

Squaring the triangle – rethinking service excellence

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Introduction

Broadly speaking, organizations, especially service organizations, strive for excellence in services through various tools and concepts. While there is consensus in the management literature on the importance of service excellence for organizational success (e.g., Clark and Baker 2007; Padma and Wagenseil 2018; Rey 2022; Wirtz and Zeithaml 2018), there is less agreement on the best way to implement service excellence in organizations (Asif 2015; Gouthier 2025; Khan 2010; West et al. 2022). Some organizations, for example, view service excellence as intertwined with total quality management (Asif and Gouthier 2014), which focuses on managing all aspects of a product's (i.e., good or service) quality. Others argue that service excellence is manifested in high levels of employee responsiveness, cultural competency, meticulous servicescapes, attention to detail in service preparation, short wait times, and the overall customer experience (e.g., Bøddeker et al. 2025; Singgalen 2025).

The lack of consensus on the 'right' approach to implementing service excellence may stem from definitional heterogeneity in the literature; there is no universally accepted definition of service excellence. Furthermore, scholarly work on service excellence implementation seldom draws on established service concepts and frameworks. A notable example is the 'service triangle' (cf. Zeithaml et al. 2010).

Interestingly, while the service triangle concept distinguishes three interlinked groups (i.e., organization, customers, employees) that collaborate to develop, promote, and deliver high-quality services (Zeithaml et al. 2010), it has received little attention in the service excellence field. In this research, we argue that the service triangle offers a promising framework for effectively implementing service excellence in organizations. To this end, it is essential to conceptually bridge these two concepts. A search on Google Scholar using the terms 'service excellence' + 'service triangle' yielded approximately 120 results. However, when the search was limited to titles of published works, the number of hits was zero. In other words, there appears to be no research connecting service excellence with the service triangle,

which we consider an important oversight given the service triangle’s potential to facilitate the implementation of service excellence in organizations.

Accordingly, this research pursues two main goals. First, given the myriad of ‘service excellence’ definitions, we aim to identify commonalities and differences among existing definitions and propose a unifying definition. A unifying definition is needed to integrate service management research conducted under different terms but based on potentially similar underlying concepts. Second, recognizing that the ‘service triangle’ is an important tool for strategic service management, as it enhances understanding of how services are delivered through a three-way alliance among service managers, (frontline) employees, and customers (Vogus et al. 2020), we aim to demonstrate how each of the three service triangle components contributes to achieving service excellence.

Conceptual background

Service excellence: Toward a new definition

Kearney et al. (2017) suggest that service excellence is a non-financial key performance indicator (KPI); however, the literature offers little guidance on how to implement service excellence in organizations, possibly due to the lack of a generally accepted definition. Indeed, the myriad of definitions of ‘service excellence’ found in both the management and services literature suggests that the concept is far from clear-cut. We therefore begin with a review and comparison of service excellence definitions. Table 1 contains a comprehensive, though not exhaustive, list of definitions of ‘service excellence’ in chronological order. The definitions listed in Table 1 span the period from 1993 to 2024 and reflect how the concept of service excellence is viewed in the pertinent literature.

Table 1. Representative definitions of service excellence

No	Author(s)	Definition
1	Madsen (1993)	“service excellence concentrates on listening, empowerment, innovation, and making customers and employees part of the action”.
2	Kim and Kleiner (1996, p. 22)	... a clear corporate “culture provided by committed management, employee empowerment by enhancing knowledge and skills, and improvement of operating processes with technological applications.”

3	Bunzel (2001, p. 366)	“the capability to pick up or anticipate customers’ needs and wants, that make all the difference in service delivery and that, ultimately, define service excellence. Therefore, staff has to “expect the unexpected” in order to deliver customer service that exceeds customer expectations.”
4	Johnston (2004, p. 131)	“(…) easy to do business with. It simply requires organisations to do what they promise and if and when things go wrong to have good systems in place to deal with them.”
5	Gilthorpe (2006, p. 33)	... “the fundamental link between a happy and motivated workforce and a successful organisation. It’s as much about changing hearts and minds as putting the correct processes in place”.
6	Gouthier et al. (2012, p. 448)	... the “provision of excellent service quality through a management system, exceeding a customer’s previous expectations, to result in not only customer satisfaction but also customer delight and therefore greater customer loyalty”.
7	Asif and Gouthier (2014, p. 512)	“Service excellence means providing services that both exceed customers’ expectations and delight them. Service excellence is critical to an organisation’s sustainability because it increases customer loyalty and profitability.”
8	Grove et al. (2014, p. 116)	“Those who deliver services have been characterised as ‘actors’ or ‘cast members’ (...) whose role enactments help define service excellence.”
9	Wirtz and Kaufman (2016)	“service excellence is defined as delivering a higher level of perceived value than you previously delivered.”
10	Wirtz and Zeithaml (2018, p. 60)	“the high end of customer satisfaction, that is, service excellence.”
11	Jin et al. (2019, p. 152)	“Service excellence is often defined as the delivery of a service that exceeds expectations (...) Although an all-encompassing operational definition does not exist, judgments of service excellence can be based on a number of criteria including: promise fulfillment, ease of issue resolution, going above and beyond, high levels of consumer engagement, and the overall quality of the interaction.”
12	Zhan et al. (2021):	“Service excellence is viewed as firms providing high levels of service quality that in turn generate high customer satisfaction.”
13	Norris et al. (2023, p. 613)	“service excellence (i.e. quality) in terms of how a restaurant employee provides superior service, is willing and able to help the guest and the overall favorable attitude toward the guest.”
14	Jacob et al. (2024, p. 1245)	“Service excellence refers to the ability of service providers to consistently meet and occasionally even exceed customers’ expectations.”

A closer analysis reveals that these 14 definitions exhibit differences but also share some common attributes, or similarities. These similarities fall into five categories, which are labeled, summarized and explained in Table 2. What becomes apparent is that the definitions have different foci. Additionally, some definitions include consequences of service excellence, such as customer loyalty (e.g., definition #6), whereas others do not. While most definitions of service excellence share a common theme, that of delivering superior service that exceeds customer expectations, leading to satisfaction and loyalty, they differ in their emphasis. Some, like #2 and #5, focus on organizational culture, employee empowerment,

and continuous improvement. Others, like #4, highlight operational systems, fulfillment of promises, and issue resolution. A few definitions, such as #8 and #3, emphasize the human interaction aspect, with the service provider playing a critical role in anticipating and delighting customers. This emphasis aligns with a central proposition in services management that service excellence is largely reflected in effective and harmonious employee-customer interactions (Walsh 2011). Additionally, definitions like #13 are more industry-specific, while others like #7 focus on sustainability across industries through customer loyalty and long-term relationships.

We next discuss the similarities among the 14 definitions by highlighting common themes (see Table 2).

Table 2. Similarities among definitions across five categories

No	Theme	Explanation
1	Exceeding customer expectations	Definitions #6, #7, #11, #14 emphasize that service excellence involves going beyond just meeting customer expectations, often stating it's about exceeding customer expectations or <i>delighting</i> customers.
2	Customer satisfaction and loyalty	Definitions #6, #7, #11, #12 highlight that service excellence not only leads to customer satisfaction but also helps to build <i>loyalty</i> , which in turn contributes to long-term organizational success.
3	Service quality	Definitions #6, #9, #12 associate service excellence directly with <i>high-quality service</i> . This is often linked to delivering value and meeting customer expectations in superior ways.
4	Employee involvement	Definitions #2, #5, #1 recognize the critical role of <i>employees</i> in delivering service excellence, emphasizing empowerment, engagement, and a motivated workforce.
5	Continuous improvement and adaptability	Definitions #2, #5, #3 focus on the need for <i>improvement</i> in both systems and employee capabilities, suggesting that service excellence is not static but requires adaptability, learning, and growth.

Note: Words in italics denote aspects of the definitions that represent the respective theme.

Our analysis reveals five themes that emerge from existing definitions of 'service excellence,' as detailed in Table 2. Based on the common themes, we can propose the following overarching definition of service excellence: *Service excellence is the delivery of high-quality service that consistently exceeds customer expectations, resulting in customer satisfaction, delight, and long-term loyalty. Achieving service excellence requires a collaborative effort between the service organization, its back-office and frontline employees,*

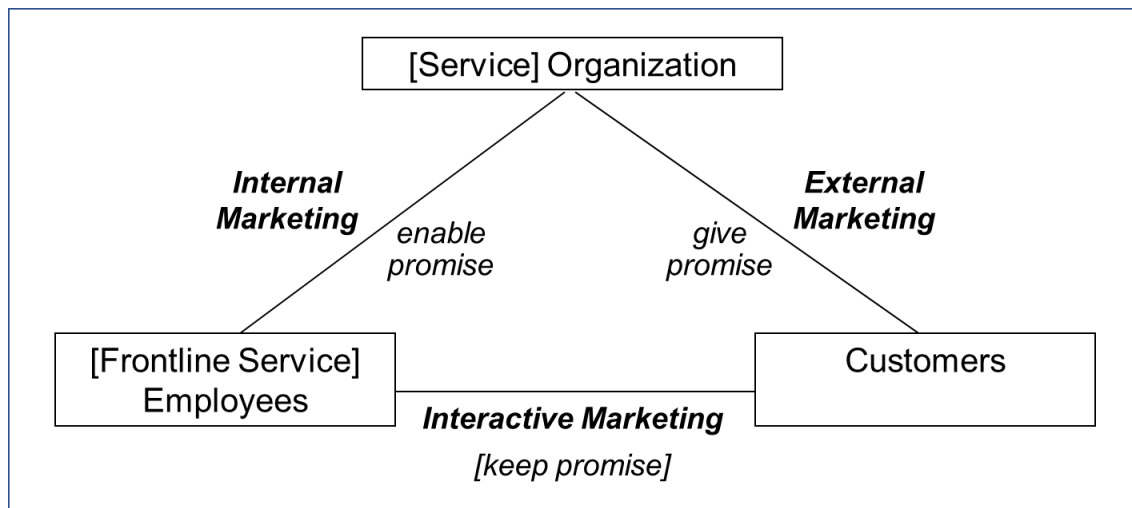
and its customers, with a focus on continuous improvement, innovation, and empowering employees to anticipate and meet customer needs.

Next, we theorize how the concept of service excellence (as reflected in its definitions) can be mapped to three components of the service triangle.

Bridging service excellence with the Service Triangle

The service triangle (see Figure 1) is premised on the assumption that three interconnected groups contribute to the delivery of high-quality services. Therefore, the service triangle offers a conceptual link to the concept of service excellence. According to the service triangle, service employees are responsible for delivering the organization's services. For a service to succeed, three types of marketing must be effectively executed between these groups: external marketing, interactive marketing, and internal marketing.

On the right side of the triangle is 'external marketing', where the organization sets customer expectations and makes promises about what will be delivered. Anything that communicates with the customer before service delivery is part of this function, but promises must be kept. The bottom of the triangle represents 'interactive marketing', where (frontline) service employees, or other representatives of the organization, either keep or break those promises. Frontline employees are especially critical here; failure to deliver results in customer dissatisfaction and eventual loss. The left side of the triangle highlights 'internal marketing', where service management supports employees to fulfill service promises by recruiting, training, motivating, rewarding, and providing necessary resources (equipment, technology, etc.). Without employees who are capable of and willing to deliver, the organization will fail, and the service triangle will collapse. All three sides are therefore crucial, and they must align: what is promised through external marketing must match what is delivered, and internal activities must support what service providers are expected to deliver.



Adapted from: Zeithaml, Bitner, and Gremler, 2010, p. 7

As outlined earlier, we argue that the service triangle is a potent tool for implementing service excellence in organizations. The service triangle concept, which involves three key components (organization, employees, and customers) that contribute to the successful delivery of high-quality services. We argue that each of the 14 definitions of service excellence (see Table 1) can be mapped to one or more of these components, reflecting how they contribute to achieving service excellence in practice. Below, we describe how each of the 14 definitions relates to the components of the service triangle (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mapping service excellence attributes to service triangle components

Service triangle component	Description	Explanation
Company	The company refers to the overall organizational structure, management systems, culture, and processes that support service excellence. It focuses on how the company designs its services, aligns employees with its goals, and creates systems to support customer needs.	Definition #2 focuses on the company's <i>culture</i> , management commitment, and process improvements, all of which are essential for delivering excellent service; #4 emphasizes the <i>systems</i> in place within an organization to ensure ease of doing business and resolving issues effectively, reflecting how the company's operational processes contribute to service excellence; #5 discusses the link between a <i>motivated workforce</i> and the organization's success, highlighting the company's role in shaping employee attitudes and maintaining proper processes; #7 highlights the <i>sustainability</i> of the company, stressing that service excellence is linked to organizational success through customer loyalty and profitability; #9 focuses on the company's ability to deliver <i>higher levels of value</i> consistently, a core principle for achieving service excellence.
Service employees (typically frontline employees)	The service employees are the front-line individuals who directly deliver the service to customers. Their attitudes, skills, engagement, and	Definition #1 emphasizes <i>listening, empowerment, and innovation</i> by employees, making them active participants in the service delivery process; #2 points to <i>employee empowerment</i> through the development of knowledge and skills, highlighting how employees' capabilities are

	empowerment are crucial to service excellence. Employees are the ones who execute the company's strategies and shape the customer experience.	central to service excellence; #3 describes how <i>employees</i> must anticipate customer needs and "expect the unexpected" to deliver exceptional service that exceeds expectations; #6 discusses the <i>quality of service</i> provided by employees, noting that employees who are skilled and motivated will deliver service that delights customers, which results in loyalty; #8 characterizes service providers as <i>actors or cast members</i> , underscoring the human element in service delivery, where employees' roles in engaging customers are pivotal.
Customers	The customers are the recipients of the service. Their expectations, needs, and satisfaction are key drivers in the delivery of service excellence. Customers influence service delivery through feedback, engagement, and their perceptions of value and satisfaction.	Definition #6 focuses on exceeding <i>customer expectations</i> to not only satisfy but also delight them, which leads to greater <i>customer loyalty</i> ; #7 refers to providing service that <i>exceeds customers' expectations</i> and delights them, reinforcing the role of customers in defining service excellence through their expectations and loyalty; #11 lists criteria like <i>promise fulfillment</i> , <i>issue resolution</i> , and <i>consumer engagement</i> , highlighting customer interaction and satisfaction as important measures of service excellence; #12 links <i>service quality</i> to <i>high customer satisfaction</i> , which in turn drives loyalty, showing how customer feedback and satisfaction shape service excellence; #13 emphasizes restaurant settings, focusing on how a <i>favorable attitude toward the guest</i> and willingness to assist impacts customer satisfaction.

Note: Words in italics denote attributes of service excellence that are likely to contribute most to the successful implementation of the respective service triangle component.

Table 3 summarizes our attempt to map the concept of service excellence (as reflected in its definitions) to the three components of the service triangle—company, service employees, and customers. Interestingly, and importantly, the 14 definitions of service excellence also highlight cross-component interactions within the service triangle. These interactions are illustrated by several definitions. For example, definitions #2 and #5 emphasize company culture and employee empowerment, which directly influence how employees interact with customers, fostering a positive customer experience and loyalty. Definitions #1 and #3 suggest that employees, through their behavior and empowerment, engage with customers to exceed their expectations and provide delight, thereby influencing customer satisfaction and loyalty.

We believe our analysis supports the idea that the service triangle can be effectively used to implement key aspects (or attributes) of the service excellence concept. Essentially, the service triangle shows that service excellence is a collaborative effort between the

company, its (frontline) employees, and its customers. Each of the 14 definitions emphasizes a different aspect of this collaboration, but they all acknowledge the importance of these three interdependent components

In sum, we believe our analysis gives credence to the notion that the service triangle can be usefully deployed to implement key aspects (or attributes) of the service excellence concept. Essentially, the service triangle illustrates that service excellence is a collaborative effort between the company, its employees, and its customers. Each of the 14 definitions emphasizes a different aspect of this collaboration, but they all acknowledge the importance of these three interdependent components.

Discussion and conclusion

We began by noting that management research on service excellence, particularly studies focused on its implementation, cannot rely on a universally accepted definition. Our analysis reveals that existing definitions tend to concentrate on specific aspects or attributes of service excellence, without considering the construct as a whole. We also observe a call in the literature for more research into effective approaches for implementing service excellence in organizations (Asif 2015; Gouthier 2025; West et al. 2022). Against this backdrop, this research aimed to develop a unifying, overarching definition of service excellence that captures the full conceptual breadth of the construct. We encourage management scholars and practitioners to use this new definition because it more accurately reflects what service excellence is. Furthermore, we argue and demonstrate that the service triangle framework can play a central role in facilitating the implementation of service excellence in service organizations. We believe our analysis supports the view that the service triangle can be effectively utilized to implement key elements (or attributes) of the service excellence concept. At its core, the service triangle illustrates that service excellence is a collaborative effort involving the company, its employees, and its customers. While each of the 14

definitions highlights a distinct aspect of this collaboration, all emphasize the importance of these three interconnected components.

Despite these strengths, our research is not without limitations, which open avenues for future research into the implementation of service excellence, particularly in the intersection between service excellence and the service triangle. For example, while we emphasize the role of frontline service employees in achieving service excellence goals, back-office and support staff may also play an equally important role in contributing to service excellence (Kearney et al., 2017). Future research should consider incorporating these employees into their models. Moreover, much of the service excellence research takes a Western, customer-centric view, and the present study is no exception in this regard. However, it is conceivable that the definition and implementation of service excellence in service organizations may be influenced by cultural or situational factors, such as the likelihood of interethnic service encounters or a company's emphasis on cost-related and financial goals over 'soft' or non-financial goals (e.g., Walsh, 2024; Wirtz & Zeithaml, 2018; Zhang et al. 2008). These issues could be explored in future studies.

In sum, service companies often find themselves forced to trade off the implementation of one goal against another. For example, a company may pursue productivity gains at the expense of customer satisfaction (Walsh et al. 2016), or profitability at the expense of sustainability (Dose et al. 2025). The service triangle concept helps address this challenge, or tension, by encouraging service managers, in pursuit of service excellence, to work toward balanced relationships between their organization, its employees, and its customers. We encourage service practitioners to make use of this simple yet effective concept, alongside our proposed new definition of service excellence. However, future research is needed to corroborate the efficacy of the concept in facilitating the implementation of service excellence in organizations.

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