

A holistic framework to embed good company practice for customer retention

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Figure 1. 4-P Cycle of CI. (Adapted from Buelens et al., 2002, p. 8)

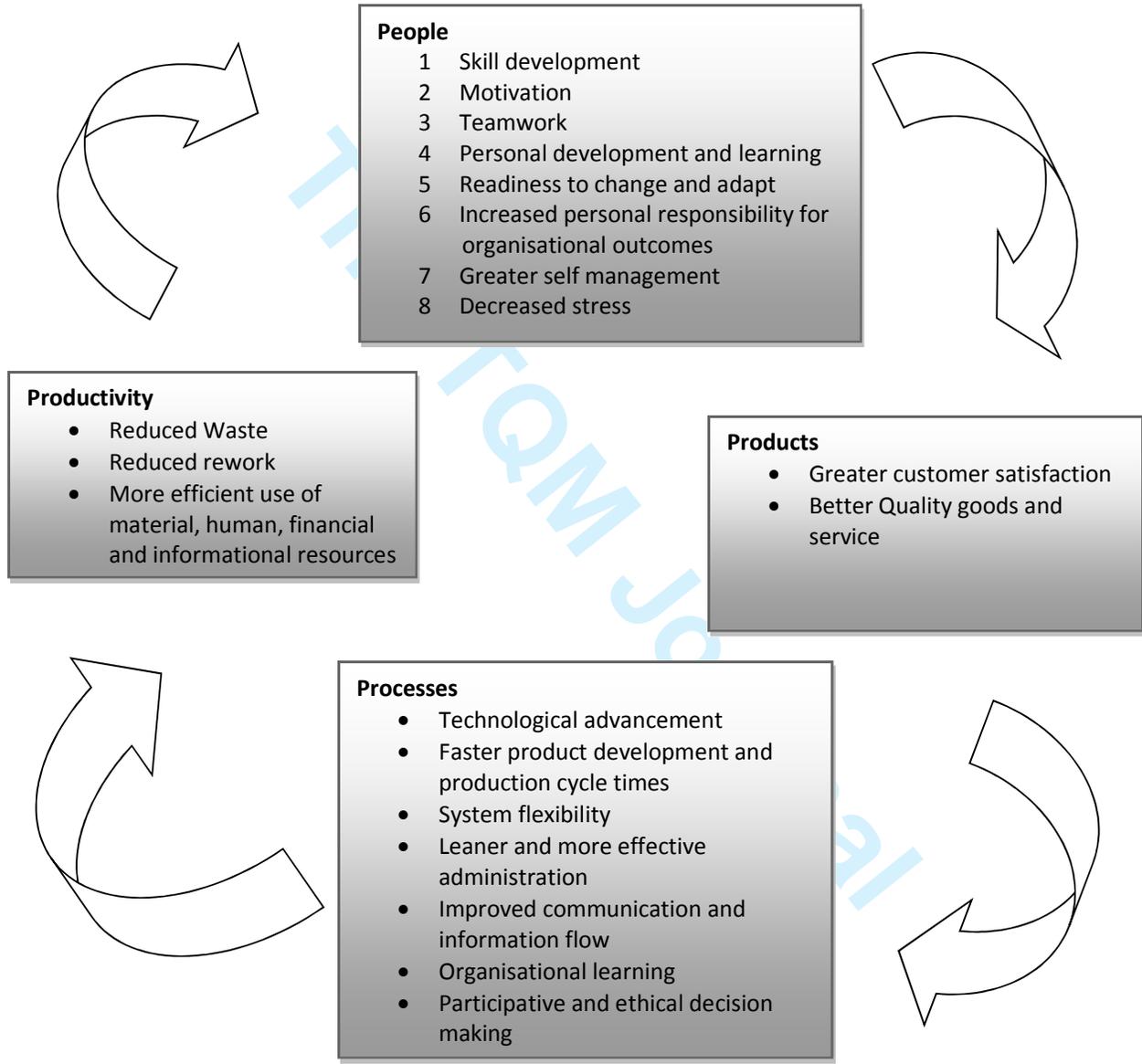
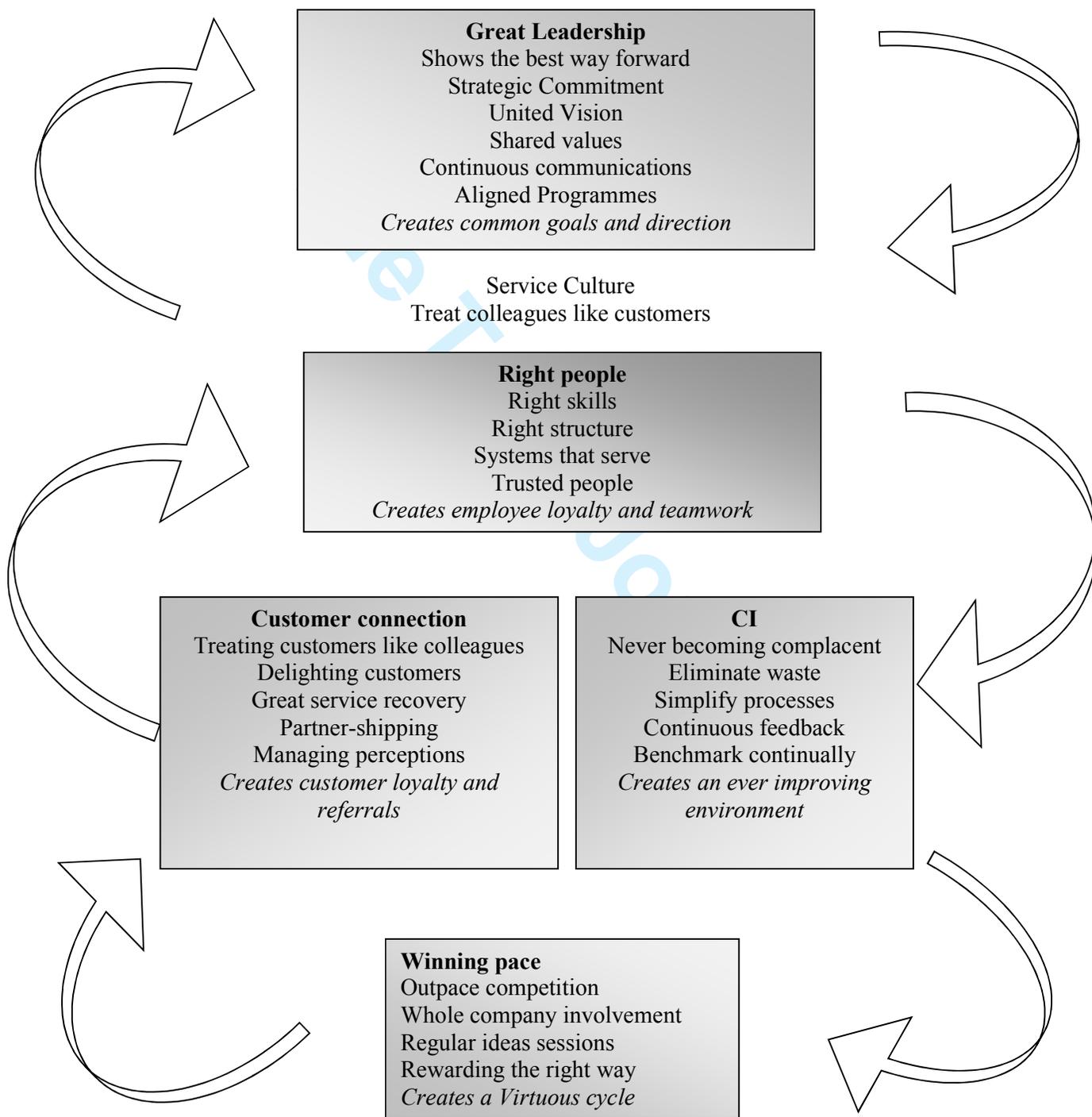


Figure 2. The key elements of world class service (Adapted from Daffy, 2001, p. 223)



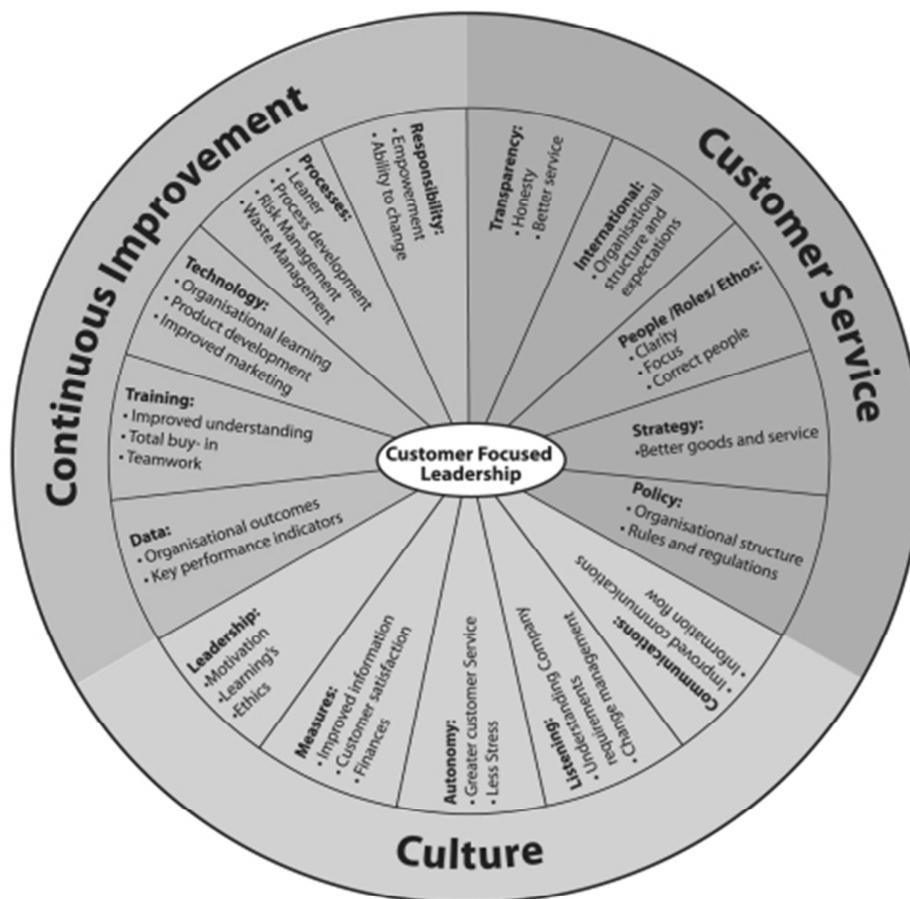
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Figure 3: Initial framework



Figure 4: the final framework



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Abstract

Purpose – To detail a holistic practice based guiding framework for improving customer retention, which helps companies instil a customer service culture through encouraging them to concentrate on the three key areas of culture, continuous improvement and customer service.

Design/Methodology/approach - The Delphi technique, ~~in the form of a qualitative and systemised approach to data collection that incorporated in-depth semi-structured and structured interviews at director level across a range of industries~~ using 3 rounds of hour long in-depth semi-structured interviews at director level across a range of industries. This was done with 9 directors, totalling over 30 hours of data requiring in excess of 200 hours to transcribe.-

Findings – In order to achieve customer retention, a holistic company approach underpinned by senior management buy-in is critical, with open communication, employee empowerment, and employing ‘the right’ personnel. The framework is viable with specific organisation input and supplementation with ongoing customer research.

Research limitations/implications - The framework has only been tested with the companies in the study, and requires testing in practice. As such, it has not covered the ability of companies to change, but has simply developed a framework to assist in identifying the areas that need to be reviewed when considering changing to focus on the customer.

Practical implications - To use this approach to customer retention requires companies to amalgamate culture, customer service and continuous improvement equally alongside customer focused leadership, as an underpinning for the ethos of the business.

Originality/value - The Delphi technique in an in-depth systemised approach with directors revealed unanticipated and significant insights regarding the benefits of amalgamating and devoting equal weight to the three areas of culture, customer service and continuous improvement to improve quality in all these areas

Introduction: context and value

This paper details the development of a practice based guiding framework to improve customer retention. ~~This framework is~~ intended to be a mechanism for companies ~~to focus on the key areas and steps~~ to instil a customer service culture and ~~thus~~ improve ~~customer retention~~ by improving organizational performance (cf. Rezaei et al. 2015). Customer retention is key, particularly in today's highly competitive post financial crisis world. Yet, research suggests ~~that~~ 70% of ~~leaving~~ customers ~~leaved~~ ~~so~~ due to poor customer service (Rich, 2009; Tayfon, 2006; US Chamber of Commerce, 2006; Thomas 2003; Thompson, 2005; Daffy, 2001; Mintel, 1999) and attracting customers costs significantly more than retaining customers (Ennew et al., 2015). Literature ~~exists~~ ~~in a number of~~ related fields (~~including~~ Organisations, Customer Service, Continuous Improvement, Company Culture and Competitive Advantage) ~~suggests~~ ~~reveals~~ three key areas ~~for~~ ~~instilling a~~ customer service culture:

1. Continuous Improvement (CI)
2. Customer Service
3. Company Culture

~~Regarding~~ ~~in terms of~~ the role CI plays in implementing a good customer service strategy, numerous ~~a number of different~~ models exist (e.g. Buelens et al, 2002). These models agree that creating a customer service environment requires the correct people, management, processes, and the capacity for internal change. Nevertheless, some ~~of the~~ models are more process and procedure driven, and could potentially neglect people through their focus on cost savings (e.g. Kee-Hung and Cheng, 2009).

~~If~~ ~~further,~~ in the area of customer service writers such as Cook (2008), Wellington (2010), Deming (1991), Heskett et al., (1997), Marsh (1998) and Juran (1989 and 2003) have developed models to help instil a customer service culture, but these often ~~fail to meet the ideal 'Goldilocks' principle of being 'just right'~~. They tend to be either too simplistic (e.g. Buelens et al, 2002), or too complicated (e.g. Wellington, 2010) to enable linkages to be made. Nevertheless, two models help show links between CI (Beulens et al, 2002 (see figure 1 below) and Customer Service (Daffy 2001) (see Figure 2). These models' depth and focus ~~echo~~ ~~with~~ many areas mentioned in the literature. Most importantly, they take a holistic approach and include culture and leadership, ~~which is noted as key in much literature~~ (cf. e.g. Baird and Parasnis, 2011; Buelens et al, 2002; Daffy, 2001; Gratton, et al., 2003; Rowlands, 2008; Suzuki, 2002) something key at every customer interaction or touchpoint (Rawson et al, 2013; Sleep et al., 2015).

~~The culture of a company~~ culture plays a key role in ~~the running of any~~ business, ~~and~~ Culture can be influenced by leaders, ~~who can have~~ either a positively or negatively effect; “excellent customer service provides a strategic advantage-but only if an organization's culture is transformed to meet the moving target of changing requirements” (Kaufman, 2015, p. 33). Cultures of openness and change ~~are those that~~ can produce a competitive advantage, ~~and~~ sustainability (Want, 2003), profitability and growth (Aula, 2016). Crucially, leaders must understand the company strategy and values (Gimenez-Espin et al., 2013) and effectively communicate these throughout (Haran 2005).

~~Regarding~~ ~~In terms of~~ how these three elements operate within TQM, ~~TQM has a long and much lauded history of research and implementation and~~ the early work of Deming (1991) and Juran (1989) is still ~~very~~ much ~~in~~ used today. Sashkin and Kiser (1993) describe TQM as consisting of a three pronged approach:

1. Training in the tools available to solve issues and improve processes (i.e. CI).
2. The customer must become the centre of the process (i.e. customer service)
3. Company culture should be one of agreed values and leadership direction (i.e. culture).

In order for companies to perform TQM to the optimum these three elements must be aligned (Green, 2012). ~~and~~ within a holistic approach (Kohlbacher and Reijers, 2013; Gifu and Teodorescu, 2014). Conversely, companies could ~~in fact~~ damage their strategy by not considering taking into account these ~~above~~ areas of business functionality (Asif et al, 2009; Harvard Business Review, 1999; Ishikawa, 1990) and even create counterproductive workplace behaviours, (Johnson, 2015) potentially damaging customers' experience. Criticism is still aimed at TQM is still criticized for not being sufficiently customer, or new customer (Parast, 2011; Cao et al 2015) focused, nor having a company culture to support it (Dahlaard, 2006; Irani, 2004; Godfrey et al., 2002). Surviving cCompanies ~~that will survive oftentend to~~ have cultures that embrace people empowerment (Williams, 2008), strong leadership (Rowlands, 2008; Carter, 2013; Lam et al. 2015) or influential (Löfving, 2016) leadership, flexibility in ~~its~~ people and processes (Beulens et al. 2002), ~~and hold~~ high ethics, and quality policies (Asif et al. 2009). Furthermore, they understand the importance of gathering and using relevant information (Beanstock et al. 2015) that is customer focused (Saarijärvi et al 2015). This paper adds to the field by presenting a holistic model that amalgamates and gives devotes equal weight to the three areas of culture, customer service and continuous improvement ~~throughout all areas of a business to help instil customer retention.~~

The paper now reviews some ~~of the literature and models~~ in these fields of customer service, continuous improvement and culture. ~~Then Following this~~, the methodology of how the Delphi technique was used to gather data to develop an empirically based framework (to complement existing literature based ones (e.g. Chakravorti, 2011)) is described. Next, the findings are presented and discussed before the final model is shown.

Continuous Improvement, Customer Service and Company Culture

Much ~~literature aimed at~~ Customer Retention literature exists in the fields of Continuous Improvement, and Customer Service. In this literature, three important areas are highlighted: Continuous Improvement (CI), Customer Service, and Company Culture (also referred to as Organizational Culture). ~~It is The literature~~ generally agrees that companies must gather relevant information about both internal and external customer needs (Berry and Parasuraman 1991, Suzaki 2002, Buelens, et al. 2002; Griffin et al. 2012) in an endeavour to achieve sustainability and a competitive advantage (Ireland et al., 2012; Williams, 2008; Gremler et al., 2001; Gupta, 2016). Indeed, “there can be no long-term success without satisfied customers” (Chaneski, 2015, p.42). To ~~achieve~~ this, however, requires an established culture of ‘delighting customers’ (Daffy, 2001; Carter et al. 2013; Chidley and Pritchard, 2014) with clear staff direction, strong leadership, unambiguous policies and procedures, excellent communication, and training programmes to improve skills and instil employee empowerment ~~are required~~ (Williams, 2008; Porter, 1998; Conway and Briner, 2015; Li et al, 2015). Indeed, employees’ knowledge can help identify Critical Success Factors for managing quality (Calabrese and Scoglio, 2012). Business improvement models such as TQM or Lean (Womack and Jones, 2003; Laureani et al, 2010), and Six Sigma (Parast, 2011), although ~~key part of the process~~, arguably do not complete the whole process as. ~~This is partly because it has been argued that t~~they can be somewhat process driven and less customer focused (Dahlaard, 2006; Irani, 2004; Godfrey et al., 2002), and complex processes may require the amalgamation of many approaches (Assarlind et al, 2012).

~~For To undertake a~~ CI or a Customer Service initiatives, companies must arguably consider all areas ~~of in relation to~~ customer experience, ensuring ~~all~~ employees understand customer needs, and are able and empowered ~~have the capabilities and empowerment~~ to address them (Oliver, 1999; Want, 2003; Pantouvakis and Bouranta, 2013). ~~Although it is acknowledged that~~ employing the ‘right person’ is considered the most important asset to a company, actually identifying and keeping the m-‘right people’ is ~~a~~ challenging (Soderlund

and Rosengren, 2008). Also, ensure employee job satisfaction is key to boosting service quality (Hur et al., 2015; Lages and Piercy, 2012, Yang et al. 2016), particularly with toxic customers (Kumar Madupalli and Podder, 2014). Furthermore, rewards, targets and measurable KPIs must recognise ~~the~~ customers within the system and procedures must align with the company strategy (Laursen and Thorlund, 2010; Parmente, 2007).

~~Company culture consists of many facets and can impact on all business areas. Research shows that companies with a CI customer focused culture, values and norms tend to be more successful (Want 2003). Thus, companies must motivate employees by setting clear guidelines surrounding their values and norms that must be followed to achieve this culture (Want 2003). Organizational change is inextricably linked with organizational culture: without the culture of change some argue that change will not happen (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2015).~~

~~Nevertheless, Yet despite all of the above, and arguably having a knowledge of all of the above, many companies still focus on sales, manufacturing and profit rather than customers. This can be seen in key models in the field.~~

Two key models in this area are Beulens et al's (2002) model of the 4 P Cycle of CI (see Figure 1 below) and Daffy's Key elements of World Class Service Model (see Figure 2 below).

Insert Figure 1 Here

Insert Figure 2 Here

Although key models in their area, ~~neither both fail to~~ *holistically* represent ~~a way~~s forward for companies to inculcate a customer service culture for customer retention. Beulens et al's model is arguably somewhat simplistic in its implications. For example, when ~~it~~ describes ~~how the~~ customer ~~will~~ feelings or ~~the it describes the~~ delivery of quality goods and services, these are merely statements, ~~whereas and in other parts of the eyele~~ the model describes ~~necessary the~~ actions ~~that need to be taken~~ such as developing skills, or increasing responsibility. ~~In terms of~~ Daffy's Key Elements Model, ~~this~~ arguably places more emphasis on ~~the~~ customers ~~throughout and highlight~~ *throughout, highlightings* the importance of the different elements, ~~although they are treated discretely rather than holistically. However, these elements are nonetheless treated discretely and there is thus a danger of the focus being dissipated away from the customer towards profit. Furthermore,~~ Porter (1998) also advises

~~againsteaution regarding the error of potentially~~ jumping from one strategy to another, as this ~~reduces focus,takes the focus away from implementing any one strategy correctly.~~

Despite ~~suchtheir~~ shortcomings, both models are key ~~in the field~~, and also resonate withreflect (and are reflected by) much of the literature. ~~With regard to~~ Beulen's et al.'s (2002) model's ~~focus on,the importance of~~ having the right people is echoedalso reflected in many sources (e.g. Schein, 2004; Rowlands, 2008, France et al., 2009) as are the importance of productivity (Zeithaml et al, 1990; Gratton et al, 2003), products (Heskett et al, 1997, Suzaki, 2002) and processes (Baird and Parasnis, 2011, Rowlands, 2008). In ~~terms of~~ Daffy's model,~~and in line with much of the literature,~~ leadership is much emphasised (cf. Gratton et al., 2003; Pride, 2008), aided by ~~gathering and~~ listening to customer feedback (Zeithaml et al., 1990; Rowlands, 2008; Dabholkar, 2015). The use of up to date technology (Baird and Parasnis, 2011) and now the use of social media (Agnihotri et al. 2015) is also considered key. Also for companies operating across many cultures, processes may need to consider different cultural practices (Mobley et al. 2009; Leatherman, 2008; Webster and White, 2010)

The research in this paper combined the three elements of: Beulens et al's (2002) model, Daffy's (2001) model, and existing literature to formulate questions for in-depth Delphi interviews with company directors. We now describe the rationale and approach to these interviews. ~~the underpinning rationale and approach with these interviews before moving to our findings and the framework.~~

Methodology: interviews using the Delphi technique.

~~The data to form the framework was gathered using three iterative rounds of interviews with 9 experts from companies of differing sizes and all from different industries. A broad industry view was sought largely due to the aim of producing a framework guide that could be used in the general business marketplace. At each round the data gathered was shared with each interviewee and new opinions were sought, with the aim of reaching a consensus on the value of the data for all concerned. This process of reporting back after each round is known as the Delphi technique. The Delphi technique is named after the Ancient Greektakes its name from the Ancient Greek fount of knowledge, the Oracle, situated at Delphi. It, and is a qualitative, yet structured and systemised approach that aimed to gain the most reliable consensus of opinion (Powell 2003; Woudenber, 2001). The technique dates back to 1948 when it was first used in forecasting and planning, (Gupta and Clarke, 1996; Woudenber, 1991). and It gained popularity in the 1970s as a method of research investigation or a~~

communications device (Woudenberg, 1991) that moved away from purely quantitative methods into the qualitative arena, and involved a number of anonymous interviews with experts (Rowe and Wright 2001), semi-structured or structured, to elicit the opinions of industry experts (Browne 1968).

~~The Delphi technique~~ has ~~manya number of~~ advantages. ~~Its~~ anonymity encourages discussion, yet ~~as participants understand the fact that people know~~ the information will be shared and ~~that~~ feedback will be given over multiple interactions. ~~encourages~~ reflection and consideration ~~are encouraged~~ (Salkind, 2010). Its use of experts draws on an immense range of experience when the total experience of all individuals is accounted for (Rowe and Wright, 2001). Further, ~~the fact that~~ it uses several rounds of ~~data collection, interviews~~ ~~helpings~~ reach ~~a~~ consensus and increases reliability (Salkind, 2010). ~~P~~ ~~with~~ participation leading to ownership, and ~~possibly can result in the~~ implementation of change ~~by the participants~~ (Woudenberg, 2001), especially ~~as given the fact that~~ the feedback ~~process~~ allows participants to widen their knowledge (Salkind, 2010).

~~Commonly, Delphi studies are done using questionnaires (Saizarbitoria et al 2006), surveys or database analyses. Saizarbitoria (2006) summarizes numerous Delphi studies, 11 of which drew on surveys and 7 of which used databases. Such studies have the advantage that the data gathered can come relatively straightforwardly from large numbers of participants (e.g. 100) and also yields itself to ready analysis through the use of electronic software such as QSR Nvivo. Despite these advantages, the Delphi technique is not without its drawbacks. Logistically it places immense time demands on both participants and researchers, but the richness and depth of the data it gives arguably outweighs these drawbacks.~~

~~In contrast, terms of the process of how data was gathered for this project used, three rounds of in-depth interviews with 9 industry experts were undertaken. Thus, 27 interviews were conducted totalling more than 30 hours in length. Such a large amount of data took over 200 hours to transcribe but had the advantage of containing extremely. Although only 9 industry experts were interviewed, the richness of the information to gathered assisted in help reaching an overall consensus after the final round. The transcripts were analysed through continual reading and rereading in a themed analysis. Whilst having the advantage of more than meeting the recommendations of the number of interviews (Rowe and Wright, 2001 recommend 2) and minimum number of interviewees (Woudenberg 2001 recommends 6) there are nevertheless limitations. One of the main criticisms is the vast amount of time and cost required to gather and analyse the data (cf. Taylor, 2008).~~

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3 ~~Also,~~ the experts selected were arguably a convenient sample (Anderson, 2003)
4 chosen because of the fact they were known to the researcher, and for their experience as
5 company directors. ~~The experts were asked to respond with a management /director level~~
6 ~~viewpoint and were assured of their anonymity.~~ The framework (see figure 3 below) was
7 developed based on ~~the~~ data gathered from the first two sets of interviews, the models (figure
8 1 and 2), and the literature ~~review~~. ~~Q-The interview questions were~~ focused on the identified
9 3 key areas ~~as indicated~~ from the literature ~~review~~: Company Culture, Customer Service and
10 CI. The first round of questions were semi-structured to allow for expansion and probing
11 (Teche, 1990). ~~The second round of questions was~~ more detailed and specific, with. ~~The~~
12 questions ~~were~~ developed from the findings from round one and shared ~~in turn~~ with each
13 interviewee. Feedback, opinion, and answers were discussed. In the third ~~and final~~ interview
14 the framework was shown to elicit industry expert opinion as to the suitability and ease of its
15 use ~~of the framework~~ in practice.

26 Findings and Discussion

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28 ~~Our results and discussion section is divided into two parts.~~ The first part of our findings and
29 discussion presents and considers the results from the first two interviews relating to ~~the~~
30 ~~three main areas of~~ Customer Service, Culture, and Continuous Improvement. ~~It is these~~
31 ~~three areas~~ that the developed framework centred on. ~~This framework is presented and~~
32 ~~discussed in~~ the second part presents and discusses where the results from the third and final
33 Delphi interview ~~are presented and discussed to,~~ showing the reactions of the ~~industry~~
34 experts to the framework. Our discussion focuses both on comparisons with the literature
35 and our with industry ~~expert~~ experts' views, on and in particular considering ~~implications~~
36 ~~involved with the framework's~~ practical implementation ~~of the framework to instil a~~
37 ~~customer focused approach throughout all levels and areas of the company.~~

46 Customer Service,

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48 Regarding ~~In terms of~~ Customer Service, ~~the areas of~~ 'competitive advantage', 'people' and
49 'local knowledge' were ~~either~~ considered ~~beneficial or~~ integral to delivering customer
50 service. ~~With regard to the area of~~ 'Competitive advantage' was noted to be key, it was
51 noted by by the majority of companies ~~to that~~ delivering effective customer service was key
52 to giving the company a competitive advantage (cf. Want, 2003; Aula, 2016). Consequently,
53 customer service was held as a core competency and considered by the majority of companies
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3 to be the ethos of the business (cf. Deming, 1991; Wellington, 2010). ~~It was felt that~~ the
4 leadership team needed to believe in a clear policy, explain ~~it~~, mentor ~~it~~, train and support
5 employees (cf. Li et al, 2015), and ~~It was also felt that there had to be a clear policy and that~~
6 ~~an atmosphere that~~ encouraged questions, and feedback ~~and support~~ that incorporated
7 continuous monitoring ~~and training~~ was needed (cf. Williams 2008). In interview 2, all nine
8 respondents expressed the idea this was “*up to the whole company*” and the responsibility of
9 “*anybody with a touch-point with customers both internally and externally*” to look after
10 clients (Sleep et al., 2015). ~~The achievement of~~ such a competitive advantage could be
11 ~~also~~ linked in with salaries and promotion. ~~Regarding salaries,~~ One company noted ~~that~~:
12 “*our customer service policy is used throughout the company as a measure of competitive*
13 *advantage and salary advancements. We talk about it all the time*”. In terms of promotion,
14 ~~the~~ company commented that “*all our staff are measured against the company’s core*
15 *values on a continuous basis and it becomes a competitive advantage for them if they are*
16 *applying for an internal role and is a constant reaffirmation of what we are here to do [and]*
17 *in order to do this, employees must understand, accept and live by the company core values*”.
18 One factor that arose in the Delphi interviews but is not considered in the literature as far as
19 we can see, is the issue of transparency. One company stressed the importance and presence
20 of transparency, ~~noting that~~ “*We have a complete transparency policy, we are completely*
21 *open with our clients and assume they are with us, it helps to build trust in the partnership,*
22 *and we always let them know what’s going on*” and felt openness builds trust. ~~another felt~~
23 ~~transparency was important.~~

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38 The ~~theme of~~ having the ‘right people’ was also considered critical to achieving
39 customer service (Soderland and Rosengren, 2008) and ~~As one company noted,~~ “*it’s down*
40 *to the people you employ to look after your customers*”, or, ~~Another company further noted~~
41 ~~that,~~ “*no matter what policy you have in place, the wrong people may not follow your*
42 *policies*”. Although not emphasised in the literature, in our Delphi interviews, ~~Regarding~~
43 employee selection was a critically important element, and a minimum of two interviews
44 was suggested, ~~with continuously questioning the candidate to attain the truth,~~ to “*be*
45 *specific, use examples and probe and probe until you are comfortable with the answers*”.
46 Experience and personality were considered potentially ~~of~~ more valuable than education,
47 ~~and it was felt appraisals related to delivery of the company’s core values were an excellent~~
48 ~~idea, and these should include consideration of examples where employees had delivered~~
49 ~~excellent customer service.~~

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3 In terms of the importance of local knowledge, all companies agreed that local
4 knowledge was essential and that one process will not work across all cultures. For example,
5 two companies commented on differences in customer service approaches in different
6 countries, and that in one country “if they [the customer] do not complain then we don’t have
7 an issue”. This respondent said that they were trying to change this thought process but were
8 struggling to get agreement on any changes.
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17 Organisational Culture

18 Similarly to how leadership was key to delivering customer service, it was also considered
19 key to shaping the culture of a company to a service focused culture. Overall, the themes of
20 leadership, communication, people and information were also prominent in the area of culture
21 (cf. Rowlands, 2008). In terms of leadership, this was considered key by all companies, and it
22 was felt directors and key managers needed to agree with the policy on culture. It was felt
23 that directors must support the workers and show, or direct, rather than dictate. However,
24 directing rather than dictating, although important, this was easier said than done, ~~as one~~
25 ~~company noted that~~ “it’s actually quicker and easier to tell people what to do, but not
26 necessarily the right thing to do”. In interview 2, all companies agreed with the statement
27 from interview 1 that “yYou need to have the directors on board, if they believe in it and get
28 behind it, it will work, but they need to keep control of it”. ~~Further, that this was essential, for~~
29 ~~example, saying that “Leadership is the key in implementing any new objectives” (cf.~~
30 ~~Leatherman, 2008).~~ However, issues related to the exact manner of this leadership were
31 complex. It was felt a “bullying atmosphere” could createlead to disloyalty and ~~create~~ a
32 negative working environment. Also, ~~it was felt that if there was,~~ “too much control in place
33 you show a lack of trust” (cf. Want, 2003). It was believed ~~that~~ company employees will
34 follow the attitude of the directors therefore the delivery of internal customer service is also
35 important. ~~or person responsible for customer service and therefore reaching agreement that~~
36 ~~customer service is a key component for business success was required. However, although~~
37 ~~in interview 2 everyone agreed with the interview 1 statement that “we need to be joined at~~
38 ~~the hip in terms of good customer service; it’s at the heart of what we do”, there was also a~~
39 ~~feeling that this would be something that was aspired to rather than something the company~~
40 ~~actually did. However, it~~ was also felt that most directors will have moved away from
41 understanding the day-to-day workings of the business, and that in order to set out clear
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3 plans, targets, training and feedback it was necessary to listen to employees' opinions. ~~the~~
4 ~~opinions of the workers as they will then potentially assist in implementing the changes given~~
5 ~~that their opinions had been sought and considered.~~ Thus, the Delphi interviews highlighted
6 the challenges directors face when attempting to practically implement a different way of
7 working, and arguably such ways can only be implemented when they are done so
8 holistically. Although directors here said they would aspire to do this rather than actually do
9 it, they also felt that using the developed framework would help overcome these challenges.

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14 C~~In addition,~~ communication was also considered ~~to be~~ fundamentally important and
15 something ~~that~~ every department had to be involved in (cf. Haren, 2005). ~~For example, in the~~
16 ~~words of one company,~~ *"All departments need to be involved, otherwise it just won't work,*
17 *what is the point of have a singular customer service policy for one department; they all need*
18 *to be involved and take responsibility"*. C~~Furthermore, it was felt that~~ communications
19 should be circular, ~~therethat there~~ *"should be a circle of communications with all departments*
20 *interacting with each other"*. ~~Regarding~~ ~~With regard to~~ company policy on communications,
21 it was felt that companies need to have and communicate very clear values and competencies,
22 ~~and communicate them right from the start.~~ Further, ~~in line with the above ideas that there~~
23 ~~should be no bullying and that company policy should not be dictated,~~ communication should
24 be open: *"There needs to be an open interactions policy and method of communications and*
25 *exchanges."* Interestingly, ~~though,~~ one company added that *"the intranet will not allow for*
26 *this;"* ~~and~~ ~~Indeed, in interview 2,~~ when presented with the comment from interview 1 that
27 *"our customer service policy is sent out by the company intranet, we expect everybody to*
28 *read and implement it,"* ~~a~~ ~~All~~ ~~the~~ other ~~eight~~ companies did not feel the intranet was
29 sufficient (contra. Baird and Parasnis, 2011). Statements such as *"ridiculous"*, *"absolutely*
30 *not"*, *"It's too important"* and *"it's unlikely to be enough"* were used. All eight agreed that
31 the intranet or emails ~~were useful in their own right, but~~ tended to be ignored depending on
32 how busy people were. They also agreed that communication mechanisms used reflected on
33 the importance placed on the task and the use of *"emails would not suitably reflect the*
34 *importance of any [internal] communication regarding customers or policies"*.

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50 Regarding ~~the area of~~ 'people', ~~it was felt by~~ all companies ~~felt that~~ people are crucial
51 and that they must understand, accept and live by the company's core values (Soderland and
52 Rosengren, 2008). ~~For example~~ ~~One company stated:~~ *"employees need to understand that if*
53 *we have no customers they won't have a job, but it's up to the directors to help them*
54 *understand this and how to go about keeping their customers happy."* There was a tension
55 between empowering/valuing people ~~yet~~ ~~and emphasising their importance but at the same~~

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3 ~~time~~ not allowing them complete freedom, and ~~the idea~~ that any changes to working practices
4 ~~must needed to~~ be agreed in advance before being allowed. As one company noted, “*if*
5 *changes need to be made then as a company they should be discussed and made, I do think*
6 *however any changes need to be agreed before [being] implemented otherwise there could be*
7 *bedlam.*” — It was also ~~generally~~ felt that not all employees would be happy with all ~~the~~
8 changes ~~that would be implemented~~, and that for those who did not come on board even after
9 retraining, ~~then~~ dismissal was considered appropriate. ~~Thus, the Delphi interviews revealed~~
10 the importance of such personal elements as these, and the use of technology, which are not
11 considered in the quality management literature as far as we could see. Yet, for these
12 directors, they were considered key within a customer focused business.

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20 ~~Regarding~~ ~~In terms of how the area of information related to a culture of customer~~
21 ~~service, companies felt it was important to~~ understanding why clients leave, ~~and that trying to~~
22 gathering ~~this~~ information before clients after they had left was crucial too late. The
23 importance of collecting data from ~~numerous a number of sources and of~~ internal and external
24 ~~sources research~~ was also emphasised (cf. Dabholkar, 2015). For example, such data was
25 ~~felt described as being~~ “*paramount to your business especially now, I need to know why my*
26 *customers are leaving, is my offering wrong or are my competitors performing better?*”
27
28 More emphatically, another company said ~~of whether or not to measure if customers were~~
29 ~~leaving, that~~ “*you must be mad if you don’t [measure why clients leave], you need to*
30 *understand what is going on, are they leaving because of the recession or are they going*
31 *somewhere else?*” ~~Nevertheless~~ ~~Yet, despite these comments~~, only one of the nine companies
32 actually measured whether their customers left and why, and even then this company did not
33 react to the data they collected. All companies did state, however, that they intended to
34 investigate how to do this as a next step. Interestingly, given the fact that companies felt the
35 intranet and email to be largely ineffective in disseminating information, one company spoke
36 of how they believed a customer service poster that they had on their walls was only “*part of*
37 *the furniture*” and generally useless. We argue that the framework we develop here should
38 become a way of working and implementing company strategy, thereby helping with the use
39 of data collected and avoiding the scenario whereby customer service statements become
40 simply “part of the furniture.”

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Continuous Improvement

In the area of continuous improvement ~~similar~~ themes ~~emerged as had done so in the areas of Customer Service and Culture, i.e. those~~ of leadership, communications, training, and information again emerged. In terms of leadership, ~~to help ensure continuous improvement in customer service~~, all directors were happy to empower staff but felt controls needed to be in place ~~to guide staff~~. They also felt that the attitude of the customer person will dictate the employee's attitude to customer service strategy implementation (cf. Kumar Madupalli and Potter, 2014), and ~~that~~ it was the director's responsibility to ensure processes were being adhered to (Baird and Parasnis, 2011) and ~~to~~ establish measurable KPIs. One company noted that, *"Clear values and competencies need to be embedded from the start"* and another emphasised that *"If you don't show your staff how you would like them to behave, they will do whatever they think will be suitable"* (cf. Li et al., 2015).

~~With regard to communications~~, All companies emphasised the importance of communicating ~~to all employees~~ that customer service is the bedrock of the business and that this should be part of the induction. ~~Regarding~~ ~~With regard to~~ the use of Twitter and Facebook, all companies agreed that the business environment is changing at a dramatic pace. However, no company was currently considering implementing any controls of the use of email, Twitter, Facebook or Skype, although they did acknowledge the benefits and dangers of these mechanisms. We would expect that since recent changes in social media activities that these media are considered key (Ajnihotri et al, 2015).

All companies agreed that ~~In terms of integrating~~ Customer Service ~~into company training~~, ~~all companies agreed that this~~ should include people skills, ~~and~~ customer service ~~and as well as~~ product knowledge. All companies noted the costs ~~of~~ ~~involved in~~ training in time, money, sales, reputation and effort to retrain underperformers ~~yet~~. ~~However, companies agreed that this would be cost-efficient if it successful, eded. The absence of training in the past was also noted, one company commenting that "Customer Service wasn't mentioned in my induction". Further, all nine respondents noted the importance of implementing correct and should be ongoing training in skills, knowledge and products (Arya et al. 2003)~~; For example: ~~saying that~~ *"Training in people skills is vital; it's massively important so why would we train in product knowledge but not in how we treat our customers when they are equally important"*.

~~With regard to the role of information in maintaining a customer service focus~~, It was generally felt to be company 'suicide' not to establish what customers (cf. e.g. Rowlands, 2008) and competitors are doing: ~~As one company noted~~: *"You need to have data about both sets of customers [(internal and external)] ~~and~~ that's why it's important to keep doing*

surveys and research, but act on them, ~~it's company suicide not to find out what your customers and competition are up to~~" (cf. Porter, 1998). The importance of gathering data was stressed by all, ~~but at the same time however it was noted how the expensive was noted it was to conduct research, and that in a recession it and that it~~ was not always possible to maintain the necessary investment required to keep ~~websites-information~~ up to date, or to keep ~~the company up to date relevant on~~ new processes and technologies. ~~The importance of having the right people on board was again stressed in the area of information, and the fact that E~~employees were being asked to do more and more during ~~stressful timestimes of a recession meant that they and~~ may not be as customer focused as ~~required they should be~~. As ~~O~~one company noted: "~~w~~*We have lots of information on our customers but we really only look at it if somebody [i.e. a customer] leaves. We never ask them why, I think it's because people think they will get extra work if we need to change things.*" Nevertheless, three companies emphasised ~~that~~ this would not be an issue provided they had employed the right people. ~~Thus, these in-depth interviews confirmed the importance for these directors of gathering customer data and feedback (e.g. Dabholkar, 2015) but they also showed how it was felt insufficient to merely gather data; instead, such data needed to be acted on in order to improve customer retention.~~

Framework Guide

On the basis of the first two interviews, the ~~following framework-guide~~ was constructed (see figure 3). ~~This was then taken to the same nine companies, who were then asked for their thoughts about it. The experts were asked their opinion in the final interview as shown below. The key ideas they had are now presented and discussed here under the areas of content and implementation before the final framework, based on these third interviews, is presented.~~

Insert Figure 3 here

Framework Content.

~~When asked the question 'Does the framework make sense?' t~~There was consensus that the framework was understood. ~~For example. This was borne out through responses such as "it's logically linked and self-challenging", "Absolutely", "It all makes sense and I love the piece about directors showing rather than dictating". Regarding~~In terms of suggested modifications, one company suggested ~~that the~~ customer be placed in the centre, ~~by noting the following:~~ "*It absolutely makes sense but I would place the customer in the centre, after*

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3 all aren't they the people that are important, then all segments would be running off them, I
4 would move the leaders into the culture section under leadership or management". This was
5 subsequently done (see figure 4 below) and these comments show the advantages of the
6 Delphi technique as the framework was developed from the views and consensus gained
7 (Powell, 2003). Further, some ~~of the~~ companies then later went on to use some of the findings
8 within their own businesses (see below).

9
10 ~~Regarding~~ ~~With regard to the content of the framework content~~, when asked ~~the~~
11 ~~question~~ 'Do you agree or disagree with the frameworks content?' there was a general
12 consensus of agreement. ~~For example. This is illustrated by comments such as~~ "Yes I can't
13 find anything I could disagree with", "Yes I agree with all of it. I find it interesting that we
14 think we are doing all of this until its put in front of you and you realise so much has fallen by
15 the wayside.", "I definitely agree; it's all logically linked", "Completely agree", "It's so full I
16 agree with everything in it", "I agree with it, I think the big question now is what your
17 company strategy is? Once you have that the rest will fall into place" (cf. Merchant, 2010).

18
19 ~~It is notable that~~ the Delphi technique allowed for in-depth discussion regarding the
20 leadership team's commitment to change, and to their continuous improvement strategies
21 focusing on the gathering and use of data. Without both (cf. Baird and Parasnis, 2011) it is
22 hard to see ~~how~~ changes can be successfully introduced within businesses. As Porter
23 contends, without leaders fully understanding the direction a company needs to follow, no
24 strategy would be relevant. Thus, good leaders are more important than any strategy (Swaim,
25 2010, Crosby, 1995).

26
27 In terms of ~~the~~ complexity, ~~when asked of the framework, the underlying theme that~~
28 ~~came through in response to the question~~ 'Would you consider it a simple or a complex
29 framework and why?' ~~was that~~ it ~~was felt~~ ~~to~~ need some initial explanation before it
30 would work. ~~For example This is shown by comments such as~~ "I think the colours should fade
31 into each other", "I think it's simple once you understand how it works, and it can be used in
32 a small area or in total. It gives me somewhere to get started and tells me what I need to
33 consider" (cf. Suzaki, 2002). "It looks big to start with but once you get into it you see there
34 is a lot of cross-over. It shows what you need to focus on, ~~the key indicators and~~ this is
35 important" (cf. Parmanter, 2007). Thus, there was perceived to be a clear benefit of reading
36 the findings in conjunction with the framework to help understand and implement it.

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38 ~~With regard to the possibility of the framework working in practice,~~ in response to
39 the question 'Can you see the framework working in practice?' companies agreed that correct
40 management and employee consensus were essential to implement new initiatives, indicating
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3 a need to encompass all areas of a business as a continuous flow. This also suggests that all
4 areas should be integrated ~~in order~~ to achieve strategies, avoid communication breakdown,
5 and help businesses achieve optimum performance~~perform to their best~~ (Suzaki, 2012;
6 Carroll, 2010; Rowlands, 2008; Deming, 1991). One company believed its viability depended
7 on the buy-in from the management team: “~~w~~Without buy-in you will never get any new
8 initiative into a department let alone a company, we are far too focused on the current
9 trading environment and have completely moved away from focusing on the customers to
10 build our business. In fact we never really focused on our customers ~~, we were giving loans~~
11 ~~out far too easily; it was like shooting fish in a barrel~~ (cf. Sashkin and Kiser, 1993). Other
12 comments related to the effectiveness of the framework, e.g. “Yes it graphically
13 demonstrated what needs to be covered” and an intention to use the framework, e.g. “I intend
14 to take it to my new job; ~~it~~ will make me look good, coming in with a new idea”. Other
15 companies expressed agreement and then talked about how they would implement the
16 framework. One company responded with, “~~d~~Definitely but I would start to implement it by
17 breaking it into departments, giving them each a wheel to work on and get them to feed the
18 results back into the overall Company wheel”. It was agreed that, “~~y~~Yes it would, but what I
19 would like to see in place first is an analysis of where we currently are, then look at the
20 company strategy and see where the gaps are, then look at how people work and how it all
21 hangs together” (cf. Porter, 1995).
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35 ~~W~~Regarding whether companies felt the framework was missing anything, when
36 asked ~~the question~~ ‘Is the framework missing anything?’ ~~o~~Only one company commented
37 that “Yes, it’s missing the topic finance, I think it’s so important it should be in there, if you
38 are not measuring your finances you won’t have a business, it feels like it would come under
39 measurements but it should have a heading of its own”. No other respondent identified
40 anything missing, although one mentioned that once a company started to use it, then issues
41 may become apparent. It is significant that only one company felt that the framework was
42 missing something, arguably indicating that the Delphi technique’s ability to encompass and
43 uncover most areas surrounding a topic. ~~In fact the technique also identified topics of honesty~~
44 ~~and transparency, neither of which appear to be addressed in the literature.~~
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53 Framework Implementation

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55 When asked ~~the question~~ ‘How would you then implement it or enable it to work
56 within your business?’ ~~s~~Six respondents stated that they would start at the top to introduce
57 the process, and ensure other directors (leaders) were on board ~~before progressing~~. One stated
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3 they would tell staff to “*JFDI (just f***ing do it) everybody needs to be on board and all*
4 *working in the one way if they are not on board we need to look at their role within the*
5 *company and basically get rid*” (cf. LaWells, 2009) and one would start by researching their
6 current position in terms of strategy and customer feedback. For example,- “*mAy directors*
7 *will love this, we are small enough to agree and implement right away*”. Also, “*I need to get*
8 *everybody on the one page, that’s difficult because of our size therefore I would break it into*
9 *departments, have the managers develop a plan, that ties them in, and give them support to*
10 *show them the importance we are placing on it*” (cf. Merchant, 2010; Suzaki 2002). “*I need*
11 *to get agreement from the directors and senior managers, this would be a priority, then you*
12 *could work on a clear strategy, it needs to be very clear, getting the directors to agree will be*
13 *a challenge*” (cf. Harvard Business Review, 1999). ~~Thus, a key theme was the need to have~~
14 ~~buy in from management.~~

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23 ~~WH~~llustrating this, when asked ~~the question~~ ‘Would you see any specific priorities to
24 start with, in the implementation of this framework?’ ~~Answers~~ revealed that the right
25 people, communication and company culture were all considered important factors. It was
26 thought that once the decision to start was made then the company needed to have a
27 Customer Service focus and the culture needed to change to be in line. (Soderlund and
28 Rosengren, 2008; Popescu and Diaconu, 2008; Cross, et al., 2007). For example, ~~it was~~
29 ~~noted that~~ “*People and roles would be my starting point, check if they are right*” (cf. Kohli
30 and Jaworski, 1990). Further, one company stated that, “*yYou need your team to help with*
31 *your strategy so talking to them would be a good place to start, need to get them motivated as*
32 *well*” (cf. Wellington, 2010). Similarly, ~~a company noted~~ that “*pPeople and mind set change*
33 *will be the first things to start with; if these are wrong then you are wasting your time*” (cf.
34 Harvard Business Review, 1999). ~~Another~~ ~~One~~ company ~~also~~ underlined the importance of
35 having all people on board, noting that “*gGetting everybody onto the same path, so talking*
36 *and listening would be important and getting them motivated into doing this would be a*
37 *pretty key necessity, we would be asking them to change and they need to understand why*
38 *and knowing them they will ask what’s in it for them*” (cf. Rowlands, 2008; Dale, 2003;
39 Juergensen 2000). The ability to adopt change is seen to be a challenge amongst business
40 researchers (Taylor, 2010), one of the suggested ways to engage employees is around
41 communication and collaboration at an early stage and ensuring the targets and strategies are
42 aligned. Kaplan and Norton (2006) and Batt (1999) consistently found that self-management
43 worked more effectively for companies than TQM.

To explore obstacles to implementation, the question ‘What would be your biggest hurdle in getting buy-in to implement this framework, if any and why?’ was asked. One company was based in three culturally different countries, and felt it would be a significant challenge to get all three sites to understand a companywide customer service policy (cf. Smerd, 2009). Again there was consensus on having the correct people, “jobs worth’s, they need to be weeded out, this is an ideal time to do it; wrong people, wrong roles, can affect all areas, they just won’t see the vision”. Others felt the complexity of their business-business complexity would present challenges, for example that “The complexity of our business will be a huge challenge, we would have to divide it into each division, they definitely need this framework, but we are very diverse and big, we would need to find the threads that run through the whole lot and hang the framework off them” (cf. Suzaki, 2002). Company size was felt to be an issue by some. For example, “We are far too big to implement this as a whole; also getting anybody to agree to changes at this point will be testing”. Furthermore, getting people on board was felt to be an obstacle, for example that “One company said that “Getting agreement and peoples attitude to change are two great big hurdles, so it’s back to having the right people, they don’t normally fight change and usually see the benefits”, or Further, a second company noted that “I see the hurdles being internal staff resistance and getting them to agree to change their ways”. Company size clearly affects ability to change as the challenge of communicating a) to the whole company, b) keeping the same message and c) attaining the same understanding is immense (Kaplan and Norton, 2006; Crosby 1995). Yet, breaking the task into manageable pieces, attaining agreement, and using a collaborative approach is most likely an effective starting point (Taylor, 2010; Parmenter, 2007; Van de Berg, 2007).

The final framework.

Based on the third interviews and the comments from companies the final framework is presented here below in Figure 4X. This integrates all the ideas from the literature, from the first two interviews, and, significantly, changes the central section from ‘leadership’ to ‘customer focused leadership’ to reflect the companies’ comments.

Insert Figure 4 here

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3 Although the model still remains to be tested, in the final third interviews a number of
4 directors shed light on how the model could be used practically by commenting both on how
5 they intended to use it in practice, and also on how they had already started to implement it.
6 Regarding intentions, one company felt they would now commence a review of those who
7 were underperforming and, “move them along”, and that they felt more confident to improve
8 TQM in the company after hearing of others’ experiences. Another company felt that they
9 had neglected customer service for a long time and intended to use the framework to refocus
10 on it, and three companies stated how they now intended to use customer service
11 performance measures as part of their quarterly employee reviews and would attempt to
12 implement this into their business if they can get internal agreement. Regarding actual
13 changes, one company had now moved away from using the intranet and email when
14 launching in-company initiatives to the use of personal communications with department
15 heads. Also, two companies were in the process of compiling a list of KPIs specifically in
16 customer service as a test to see how their teams would react were they to introduce a
17 complete customer service culture. Thus, companies were drawing on and implementing the
18 model by the time of the third interview.
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32 **Conclusions**

33 This article describes the development of a framework for companies to use to
34 integrate a customer retention focused work ethic throughout their companies. This involved
35 exploring three areas of Continuous Improvement (CI), Customer Service, and Culture
36 through in-depth Delphi ~~technique style~~ interviews with nine company directors.

37
38 Regarding~~In terms of~~ Customer Service, the strategy should be simple to understand
39 and must be holistic. Further, it should become the basis of a company’s core values and its
40 delivery part of the company’s performance measures. It requires having the right person to
41 represent a company (both nationally and internationally) as key to the success of any
42 business regardless of ~~the~~ role. ~~Furthermore, the H~~ leadership was considered fundamental to
43 any ~~cultural~~ changes, not to dictate, but to spend time ‘at the coalface’ to understand
44 everyday processes and occurring issues. This would then have a fourfold effect that
45 employees ~~fel~~tel they ware being listened to; directors understood~~and~~ the workings of the
46 business; strategies, targets and relevant initiatives can be developed and; collaboration at all
47 levels assists in the implementation of new initiatives. Regarding~~With regard to~~ research and
48 information, measuring sales alone was regarded as insufficient, whereas measuring~~ement of~~
49 ~~the number of~~ departing clients and reviewing why they left was considered a better
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3 | indication of success, ~~and a review of why they left should be included~~. Customer service
4 delivery can be used as a measure for employee development and career progression;
5 delivery of this can be linked to salaries, bonuses and promotion.
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8 Regarding how information is communicated, a straightforward, clear and focused
9 strategy is required that includes processes allowing for open communications including
10 feedback. It is thus necessary to create and maintain an environment where employees feel
11 confident to discuss issues and initiatives in open discussion, meetings, training, and
12 mentoring.
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15 Regarding continuous improvement, 'responsibility' was considered key. It was felt
16 all employees should understand ~~the~~ company needs and their responsibility towards
17 delivering excellent customer service; this must be communicated from induction and
18 monitored on a regular basis. Companies should show commitment to customer service
19 delivery and include customer service policies and strategies at induction, and by example.
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21 Retraining ~~was considered~~ ~~is seen as~~ more cost effective than dismissal and rehiring.
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24 By amalgamating a continuous improvement initiative and a customer service
25 strategy, processes become holistic, involving every department ~~in and by implementing~~ a
26 continuous circle of communication ~~where~~ information is shared and used. In ~~the areas of~~
27 ~~Ce~~continuous ~~I~~improvement, again directors are responsible for the implementation and
28 success of procedures. Where the business is considered too large to implement a holistic
29 implementation of the new framework, breaking it into departments and feeding into an
30 overall company initiative could be considered.
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33 Clearly, the above article shows links between Customer Service, ~~and~~ Continuous
34 Improvement, ~~and Culture and, through the use of the Delphi technique, it shows the~~
35 ~~importance of the areas of finance, IT, and business improvement models. Theoretically, the~~
36 ~~above findings arguably show that the main area for consideration was that a CI initiative~~
37 ~~considers quality improvement tools.~~ Some ~~existingsuch~~ tools include the customer; however,
38 they have been criticised for not going far enough in looking after the customer (e.g. Dale,
39 2003; Lagrosen, 2001; McQuarter et al., 1995). ~~–~~ If they did, as the above article and
40 framework show, these two topics would arguably merge even further. In Customer Service it
41 is maintained that profit will follow good service, whilst in CI, profit is not seen to be so
42 important; ~~–~~ the customer is the important factor. Theoretically, and significantly, these
43 statements may actually align.
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56 The above results show that the developed framework to align these elements is
57 simple and uncomplicated to understand when used in conjunction with clear explanations.
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3 However, until a time when the framework is tested in practice it is difficult to say with any
4 certainty how easy it would be to implement. This is both a limitation and an area should
5 form part of anyfor future research undertaken. Implementing changes within any business
6 changes is not usually an easy task, and requires planning and communications throughout
7 the company. For example, tThe size and culture of a company also dictates the uptake of any
8 initiative and although there is consensus here that this framework will work, consideration
9 must be given to the amount of potential change possiblythat may be required, spanning
10 anything from director buy-in to process change, attitudes, skills, training, people's ability to
11 change, empowerment or leadership and of course costs. The framework may need to be
12 adapted to individual companies depending on these elements. Nevertheless, whatever the
13 context, we argue the framework demonstrates that when a holistic approach is implemented,
14 regardless of size or industry, it showsBy doing this it is hoped that it is possible to
15 demonstrate that when a customer service is the focus, of the heart and ethos of the company
16 culture and is embedded throughout all elements of company practice and culture, then the
17 improvement to TQM is both tangible and significant.

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20 Overall the use of the Delphi technique in the context of the existing models and
21 existing literature to interview company directors reveals a number of novel and significant
22 elements for integrating the three key areas of CI, Customer Service and Culture. – Firstly
23 rather than having a single customer focused department or section, in order to truly focus on
24 the customer it must be introduced holistically throughout the whole company, secondly the
25 fundamental role played by the people in the company was noted, and this has to be
26 considered at all stages of company processes including recruitment, training and openness to
27 feedback. Finally and most importantly this paper shows that without being supported and
28 driven by the leadership of the company a customer retention focused ethos will not result.

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