

An Evaluative Study of the Role of Front Office Standards in the Delivery of Customer Service.

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Executive Summary

This project aims to critically evaluate the impact of standards on the delivery of customer service from a hotel front office perspective. The project presents a critical review of the literature and uses interviews with front office managers as its data collection method, it then seeks to compare and contrast the findings.

The literature is the starting point for the project and is concerned with three key areas: Standards; customer service and customer satisfaction and finally front office. The literature review begins with a look at standards and its role over the past twenty years. This section focuses on how the role of standards has developed and changed, from being at the forefront during the 1990's, through to today, where the focus is upon the management of the customer experience which ultimately requires the use of standards. Customer service and satisfaction is the next area for consideration:- providing a definition; discussing the role staff play; the impact staff have upon customer service; the role technology and training play in the managing and improving of customer satisfaction and the delivery of customer service. The final section discusses front office, defining the role it plays within a hotel and outlines the pivotal role the department plays in the management of the guest experience.

The project uses telephone interviews with front office managers from a sample organisation as its source of data collection. The organisation in question is Q hotels; the project uses a sample size of five front office managers from across the UK. The project then compares the literature review with the results from the research to ascertain whether there is an agreement between the two. Where there is no agreement between principles and practice, a discussion is undertaken as to why this is the case.

The conclusion re-addresses the initial aim of the project; it critically evaluates how standards impact upon the ability of front office to deliver excellent customer service. The conclusion offers recommendations for the advancement of delivering excellent customer service; it makes suggestions as to how research can be developed in the future.

Key Words

Standards

Customer service and satisfaction

Front office

Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's)

1. Context, Aim and Objectives

1.1 Context

This project takes, as its theme, the use and role of standards for delivering customer service within hotel front office. This chapter will outline the main aims and objectives of the project and establish why front office standards are necessary in the delivering of customer service. The movement within the literature over the past 20 years has seen standards discussed in different ways. The 90's saw standards introduced, Lockwood (1999) defines standards as a promise of and an approach to quality. The literature over the past 10 years placed the main thrust of discussion upon the customer experience and customer satisfaction. Pizam and Holcomb (2008, p66) define customer satisfaction as "The ability of an organisation to fulfil the needs of its customers."

In order to provide an excellent customer experience there needs to be standards and to deliver this the staff need to be trained and able to embody and understand them. With customer experience being at the forefront of modern day hospitality literature, it is necessary to draw attention back to the importance of standards. Without service staff fully understanding and embodying their organisation's vision standards cannot be fully appreciated nor implemented. Therefore, it is important to ascertain the thoughts, attitudes and understanding of front office managers towards standards, since front office plays a vital role in the delivery of the customer experience and customer service in hotels.

1.2 Aim and objectives

The aim of this project is to critically evaluate the impact of standards on the delivery of customer service from a hotel front office perspective. In order to meet this aim, the following four objectives have been set:

1. To critically examine the nature, use of and importance of standards in delivering customer service.
2. To explain the context of hotel front office standards with customer service.
3. To determine the extent to which front office managers believe and understand that standards help in delivering customer satisfaction, and their attitudes towards them.
4. To highlight key areas relating to standards to help support front office managers in the delivery of customer service.

2. Literature Review

This chapter of the project will critically review the literature concerning three key areas:

1. Standards: a definition of standards within the context of hotels and front office.
2. Customer service and satisfaction: a definition and explanation of how the two are interrelated; an exploration of how customer service is delivered and its impact upon customer satisfaction and a discussion linking standards and customer service.
3. Front Office: the link between standards and the delivery of customer.

2.1 Standards

A review of the literature highlights that standards, are not just a choice, rather they are a requirement for any hospitality operation. However, the role standards have played and the lengths to which it is discussed in the literature, in recent years, has varied significantly. With this in mind a brief historical overview of the role that standards have played within the literature over the last 20 years is provided. The 1990's saw a focusing upon the need for standards, not only within branded operations but also within hospitality in general. Lockwood (1999) confirms this. In an earlier publication (1994), he argued that standards are a core element of any operation. Towards the end of the 90's into the millennium, the focus upon standards took a back seat as hospitality operations began to consider the idea of enhancing the 'customer experience'. In turn, through managing the customer experience, customer loyalty could be achieved but more important was the idea that managing the customer experience could ensure the survival of a business (Pizam & Ellis, 1999). However, whilst the idea of managing the customer experience was at the forefront of the literature, it was still evident that in order to deliver this there needed to be a relating back to implementing standards to ensure that what was being delivered was to a high specification (Gentile et al, 2007).

Lockwood (1999) defines standards as being required to achieve consistent performance and to ensure the meeting of guest expectations. Standards can be viewed as a promise of, and an approach to, quality. Lockwood (1999) observes that in delivering standards and, in turn, quality, control procedures and work instructions are needed. Standards not only detail what is to be done, who is meant to be doing the task and how it is meant to be done (control procedures) but also specifications (work instructions). Heskett (1987) comments that operating standards are concerned with how a business positions itself i.e. what is it exactly that the customers want? It is the standards that dictate the service but what actually constitutes good service? Heskett raises some fundamental questions that hotel operations must ask themselves when founding their mission statement and when communicating to the public what it is they want to deliver. Furthermore, Heskett's observation, regarding business positioning, is an important one; a hotel cannot set its standards without knowing or being able to identify its key

consumers, for example, implementing operating procedures geared towards dealing with leisure guests will not be appropriate if the hotel is a business hotel. Standards are a key part of the overall operating strategy of any business.

However, standards within operations must be realistic. Lockwood (1999), explains that high standards may offer guests a perceived value however, they inherently may incur high costs. Furthermore, with the promise of delivering high standards, the standard operating procedures (SOP's) need to be as equally detailed and accurate as the standards themselves in order for staff to meet and help deliver them. Lockwood (1999), goes further, he comments that standards need to be in line with delivery systems. In addition to Lockwood's comments it can be observed that it is the quality and ability of staff to be able to deliver a standard of service that matches that of the standards set.

Standards exist within branded hotels to standardise not only the service offered but also the product; in order to deliver standards and therefore quality there needs to be SOPs in place, as highlighted by Jones (1999). SOPs are seen not only as a form of quality control but also are to ensure cost and revenue control. Jones & Lockwood (2004,p40) define SOPs as comprising of: "a simple statement of policy, followed by paragraphs indicating directives, procedures, explanation of forms, records to be kept, positional responsibilities and co-ordinating relationships." The use of SOPs ensure standardisation throughout operations yet also ensures that the standard promised to the guest will be delivered (Heskett, 1987).

To conclude, the most succinct and accurate explanation of standards comes from Jones (1999, p95), who summarises the importance and reasoning for standards being in place as presenting: "a focal point at the interface of customer requirements and operating performance that will determine, to a large extent, the success of the operation as a whole." Furthermore, the standards in place need to be as well as controlled and directed, as without them good customer service will only be achieved by accident as opposed to through design.

2.2 Customer Service and Customer Satisfaction

The intention is to define both customer service and customer satisfaction as the two go hand in hand; customer satisfaction cannot be achieved without effective customer service and customer service cannot be continually monitored, adapted and improved without the feedback from guests regarding customer's satisfaction.

Pizam & Holcomb (2008, p66) define customer satisfaction as: "The ability of an organisation to fulfil the needs of its customers." Therefore, customer service is the delivery of quality service to meet the guest expectations, the elements of which can be intangible as well as tangible (Vallen and Vallen, 2009).

Within hospitality, and especially front office, customer service is a fundamental element of the guest experience. With front office being a core element of the project, a dedicated review of front office will be undertaken later in the literature review (section 2.3). Jeong & Oh (1998), observe the importance of customer service, since within the hospitality industry there has been an increase in competition for customer satisfaction. This is because retention of customers through effective customer service is vital. It is not possible to discuss customer service without also discussing customer satisfaction; it is the continual feedback from customers about their experiences that can only help hotel operations to improve and build upon their customer service. Jones & Lockwood (2004) highlight the role that technology plays in the delivery of customer service by helping to deliver a higher quality level of service, through the increased speed of actions such as reservations and billing. Furthermore, it can be said that it is the knowledge of front office staff on how to use the necessary technology that can affect the level of customer service delivered, as technology is only as good as the people using it. This knowledge can only be taught through the effective training and monitoring by management. If this is not in place, or is not effective, then customer service will be impacted upon.

It can be said that customer service is not about meeting the expectations of customers but rather it is about exceeding their expectations. Jones and Lockwood (2004) observe that hotels have fuelled customer's higher quality expectations by using quality as a marketing tool. With this being the case, hotels have to continually improve customer service to meet the demands of the ever discerning and knowledgeable general public.

As previously mentioned, managing is an important part of customer service and customer satisfaction. Zeithaml et al (1990) comment that strong commitment from management stimulates departments and organisations to improve service performance, yet poor role definitions, poor team work and a team lacking leadership knowledge can all contribute to poor customer service. This is especially applicable to the hospitality industry which is renowned for its high pressure environment and dependency on service knowledge, ability and deliverance. The experience, knowledge and personality of a manager can greatly affect the team's delivery of customer service. If a manager lacks the knowledge of standards, systems and management then the delivery of customer service will be impeded as front office is the first customer interface and the first port of call for any guest with a problem.

2.3 Front office

Front office, as mentioned earlier, is the first customer facing department that a guest meets, and the first port of call for the majority of guests with any queries or problems. Some of the key

functions performed by front office are outlined by Tewari (2009). He states that some of the main functions concerning front office are:

- Sale of rooms;
- Receive and register guests (Check-in) and assign rooms;
- Maintain room availability;
- Monitor and handle guest accounts;
- Handle all guest queries and complaints;
- Conclude guests stay with issuing of bills and taking of payment;
- Act as an information point for guests concerning the surrounding area;
- Undertake daily financial tasks, such as end of shift banking;
- Co-ordinate guest services;
- Facilitate communication with all departments in the hotel;

Baker & Riley (1994), observe that front office is where guests gain their first important impression, and furthermore, it is a communication hub for the hotel's operation. Vallen & Vallen (2009, pp97), go further, describing front office as: "a bundle of duties and guest services." These two definitions go some way to outlining the importance front office plays in the delivery of customer service, as well as ensuring standards are met. The front office team need to be knowledgeable of both the standards and the SOPs in place, in order for standards to be achieved. In relation to standards, it is the front office team's job to ensure that the customer's first contact with the hotel is a positive experience. This all important first impression will be based upon the welcome and the efficiency of the check-in process, both of which pertain to the standards in place. Incorporated into the delivery of these standards is customer service. It is the job of the front office team to manage the service encounter effectively. Jones and Lockwood (2004), observe that the service encounter is of paramount importance to the operational success of a department.

As already discussed earlier, it is about exceeding the expectations of guests, not just meeting them. Zeithaml et al (1990), goes further, describing the dimensions of service that customers expect to receive. The five dimensions are: reliability; tangibility; responsiveness; assurance and empathy. A study by Parasuraman (1991), provides further enhancement to the five dimensions by demonstrating what is needed to exceed customer expectation. He states that customers believe reliability is the most important factor in meeting customer expectations. In addition process dimensions, such as assurance, responsiveness and empathy, are the most important aspects of exceeding guest expectations. In order for a front office team to be able to deliver these dimensions, it is important that they receive the correct training. This is down to the manager; it is based upon their experience, knowledge and management style.

2.4 Conclusion

To conclude, throughout the literature, it becomes evident that standards are required, as they assure quality and a framework for employees to work within. They also ensure that organisations can guarantee a product or service is delivered consistently in a uniform fashion. In the case of branded operations, standards ensure a product or service is consistent within any property, anywhere in the world. As mentioned previously, the role that standards have played within the literature has varied. The idea of managing the guest experience has become a trend, which modern day literature has focused upon. However, in doing so, it must be reiterated that there needs to be a referral back to standards, as without them managing the guest experience is made extremely difficult. Furthermore, without standards, there is no framework from which the managing of the guest experience can be built upon. It is also made clear that in delivering excellent customer service, the front office manager plays a pivotal role not only through their own knowledge but through the training, developing and monitoring of staff.

3. Methodology

This chapter seeks to explain and justify methods employed in this project and address the project's aim, which to recap is:

To evaluate the impact of standards on the delivery of customer service from a hotel front office perspective.

“Research methodology is always a compromise between options in the light of tacit philosophical assumptions, and choices are frequently influenced by the availability of resources” (Gill & Johnson 2002, p2). With this in mind, it is imperative that a clear strategy is used when researching this topic, as without one, confusion may arise and/or a conclusion may not be reached.

3.1 Research design structure

Due to the exploratory nature of the project concerning front office standards and the front office managers' attitudes and opinions towards them, in the delivery of customer service, a qualitative approach will be necessary. It will also use an element of induction (discussed further in 3.2)

This project will base its foundations upon the literature and compare its findings against the theories, and as a result an element of deduction will be required (to be discussed further in

3.2). The nature of the research question requires flexibility and an element of interpretation as attitudes and opinions may vary, and so using quantitative methods would not allow for this flexibility. However, some quantitative data will be gathered so as to ensure that a balanced approach is taken, and also to provide some numerical evidence to support or challenge the literature.

Brotherton (2008), observes that the analysis of quantitative data needs to be more flexible and interpretative than the analysis of numerical data. Whilst numerical data will be gathered and collated, there is not enough to warrant the use of software packages, such as SPSS, and so the results will simply undergo basic analysis and will be collated into charts.

Furthermore, as the project is using the attitudes and opinions of front office managers, they may require future decisions regarding research instruments in response to the situation, and this is something that a qualitative approach allows (Holliday, 2002).

The decision to focus more upon qualitative techniques than quantitative techniques does not mean that the approach is any less thorough or reliable; it has even been written that the exact opposite is true. Denscombe (2003), is of the opinion that interpretative approaches usually rely on qualitative data collection, such as interviews. He goes on to say that it allows the exploration of a subject in fine detail, however, as a result it can be a time consuming process to uncover the issues such research can provide. With this in mind a small sample size would be appropriate, as highlighted by Cameron & Price (2009), whom comments that small sample sizes are often used in this form of data collection.

3.2 Working Hypothesis

This project seeks to verify and test the validity of the hypothesis. Putting this into context, the hypothesis is that having assessed the literature, it is believed that standards are needed to deliver customer service. The research that this project will undertake will seek to clarify or falsify this hypothesis. Gilbert (1993), comments that deduction comprises of: theory; a hypothesis; data collection and then the testing of this hypothesis to deduce the behaviour of the phenomenon. Since qualitative data is the main form of data collection in this project, deduction is facilitated.

3.3 Methods used

The project aims to present a critical review of the literatures' approach to standards and compare and contrast this with front office managers' knowledge, attitudes, opinions and experiences of standards in the delivery of customer service, through the use of interviews (section 3.3.2). It will compare the principles of the literature with the practices of the findings (section 3.3.3).

3.3.1 Sample Organisation

This project will be undertaking case study type research, interviewing front office managers of Q hotels. Q hotels is a UK based hotel group, founded in 2003. It operates in England and Scotland, with a portfolio of 21 4* and 5* hotels (Q Hotels, 2011). The group operates a number of iconic buildings, within the UK, including: The Midland in Manchester; The Queens in Leeds and The Westerwood Hotel in Scotland, home to the Westerwood golf course. Q hotels has a motto of "One of a Kind", which it applies to both its product and its service. Q hotels is an award winning group, having won the award of Hotel Group of the Year 2008/2009 (Q Hotels, 2011). It was also awarded joint winner with Intercontinental Hotel Group in 2010 by The Caterer as best place to work. This organisation was chosen as the author of this project worked for them, during placement year, and has built up a good relationship with managerial staff, not only at the hotel he worked in, but also with staff and management throughout the whole group. This has provided the author with reliable and genuine links that can be used when undertaking research.

3.3.2 Data Collection Methods

As stated in section 3.1, this project will be using qualitative research methods as its main approach, but in order to further support findings an element of quantitative data collecting will take place. In order to gain a good understanding of the topic and provide answers to the research questions, case study type research will be undertaken. This will involve conducting interviews with front office managers, from a number of Q hotels, to assess their opinions and experiences of front office standards, compared to the literature view. Brotherton (2008), provides an insight into the reasons why interviewing is seen as a desirable method of data collecting; he states that interviews aren't just constructed to gain data relating to where or when, but rather to gain further explanations as to why and how. This is an important point given the exploratory nature of what front office managers think about front office standards and the reasons behind this. This project will use both deductive and inductive approaches.

3.3.3 Data Analysis Methods

The project will use the literature to form a theoretical framework from which further research will seek to test this theory (Gilbert, 1993). As a result, this uses a deductive approach. However, as qualitative data is being collected this coincides with an inductive approach, whereby the data gathered is analysed for patterns and connections

(Brotherton, 2008). This is relevant as it allows the researcher to focus upon attitudes, opinions and experiences of front office managers. In order to ensure that the research is reliable, deduction will once again be used to analyse the research for statistical data. As a result, an element of a quantitative approach will be applied, through the monitoring of key words used and asking respondents to answer questions using a scale. Whilst the disadvantage of this approach is that it only looks at surface value (Brotherton, 2008), the use of induction will seek to re-address this, through making connections and relationships with the literature and to produce meaningful insights.

3.4 Access & ethics

Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2009), state that some of the key areas in ethical issues, relevant to this project, are: privacy of interviewees; consent and deception of interviewees and maintenance of obtained data. All of which will be covered in this section.

As case study type research is being undertaken, it is very important that access to the organisation is possible and realistic. Gill and Johnson (2002, pg149), comments that the problem of access occurs because: "in most cases the researcher initiates a process of inquiry which at the outset is necessarily vague in its aims." It is recognised that it is easy to believe that one has a relationship with an organisation and can therefore formulate a project question, based on the assumption that information and access to an organisation is going to be possible, when in fact it transpires to be difficult or even impossible. It has been observed that the subject of front office standards, in line with delivering customer satisfaction, using front office manager's opinions has the potential to be a sensitive issue. However, confidentiality is of utmost importance to ensure interviewees remain anonymous (Clark, et al, 1998) and all steps have been taken to ensure so. The interviews will need to be recorded, in some manner, as the researcher does not want to miss any of the valuable information the interviewees may give. With this in mind, the researcher will record the interviews using a dictaphone. This requires a number of steps to be taken. Firstly, permission must be sought from the interviewee, regarding the issue of recording (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). This will be done during the early stages of correspondence with the interviewees. To ensure that the interviewees are 100% happy to be recorded, each interview will begin with a brief introduction stating the researcher's name, the reason for the interview, i.e. the nature and scope of the project, and a final clarification that the interview will be recorded (see Appendix 2 for interview transcripts). To further ensure anonymity the recordings will be destroyed after the project has been finalised (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). A copy of the project will also be made available to any of the participants should they so wish, and all traces of identity, i.e. name, will be removed from

the transcripts. This will also be made clear to the interviewee in the introduction. Furthermore, the interviews will be structured so that neither a name nor property name is required. This ensures that all participants will remain anonymous. The questions have also been constructed using a deontological view, which states that an interviewer cannot justify the use of unethical investigation methods (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Putting this into context, the interviewer would never use deception to draw information from the interviewee. (See Appendix 1 for interview questions.)

3.5 Interviews

The interview comprises of open questions, in order to eliminate one word answers. This is because the aim of the interviews is to draw upon the opinions and experiences of the interviewee. The interviews will also be less structured, so as to allow flexibility. Holliday (2002), observes that open and less structured questions allow interaction and deviation, thus enabling a more free flowing conversation in which greater depth can be achieved. Brotherton (2008), comments that a further positive aspect is that interviews are a desirable form of data collection when in depth data is needed. However, it is recognised that there are negative aspects of conducting interviews, one of these being that the flexibility described earlier can be seen as a problem, as each interview is not standardised, due to it being a unique event (Brotherton, 2008). With this in mind, it is important that the interview question framework, whilst allowing for deviation and expansion, ensures that the questions asked are specific, so as to draw a measurable and contrastable answer, as well as allowing the interviewee to expand and provide further textual data.

The interview questions will be grouped into sections, so that the interview is structured logically ensuring that it flows, as well as grouping the questions into logical categories (see Appendix 1). Given the complexity of the information required, it is felt that a questionnaire would not suffice, as it would still require a face to face interview to talk through the questions. The questions themselves have been a challenge to compose, as it is necessary to eliminate one word responses. Instead, they need to be open and create enough scope for the interviewee to further develop their answer. The questions themselves have been structured into categories, these will be discussed in due course, however, the interviews will be free flowing, and it is recognised that in answering one question, another may be answered. In the event that this happens, the interviewee will be asked to re-state their answer to that question. As already discussed in section 3.1, due to the qualitative nature of the research, a small sample size is appropriate and therefore 5 front office managers, within Q Hotels, will be contacted. The idea of face to face interviews has been much deliberated, however, due to the

geographical spread of the 5 managers, whom are located across the UK, it has been decided that the travel commitment and timing is just not feasible. As a result, it has been decided that telephone interviews will be carried out.

The interview questions have been grouped into specific categories. These categories are:

- **Background questions 1- 6** – This section has been constructed to gain an insight into the interviewee's employment history, specifically the length and details of their industry experience. These questions will gain an insight into the type of organisations participants have previously worked for, subsequently, helping to identify how their different past experiences have impacted upon their understanding of and approach to standards. A question regarding educational history is also included. All of these questions are open to enable the interviewee to develop their answers.
- **Past experience of company standards questions 7-10** – The questions within this section all relate to the interviewee's past experience of standards and the training of standards in organisations where they have previously worked, and in turn, how these experiences impact upon their approach to standards at Q hotels. All of these questions are open to allow free flowing dialogue and to enable interviewees to develop their answers.
- **Q company standards questions 11-19** - The questions within this section are all pertinent to standards at Q hotels. A section relating specifically to Q hotels is needed, as once an understanding surrounding the interviewee's past experiences is achieved, it is possible to understand how these have impacted upon the interviewee's approach and attitude to the standards at Q hotels. The questions have been designed to extract the reasons why interviewees consider standards to be important, and what they contribute to customer service. Drawing upon Jones and Lockwood's (2004) belief that, within front office, the use of technology is important in the delivery of standards. Questions have been devised specifically relating to the interviewee's and their staff's knowledge and user levels of the front office I.T systems, in the delivery of customer service through the meeting of standards. This section contains both open and closed questions for which a scale system has been provided allowing interviewees to indicate their feelings. This will then provide some numerical data for analysis.
- **Training and development questions 20-22** – The foundation of understanding standards lies in the training and development a person receives. With this in mind, a section has been devised to investigate whether the interviewees believe that training is required, in order for

staff to understand standards and the systems which monitor the compliance of standards and therefore, in turn, help to deliver customer service. These questions have been designed, specifically taking Zeithaml et al's (1990) observation, regarding the need for a positive management figure in the delivering of customer service and in the meeting of Parasuraman's (1991) five dimensions. These questions seek to find out the role the interviewee plays in the enforcement of standards and therefore the delivery of customer service. Lastly, it is necessary to find out whether knowledge of standards or delivery of customer service is a more important ability of any member of staff. The reason for this question is to find out whether interviewees believe that excellent customer service can be achieved without the knowledge of standards. This section contains open questions allowing interviewees to develop their answers.

- **Approach to standards questions 23-24** – Considering all of the information that the questionnaire has been designed to gather so far relating to past experience and training and development, it is necessary to assess how this has impacted upon the interviewees' approaches to standards and their opinion of the importance of staff knowledge of standards. The latter is a closed question, using a scale of 1-10, with 1 being not important at all and 10 being of paramount importance. This once again provides some numerical data that can be compared once all the interviews have been conducted.
- **Attitudes questions 25-30** – This is the final category, it focuses specifically on the attitudes of front office managers towards standards and summarises all of the aspects discussed throughout the interview. With this in mind, it concentrates on: the interviewees' beliefs as to the specific advantages of standards; the role standards plays in delivery of excellent customer service; standards in line with the modern day leisure and business guest and whether standards are appropriate for either of them. The penultimate question aims to ascertain which the interviewee thinks is of more importance: delivering excellent customer service or knowledge of SOPs and standards. The interview concludes with a statement suggesting that excellent customer service can be delivered without standards. This final question seeks to ultimately ascertain whether the interviewee feels standards are needed. All of the questions within this section are open so as to allow an open dialogue and the development of answers.

In conclusion, the interview questions have been constructed to include open and close questions to allow for both qualitative and quantitative data to be collected. The questions

have also been devised to gain a fully rounded understanding of all the factors that culminate in the interviewees' understanding, approach and attitudes to standards.

3.6 Validity and Credibility

The issue of validity concerns both the interview questions and the subsequent responses from the interviewees. The interview questions have been constructed based upon the literature review, with the themes and issues clearly defined and set out in chapter two. It is, therefore, believed that there has been adequate coverage (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). These areas and the questionnaire have been discussed with industry professionals to ensure that the questions are impartial and do not lead the interviewee to provide an influenced answer, all of which contribute to ensuring content validity (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). The interviews will remain professional and will allow the interviewee to develop their answers without interference or leading.

It is recognised that there may be issues regarding reliability of the data gathered, due to the participant's backgrounds, and experience levels being unknown. In turn, this raises problems around the provision of meaningful and reliable data. However, the author has taken into account the need for validity and reliability and this and the previous observation will be addressed in the paragraph below. It is also recognised that if the questions were to be asked again, the responses would be different. However, due to the nature of the topics and the fact that they relate to past experiences and beliefs, it is thought that the content of the answer, whilst different, would provide the same general information.

For this project, the issue of credibility and trust worthiness is more important. Having worked for the organisation the author already has an insight into the company. The people being interviewed are in management positions and therefore an assumption has been made that they will answer the questions honestly. Furthermore, the candidates for the interviews have been recommended by the front office manager of Q hotels, based upon their industry background and past experiences, to ensure a varied mix.

4. Findings

The findings of the five interviews will now be presented below, in the order that the questions were asked. (See Appendix 3.0- 3.4 for the full transcripts).

4.1 Background

The interviewees' backgrounds proved to be varied offering different experiences, all leading to them becoming front office managers. Appendix 2 provides a profile of each of the interviewees, charting positions held and companies worked for. Figure one shows that the interviewees' industry experience ranged from twenty eight years to seven years.

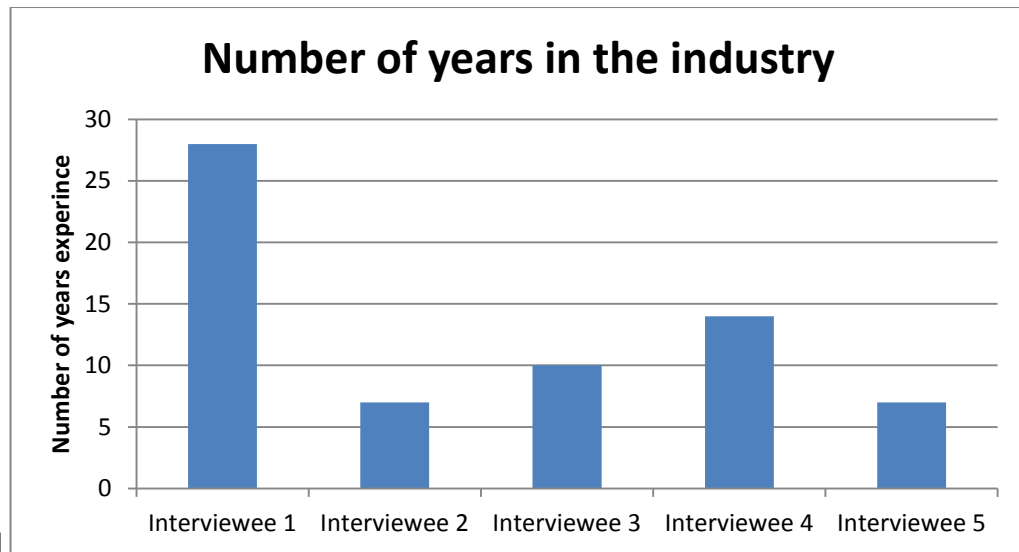


Figure 1

The length of front office manager experience varied between fifteen years and one year (see figure 2).

Figure 2

Service length at the current Q property varied from two years to four months (see figure 3)

Figure 3

4.2 Past experience of company standards

All of the participants agreed, with interviewee one saying they 'absolutely' agreed, an alternative answer was 'definitely'. Interviewee five was the only participant that, whilst 'agreed' that they helped deliver a 'standard of service', believed that the use of standards did not help deliver excellent customer service.

The question of whether the participants had ever experienced a differing in past company standards drew an interesting response. An example of a hotel was given that did not have any standards in place (1). As a result, the interviewee said there was "no direction" and that "no-

one was singing from the same hymn sheet”. Furthermore, they said that people “need guidance without which there is an impact upon business and revenue”. Differences in brand standards amongst companies were highlighted (2), such as Disneyland who had “very strict standards” in which there was “no deviation”. This was then compared to experiences of Marriott standards, which were “restricting” and “generalised” and therefore “not specific to your hotel”. The next experience, at Spicer Hotels, was the same, as they were general and hard to adapt within a specific hotel. Their next experience at Elite Hotels saw standards being adapted and developed. Interviewee three’s experiences had similar instances of a lack of standards at the University accommodation; it was a seasonal business, making it difficult, as new staff was employed annually and so there was no set routine. Their next experience of standards was with an independent company, who had set expectations of service but had no documented SOPs. Interviewee four had worked at both Millennium Copthorne and Marriott; they believed that Marriott had “very strict customer standards” and therefore provided “better customer service because everybody knew what they were doing.” However, Millennium Copthorne allowed front office managers to set their standards based upon the individual hotel, which meant a lack of continuity across the group. Interviewee five’s experience, at their first Hilton property, was one of “rigorous standards, almost brain washing” but this impacted upon the level of service delivered to the end user. At the second property they worked in “standards were not so in your face, individuals were allowed to use their own flair”.

In response to whether training of past standards had affected their approach to training standards at Q Hotels, all interviewees stated that, whilst training had differed between all companies that they had worked for, they had all approached standards with a fresh perspective.

4.3 Q Company standards

The question of what Q standards meant to the interviewees drew a varied response. Interviewee one commented that Q standards meant “consistency”. Interviewee two believed that “they tried to focus on the customer service and the guest service”, whilst at the same time “being very clear and very user-friendly”. Interviewee three believed Q standards meant “delivering a consistent standard of quality”. Interviewee four felt they meant the delivery of a “one of a kind service”. Interviewee five said that they provide “consistency and helped deliver a level of customer service”.

When asked to give two words that represented Q standards, the interviewees’ responses were realistic, in that they were in line with their initial response of what Q standards meant to them. Figure 4 highlights the number of times a word was given when this question was asked. From this, it can be seen that ‘quality’ was the most favoured word, with five responses. Interviewee one and two said “quality” and “customer service”. Interviewee three said “quality” and

“consistency”. Interviewee four said “quality” and “continuity” and interviewee five said “quality” and “inspirational”.

Figure 4

All respondents said standards aided in the delivery of customer service. Equally, when asked to answer on a scale of one to ten, all participants believed that company standards heavily affected the running of front office. Answers ranged from eight to ten, with interviewee one observing that Q standards were “customer service orientated”.

Figure 5

4.4 Technology

The interviewees believed that the level of I.T. knowledge amongst front office staff was sufficient. However, interviewee two, three, four and five conceded that staff knowledge varied and there is room for improvement. Furthermore, all respondents believe their own user levels are above average, with answers ranging from nine to six as demonstrated in figure 5 (on a scale of 1-10).

Figure 6

All of the interviewees acknowledged that there was room for improvement in their own knowledge levels. When asked to rate on a scale of 1-10, answers ranged from five to seven. (see figure 7).

Figure 7

4.5 Training and Development

When asked to comment and rate the accuracy of the following statement (1-10), “The training of standards to staff is necessary for them to be able to deliver excellent customer service”, the respondents were divided, with two interviewees ranking it a 6 out of 10 and the respective three interviewees rating it a 10.

Figure 8

Customer service was seen as more important than knowledge of standards and SOPs; all but one of the interviewees believed that customer service was more important.

4.6 Approach to standards

The interviewees provided a variety of opinions when asked about standards and their effect on customer service. Some of the phrases used include it provides: “a framework”; “goals to achieve” and “guidelines”. Furthermore, there was one comment that it “provides the minimal expectations to deliver good customer service”.

4.7 Attitudes

When asked whether they believed standards are in place to comply with company auditing and profitability, as opposed to delivering customer service, there was a belief amongst all participants that standards and SOPs exist to deliver both customer service and comply with audited tasks. Interviewees one and three were more of the belief that it was quality service orientated, whereas interviewees two, four and five acknowledged that there was an element of auditing compliance.

There were comments from the interviewees highlighting that there were issues with the current standards in place, with regards to servicing both business and leisure guests. Interviewee one, however, spoke about the systems in place and the gaps, within them, that enabled duplicate guest profiles to be produced and therefore guests were not picked up when they should have been and this impacted upon customer service. Interviewees two, three and five recognised that the delivery of customer service was not about teaching people to read “parrot-fashion” from an SOP but was about “understanding the standards” and thus being able to deliver a differentiated service.

Furthermore, there was a belief that standards need to be reviewed constantly, but at the same time they need to be realistic. Interviewee one said that SOPs can be “overdone” and that “whilst they should apply to checking-in and out they should be applicable to these basics only”. All five participants commented that SOPs need to be used, as a basis, but beyond that, the training is much more important. They all acknowledged that technology will play a big part in the future.

Four of the participants acknowledged delivery of customer service as the most important factor, however, interviewee four was of the opinion that there needed to be a balance and therefore could not rate one higher than the other.

When asked if it was possible for excellent customer service to be delivered without standards, there was an overall belief that it was not possible. Without standards, “it was not possible to deliver a basic level of customer service” (5), and that without them there “was no framework to

work within” (3). However, (4) believed that whilst standards provided a “framework”, it requires “an employee to be able to deliver customer service and think outside of the box to deliver that excellent customer service”.

5. Analysis of Research findings

The findings will now be compared to the literature and critically analysed.

One of the key themes, throughout the interviews, was the importance of standards. Examples were given of instances where there were no standards in place and the subsequent result of a lack of focus or direction. There is a clear agreement, between both the interviewees and the literature, of the importance of standards. Words, such as consistency and customer service, were used by the interviewees, which was in line with Lockwood’s (1999) view that standards exist to achieve consistent performance. However, Lockwood’s opinion that they are also in place to meet guest expectations was only the view point held by one of the interviewees. Interviewee five was of the belief that standards only established a basic level of guest service, where as the remaining four interviewees felt that standards helped deliver excellent customer service. This difference in opinion perhaps highlights a greater understanding of standards by interviewee five, who went on to highlight that it was the staff themselves that held the ability to deliver excellent customer service. It is interesting to point out Lockwood’s (1999) observation that high standards incur high costs and raise the perceived level of expectation of a guest. In offering a basic level of service, as recognised by interviewee five, the cost incurred remains lower. It is, therefore, the staff that impact upon the ability to raise the level of service offered. The issue of SOPs as a means of cost control was also an area that not all interviewees recognised. Instead two participants believed standards exist, in order for a company to be guest service orientated, whilst the remaining three, recognised that there was an element of company auditing and financial control in the designing of SOPs. The three interviewees’ beliefs were, therefore, in line with the opinion that: “SOPs are seen not only as a form of quality control but also to ensure cost and revenue control”, Jones and Lockwood (2004, p40).

The delivery of customer service also requires an understanding and an efficient use of technology, as highlighted by Jones and Lockwood (2004). However, there was an agreed response that the teaching of I.T, within Q Hotels, had been limited and the majority of knowledge was gained through experimentation and willingness of the individual. It was clear that, there was a varying level of understanding of I.T. amongst the interviewees. This will impact not only upon the individual, but also upon the teams that they are leading, and will therefore impact upon the ability of teams to deliver excellent customer service.

Zeithaml et al (1990), highlights the need for strong commitment from management to improve service performance. The interviewees agreed with this, as they continually monitor their staff, providing areas for continued improvement. They recognised that, there is a need for strong leadership to help continue to deliver good customer service.

In reviewing the interviews and the literature, there is a general agreement between the two, as to the importance of standards and their uses. Whilst the literature outlines the importance of standards and what they provide, the interviewees provided an insight into the practical application, providing a greater understanding of the challenges of implementing standards and delivering excellent customer service.

6. Conclusion of the project and its findings

The project set out with the aim to evaluate the impact of standards on the delivery of customer service, from a hotel front office perspective. To achieve this aim, research was undertaken and from this, conclusions were drawn and the project aim re-addressed.

There is a unanimous agreement that standards are important, as they provide a framework for a team to work within. However, there is not a clear agreement as to whether standards help deliver excellent customer service. Instead, the overall view appears to be that standards provide a basic level of customer service (section 4.2), and, beyond this, it is the ability of a team to deliver excellent customer service.

Standards, whilst providing a framework, can be stifling. Past experiences of the interviewees (section 4.2) demonstrate this, through the examples of Disneyland, Marriott and Hilton. There is a general theme, throughout all of the interviews, that the ability of a member of front office staff to be able to deliver customer service is as important, as their ability to understand standards. It is even highlighted that the interviewees rate ability to deliver customer service over knowledge of SOPs (section 4.7).

A possible issue raised, in the analysis of the findings, is whether staff really understands what standards and SOPs are all about. As highlighted in section 4.7, it is not about staff learning to repeat and act out SOPs in parrot fashion, rather it is about getting employees to truly understand and embody them, which is in line with Marriott and Hilton protocols. However, whether it would be possible to implement this, without the stifling culture type environment, is unknown. It is clear that embodying a brand, yet also being provided with a clear scope to work within, enables front office employees to provide that important excellent customer service.

Technology is a clear current and future theme. The varying levels of I.T. knowledge, not only amongst staff but also management, has an impact upon the delivery of standards and, in turn, impacts upon customer service. The differing levels of I.T knowledge, amongst management, will impact upon the different properties accordingly, but will also have a negative impact upon the overall seamless experience throughout all Q hotels. The seamless experience is the idea that you receive the same service levels no matter which Q hotel you walk into. There was recognition amongst all interviewees that technology needed to be at the forefront of delivering customer service, and all of the interviewees acknowledged that the use of check-in booths would provide speedier check-in for business guests, this will be discussed in section 6.2.

In re-addressing the project aim, and therefore concluding this section of the report, standards have a considerable impact upon front office. However, it is how the standards are used that

dictates the depth of impact that they can have on the department. The research suggests that standards, whilst important, need to be built into the daily routine, so that they can become second nature. Over subscribing and overdoing SOPs can be to a department's detriment, as this has the tendency to become the sole focus, and not the delivery of customer service, therefore impacting upon the creation of a positive customer experience. Standards are clearly needed not only to provide a guaranteed level of customer service, but to also ensure maximised revenue. Standards, whilst heavily impact front office, provide it with a framework to work within and provide direction for front office teams. The use of SOPs further ensure this, as they provide the guidelines needed to supply employees with the ability to replicate important actions, such as check-in and check-out, time after time.

6.1 Recommendations for future research

This project sought to explore the role of standards using a deductive approach as its starting point, whereby testing theory. However, the analysing of the data took an inductive approach. The use of these two methods highlighted further areas that could be researched. This project, therefore, serves as a starting point for future projects, addressing standards and attitudes and approaches to standards within front office.

Whilst front office managers have been the focal point of this research, it would be useful to gain an understanding of the perceptions, knowledge and attitudes of front office staff towards standards. This is felt important because, unlike front office managers, staff are not employed based upon their experience of standards and, as this research has highlighted, delivery of customer service is not just about being able to read parrot fashion SOPs, but to truly understand and embody them. It would, therefore, be interesting to gauge, amongst staff, their level of real understanding of standards and SOPs.

If further research was deemed necessary, it would be suggested to undertake a case study approach. This would be useful for Q hotels, as this could involve the analysis of Q SOPs and the Q front office operations manual, and compare its content with the answers of front office staff.

Further areas for research could be the role of technology in front office, specifically for check-in and check-out, assessing whether automated booths are an option for business driven hotels and the perceptions of such technology by management and customers.

6.2 Recommendations for Q hotels

The research undertaken highlights that there are a number of areas that Q hotels could improve and develop to increase employee' understanding of standards and SOPs.

Firstly, the role of standards, within the organisation, could be addressed. Both the interviews and drawing from personal experience demonstrate that SOPs are taught in a repetitive manner to the point that individuals know them parrot fashion. Whilst the employee, at this point can memorise SOPs and standards, there is an issue as to whether staff truly understand the importance of standards and what they aim to achieve. Alongside this, there needs to be a defined scope for all members of front office staff to work within; a number of the interviewees described, it is about the little touches that can impact on a guest experience and it is this clearly defined scope of what staff can and can't do that needs to be clearer. With this in mind, the recommendations, regarding the training of standards, is the implementation of a more formal class room type environment, as whilst on the job experience is imperative and key, the class room environment gives staff time to reflect and also further understand the importance of embodying standards. Investment in this type of training may also contribute to a lower turnover of staff, as too often it is felt that training and development for front office staff is minimal, thus making staff feel insecure and unhappy with the working environment.

The second area of recommendations is regarding technology, a running theme throughout the project is the importance of such technology. The majority of the interviewees' experiences were of being thrown in and given very basic training of technology. What is evident is that, the differing abilities of management to use technology can impact significantly upon a property and its team. This is something that can be contributed to from personal experience of Q hotels. A change in management saw a number of different managers drafted in to help from different Q properties, their differing levels of knowledge of I.T and systems made shifts easier or harder, depending upon their knowledge level. Those managers who had an advanced knowledge were able to demonstrate how using the advanced functions enabled the teams to generate reports, which would further reduce the teams work load. It is, therefore, recommended that the group invests more in the training of staff in the I.T. systems, since the majority of the knowledge gained by front office staff comes from other front office members, as opposed to from a SOP manual. This increase in training would raise efficiency and therefore impact upon the customer experience.

Another area of technology is the challenge of meeting leisure and business guest expectations, an ever changing market which provides many challenges, especially with business guest for whom check-in is never quick enough. The interviewees highlighted that this was a continuous challenge. With this in mind, the use of automated check-in booths could be investigated. It is believed that it would satisfy the speedy check-in for business guests but would not impact upon

customer service as a whole, as it is a single element of the guest experience that still requires interaction with the front office to make up the other elements. However, it would considerably increase customer satisfaction in this area.

In conclusion, the implementing of such recommendations, could potentially impact upon customer satisfaction, employee retention and employee knowledge and understanding of standards and SOPs. Whilst the areas highlighted would require some financial investment, the potential ROI could be seen as far greater, not only through revenue generated and customer retention, but also reduced costs incurred through the continual recruitment and selection process which many Q Hotels front office teams endure.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Dissertation Questions

My name is Panayiotis Panagiotou and I am a final year student at Sheffield Hallam University studying a BSc Hospitality Business Management degree. I am conducting an independent and impartial investigation into the role of standards in the delivery customer service within front office. You will remain anonymous and will not be identified by name. However I do not want to lose any of important information you may give me in the answering of these questions, I would like to record the interview using a Dictaphone. This will be destroyed once the project has been written and I will be more than happy to supply you with a finalised copy of the project.

Job Title:

Background

1. Education History (Degree, GNVQ,etc)?
2. Length of Industry experience?
3. Employment History?
4. How long have you worked at management level within FO?
5. Length of Service within Property?
6. Other Companies worked for?

Past experience of company standards

7. Do you agree that standards help deliver excellent customer service?
8. Have you experienced a difference in standards between companies that has led to an impact upon customer service?
9. If you have worked for other hotel organisations, can you explain how your experiences have led you to approach standards within Q.?

10. Has the training of standards in previous companies differed to that of Q? If so how and how has it affected your approach to standards?

Q Company standards

11. What do Q hotels standards mean to you?

12. How important do you feel company standards are and why?

13. How do you use standards day to day i.e. does the daily shift revolve around them? Is the checklist built around them?

14. Can you give me three words that you think the standards of Q represent?

15. Do you feel Q standards aid in the delivery of customer service?

16. Do you feel that staff knowledge of Protel and the tools within it is sufficient enough in order to help them complete shifts and undertake company standard tasks?

17. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being not at all and 10 being heavily affect). How would you rate your knowledge and user level of Protel?

18. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being not at all and 10 being heavily affect) how do you feel company standards affect the running of FO?

19. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being not confident at all and 10 being very confident) how confident are you with the advanced functions of Protel in the meeting of standards?

Training and Development

20. On a scale of 1-10 how relevant do you feel that the following statement is? "The training of standards to staff is necessary for them to be able to deliver excellent customer service"

21. In the training of staff, which do you feel is more important: 1. Customer service 2. Knowledge and ability of company audit standards and SOP's?

22. What systems do you use to monitor the compliance of standards?

Approach to standards

23. What is your opinion of Company standards and their affect on the delivery of customer service?

24. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being not at all and 10 being of paramount importance) how would you rate the importance of staff knowledge of FO standards?

Attitudes

- 25.** What do you feel are the benefits of standards?
- 26.** How accurate would you say the following statement is? “The current standards and SOP’s are in place to comply with company audits as opposed to maximising customer service”
- 27.** Do you feel the current guest check-in standards are sufficient to meet both business and leisure guests?
- 28.** How appropriate do you feel the SOP’s in place are in line with delivering customer service to the modern day guest?
- 29.** Which would you rate of more importance: “Delivery of customer service” or “knowledge of SOP’s and standards”
- 30.** What are your opinions on the following statement: “Delivering excellent customer service can be achieved without Front Office standards and SOP’s.”

Thank you very much for your time

Appendix 2 – Interviewee Profiles

All five of the participants held Front Office Manager positions and had GCSE'S or the equivalent. Four had studied at a higher level (A-levels & hospitality related degree's), with only one participant leaving college after GCSE'S and going straight into employment. The interviewee's length of industry experienced varied from twenty eight to seven years (figure 1.0) and their routes to becoming reception manager were all very different.

Interviewee one

Interviewee one began at 16 as a room attendant and made their way up to Deputy Head House Keeper then became a Deputy Hotel Manager followed by a General Manager, before deciding to become a Front Office Manager.

Interviewee two

Interviewee two began in as a waitress in a pub then as a Front of House Attendant for Sheffield theatres. This was followed by a 4* hotel in Dublin where they worked in Management positions for both front and back of house including reception. They then worked as Front Office Manager for Durham University Halls. I

Interviewee three

Interviewee finished their 'A' levels, and went to do an International Hotel and Tourism Management degree at Sheffield Hallam, including a placement at Disneyland during their university Placement, followed by Front Office positions at Elite Hotels and Marriott.

Interviewee four

Interviewee four began their working life in banqueting within a hotel and gained experience in the bar, kitchen before moving into front office before moving to a Marriott property. Once they finished University they joined a graduate programme at Dalmahoy, Scotland after year they were made Reception Manager. After a further year they moved to Marriott, Sheffield for two

years, before moving back to Scotland as a Revenue Manager for three years before finally going to their current Q property as a Front Office Manager.

Interviewee five

Interviewee five started in kitchens and in two years became second chef at an award winning country restaurant. After which they moved into F& at Hilton, Sheffield before being promoted to an operations supervisor (3 departments rest, bar, Conferencing and Banqueting). This was followed by a 13 month internship in Front Office of Hilton, America, once this was completed they returned to Hilton Sheffield whilst completing degree as Assistant Front Office Manager. Once they had graduated they entered their current Q hotel property as an Assistant Manager, after 3 months they were promoted to Front Office Manager.

Appendix 3.0

****(Phone ringing tone!)****

Interviewee: Good morning, ... speaking, how can I help?

Interviewer: Good morning ..., it's Yoddy.

Interviewee: Hello there, how are you?

Interviewer: I'm not too bad! Yourself?

Interviewee: I'm fine, thank you!

Interviewer: Good, good; not too busy this morning I hope?

Interviewee: Erm, no, not really!

Interviewer: Good, good!

Interviewee: It's steady...

Interviewer: That's how we like it: Nice and steady! Erm, are you OK to answer some of my dissertation questions?

Interviewee: Absolutely!

Interviewer: OK, I'll just read you this spiel that I have to do at the beginning. My name is Panayiotis Yoddy Panagiotou and I'm a final year student at Sheffield Hallam University, studying a BSc Hospitality Business Management degree. I'm conducting an independent and impartial investigation into the role of standards in the delivery of customer service within front office.

You will remain anonymous and will not be identified by name. However, I do not want to lose any of the important information you may give me in the answering of these questions. And therefore I would like to record the interview using a Dictaphone, with your permission. This will be destroyed once the project has been written, and I will be more than happy to supply you with a finalised copy of the project. So, basically, first of all, are you happy for me to record the conversation?

Interviewee: Yeah, that's fine.

Interviewer: That's fine...

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: OK. So the first question, erm, what's your official job title?

Interviewee: My official job title is Reception Manager.

Interviewer: Reception Manager, OK. Erm, so I'll start off with a few questions about your background. Some of the questions may seem a tad repetitive, but they're just trying to work out use of words and things like that. So...

Interviewee: Yeah...

Interviewer: The first one's about background. So the first question is, what's your education history – GCSEs, 'A' levels, degrees, that kind of thing?

Interviewee: Erm, oh God, now you're asking, it was so long ago since I did them!

Interviewer: (laughs)

Interviewee: Just GCSEs...

Interviewer: Just GCSEs...

Interviewee: Or CSEs, as they were in those days!

Interviewer: OK! Erm, and what's your length of industry experience?

Interviewee: Erm... hang on a second!... 28 years.

Interviewer: 28 years! Ooph! (laughs) The next question is, can you give me – as it's 28 years – a very brief employment history in regards working in hotels?

Interviewee: Yeah, certainly. Erm, I got a part-time job to cover holidays before I was supposed to be going to college, at a hotel, as a Room Attendant, decided that I would miss the money too much, stayed on, became the Assistant Housekeeper, then the Deputy Head Housekeeper, then moved to another hotel, followed a housekeeping career through, then decided I wanted a little bit more, so went into management, got a job as an Assistant Manager, worked my way right the way up to General Manager, decided that being a General Manager was a little bit too stressful, didn't want the stress or hassle any more because I've been there and done it, and then decided to take a job with less stress, less hassle, and I am now the Reception Manager here at the Chase.

Interviewer: That's quite... that's quite an employment history! (laughs)

Interviewee: (laughs)

Interviewer: So how long have you worked at management level within front office?

Interviewee: Oh, gosh!... Let me think... Probably about 15 years.

Interviewer: 15 years, OK. And how long have you worked at the Cheltenham Chase?

Interviewee: Erm, just coming up to 12 months now.

Interviewer: 12 months, OK. Could you tell me, have you worked for any other branded hotels?

Interviewee: Now when you say branded...?

Interviewer: Er, Hilton, Holiday Inn, that kind of thing.

Interviewee: No, not any corporates, no.

Interviewer: No corporates, OK. So the next section is about past experience of company standards, brand standards, that kind of thing.

Interviewee: Yes

Interviewer: Erm, would you agree that standards help deliver excellent customer service?

Interviewee: Absolutely.

Interviewer: Absolutely, OK. Have you experienced a difference in standards between companies that has led to an impact upon customer service?

Interviewee: Yeah

Interviewer: Can you kind of develop on that?

Interviewee: Yeah. One hotel I worked at, they didn't actually have any standards whatsoever; they just had nothing. And it was basically awful because nobody knows... there's no direction, nobody knows what they're doing, everybody does their own thing, nobody sort of sings from the same hymn sheet. You know, people do need guidance...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: And somebody needed to guide, and be that by either standards or... erm, brand standards...

Interviewer: Brand standards, yeah...

Interviewee: They need something. People do need... they do need something to sort of aim towards, otherwise it just all goes off in the wrong direction...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewer: And it's... it's not good.

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee: There's loss of business, loss of revenue.

Interviewer: OK. The next question. Erm... Oh, you've kind of... you've already answered that one actually! Has the training of standards in previous companies differed to that of Q significantly? If so, and how has it affected your personal approach to standards?

Interviewee: Not really. They're all sort of very much letting people have their own... if you've got standards... oh, how can I describe this?... erm... Q standards are a bit more brand-led...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: If that makes sense?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, yeah (laughs)

Interviewee: Which I'm sure Holiday Inn, and Marriott and everybody else...

Interviewer: Everybody else does...

Interviewee: Is all brand-led that way as well.

Interviewer: OK, OK.

Interviewee: Erm, I think the other thing about Q is it's very, very much across the board, whereas... and it is... it's... somebody's thought about QHotels' standards...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Whereas other hotels I've worked in, they've decided, oh, this is going to be our breakfast standard, which probably works in about three of their hotels, but in other hotels it doesn't work...

Interviewer: It doesn't work, no.

Interviewee: You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: But I think, with Q, it's definitely been thought about long and hard...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: And hence it works in all... in all the properties, because I mean I've been in... I've gone and covered reception shifts in other properties, and the only difference was that I just didn't know where to put things...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: You know, but with regards to doing the reception shift, it was great, there was no issues whatsoever. All it was, was 'oh, where do I file this?'...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: You know...

Interviewer: Yeah, OK. So the next section is about Q company standards. Erm... but I'm going to throw the word 'values' – 'brand values' – in there as well'. So what do QHotels' standards and/or brands mean to yourself? Do you try to embody and do you try to get your reception team to embody Q brand values?

Interviewee: Absolutely, yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: Because we all need to be singing from the same hymn book and...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewer: Yeah, it's how it needs to be. And again, if they're ever asked to go and work at one of the other hotels, then they need... they need that with them.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Right, OK. Erm, so you've already kind of explained how important you feel company standards are and why. Erm, as you said, about it almost becomes a lawless society, didn't you, in effect?

Interviewee: Yeah

Interviewer: Yeah. How do you use standards day-to-day; i.e. does your daily shift revolve around them, is the checklist built around them, or is it the kind of thing that is implemented through training but it kind of sits in the background and isn't, you know, kind of forced upon staff on a day-to-day basis?

Interviewee: Our... our check sheet is actually built around the standards...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So there is the standards, when you check somebody in this is what you do, when you check somebody out this is what you do. It is sort of... the checklist is very, very much built around the company standards and what we have to achieve actually on the shift.

Interviewer: OK, OK. Can you give me three words that you think the standards of Q represent?

Interviewee: Quality... erm... let me think... I would say quality and customer service... (pause)...

Interviewer: If you're struggling with a third, we can leave it at two...

Interviewee: Oh sorry, I thought you said two!

Interviewer: Oh sorry!... Yes...(laughs)

Interviewee: It's all right!

Interviewer: I may have done! It's OK, we'll leave it at two!

Interviewee: Oh right, OK.

Interviewer: Erm...

Interviewee: I just thought you said two!

Interviewer: Do you feel that Q standards aid in the delivery of customer service?

Interviewee: Absolutely, yeah.

Interviewer: OK. Do you feel that staff knowledge of Protel, and the tools within it, is sufficient enough in order to help them complete shifts and undertake company standards.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Erm, on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not at all and 10 being highly competent, how would you rate your own knowledge and user level of Protel?

Interviewee: Erm, probably about a 7.

Interviewer: A 7, OK, OK. Again, on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you with the advanced functions of Protel in the meeting of standards?

Interviewee: Now when you say 'advanced functions'...

Interviewer: Erm...

Interviewee: Can...

Interviewer: Well...

Interviewee: You embellish a bit on that?

Interviewer: Yeah, of course. When I worked at Q, we were only shown so many, you know, kind of report functions that would kind of help with the day-to-day shifts...

Interviewee: Aha...

Interviewer: And then another manager came in and almost kind of blew our world apart, because his knowledge of report functions, and... and mainly it was report functions, helped with your daily shift a lot more than the kind of ones that we knew. So it became evident that within managers of Q, some were very, very experienced in Protel and knew it lack the back of their hand. And then some weren't quite as knowledgeable. So it's just to try and gauge, you know, experience levels of staff within Q of Protel.

Interviewee: Erm... it's a bit difficult really. I mean I know... obviously I learned the system when I came in; I wasn't actually trained, but I was trained by whoever trained me. I do think to a certain extent, when you've got... if you're not trained by the person that actually sets levels for the hotels themselves...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: I do think it gets diluted. There is a dilution...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: In the system. And I think that's the same with anything. I mean I've worked in other hotels where I've actually been trained by the people that installed the system...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And then whether I've then trained my staff to that standard, I don't really know, but I do know you do get dilution...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: All the way across...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: You know, you get... you always... you'll get people... I'm the sort of person that I will go and have a look and I will fiddle; if I want to find something...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: I'll sit there on the computer, and I'll have a look and I'll have a fiddle, because I don't like computers to beat me!

Interviewer: No! (laughs)

Interviewee: You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And then you get other people that, it's like, 'oh, well, I've never been shown that, so I don't know'...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewer: So I think a lot of it depends on your mentality. Some people do sort of, like, 'well, I've never been shown it, so I don't know'...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Other people will, as I say, go and fiddle. But I do think you do lose, you know, training does get diluted.

Interviewer: OK. Erm, final question in this section. On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel company standards affect the running of front office?

Interviewee: Erm, affects in what way?

Interviewer: Erm... affects in the sense that... erm... I'm going to have to think about this question... erm... how do you feel company standards affect the running of front office... erm... when, on a day-to-day basis, is everything that front office does company- standards-oriented, or is it in a sense everything's customer- service-oriented?

Interviewee: Well, I think to be fair, most of the company standards are customer- service-oriented...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So it sort of revolves around that, doesn't it really?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: OK. The next section's on training and development. What systems do you use to monitor the compliance of standards within your... within your team? Do you have anything extra on top of the, you know, the normal company checks?

Interviewee: Yeah, I mean, well, I do sit down with my staff, I try and sit down with them individually at least once a quarter, just to go through, see how they're doing... erm... if we do something new, because sometimes we get other things that we need to do. Sometimes we get results back from Hilary...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And this wasn't very good, so we need to address this. So, yeah, I do sort of monitor it, I am aware of training needs. You know, if something comes up, I do... I will sort of take a person to one side and say, 'right, OK, we need to have a discussion about this', or 'we need to talk about this', or 'we need to develop you further'...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: In this area.

Interviewer: Yeah, OK. Erm, in the training of staff, which do you feel is more important: Customer service, or knowledge of SOPs?

Interviewee: Customer service.

Interviewer: Customer service. Do you feel that the delivery of customer service could... can be achieved constantly by somebody who has quite a poor knowledge of SOPs and somebody who continually kind of fails to be able to pick up on them?

Interviewee: Yeah. I think basically, if you're honest with people... erm, you know, somebody could ask a question, you might not know the answer; as long as you turn round and say to them, 'I don't know that at the moment, but leave it with me and I'll get back to you'...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: People appreciate the fact that you're getting back, because you're taking the time. If you're standing there saying, 'well, no, the company standard is so-and-so', and that's it, bish bash, bosh, it's not coming across to customers, even though yeah, that might be what it says in the SOP...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: How's it coming across to the customer? I think customers will always appreciate... you know, if, say, for example, I mean we have... we have this loyalty card now...

Interviewer: Right, OK...

Interviewee: And people will ask, 'can I backdate my points?'... Well, at the end of the day, no they can't. They can't backdate the points to when... before they have it...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Erm, so what we'll normally do is just sort of say to them, 'well leave it with us, we'll have a look and see', you know, and then we'll get back to them and say, 'look...', you know, 'we spoke to the powers that be, really sorry but unfortunately, no, you're not able to backdate the points on that'.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: Rather than stand there and go, 'no...'

Interviewer: No...

Interviewee: 'Company policy says... it says in my SOP...'

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: You know what I mean?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, OK. Erm, the next section's on your approach to standards. What is your opinion of... oh, well, it's kind of a repetition of a question, but I'll ask it you anyway: What is your opinion of company standards, and their effect on the delivery of customer service? Erm, so basically, if you could just repeat the kind of answer that you gave me earlier.

Interviewee: What answer did I give you earlier? (laughs)

Interviewer: Erm... well... you can give me a new answer if you like! Erm, so basically, how important you feel company standards are to deliver customer service.

Interviewee: Oh yeah, I mean it is important, because it needs to be... it needs to be of a certain standard, people need to know where they are. You need... people need guidelines; people are what I like to call pencils: They have to be led!

Interviewer: (laughs)

Interviewee: And they need benchmarks and things to sort of go against, because otherwise, you know, they're out in the wilderness, they do it, and unless somebody's saying, 'no, that's not how we do that', or 'we need to do this better', they will just carry on doing... doing things...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: I mean I tell my staff a story about a little girl, and their mum's cooking a meat loaf, and before she cooks it, she cuts both ends of the meat loaf off and puts it in the tin, and the little girl says to her mother, 'mummy, why do you do that?'... She says, 'because your grandmother always used to do it'.

Interviewer: (laughs)

Interviewee: So the little girl goes to her grandmother, and her grandmother does the same thing, gets the meatloaf, cuts the two ends of the meat loaf off, and then puts it in the tin. And the little girl says to her grandmother, 'grandmother, why do you do that?'... She says, 'because your great grandmother always used to do it'. So the little girl then goes to her great grandmother, and she says to her great grandmother... great grandma does the same thing. And the little girl turns round, she goes, 'great grandma, why do you always cut the end off the meat loaf?... She says, 'because the tin isn't big enough!'

Interviewer: (laughs)

Interviewee: A point of fact!

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, yeah! Erm... oh, this is a bit of a controversial one: What is your opinion of the following statement?

'The current standards and SOPs that are in place are to comply with company audits as opposed to maximising customer service.'

Interviewee: Erm, well, I think it's... I think the SOP, if you read it, is all actually about giving quality customer service...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: You know, so it's not... it doesn't sort of stop it; it's there to encourage the customer service, and give you the... you know, I mean if you... when... I mean when you look through our SOPs, there's lots of little smiley faces and things like that, that's, you know, that's always encouraging you to smile and sort of saying, 'at this point, you...', without actually saying, 'at this point, give the customer a smile'...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: It's sort of implying that...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: At this point, when you're doing this you should be smiling.

Interviewer: OK, OK. Erm, do you feel the current guest check-in standards are sufficient to meet both business and leisure guests? Erm, because there's... if you read through the literature on standards, there's becoming an increasing gap between the happiness of business guests with hotel check-in/check-out standards, and what you're seeing at the moment is, is some companies are moving towards automation for business check-in, because they can't seem to find the balance between the check-in standards for leisure guests and the check-in standards for business guests...

Interviewee: Mmm...

Interviewer: What's your kind of opinion on that, and how are Q dealing with it?

Interviewee: Yeah, I mean we're trying to encourage most of our regular customers to do the Jump the Q' so that we can...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Just give them the... so that we can just give them the keycard when they check-in to the hotel, basically. You're aware of the 'Jump the Q?'

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: Yeah. We're trying to encourage most of our people to do that. Erm, it is... I mean it can be really frustrating if somebody arrives and I look at them and think I know you...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Because you've stayed with me, you stay with me every single week, and then they go onto the system and then it's the wrong profile!

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewer: And then I have to go through all the... you know, I mean I personally, yeah, I mean I don't know much about this paperless check-in...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: But I do think it would be something worth looking at; whether it would work or not I don't know, but I definitely think for the people that stay here, you know, all the time, we need something.

Interviewer: OK, OK. Erm, just a couple of questions left. Erm, how appropriate do you feel the standards and SOPs in place are in line... sorry... how appropriate do you feel the current standards or SOPs are for delivering customer service to the modern-day hotel guest? Erm, do you think there's been a change in the hotel guest over, say, the last even five years, and can... do you think that SOPs and standards are something that modern hotel companies need to kind of revise on, say, a five-ten year basis?

Interviewee: Erm, I think basically, I think you can overdo SOPs. I've worked at a place myself, where I've worked at an opening, and we overdid an SOP until we were blue in the face. I do believe there is only so many ways that you can flick out a napkin and put it on somebody's lap...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: When you're doing a wedding. I do believe, though, it's all serve from the right, clear from the left...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So, at the end of the day, I mean I've done banqueting where there's no way I was going to be able to get a plate in on that side, so I'm going to have to put it in on the other side. I think you can overdo them; I think you can do it to the point of... everything you can actually think of, you can write an SOP for it...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Erm, you know, whether you've actually achieved that SOP, I just think it needs to be more sort of standard, and obviously for the basics, like the checking people in, the, you know, the way you go about things, that I do think you can overdo SOPs, I do think it, you know, it can be... As I say, I mean we wrote them right down to the flicking out the napkin, how you fold the napkin, you know, make sure the corner is in line with the corner and blah, blah, blah. And I mean, with all due respect, I mean the amount of napkins I've folded in my life...

Interviewer: (laughs)

Interviewee: I've sat there and I've had to do 200 napkins for a wedding...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: You know. I've done the same fold; do they all look the same? Well, no...

Interviewer: No...

Interviewee: Not quite, no.

Interviewer: Yeah... (laughs)

Interviewee: But, yeah, I think you can overdo it, and I think it's... it's a case of actually getting the balance. You know, as long as there are certain things that are in place, and there are certain standards that are adhered to, and you haven't got people running off on a tangent and doing their own thing, and as long as they've got some sort of structure. And I think also, over the last sort of five or ten years, the hotels, they've come under... I mean I think we had the... boutique hotels started about ten or so years ago...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Didn't they?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: And they were the 'in' place to go, and everybody stayed at them, they're occupancy was like 99 per cent most of the time, and if you wanted to book a hotel you had to book it three months in advance...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And then everybody in the system... everybody catches up. And I think we've got to that stage now, where everybody's catching up with the boutique hotels, so they're – excuse the expression – they ain't all that...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: We're going to now come to something else, with be this this paperless check-in, be this something else, we now need... the industry now needs to move on to the next level of whatever the next level's going to be. You know, I don't think it's... but I think it is going to be based around the technology...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And I think, yeah, we do need to... we need to start looking at it, it needs to be looked at, you know, because we can still have the same customers coming back here in ten years time, but do we want a customer – and I've actually had it myself – where I've actually, on my first day, in a hotel, and I took a customer up to the room, and they were really, really excited, because they were... they stayed in this room ten years ago on their wedding night, they got married at the hotel, and they walked into the room and not a thing had finished... changed...

Interviewer: Oh dear!

Interviewee: And they were just really disappointed...

Interviewer: (laughs)

Interviewee: It had the same bedspread, the same... you know, the same decorations, and I think if... you know, we're all coming up to that boutique standard, you know, we've all got the white duvets, we've all got the minimalist...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: You know, and I think the next thing... but yeah... the hotel industry, it does need to go on to the next level, whatever that next level may be. I do think it's going to be the technology-side of it.

Interviewer: OK, OK. Erm, the last question, again it is a slight repetition, because we've already spoken about it: What's your opinion of the following statement? (This is just to close...)

'Delivering excellent customer service can be achieved without front office standards.'

Interviewee: Erm... (pause)... well, I'm a bit sort of torn here, because it's people's perception of customer service...

Interviewer: Yeah

Interviewee: Isn't it?

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: You know, I... I mean I had an example the other week where some people lost some champagne glasses; you know, and I said, 'oh, bear with... let me go and actually have a look and see if I can find them', you know...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And, at the end of the day, I didn't find them, but the fact that I'd put myself out to actually go and have a look for these champagne glasses...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: The customers really, really appreciated it. Now there's nothing written down in any standard anywhere that says 'if somebody loses a champagne glass you've got to go and look for it'...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: You know, I mean obviously the least I would have done would have been taking, you know, key contact details, just in case they came... came to light...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Erm, but I think, at the end of the day, it's the customer's perception of customer service. If people think they've had good customer service, then that's what it's all about. And like most, they won't tell anybody...

Interviewer: No...

Interviewee: They'll be really pleased and, if somebody asks, they'll tell them, but if they have bad customer service, it's a case of they'll tell ten people, those ten people will then tell eight people...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: So I think it... it depends what... what you're actually delivering as to, you know, how... and that's basically how it's perceived, because customer service is really all about perception...

Interviewer: Yeah, it is, yeah, yeah. OK, well, thank you very much; we've come to the end of the interview. Hopefully it wasn't too traumatic for you!

Interviewee: No, well I hope I've been helpful for you.

Interviewer: You have indeed, you have provided some very useful information and I thank you for your time... Anyway I can appreciate that you are incredibly busy at the moment so I shan't take up any more of your times

Interviewee: OK, no problem!

Interviewer: Thank you very much.

Interviewee: And good luck with the dissertation!

Interviewer: Thanks a lot, take care.

Interviewee: All right then, take care.

Interviewer: Bye.

Interviewee: Bye.

Appendix 3.1

Interviewer: My name is Panayiotis Yoddy Panagiotou and I'm a final year student at Sheffield Hallam University, studying a BSc Hospitality Business Management degree. I'm conducting an independent and impartial investigation into the role of standards in the delivery of customer service within front office.

You will remain anonymous and will not be identified by name. However, I do not want to lose any of the important information you may give me in the answering of these questions. I would therefore like to record the interview using a Dictaphone. This will be destroyed once the project has been written, and I will be more than happy to supply you with a finalised copy of the project. Are you happy for me to record this interview?

Interviewee: Yes, that's fine.

Interviewer: OK. So can I start off with your job title?

Interviewee: I'm a Front of House Manager at QHotels.

Interviewer: OK. The first five or six questions are just to get an idea about your educational background and your working background. So can you just start off by telling me about your education history – GCSEs, 'A' levels, any degrees, anything like that?

Interviewee: Erm, I have a degree in Hospitality Business Management with Culinary Arts. I've got three 'A' levels, five 'AS' levels, ten GCSEs...

Interviewer: That's good! (laughs)

Interviewee: In English, Maths, Science...

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee: All the normal stuff.

Interviewer: And how long have you been working in the hotel industry / hospitality industry?

Interviewee: Erm... seven years.

Interviewer: Seven years. Can you give me any information about your employment history, whether it be restaurants, hotels... anything?

Interviewee: Erm, I started out working in pubs, just working behind a bar and on the floor serving food and drink. Erm, I've worked for Sheffield Theatres as a Front of House Attendant, so I got to take part in the event management side of things. I did my university placement at a 4 star hotel in Dublin, where I got to work in all the front of house and back of house departments at management level. I've... where else have I worked?! Erm, I've worked as a Receptionist and a Manager for Durham University in their halls of residence, which is opened up to the public in the term time... in the holidays, sorry... as a hotel-/hostel-type thing.

Interviewer: Erm, so how long have you worked at management level within front office?

Interviewee: Erm, three years.

Interviewer: Three years, OK. And how long have you been working at the specific QHotel property?

Interviewee: About four months.

Interviewer: About four months, OK...

Interviewee: I'm new to the job! (laughs)

Interviewer: (laughs) Can you name any other... have you worked for any other companies, as in branded hotels or, for example, companies that would have standards in place?

Interviewee: Erm, I worked for Greene King for about three years, so, being a big brand, they had a lot of standards that are set across the whole company, which are regularly enforced. So it's really important that you're trained in them and that every... in the team is trained to the same standard.

Interviewer: OK. So the next section is about any past experience of company standards. Erm, so first of all, do you agree that standards help deliver excellent customer service?

Interviewee: For branded companies I think that standards are really important; it gives you continuity, it means that the customers know what they're going to expect when they come in, and it acts as a checklist, so that you're not really going to forget anything. So, for example, if you work... like Greene King, when I worked for them, you have to have standards so that you know that you're going to remember to ask them if they want this, that and the other, and you're not going to then find them coming back later on and creating extra work for you.

Interviewer: OK. Second of all, have you experienced a difference in standards between companies that has led to an impact in customer service? For example, when you worked at the hostel... erm, sorry, when you worked for the university, whether they had the standards which affected how customers were served then as opposed to where you're working now? Or even Greene King compared to where you're working now?

Interviewee: Erm, working for the university, because it's not a continuous business for them. For the work that I did, it meant that you kind of had to start the standards again at the start of each holiday, which, at first, there's always a few teething problems when you have new staff come in and there's no set routine for them. It takes a while to develop that, so I think if there was a set of standards, just... even just written down, and that's part of your first day training, for like opening up, closing down procedures, how to talk to guests, that probably could help.

Interviewer: So working at this Q property has been the first instance where you've experienced standards in a purely hotel environment?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Yeah, OK. Erm... Oh, well, the next question was, if you have worked for other hotel organisations, can you explain how your experiences have led to approach standards within Q. Now you've already mentioned that, in the hotel you worked in before, or the hostel, there were no standards, so really did you come into the job with any... any way to approach standards, or was it just from a fresh perspective?

Interviewee: When I did placement, I worked on front desk twice. The first was quite early on in the placement, and I found it really difficult because the staff weren't used to training. I'd never worked in a front desk in that kind of environment before and, as I said, they had no... they hadn't trained anyone before, it was really new to them and they didn't know how to do it. Erm, I then went back about six months later, and had time to think about it, and I kind of knew... I'd almost kind of set standards for myself, so I knew kind of what to ask, so I knew how to learn these things, and then I got the opportunity to actually train another new Receptionist. So I wrote out kind of check-in procedure, talking to guests procedure, check-out, end-of-day reports; so I wrote standards for them, which I think they're still using.

Interviewer: So did the hotel have no SOPs to speak of?

Interviewee: No...

Interviewer: Did they have brand values and standards?

Interviewee: It was an independent hotel...

Interviewer: Oh right, so it wasn't a chain, OK...

Interviewee: So, basically, they just relied on having really good staff...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: But they weren't used to...

Interviewer: So did they...

Interviewee: New staff...

Interviewer: Did that experience lead you to approach a teaching of standards – even though Q has SOPs – did you... did it in your own mind mean you walked in with an idea of how you wanted to train your staff and how you wanted to approach...?

Interviewee: Yes, because I can relate back to being a new member of staff and not knowing, so I kind of could identify what was needed and what teaching methods would work well.

Interviewer: OK. So has the training of standards in previous companies differed to that of Q? If so, how has it affected your approach? Well, you've already kind of answered that question...

Interviewee: Yeah...

Interviewer: In the previous one...

Interviewee: So Q has SOPs which are the discrete basis for...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: Erm... using standards.

Interviewer: And then it was more about how you would try and teach those standards to others?

Interviewee: Yeah, so personal development, of myself and of staff.

Interviewer: OK... (pause)... Are you OK answering that one...?

Interviewee: Erm... what do QHotels standards mean to me? Erm, delivering a consistent standard of quality...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: To guests across the entire company.

Interviewer: OK, so that's what QHotels' standards mean to you. Erm, how important do you feel company standards are, and why?

Interviewee: Erm, I think it's very important, because it shows guests that you're a quality organisation and it helps the day run more smoothly. If you've got standards, then you're not going to forget to do something, nothing's going to get slipped, like you're not going to get to the end of the month and not have kept up with any of the reports, creating extra work for yourself.

Interviewer: OK. How do you use standards day-to-day; i.e. your daily checklist, do they revolve around them, is the checklist built around them, or is... or are standards kind of something that you've taught to your staff, you've kind of drummed into them, so it becomes more of a habit than something that they constantly keep having to check that they're doing?

Interviewee: Erm, I think it becomes a habit... and it's obviously something that can be improved upon if needs be; like if something isn't working, then obviously you can edit it at some point and think about why it's not working and change the standard or change the procedure...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: So it's monitored.

Interviewer: OK. Can you give me three words that you think the standards of Q represent?

Interviewee: Erm, quality, consistency and... oh my gosh!... erm... three words!

Interviewer: It's OK, if you can't think of a third, we'll...

Interviewee: (laughs)

Interviewer: We'll change it to two! A lot of people seem to be struggling with that one!

Interviewee: Good! (laughs)

Interviewer: OK, so do you feel that Q standards aid in the delivery of customer service?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes – you've kind of already answered that one. OK, erm, do you feel that staff knowledge of Protel, and the tools within it, is sufficient enough in order to help them complete shifts and undertake company standards. So, you're new to the company, you've just walked in; the staff that are there at present, how would you rate their kind of knowledge and their ability to use Protel?

Interviewee: Erm, it can be improved; I think Protel doesn't help as much as it could do. There could be further programmes that can be used or developed, to ensure better coherence between all the different departments, so that staff can have just a better insight into the customers and what their needs are.

Interviewer: OK. So, on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your own knowledge and user level of Protel? 1 being you have no idea, 10 being you'd consider yourself almost an expert in it.

Interviewee: I'd say around the middle: 4 or 5.

Interviewer: 4 or 5...

Interviewee: I'm quite new to the company, so (laughs)... there's always room for improvement!

Interviewer: OK. So, again, on a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel company standards affect the running of front office?

Interviewee: Erm, I think 8 or 9; it's very important, it indicates delivery of service.

Interviewer: OK. Erm, finally in this section, on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you with the advanced functions of Protel in the meeting of standards? So, when I say this, I mean are you aware of all the advanced functions, reports that can help you with the running of your department, and also extra reports which may help your staff in completing shifts and things like that?

Interviewee: Again, being new, I'd say 4 or 5...

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee: It's something that can be improved upon.

Interviewer: Just to develop on that, how well do you feel that the use of Protel is taught to not only managers, but how the company tries to teach it to staff? Do you think it's adequate or do you think it needs improving?

Interviewee: Erm, improving. I think that it's an area that can be improved upon, because it's so core to the running of the hotel that if you aren't confident with it then it really, really slows down the day-to-day running.

Interviewer: OK. So the next section is on training and development. So on a scale of 1 to 10, how relevant do you feel that the following statement is?

'The training of standards to staff is necessary for them to be able to deliver excellent customer service.'

Interviewee: Erm, it's not essential if you're... if you've got good customer service then you don't necessarily have to... customer service is transferable, so you could not have a clue about QHotels but still be very good at speaking to guests and dealing with complaints. So it's something that... standards are something that can be trained, and customer service is intuitive.

Interviewer: OK. So in the training of staff, what do you feel is more important?

1. Being able to deliver customer service; or
 2. Having knowledge of company audit standards and SOPs and being able to carry them out.
- Which is more important?

Interviewee: Erm, for myself I'd say customer service. As I said before, you can train the knowledge and the ability and SOPs; that can be something that can be trained, but customer service is harder to...

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee: Teach people how to be good at.

Interviewer: So what systems do you use to monitor the compliance of standards by your staff?

Interviewee: Erm, the leagues that are used across QHotels; it's a good motivator in a way. If you're top of the league then you know that you're doing something well; if you're bottom, you can see what you need to improve upon. And that obviously goes to management, so... you need to impress them. And the bi-weekly/monthly reviews are a good indicator of what you're doing well, what you're doing poorly.

Interviewer: OK, so you almost have bi-weekly and monthly reviews with your staff...

Interviewee: Yes...

Interviewer: To see how well they're doing. OK. The next section is on the approach to standards. So what is your opinion of company standards, and their effect on delivery of customer service?

Interviewee: Erm, I think the company standards at Q are useful in delivering customer service, in that they can act as a checklist-type thing. Erm...

Interviewer: So provide... would you say it almost provides them with a framework to be within...?

Interviewee: A framework, yeah...

Interviewer: It gives them almost like a law to abide by...?

Interviewee: Yes...

Interviewer: A framework to work within, to help them to deliver what Q would think... how Q sees customer service?

Interviewee: How Q wants... yeah.

Interviewer: OK. So on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the importance of staff knowledge of front office standards?

Interviewee: Erm, I'd say around 6, that it's reasonably important; but, as I've said before, training can be done... you can develop your knowledge, but knowing how to interact with customers is the most important thing. Anything else can be worked on.

Interviewer: OK. The final section is on attitudes. This question is a slight repetition, but just if you can kind of repeat what you've said before. What do you feel are the benefits of standards?

Interviewee: Erm, it's... the standards act as a framework for you to run the day-to-day runnings of the front house around, so everybody's going to work off the same... everyone's going to be doing the same thing, basically.

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee: So all the guests are going to be treated the same.

Interviewer: OK, OK. Next, how accurate would you say the following statement is?

‘The current standards and SOPs that are in place are to comply with company audits as opposed to maximising customer service.’

Interviewee: Erm, well, to maintain...erm... Q obviously needs to stay competitive against other hotels in the country, so they want good customer service as a method of maintaining this competitive advantage... And the standard operating procedures are very customer-driven (laughs)... and you can use smiley faces...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: In them... (pause)... to encourage people!

Interviewer: OK. So do you feel the current guest check-in... and check-in standards are sufficient to meet both business and leisure guests?

Interviewee: Erm... no. They’ve developed... Q’s developed a new business-focused SOP, but it’s still having a few kinks ironed out, that there’s holes in the system which... so it’s not continuous enough to be successful at the moment. And obviously business guests and leisure guests are expecting completely different types of customer service; and this needs to be something recognised by staff, maybe through the booking information it’s got, so you know how to approach them and how to speak to them.

Interviewer: So would you say that whilst SOPs are in place, it’s more to do with how staff use them and how staff...

Interviewee: Yeah...

Interviewer: Erm, the use of it, because it’s all well and good having something written down, but it’s almost...

Interviewee: Mmm, even if it’s just something as basic as putting all the information onto Protel that you know what company this guest is working for, who they’re working with, kind of just so you know a little bit about the guest before they show up in your face and you have to speak to them.

Interviewer: So how appropriate do you feel the SOPs that are in place are in line with delivering customer service to the modern-day guest?

Interviewee: Erm, with SOPs you’re being constantly monitored, and you can constantly monitor what’s going on in the department – or I can constantly monitor. So you can become more discerning and more knowledgeable of guests, which I think is the way to deliver the best possible customer care...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: Through standards...

Interviewer: So with modern-day customers being ever-more demanding, and they have a great... the modern-day customer has a far better knowledge of hotels and what they can and can’t do, and/or get...

Interviewee: Yes...

Interviewer: Than they did, say, ten years ago, so do you think SOPs are something that need to be constantly changing? Do you think the SOP of five years ago meets...

Interviewee: Definitely...

Interviewer: Meets the demand?

Interviewee: I think it's definitely something that needs to be constantly monitored and updated, to meet the constantly changing needs of the customer and of the business; you need to become more and more efficient at maintaining competitiveness and profitability.

Interviewer: OK. So which would you rate as more important: Delivering excellent customer service, or knowledge of SOPs and standards?

****INTERUPTION! ('We've booked this room!')****

Interviewee: Can we just have two minutes? We're just doing an interview... Thanks.

Erm, I'd say that delivery of customer service is the most important. I think so long as the guest feels that they're being... they have a smiley person, someone who's polite to them, and that they're treated with respect, they can let a few mistakes slide, but...

Interviewer: OK, OK. Well thank you very much for your time, and...

Interviewee: You're very welcome!

Interviewer: You're very helpful. Thank you!

Appendix 3.2

Interviewer: So, it just starts off with my name is Panayiotis Yoddy Panagiotou and I'm a final year student at Sheffield Hallam University, studying a BSc Hospitality Business Management degree. I'm conducting an independent and impartial investigation into the role of standards in the delivery of customer service within front office.

You will remain anonymous and will not be identified by name. However, I do not want to lose any of the important information you may give me in the answering of these questions. I would therefore like to record the interview using a Dictaphone. This will be destroyed once the project has been written, and I will be more than happy to supply you with a finalised copy of the project. So the first question is, what is your job title?

Interviewee: I'm a Secretary Reception Manager.

Interviewer: A Secretary Manager, OK. And the next section is just a few questions about your background. So first off, can you just give me a brief overview of your educational history?

Interviewee: Yes. After finishing from school and my 'A' levels, International Hotel and Tourism Management degree at Sheffield Hallam, including a placement at... (inaudible)

Interviewer: So how long have you worked in the hospitality industry?

Interviewee: I have been working, erm... ten years now.

Interviewer: Ten years! So how long have you worked at management level within front office?

Interviewee: Within front office, I've been on management now for five years.

Interviewer: Five years, OK. And how long have you worked at your QHotels property?

Interviewee: I've worked there for two years.

Interviewer: Two years, OK. In the past, what other hotel companies have you worked for?

Interviewee: I've worked for Elite Hotels, and also the Marriott Hotels and Disneyworld.

Interviewer: Disneyworld, OK. So the next section is relating to your past experience of company standards. So, first of all, do you agree that standards help deliver excellent customer service?

Interviewee: Definitely, yes.

Interviewer: Definitely, OK. Have you experienced a difference in standards between companies that has led to an impact upon customer service? So in your previous experience in other jobs, has the way they wanted standards delivering affected your approach to customer service when you came to Q?

Interviewee: Yes, definitely.

Interviewer: OK, can you develop on that?

Interviewee: Erm, I've worked in companies that have had very strict standards, which are very strictly enforced, such as Disney, and you don't deviate at all, because they're very lucky that they have enough staff to... if you don't stick to the standards, you're out, basically. Then I've worked at Marriott... they have very high standards that generally came from the Head Office, and they were a bit too restricting in that they weren't specialised to your individual sort of hotels or particular needs. Then I worked for a Spicer Hotel, it's a 4 star and trying to adapt the standards was quite difficult, to take them and fit them to sort of your particular environment. Elite had... sort of they'd been developed over the years, but they were quite a small company, and they had only sort of four hotels, so their standards had to be adapted quite often to make... again, the sort of newer properties, the new things they take on, whereas they're quite traditional in a lot of... (inaudible)

Interviewer: OK, so when you came to Q, did you approach the standards that they had set in a certain way? Did you, having worked for Disney, where they were so strict, and struggled sometimes to adapt to some of the standards of some of the other hotels, what did you think of... well, what was in your mind when you came to Q when you saw the standards that were in place?

Interviewee: Erm, the standards again at Q were quite sort of limited (inaudible)... in that they hadn't really introduced many, and one of the reasons is that the General Manager there actually brought herself... (inaudible)... work really strongly with introducing standards. Again, the hotel I worked at

there had been privately owned for a long time, you know, it was only quite recently it was taken over by Q.

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee: Erm, and they... one of the things they wanted to put into place to make it successful was the standards. I tried to (inaudible)... standards are important, but they have to be able to be flexible as well. If you have too strict standards, you end up with... (inaudible). And you need people who can acquire the standards, and have the flexibility to sort of understand how to adapt to individual situations that they approach.

Interviewer: OK. So the next area is regarding specifically Q company standards...

Interviewee: OK...

Interviewer: So what did Q standards mean to you? What kind of values did they try to represent or convey to you to try and represent?

Interviewee: They tried to focus on the customer service and the guest service side, focused on the minimum we want to achieve, and then always put the areas that we can go the extra mile and the extra sort of special (inadible) that we can do, and make sure that they're being very clear and very user-friendly, and not trying to be long-winded, but (inaudible) short and snappy about things... (inaudible)

Interviewer: OK. Earlier you mentioned that you felt standards are important. Can you just develop why you think they're important?

Interviewee: Erm, it's important that everybody knows what's expected of them. When you do staff reviews, you realise how much staff like to be told what they should be doing, whether they're doing it; it's good to have a benchmark as to which sort of have standards against, so you can say you're meeting this or not that requirement, and it gives people areas to develop, they know what's expected. It ensures as well that you can be confident with your guests about what our standards are and what they can expect. Certainly if you work in different sort of levels of hotels, where they're not sort of 4 star or 5 star, there are certain things that are not made part of your standard (inaudible)... say to people that that is the way we do it. We have a lot of queries about our standards, about checking-in, in terms of taking credit cards, that side of it, and insist that we have the same procedure and everybody know that that's what we do, and then we can justify it to people.

Interviewer: OK. When you were at Q, how were standards used day-to-day? Because in some Q properties, the shifts almost regimentally revolve around them; in others, they're built into the checklist, but it's very subtle, it's not hammered in that you are undertaking company audits, you are undertaking Q standards. How were standards built into the daily shift where you worked?

Interviewee: Erm, we had them, sort of like you say, subtly built into the checklist, that everything... if there was any new standards or anything we needed to practice on, it was always put there and listed... and highlighted... (inaudible)... a standard, it's probably reviewed on a sort of monthly basis with individual team members... they learned certain aspects at either handover meetings or team meetings, and so pretty much most of my sort of team meetings we should have every couple of months would always be based around sort of things to do with standards. It would generally be unfortunately when we weren't quite meeting them like we should be, and then reviewing it and making sure that (inaudible)...

Interviewer: OK. So did you feel that Q standards aided in the delivery of customer service?

Interviewee: Definitely.

Interviewer: Definitely, OK. Erm, did you feel that staff knowledge, and the tools within it, are sufficient enough in order to help them complete shifts and undertake company standards. So, did you feel that staff knowledge was – of Protel – was as good as it should be?

Interviewee: Erm, I think it was mixed across the board. Erm, there is people who have been there (inaudible) but I'd say the knowledge that they have is very much learned kind of on the job and learned by just finding out sort of, 'I need to be able to do it, how can I do it, how can I not do it?'. I certainly think there's scope for it to be utilised much more effectively. The computer system generally has the ability to pretty much run the hotel...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: For you if the right information is in the system.

Interviewer: So would you say that there needs to be more... not classroom training, but definitely training enforced in Q for the use of Protel?

Interviewee: I would definitely say so. To me, it's a big difference from working at Disney; they had developed their own property management system inside their organisation...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: But they had their own IT specialists, their own sort of people, and the system is much better utilised... and people have a much higher knowledge of it because there is always somebody from Property at the hotels who is a specialist in that sort of department, whereas I understand that sort of a smaller hotel company that can't happen, you need to somewhere find a balance in between them. You need people who are specialists to set the system up directly and maintain it correctly, because one of the big problems is getting things utilised and changed, where people have individual access to sort of alter their own things.

Interviewer: On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not at all, and 10 being a high knowledge, how would you rate your knowledge and user level of Protel?

Interviewee: I would rate myself a 7.

Interviewer: A 7, OK. On a scale of 1 to 10, because earlier you mentioned that, to an extent, if you could use Protel in the right way you could run the whole hotel with it, so on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you with the advanced functions of Protel? You know, the kind of reports that some managers seem to be able to pull up, that other managers didn't have a clue how to pull up; and those reports that some managers could pull up seemed to take minutes and quite a lot of time out of actual work that otherwise could have taken you a lot longer. So how confident were you with the more advanced functions of Protel?

Interviewee: I'd say I was at about a 6.

Interviewer: About 6...

Interviewee: I could do pretty much what I needed to do, or find a way, and I knew kind of who to ask if I didn't.

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: And I would say it was very much about having the knowledge to be able to try and find your own way.

Interviewer: OK. Final question on this section, on a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel company standards affect and impact the running of front office?

Interviewee: 10.

Interviewer: 10, OK. The next section's on training and development. On a scale of 1 to 10, how relevant do you feel that the following statement is?

'The training of standards to staff is necessary for them to be able to deliver excellent customer service.'

Interviewee: 10.

Interviewer: 10, OK. In the training of staff, which do you feel is more important? Firstly, the ability to be able to deliver customer service; or knowledge and ability of company audit standards and SOPs.

Interviewee: The ability to deliver.

Interviewer: The ability to deliver customer service?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: OK. What systems do you use to monitor the compliance of standards?

Interviewee: Erm, generally guest feedback, and also auditing.

Interviewer: Auditing, OK. Erm, now the second-to-last question: This is on the approach to standards. So what is your opinion of company standards in general, and their effect on the delivery of customer service?

Interviewee: Erm, they have... they do have a big effect. They make it... you need to have people who can do the customer service, but you need to have the standards of how you want them to perform behind that as well.

Interviewer: OK, so it's more of a framework for people to work within?

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, OK. Erm, how accurate would you say the following statement is?

'The current standards and SOPs are in place are to comply with company audits as opposed to maximising customer service.'

Company audits referring to, really, essentially maximising profits.

Interviewee: Erm, I don't think that's true. I think they're there for the customer service point of view rather than... they do incorporate the sort of what we need to do as well, but they're mainly there for the purpose of customer service.

Interviewer: OK. Do you feel the current guest check-in standards are sufficient to meet both business and leisure guests? If you read... within the literature, there's a claim that a lot of hotels' check-in and check-out procedures aren't sufficient to meet business guests; that's why there's some hotels are bringing in automated services, because no matter what the changes they make within SOPs, they don't seem to be able to meet the requirements of business guests. Well what's your opinion on...?

Interviewee: My opinion on that is that the trouble with standards is that you have to not just teach people to parrot-like read a book, they need to be able to understand what the standards are about, and recognise their guests and recognise the difference of the types of guest that they have and how to deal with those people.

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee: And I think that comes across in the way that you actually train the standards. If you just have a standards book sort of thing, read it, they won't get that. If you actually train it properly and do it, they'll understand the difference.

Interviewer: So would you say the same sort of answer for the next question: How appropriate do you feel the SOPs in place are in line with delivering customer service to the modern-day guest? Do you think SOPs are something that need to be constantly reviewed in order to keep the modern-day guest happy, or do you think SOPs are something that can be designed once and one model fits all kind of thing?

Interviewee: They... they need to be reviewed, certainly, and also be realistic of what you can achieve, what you can't achieve. We haven't got perfection... (inaudible)... certain ideas, but we have realistic sort of standards as well as what we... (inaudible) I think you have to... it is all about how you train that (inaudible), how you verbalise that, and also the biggest way to train is to spend the time with one of the best, and to coach them...

Interviewer: Coach, yeah...

Interviewee: (inaudible)... That's not the right way, this is the right way, you need to... (inaudible)

Interviewer: So do you think within, not just Q, but the hotel sector in general, that that approach that you've just spoken about is really undertaken? Do you think front office managers in general, in your experience, have tried to do exactly what you've just said, or do you think a lot of the time it's, kind of, 'here's the job, we'll leave you to it', kind of thing?

Interviewee: I think sometimes it is 'we'll leave you to it', and sometimes it's treated too much like a pest, that people are expected to sort of read parrot-fashion the SOPs, and then that's it, you've passed. What you need is to actually watch people doing it in action (inaudible)... or do they actually try to meet that standard?

Interviewer: OK. Second-to-last question: Which would you rate as more important: Delivery of customer service or knowledge of SOPs and standards?

Interviewee: Delivery of customer service.

Interviewer: OK. Last question: What's your opinion of the following statement:

'Delivering excellent customer service can be achieved without some standards and SOPs.'

Interviewee: Not possible.

Interviewer: Not possible, OK. That's the end of the questions, Thank you very much for participating.

Appendix 3.3

Interviewer: No problem ..., how are you?

Interviewee: Very well, all ready to go with my questions!

Interviewer: Thank you very much. Well, just before I start the questions, I've got to read you a bit of a blurb!

Interviewee: OK...

Interviewer: It's just a bit of background information. So, my name is Panayiotis Yoddy Panagiotou and I'm a final year student at Sheffield Hallam University, studying a BSc Hospitality Business Management degree. I am conducting an independent and impartial investigation into the role of standards in the delivery of customer service within front office.

Interviewee: OK...

Interviewer: You will remain anonymous and will not be identified by name. However, I do not want to lose any of the important information you may give me in the answering of these questions, and therefore would like to record the interview using a Dictaphone. This will be destroyed once the project has been written, and I will be more than happy to supply you with a finalised copy of the project. So are you happy for me to record the conversation?

Interviewee: Yes, I am.

Interviewer: Thank you very much. So the first question, nice and easy, what is your job title?

Interviewee: My job title is Front Office Manager.

Interviewer: OK. So the first section of questions are relating to your background. So can you give me a brief overview of your education history – ‘A’ levels, degrees, anything like that?

Interviewee: Yeah, I’ve got... up in Scotland we do... we have Highers... I completed Highers and then went on to university to do a BA in Hotel and Hospitality Management with honours...

Interviewer: OK. Right then, and what’s... what length industry experience do you have?

Interviewee: I entered the industry when I was 16 and I’ve worked there for 14 years altogether.

Interviewer: OK, and can you give me a snapshot of that 14 year history in the industry?

Interviewee: Aha, yeah, I did the first couple of years (inaudible)... so I worked in banqueting, a restaurant, bars, and even went to work in the kitchen on occasions as well. And then, from about 18 onwards, my main experience has been in front office. So I worked... I joined Marriott when I was 18 and worked with them for a few years while I was at uni...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: And then I joined the graduate programme, which I was pleased to go to a country club called Dalmahoy, in Scotland...

Interviewee: OK.

Interviewee: So I worked there for a year on a graduate scheme, and then after that I was kept on at the Dalmahoy and was made the position of Reception Manager. There was still the Front Office Manager above me...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: And so I was next in line, if you like...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And then once I done that for a year, I then applied for a Front Office Manager at another Marriott property in Sheffield...

Interviewer: Oh right, yeah...

Interviewee: So I worked down there as Front Office Manager for two years, and then I got a bit homesick so then I moved back up to Scotland and actually went internally assessing Revenue Managers, it’s completely different...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: And I worked there for three years, and then I came to The Westerwood at QHotels, about a year and a half ago now, as Front Office Manager.

Interviewer: OK, so you've travelled about a bit then?!

Interviewee: Yeah...

Interviewer: So...

Interviewer: I found my way back!

Interviewer: What length of service... sorry, how long have you worked at management level within front office?

Interviewee: Erm, probably since I went into Sheffield...

Interviewer: Sheffield...

Interviewee: I think that was in 2006, if I'm looking back... erm...

Interviewer: About five years...

Interviewee: That would now have been, what, about five years?

Interviewer: Yeah, about five years, yeah!

Interviewee: Erm, and how long have you been working at the Westerwood?

Interviewee: I started in December 2009...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewer: So over a year... a year and four months really...

Interviewer: OK. Erm, and as you said earlier, you've worked for Marriott mainly. Have you worked for any other branded hotel chains?

Interviewee: Erm, Millennium Copthorne...

Interviewer: Oh right...

Interviewee: I worked there as Assistant Revenue Manager...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: And mainly before that it was just independent companies...

Interviewer: Independent, OK.

Interviewee: Privately owned.

Interviewer: So the next section of questions are about your past experience of company standards. So would you agree that standards help deliver excellent customer service?

Interviewee: Absolutely, 100 per cent.

Interviewer: OK. Have you experienced a difference in standards between companies – so between Marriott and Millennium Copthorne – that has led to an impact in customer service? So, in the way it was delivered, did it achieve customer service in a different way, did it impact upon the delivery of customer service? What's your experience?

Interviewee: I think the new Marriott has very strict customer service standards and, for me, they provided better customer service because you knew exactly what you were doing...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: And Millennium Copthorne did have standards, but not so much across the company. You would set your own standards for your particular hotel in many ways, which means then if you went to Millennium Copthorne in London you may not necessarily get the same type of service that you would do in Glasgow...

Interviewer: Right...

Interviewee: And that's the whole point of a chain...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Is to get the same sort of standards...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And so I think it impacts. I think because Marriott was such a bigger company...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: So they were much more strict in what they term as the Marriott service, and they invest a lot into customer service. And for me, Millennium Copthorne was that wee bit behind!

Interviewer: Right, so...

Interviewee: At the time.

Interviewer: So Marriott's more... more of a... you could almost call it a religion, the way... the way they...

Interviewee: Exactly, that's what it was all about – the culture and everything...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And working there I'd seen a massive difference when to Millennium Copthorne, because I was so used to the Marriott way, do you know...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And I think the Hilton's very much like that, although I've never worked in a Hilton...

Interviewer: No, no, the... no... yeah, it appears from what I've heard, the American companies – so your Hiltons and your Marriotts – are all very regimented. It's... you stick to their way or the highway, kind of thing!

Interviewee: Aha.

Interviewer: Erm. so the next question, because you've worked for other hotel organisations, can you explain how your experiences have led you to approach standards at Q? Have they impacted upon how you've... you've approached standards and tried to deliver them?

Interviewee: Well, you always have to have a balance. There are certain standards you have to do, but you've got to be careful that you're not reading off a script, if that makes sense?

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: So you still had to have the balance of personal service and to make it individual to them, rather than just, you know, just this is it, sort of thing...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: Erm, but for me, I like to have the standards there because it tells you what you're supposed to do, and if you accept that then that's great, but it gives you a guideline...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: On, you know, this is the service you have to give and this is how you do it, sort of thing, but you can always bring in your own personal abilities and attitudes to it anyway...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So you can always make it your own, but, at the end of the day, you're still doing what you're supposed to be doing, sort of thing.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. OK, so the next section's about Q standards per... specifically. So what do QHotels' standards mean to you? What do you think Q try to represent?

Interviewee: I think for me, Q are very much... they like to have standards but they're one of a kind... being one of a kind...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: You know, although they have 21 hotels in the UK, they're all different. Whereas, you know, if you went into the Marriott they've got the same carpets and everything, it doesn't seem like there's a real difference.

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: Erm, so, for me, Q do want to have that standard because they want to out-perform everybody, so they know that they need to have the certain things you have to do. But, at the same time, they're big on being individual about it.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, definitely. So, earlier on you said company standards are needed and are important. Can you just give me a brief explanation as, for you personally, why they're important?

Interviewee: Yeah, I think... for me, I'm the kind of person who likes to know what's expected of you...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So if something's written in black and white, you know exactly, there's no grey areas. You know, they say 'this is what you need to do', and I'm quite organised in that sense, and front office is

very much like that. You know, you have your certain procedures you have to follow each day so, for me, I like to do that. It gives me a wee bit of structure and something to work towards...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: But, for me, it's a big thing.

Interviewer: OK, and how do you, as a Front Office Manager, use standards day-to-day? i.e. is your checklist... does your checklist revolve around them, or in... I've heard from some managers, they're not specifically built in to the checklist, they're almost a background kind of thing, which has been almost drummed into staff, but the checklist... it doesn't become the main focal point of the checklist.

Interviewee: No, what they do... the checklist has tasks you need to do, but you have standard operating procedures behind tasks... if that makes sense?

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So every day we'll check-in, check-out for example, but on the checklist it won't tell you how to do that. We train that, according to the SOPs, if you like.

Interviewer: SOPs, yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: So, you know, we need to make sure they're asking for newspapers, wake-up calls, thing like that, on check-in, but that might not necessarily be on the checklist...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: The things that will be on the checklist, that are part of sort of SOPs, would be things like we have to balance up Wi-Fi access and property management systems, so that has to be done in a certain way. And the change from each department has to be done in a certain way; for example, the bar, once they've finished their lunchtime shift, they'll come to reception and give us their takings and we have to post it all on. So again, that has SOPs against it, but it might not necessarily be specifically what they are on the checklist...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewer: If that makes sense?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, OK. So can you give me two or three ways that you think the standards of Q represent?

Interviewee: Erm, I think continuity, because everybody has to do the same...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: Erm... I think structure... I like structure...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: Me personally, I like structure. And the third would...

Interviewer: Can you give the third one kind of in relation to standards for the delivery for customer service? So what standards do Q represent for the customer, in your opinion?

Interviewee: (pause)... Oh, goodness! I think maybe reassurance, in a way, for the customer, because if you're doing things a certain way, then they know that you're doing your job right and they know that,

you know, they can be safe in their environment or, you know, they know they can come to us if they need anything...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So I think possibly something like that, maybe reassurance for guests that you know what you're doing.

Interviewer: OK, OK. So do you feel that staff knowledge of Protel, and the tools within it, is sufficient enough in order to help them complete shifts and undertake company standard tasks?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: You do, OK.

Interviewee: There's different people on different levels. You know, we've just taken on a new person, so obviously their knowledge isn't as good as the ones that have been there, but their knowledge of what they need to do will help them deliver the customer service to the best of their ability...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: If that makes sense?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your own knowledge and user level of Protel?

Interviewee: Me, I'd like to know a lot more. From my point of view, not very well, but I would say about 9. But from, like, I want to know more about group reservations and things like that...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So in that sense, you know, the things that don't affect me, erm, about 6, because there's still plenty that I don't know about the system.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, OK. Erm... On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you feel company standards affect the running of front office? So 1 being not at all, 10 being they heavily affect the running of front office.

Interviewee: I think number 10 for front office, definitely.

Interviewer: OK, OK. On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you – you've kind of already answered this – with the advanced functions of Protel? So the... I've spoken to some managers, who said that, well, my own experience when I worked at Q, we had a manager who kind of knew how to generate all the necessary reports, but then we had another manager come in when she left, and his knowledge of the more advanced things that could help shifts run even better was far better than our previous manager's knowledge. So I'm just trying to get a gauge on... across the board at Q, how comfortable Front Office Managers are with the, you know, like the group reservations kind of thing, and the more advanced settings of Protel.

Interviewee: There may... well, like I said, there's stuff that I still want to know about the system, but it helps me do my job anyway, regardless, because I know what I know. But because I've only been here about a year and a half...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: There's still plenty I need to know...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So, for me, there's still much more out there that could help me in my job. So again, well, about 6 or 7 then.

Interviewer: 6 or 7, OK. So the next section's about training and development. So on a scale of 1 to 10, how relevant do you feel the following statement is?

'The training of standards to staff is necessary for them to be able to deliver excellent customer service.'

Interviewee: Erm, I think it's 9 or 10, it's got to be well up there for me.

Interviewer: OK. In the training of staff, which do you feel is more important?

1. Being able to deliver excellent customer service; or
2. Knowledge and ability of company audit standards and SOPs.

Interviewee: That's a hard one... because you can get really friendly people that don't know what they're doing...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: And it doesn't work that way. Because I recently had... one of my young receptionists, she was... she's so friendly and bubbly but she just couldn't get to grips with what we needed her to do, and it just wasn't working out, and occasionally that brought us down, so I think, for me, number 2.

Interviewer: Number 2, OK.

Interviewee: But, at the same time, you can't have somebody that knows the system and knows it well but, you know...

Interviewer: No customer service...

Interviewee: Not be approachable...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So there has to be a balance...

Interviewer: A balance...

Interviewee: They need to know their jobs first, I think...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: There has to be a good understanding there, otherwise it just doesn't work.

Interviewer: It doesn't work, OK. So what systems do you use personally to monitor the compliance of standards and to monitor how well your staff are getting on in the learning of standards, et cetera?

Interviewee: Well, we have a guest satisfaction survey called Retail Eyes ...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: So that maps out the four different categories, that you were greeted on arrival in a warm and friendly way, check-in was efficient and individual, check-out was hassle-free, and we said 'goodbye'

in a warm and friendly manner. So we get marked on that, so that lets me see if we're falling behind perhaps with the arrivals good but the check-out is not so good, sort of thing...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewer: So it lets me highlight the areas that aren't so good... but we're always over about 90 per cent...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: And then we also get guest comments; they write things about, you know, their experience here, and if it relates to reception, I'll look into that, we'll feed it back to the guests, we'll call them back and let them know what we're doing about it, so that they know that their comments are really taken on-board.

Interviewer: Do you also use the league... the kind of league tables that Hilary produces...

Interviewee: Aha...

Interviewer: On auditing? Do you use them heavily as well?

Interviewee: Yeah, she sends them out every month, so for example, she'll let us know how we're doing compared to the rest of the company in Retail Eyes...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: She'll let us know how we're doing on (inaudible), conversion rates, (inaudible), PDQ machines for foreign currency...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: So we always like to see... we get set targets for each and every thing, and then when she sends them through we'll have a team meeting to discuss what our targets are and where we're at in relation to them...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewer: And if we're not meeting them...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: Then we talk about ways in which we can improve them. Or if we are meeting them, then we talk about ways in which we can sustain that, because it's nice to be the top, but you want to stay there for a while.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, definitely. So do you have a very, almost interactive and hands-on approach with your staff?

Interviewee: I like to think so, I like to think so, and they all bring their own personalities to the team and things, and they all have their own, you know, interests, you know, we can say we can do this better or we can do it that way, we get feedback from other members of the team... do you think we could help out more, or do them well, sort of thing, so we're quite lucky I suppose.

Interviewer: OK. So on a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not at all and 10 being of paramount importance, how would you rate the importance of staff knowledge of front office standards and procedures?

Interviewee: Erm, I think it is really important. Obviously, to start with it's not, because they don't know much of Protel...

Interviewer: No...

Interviewee: So...but, for me, I think it is important because then they can't do their job, and like I said before, it's all very well being nice and friendly, but if you can't do the background part of it, it doesn't work out, so I would say at least 8 or 9 there.

Interviewer: 8 or 9, OK. So, this is the last section. It's... so the first question you kind of answered but, just to get a more clarified answer, so what do you feel are the specific benefits of standards?

Interviewee: Me, my specific benefit is you know exactly what you're supposed to do...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: The goals are set, so that you know what you're aiming for...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: It means that you're doing everything the same, so that the guest gets the same experience...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: But the individual part of it is to do it with them; I mean you might do, a check-in, you might do it a different way, but the ultimate way, the end result, is what they get, you know, you get a totally efficient check-in...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: You know, they're friendly, stuff like that, all the procedures are carried out for other departments, so that if you're doing a (inaudible), for example, it's correct, so that then makes the (inaudible)'s job easier, and things like that, so...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: For me, if you follow a process, then it has a knock-on effect on everybody else.

Interviewer: OK, So how accurate would you say the following statement is?

'The current standards and SOPs that are in place are more about to comply with company audits as opposed to maximising customer service.'

Interviewee: I think there's a good mix... so I do agree that they're in place to deliver good customer service, so I think they need to be there more for customer service, because they're there for a reason, they do it for a reason...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: And it is also to comply with company audits, but if we do the same then the customer gets a good service...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: If that makes sense?

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, OK. So do you feel the current guest check-in standards, and check-out standards for that matter, are sufficient to meet both the modern... erm, both business and leisure guests?

Interviewee: Yes.

Interviewer: You do, OK.

Interviewee: Yeah... and the guest satisfaction survey has that, so it shows that we're doing really good, so we must be doing something right!

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah, OK... So, with the modern-day guest almost constantly evolving – I mean their expectations now compared to even five years ago have moved a million miles away – so, what's your opinion on SOPs and the reviewing of them? Do you feel that, with the modern-day guest, SOPs aren't something that, like some companies did, made up 10 years ago and haven't looked at since, or do you think SOPs are something that need to be constantly monitored and reviewed?

Interviewee: They need to be constantly monitored and reviewed, because you'll be putting new things in place, so then you need to do an SOP for that. You might change the way you do something, so you need to change the SOP for that. So I think you constantly have to change them...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: Because the point of doing an SOP is that somebody comes into your department and they can pick up a folder with all the operating procedures in, they should technically be able to do your job...

Interviewer: Yeah...

Interviewee: In a sense.

Interviewee: Yeah, yeah, OK. There's a lot in the kind of literature about giving service to the modern-day business guest...

Interviewee: Aha...

Interviewer: And there's a movement within some hotels of using an automated check-in service for business guests, purely because they can't almost keep up with the constant... the ever-changing demand of them; it's never quick enough and it's never... especially within the bigger, full-service hotels. What's your opinion on using technology to help almost deliver that next level of customer service? Are you a fan of the idea of some... a part-automated check-in, or is your belief that customer service can only really be delivered through kind of human interaction?

Interviewee: No, I think... we had the conversation just the other day actually; and I think customer service can be both through a personal interaction and through computers. Because if you think, I mean if you order something online you get delivered, that's good customer service in a way, because you've ordered it, you've received it, so good!

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: But I think for a hotel and hospitality, part of that service is a guest interaction...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah...

Interviewee: But I think it can go so far for some people, but some people like to spend that bit of time on check-in, to talk about what are your facilities, you know, where's this, where's that, or of the local area. So it will work for a lot of people...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: But for the rest of us I think people like the sort of interaction.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely, OK. Erm, last two questions... Again, you've already kind of answered this, but which would you rate as more important: Delivery of customer service, or knowledge of SOPs and standards?

Interviewee: I think you have to have a mix. So I know I keep banging on...

Interviewer: (laughs)

Interviewee: About SOPs are important, but you can't have...

Interviewer: One without the other?

Interviewee: Aha. It's very difficult...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: Because you may have the nicest of person, but if they don't know what they're doing, it just... doesn't work.

Interviewer: Doesn't work, OK, And the last question... What are your opinions of the following statement?

'Delivering excellent customer service can be achieved without front office standards and SOPs.'

Interviewee: I disagree: I think you have to have ways of doing things, otherwise someone checks in one time and says 'well you've never done that last time, why are you doing it just now?', or 'you've done this for me last time, why aren't you doing it now?' So I think we have to have the standards in place.

Interviewer: And did you... within the... because... within branded hotels, there's obviously SOPs there to ensure that there's a continuity and a consistency no matter what property you went to; did you experience that in independent hotels, you know?

Interviewee: Well they still have their own SOPs, but they may not necessarily be the same as in another hotel; whereas all Marriotts are the same. But even... we might do things differently here at the Westwood to what maybe Hellidon Lakes does, and they're still a QHotel, but overall their standards are the same. But we might have individual ones specifically for the hotel.

Interviewer: OK, OK. Well Thank you very much for participating your responses are greatly appreciated

Appendix 3.4

Interviewer: OK, so I'm just going to read you a... a brief blurb before I start the interview, erm, if you're OK with that...

Interviewee: Yeah...

Interviewer: So, erm my name's Panayiotis Yoddy Panagiotou and I'm a final year student at Sheffield Hallam University, studying a BSc Hospitality Business Management degree. I am conducting an independent and impartial investigation into the role of standards in the delivery of customer service within front office.

You will remain anonymous and will not be identified by your name. However, I do not want to lose any of the important information you may give me in the answering of these questions. I would

therefore like to record the interview using a Dictaphone. This will be destroyed once the project has been written, and I will be more than happy to supply you with a finalised copy of the project. So first question, are you happy for... for me to record the interview?

Interviewee: Yes, that's fine.

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, nice easy question to start with: What's your job title?

Interviewee: Erm, I'm just the Front Office Manager...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewer: For Guest Service Agent.

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, I grouped, erm, the interview into blocks of questions. They're all relating within that section. So the first section is, erm, just some information about your background. So can we start off with your education history – GCSEs, 'A' levels, degrees, et cetera?

Interviewee: Yeah. Erm, I can't really remember my GCSEs. Erm, I did two 'A' levels, and then I went on to college, where I did NVQs, erm, in Food and Beverage Service, and Catering. I did it at level 2, and then I did it at a management level, erm, which is NVQ level 3, and then progressed on to university after that, to do a Hospitality, erm, Business degree. Erm, through that I did the internship with a couple of hotel groups, getting some experience, and then I progressed into the role where I am now.

Interviewer: OK. So how... how long have you actually worked in the industry?

Interviewee: Erm... including my cheffing experience, about seven years.

Interviewer: OK. So can you just give me a brief snapshot of your overall employment history within the industry?

Interviewee: Yeah. Erm, when I was 17 I started working in the kitchens. Then, probably by the time I was 19, I was Second Chef at an award-winning country restaurant. And then, erm, moving forward, whilst I was at university, I was a, erm, Food and Beverage Supervisor... erm, probably for about six months. And then I got promotions to an Operations Supervisor, where I was in charge of three departments: the restaurant, bar and, erm, C&B, which was like our conference and banqueting department. Erm, from that I then did my internship, and spent, erm, 13 months on the front desk in America, as a Guest Service Agent. And then I returned to England to finish off my degree, and spent a further year on the front desk with Hilton, erm, gaining more valuable experience in guest service. Then, once I graduated, I progressed into a, erm, Assistant and Management role, erm, where unfortunately enough for me, my Manager shortly left after I'd started; I was three months into that, erm, job role, and I became the, erm, Front Desk Manager...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: At Q...

Interviewer: So how long have you actually worked at management level within front office?

Interviewee: Erm, probably only a year.

Interviewer: OK. And have you been working for a year at the property that you're... that you're currently Manager at?

Interviewee: About that, yeah.

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, what other companies have you worked for, erm, in terms of front office, branded or... or not branded?

Interviewee: Erm, I've got quite a lot of background with Hilton. Erm, other than that it is just Q. I spent quite a few years with Hilton.

Interviewer: OK, So the next, erm, section is regarding your past experience of company standards. So, first question: Do you agree that standards help deliver excellent customer service?

Interviewee: Erm... yes. I think they deliver a consistent customer standard, erm, particularly for branded hotels, that those standards conform to, no matter which hotels you go to, you're going to find certain traits of standards from the employers and staff who are working there. Erm, however, in answering your question, do I think it's excellent customer service, delivering it, erm... I wouldn't say it delivers *excellent* customer service; I feel that it delivers a standard of service. I think sometimes it can restrict some members of staff with natural flair, who would deliver excellent service if they weren't thinking so much of conforming to a brand standard, and having to say certain things to guests in a certain order, and following certain protocols which, I believe, with a certain amount of training, they would do anyway.

Interviewer: Mmm. So you're saying that... standards almost provide the basic framework, but then it comes down to the individuals who work for the company?

Interviewee: I do, yes, but I also believe those standards can hinder... erm, excellent customer service. But I've got no doubt that standards also help deliver good service...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewee: But I just wouldn't say 'excellent'.

Interviewer: OK. So have you experienced a difference in standards between, say, Hilton and here, erm, have you experiences of standards in the past then that led and impacted upon the way that you've approached customer service? Or sorry, let me rephrase that: Have you experienced a differences in standards between companies that has led to an impact upon customer service? So when you worked at Hilton, did you see... did they work with standards in a different way, and did it affect customer service in a different way?

Interviewee: Erm, with working at a couple of hotels, I could see the standards implemented in different ways. Erm, the first hotel that I was at, which was a Hilton, erm, when I was first introduced to the whole brand standard idea, there was rigorous training, almost brainwashing, if you will. Erm, but you could see how that affected the end-user, that being the customer or staff member, everyone working in similar ways. However, when I went to the second hotel, those standards were still there, but they weren't evident, they weren't in your face, there wasn't rigorous training on it, staff were a lot more free, erm, to approach guests in different ways in their own unique styles, erm, mainly because that property was a resort. Erm, however, I felt sometimes that those standards would have been good in place of setting some consistency with guest relations... erm...

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, having experienced those two differences, how did it, erm, impact on the way you approach standards at Q? Did you choose to take one or the other approach that you've already experienced, or did you decide to combine that two? What did you... how did you approach and enforce standards within your property?

Interviewee: I think from those experiences, erm, I did learn that consistency was important. Erm, so that was the approach that I decided to take; I took on board the standards, and I wouldn't say you pick and choose them, but I think there's certain times when you're in guest services and dealing with the general public that you do conform to those standards. But there is areas and time where it's better to either go above and beyond, or outside of those standards, where there's certain people and certain guests who wouldn't appreciate or doing certain standards of check-in – saying certain things, explaining the hotel and layout of things to them. It wouldn't necessarily be necessary, particularly for repeat guests, erm, or guests who are in a real rush, erm, or in particular when they're checking in late, they just want to go to bed and you know they need to get up early. I think this is where the, erm, key skills of your guest operatives that you've spent all the time searching for and testing their skills during the employment and development stage to place trust in. They're able to look at the people standing in front of them and knowing what sort of standard they need to implement. But it's definitely strongly about finding the right people and the right places to, erm, employ that consistency of standards.

Interviewer: OK. Erm... so the next question: Has the training of standards in previous companies differed to that of Q? If so, how, and how is it affected your approach to standards? So, erm, in Hilton, was training a massive thing, or was it kind of basic and you kind of had to find your own way, erm, and how has that affected your approach to kind of training in standards and...

Interviewee: Erm...

Interviewer: And learning new ones?

Interviewee: I'm not sure if it was necessarily with some of the hotels that I've had experience with. I just generally think it's the hotels sector. But training isn't always a priority. Erm, I cannot recall, when I've started a job, when it hasn't been short-staffed and you're thrown in the deep end. Erm, luckily enough, I think that is the best way to learn; however, training always takes a backseat. Erm, you will probably learn the minimum as fast as possible, and then you'll be implementing it on the way as you're learning it. Erm, I'm all for on-the-job training; it is the best way to learn. However, when you refer back to brand standards and consistency of service, this isn't necessarily what the guest's going to receive when you're employing new operatives into the hotel industry, particularly on the front desk. Erm...

Interviewer: Do you think... do you think that considering therefore the high turnover of... of, erm, employees within front desk, that that this, erm, this issue of guests not receiving that standard when you're trying to train new people, do you think that... that maybe this could be a reason for the, you know, the kind of high... high turnover of people on front desk – because they feel so uncomfortable, because it is so, you know, kind of high pressure and you've got to learn it there and then as well as deliver the experience to the guest? Do you think that the whole issue of training is... could be a... could be a, erm, a dominating factor?

Interviewee: Erm, yeah, it could be a damper of the... stop that initial shock that people get when they enter the environment of the front desk, because it is... nothing like any other area of the hotel. Erm, I think of it as the central hub, like the communications centre – the processing unit for the hotel. Erm, but you're also at the forefront of guest services; if there is any issues or anything that goes wrong, erm, the guest tends to voice it there and then, directly at you. And quite a lot of people find that difficult to deal with, erm, with the added pressure of the workload and trying to get through the daily checklist and tasks. I think if, erm, if there was a sufficient amount of training beforehand, it would be a damper on that initial impact the employees get when they move onto the front desk environment...

Interviewer: Would you therefore say that because of the... the way the industry kind of roles, that whilst that is in an ideal world you'd like to do that, do you think that's... that's... that's ever going to happen?

Interviewee: Erm... I came close to an experience with it. Erm, when I moved hotels to the resort in America, I had three and a half days of intensive training, erm, that was sat in front of a computer for three and a half days. Erm, I wouldn't have said that was a good match to my personality, nor I would, like, nor the sort of people that you'd have on the front desk. Erm, that made me very disengaged before I even got on the front desk and, erm, I don't think I took that much from that experience or that training. By the time I came to implement it on the front desk, erm, I was learning new, different, quicker ways to, erm, have the same outcomes on using the software, erm, for the guest service. So... it's hard to say.

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, next section is about Q specifically. So what do QHotels standards mean to you?

Interviewee: Hmm... Erm, I think they're important. Erm, I believe they do make a difference and they do have a consistency, and they... they do help deliver a certain level of customer service. However, I don't think they allow for excellent levels of service; I think they can restrict exceptional young professionals from doing an amazing job and wowing guests, erm, because of thinking about all these other standards or, like I was saying before, when I was going through my training of three and a half days in front of a computer, that already made me disengaged, and what I learned wasn't completely relevant. And then, erm, when you're trying to engage with the guests and implement that, you're almost having to think about too much, and it's taking away from your personality and your past experiences, and things that you'd really want to for the guest. Erm, I know the standards and everything do help, erm, ensure that the guest's needs are met; however, I do think that they can stop, erm, exceptional customer service.

Interviewer: OK... OK. So, erm, the next question you've already kind of answered. So very briefly, just kind of sum up: How important do you feel company standards are, and why? So, the foundations of company standards: Why do you think they're important? Just briefly.

Interviewee: They're important to make sure that, erm, everyone's working on the same level, and that there is a certain standard throughout the brand that, erm, all members of staff are going to conform to, and that there's a consistency, so the guest knows what they're expecting, what they're going to get...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: I just think on the downside, erm, it does restrict your exceptional young professionals, who would do it though go above and beyond.

Interviewer: OK. So how do you personally use standards day-to-day within your property, i.e. does your daily shift revolve around them, or are they in a checklist and though... although they're on the checklist, but it's kind of a background thing that people just know that they need to do?

Interviewee: Erm... brands are through and through. Erm... before any of the staff get onto the front desk, they're definitely aware of the brand and a certain amount of standards. Erm, there's not one shift which goes by when it's not mentioned or something's done a certain way. Erm, this... it can be a bit of a safeguard as well, when, erm, members of staff say, 'oh, well why do you do it that way?' 'Well, it's the brand.' However, you know that it's not necessarily just the brand; it could be for a profit performance, et cetera, and it's not always in the favour of the guests...

Interviewer: So is your... is your checklist, erm, built around the standards, or are they just... are they just kind of...

Interviewee: It does...

Interviewer: Done irrespectively, regardless?

Interviewee: It does incorporate it; erm, the checklist for us is, erm, just making sure that a routine is followed in the morning and certain time deadlines are met, which all tie into the brand, erm...

Interviewer: OK...

Interviewee: But I would have said it's more of the standard in which people work that's associated with our brand.

Interviewer: OK. So can you give me two or three words, erm, that you think Q standards represent?

Interviewee: Erm... inspirational... erm... by that, I mean guest services being inspired by others and also the guests being inspired by enthusiastic and excited staff. Erm... enthusiasm – is obviously another word I just mentioned at the end of that. Erm... a third one... erm... would be quality.

Interviewer: OK... OK. So, erm, you've already kind of mentioned this; erm, no, you have mentioned it. Do you feel that Q standards aid in the delivery of customer service? Erm, again, just very briefly sum up what you've kind of said.

Interviewee: Erm, yes, most definitely; they give the customers the... well... I think with customers' demands and changing needs ever-growing and getting higher, I think brand standards now meet the minimum levels of satisfaction for customers.

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, just some questions about your staff and their knowledge of, erm, operating systems. Do you feel that staff knowledge of Protel, and the tools within it, are sufficient enough in order to help them complete shifts and undertake company standard tasks. So, in your experience at Q, how have your staff been, knowledge-wise, of the operating systems?

Interviewee: Erm... I tend to find that there is a lack of, erm, people who are savvy with technology. Erm, the system and information is there, and if utilised correctly, could be really useful, and could be used a lot more effectively and efficiently. Erm, however, I find almost all of the staff members are scared to experiment and try new things with the system, which is understandable...

Interviewer: Aha...

Interviewer: Erm, but I also find their background IT knowledge restricts them a little bit, that they're almost scared to engage and, erm... I wouldn't say explore, but utilise, erm, the facilities in front of them.

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your own knowledge and user level of Protel?

Interviewee: Erm... strangely enough, I'd rate it a little bit higher, purely based on the fact that, erm, I am comfortable with technology and I do have a bit of an IT background. I'd probably say, on a scale of 1 to 10, probably a 7... erm, purely on the basis that, if someone comes to me with an issue, then I will resolve it, I'll play around with the computer system until I get it right. I know how to correct mistakes and errors; so, for me, I'm not too concerned about exploring and playing around with the computer system. For me, it's more of a time factor.

Interviewer: So, on a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you with the more advanced functions of Protel in the meeting of standards? So, the more advanced, erm, forms of making reservations, and printing off of certain checklists or... not checklists, sorry... erm, reports which aren't, you know, common knowledge to... to the average, erm, front office, erm, worker.

Interviewee: Erm, I'm fairly comfortable with them. Erm, I will put a score to it in a minute. But, erm, I think it can be extremely useful; however, again, it's the time factor of searching through and getting used to it. Erm... the... I'd probably put myself as a 6, just purely on the fact that, erm, with those things they can just be a long process; i.e. you go through all these steps to get to a certain point, and you know if you make a mistake then that you're going to have to start all over again. Erm, over half the time you end up spending more time correcting and altering things than trying to enter it into the... into the system in the first place.

Interviewer: OK

Interviewee: So that's why I'd rate myself as a 6, and not a little higher.

Interviewer: So on a scale of 1 to 10, erm, how would you... how would you feel company standards affect the running of front office? So 1 being not at all, 10 being heavily impact.

Interviewee: Erm... I'd go around an 8... erm... purely because other departments will say certain things to us, and front desks are expected to know the answer. Erm, we know the brand standards for other departments across the hotel, mainly because quite a lot of the people who work on front desk have rotated into that position, erm, from within the hotel. Purely just because of the amount of knowledge that you'll need on the front desk, about the operations side, within the environment that you're working, so...

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, next section's on training and development. On a scale of 1 to 10, how relevant do you feel that the following statement is? So 1's not relevant at all; 10 highly relevant.

'The training of standards to staff is necessary for them to be able to deliver...' – and here's that word again – '...excellent customer service.'

Interviewee: Erm... being able to deliver... That's a difficult one, purely based on the fact that it varies from members of staff. There's certain people that, I feel, could be taught the standards once and it could just literally be brushed over and they'd be aware of them. Erm, and there's other members of staff that I feel you would really have to teach the standards to, and that would be very beneficial to the company, because it'd ensure that they're conforming to a certain level of service. Whereas other members of staff have this natural ability or flair to do what the brand standards are trying to achieve. Erm, so for that reason, I'd probably go around a 6.

Interviewer: OK. So which is more important to you, the next question. Erm, is... is... in the training of staff, which is more important? Is it customer service, or/and the delivery of; or, erm, the training of knowledge and ability of, erm, to undertake company audits, and understand and act out SOPs? Which is more important to you, in a member of your staff?

Interviewee: Sorry, I thought you were going to say training of knowledge for the staff.

Interviewer: No...

Interviewee: Because if it was that, I would have rated higher! (laughs) It's...

Interviewer: Do you think... do you think it's more important to train somebody in delivering a customer service, and through that they will then understand the standards? Or do you think it's the other way round? Erm, only through the knowledge of SOPs and standards will they then be able to deliver and learn about customer service?

Interviewee: Erm, for some people, definitely SOPs. But I think the training is important for customer service. Erm, even just teaching people to say things in a certain way, who wouldn't necessarily think about what they're saying; erm, negative phrases and the way that you word things on the front desk is very critical to how you perform. Erm, however, the front office is very performance-focused. Erm, for me, as a Manager, it's definitely the performance side. Erm, I think you need a good mix on the front desk. I think, for my staff, customer service is the foremost; and for me, as a Manager, it's my job to worry about the targets and hitting certain financial goals and standards.

Interviewer: OK. So for your staff, would you say customer service? Or are you saying that essentially there needs to be a balance?

Interviewee: There needs to be a balance. Erm... but I think the main focus for the staff would be customer service.

Interviewer: OK. So, erm, in the training of all of this, what systems do you use to monitor the compliance of standards?

Interviewee: Erm... the usual stuff. Off the checklist, erm, which is signed off at the end of each shift, like the morning shift, and the late shift, and then night order, which is then, erm, handed over afterwards. And then you've got your quarterly staff reviews. Erm, this is the review, like individual performance, more in-depth, and talk on a one-to-one basis with a member of staff. Erm, ideally I like to use this as a confidence boost, and to set targets and goals for that member of staff. Erm, I find it does sort of inspire them, for at least the first month or so, to try and do a little better, and I think quite a lot of them do take it on board and change a little bit the way they work. Erm, but I think self-improvement is a huge thing; we're definitely a society of continuous learners.

Interviewer: OK. So, erm... two sections left. Erm, next is about the approach to standards. Erm, again, you've kind... you've already answered this question, but if you could just give me a brief, erm, answer. What is your opinion of company standards, and their effect on the delivery of customer service?

Interviewee: Company standards... erm...

Interviewer: Brand standards, customer standards...

Interviewee: I think they do give the minimal expectations of good, consistent customer service. Erm, they almost ensure it, if not guarantee it.

Interviewer: So, erm, the kind of message that I've been getting is that you believe that standards, erm, offer a baseline of customer service – a level of customer service...

Interviewee: Yeah...

Interviewer: But in order to be able to hit that *excellent* customer service, it comes down to the people you employ and the training of the delivery of that customer service...

Interviewee: Yeah, and almost, erm, empowering them, outside of their position, making them feel comfortable, that if they want to go above and beyond, within reason, that they're able to do so. Erm, and that if they do forget to say, 'oh, I see you selected, erm, business in your guest profile' and they

forget to say 'oh, the business centre's right behind you', et cetera, erm, but instead they pass on some really important information about, erm, something that particular guest may have had of interest, I think that's more important than telling them where the business centre is, where there's several signs and bits of information that the guest – if they wanted to know – would find out anyway.

Interviewer: OK... OK. So, erm, on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate the importance of staff knowledge of... of, erm, standards?

Interviewee: Erm... a 7. I wouldn't put it at the forefront of important. Erm, but I'd definitely put it over halfway. Erm, it would need to... it needs to be in their mind, but it doesn't need to be the thing they're concentrating on.

Interviewer: OK. Last section: So how do you... what do you feel are the benefits of standards?

Interviewee: Erm, they ensure your team are all working in the same manner; it makes it a lot easier when you're changing over a shift, when you've got people who've done things in a certain way, erm, so when you've got your shift changeover, the people who follow them know what process they were up to and whereabouts they should be up to. And if they get a guest coming back to them saying, 'oh, my room isn't ready', erm, the person they're now speaking to knows exactly where the pre-registration should be, or whether or not their room is ready, erm, and also whether or not a credit card's already been taken or a key has been cut for the room. I think for that sort of reason, those standards are extremely important.

Interviewer: OK. So how accurate would you say the following statement is?

'The current standards and SOPs are in place to comply with company audits as opposed to maximising customer service.'

Interviewee: Erm... that's a hard one! ... Because my goal, as a Manager, is the whole audit side. Erm, I often find that I can have... deliver a guest service through my staff that meets my performance targets but didn't meet the guests' needs. However, that didn't matter, because my performance targets have been missed... erm, have been hit. Yet we won't see that guest again in the future... erm, whereas if we've gone above and beyond to deliver that guest service and meet those expectations, I might not have hit performance targets, yet I'd see that guest again and again. And as we all know, repeat business is way more financially profitable; however, for that month, I'll be down and I'll be in trouble!

Interviewer: (laughs)

Interviewee: So ultimately, for me to keep my job, I need to focus on the there and then. Erm... which could be a shame!

Interviewer: (laughs)... So, erm, do you feel the current guest check-in standards are sufficient to meet both business and leisure guests?

Interviewee: Erm... leisure guests, yes, in a different way. I don't think you need to, erm, bore them with some of the brand standard check-in operations. I think you could have fun with the leisure guests, erm, have a chat. However, for your standard of check-in, you've got to meet certain times, and a restricted number of staff on the front desk, so you end up forming queues, you've got to be very careful doing this. It takes a certain breed of people to be able to handle that. Erm, also a certain level of experience with your business traveller, erm, it can be a very easy, simple check-in, especially with repeat business. Erm, however, people are individuals, and it's very difficult to set a standard and... you know, base your standard operation that is going to please and satisfy everybody, and I think that's where your individual employees come in.

Interviewer: OK. So how appropriate do you feel the SOPs in place are in line with delivering customer service to the modern-day guest?

Interviewee: Modern-day guest... Erm, I think the modern-day guest has changed quite a lot recently. Erm, I think there is definitely a... pause between new standard operations and... and what needs to be done. I think they're a little out-dated at the moment. Erm... but one of the main problems is, erm, new ones will come in, and then we'll just have confusion between what should and shouldn't be done. And this is where you start turning good members of staff into... confused people who aren't too sure how to do their job any more.

Interviewer: So... so within... within the industry, there's talk of using things like, erm, automated check-in booths, to satisfy the speed of which, erm, business guests are checking... checking in. There's... there's actually a company who have actually completely restructured their check-in process for their business guests, using automated machines. How... how do you kind of think that this will impact upon customer service; if this changing of the SOPs to meet business guest demands has kind of been satisfied, erm, because, erm, automated check-in desks have been brought in, but do you think that therefore impacts and takes away from customer service?

Interviewee: Erm...

Interviewer: Does it still provide a standard?

Interviewee: Those kiosks are only servicing one particular need of the guest, erm, and one particular one, erm, and that'd be like the speedy check-in. However, it's obviously not always going to be a speedy check-in, and you can't control someone at the front of the queue who can't work the machine, or they just want to... peruse through it. Erm, they're going to end up causing a queue. Erm, it only serves one... one purpose, and that's for a quick check-in; you've got to have the repeat guests who know how to use it. Erm, I think it would implement a lot of frustration in people at first; erm, however, people who are comfortable using it, and travel on a regular basis, and stay within the hotel, would be very comfortable with it. I'd... I'd be very careful where you placed it in the lobby... erm, and I think it should almost be off into one corner, erm, where maybe a journey ambassador can guide people towards it if they so wished. Erm, people want to speak to people; erm, they're the only people... they're the only way that individual needs can be met, and that's definitely what you're seeing with 21st century consumers. They all have individual wants and needs, and want to be spoken to and approached in an individual way and manner. I think by carrying everyone through one machine for the business travellers would probably work brilliantly for them who are on a tight schedule, they know what they're doing, they don't... they don't want to speak to the Front Desk Agent, it's a way of life for them. Erm, for your leisure and first-time business travellers, you really do need that Guest Service Agent, and particularly when a guest has an issue.

Interviewer: OK. So which would you rate as more important: Delivery of customer service, or knowledge of standards, SOPs, et cetera?

Interviewee: Erm... well they both do the same thing, to a certain level. Erm...

Interviewer: But if you have...

Interviewee: But I... I would rate customer service at the forefront.

Interviewer: OK. Final question: What's your opinion of the following statement?

'Delivering excellent customer service can be achieved without front office standards and SOPs.'

Or, sorry, more to the point, without front office standards.

Interviewee: Erm, no, I wouldn't have said they could. Erm, it would be a bit chaotic, to say the least. Erm, you do need that standard for everyone to conform to and work to on the front desk. Erm, it allows people to focus and plan on what they're trying to do, and prioritise, which is extremely important on the front desk. When you've got several things going on, they need to know what their main focus should be, and at what certain times they should have had done and achieved already. I think, erm, freeballing it would not be a good idea.

Interviewer: OK, that's the end of the questions, thank you very much for your time.

Interviewee: That's quite all right, thank you!

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