarios form the basis of discussion about how to handle situations. The training is customised with the selection of incidents used being tailored to the trainees from different sections of The Hive (e.g. library, housing, archives). Empowering Hive staff to handle CCI enables many potentially negative situations to be de-escalated before they become serious or for firm interventions to be made rapidly. The training has been attended by all Hive staff who have customer contact. In the region of 50 staff undergo this training at least twice a year.

The re-orientation of the Hive's customer service strategy has had the following specific benefits:

- (a) Employees have a better understanding of the range of interactions occurring between customers at The Hive (Source F)
- (b) Employees have a better understanding of when and how to intervene in negative CCI situations (Source D)
- (c) Employees experience less stress when handling difficult CCI situations (Source F)
- (d) Customers at The Hive enjoy a better customer experience and encounter a more consistent employee handling of CCI situations (Sources A and D)

The impact of the research has extended to several other libraries in the region. An event, partly designed to showcase the new approach to managing customer service at The Hive, was held on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2018 in Worcester (Source G). This one-day workshop, which was organised under the auspices of Mercian Collaboration Staff Development Group, a professional network of SCONUL higher education libraries in the East and West Midlands, addressed the issue of managing challenging and unorthodox behaviour in academic library environments and was attended by around 20 professional participants responsible for delivering training in libraries, including University of Coventry, Warwick University, and Birmingham City University.

##### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Preliminary report on User-to-User Interaction Research Project at The Hive (2016)
- B. Testimony from Service Development and Engagement Officer, The Hive
- C. Confidential Internal Report (2017): *Managing Behaviours – a New Approach*
- D. Allen, S., Downes, J. and Keene, J. (2018), "New Audiences, New Opportunities in a Joint Academic and Public Library, The Hive, University of Worcester, United Kingdom", in Atkinson, J (ed.), *Collaboration and the Academic Library*, Oxford, UK: Elsevier, 83-194, ISBN 9780081020845. The chapter highlights the impact of the research: "We recently benefited from the research interests of a lecturer in the Business School specialising in Customer to Customer Interaction (CCI) who has conducted a preliminary study with staff on the effects of CCI within our wide customer base at The Hive. The study has informed staff development and has given us a new approach to supporting managing behaviours across the building".

- E. Extract from The Hive Customer Service Training manual
- F. Employee feedback on the new training approach
- G. Information sheet from Mercian Collaboration Staff Development Group about sharing training approaches for managing challenging and unorthodox user behaviour in academic environments.