

“I’m holding on thanks to my customers!” When the customer becomes the main source of social support for frontline employees

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Abstract

• Objectives / Research Questions

The jobs of frontline employees can occasionally be particularly demanding. Service companies have drawn up and put into practice a series of initiatives to provide social support to their frontline employees. The main sources of social support studied in the literature concern the organisation, managers, and colleagues. The objective of this research is to propose a conceptual framework of social support for frontline employees that includes customers as an additional dimension, and to study its influence on the emotional exhaustion of frontline employees.

• Methodology

Based on a quantitative study of a sample of 595 employees, the analysis validated the conceptual framework of social support from four sources: the organisation, managers, colleagues, and customers. The study also shows how this support can reduce the emotional exhaustion of frontline employees.

• Results

This study makes three major contributions to the literature. Firstly, it validates a second-order model of social support in four dimensions related to the sources of this support, adding the customer to the organisation, managers, and colleagues. Secondly, it shows that social support from the customer negatively influences employee burnout. Finally, it shows that social support from the customer has the strongest influence on employees and is the most stable, regardless of the sector concerned, thus opening the door to numerous managerial implications.

• Managerial implications

The results are particularly interesting for helping companies reflect on contexts that bring out customers social support, and thus enter into a relationship that improves both employees' well-being and customer satisfaction.

• **Keywords:** Customer social support, emotional exhaustion.

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