

# Scholarly Knowledge Communication in Organisational Decision-Making

*Peter Björk*

*Department of Marketing  
Hanken School of Economics*

*Hannele Kauppinen-Räsänen*

*School of Marketing and Communication  
University of Vaasa*

*This study explored how scholarly knowledge—with a focus on service quality—is used and obtained by business managers in daily practice, and potential barriers to implementing such knowledge in decision-making. A qualitative approach was employed in conducting individual interviews with 20 managers in 10 Finnish companies. The study detected that service quality knowledge was recognised and internally communicated, thereby affecting business practices. By exploring how such knowledge is obtained and used, this study detected several barriers on both the individual and organisational levels, indicating that scholarly knowledge is not fully employed as evidence in decision-making. The study contributes to the ongoing discussion concerning the relationship between theory and practice by providing empirical insights regarding service quality knowledge and by elucidating why this knowledge is not employed in decision-making.*

**Keywords:** internal communication, management practice, scholarly knowledge, service quality

## 1 Introduction

Managers today face challenging, fast-paced business environments where decisions are often governed by habits and conventions. At best, these decisions are cognitive responses guided by automatic activation of stable memory constructs that individuals can access without much reflection or effort (Salas, Rosen & DiazGranados 2010). The rationale here is that, over time, memorable stored experiences cultivate a level of practical and situational expertise (Martelo-Landroguez & Martin-Ruiz 2016). Conversely, evidence-based management makes decisions informed by unbiased organisational data (Rousseau 2006; Bansal et al. 2012). Such decision-making is supported by empirical research and analysis, based on the assumption that they reduce bias and errors of judgement more effectively than intuition- or expertise-based management (Baba & HakemZadeh 2012).

Management decisions are increasingly based on scholarly evidence (Rowley 2012), yet it is claimed that scholarly knowledge is not employed to its full potential (e.g. Crespín-Mazet & Ingemansson-Havenvid 2020). Scholars develop concepts, theories and models based on real-life phenomena (Lilien 2011; MacInnis, 2011), and although ‘business research is research about business, not research for business’ (Lee & Greenley 2010: 7), researchers stress that scholarly research aims also at contributing to business practices (e.g. Lehmann, McAlister & Staelin 2011; Kumar 2017). For marketing, Foltean (2019: 520) affirms that, ‘as an applied science, marketing must have practical relevance’.

The theory–practice relationship is not a new debate. It has received attention in fields like management (Bartunek & Rynes 2014; Ungureanu & Bertolotti 2020) for decades. Research on marketing management has contributed insights on the kind of scholarly knowledge that is used in the field (e.g. Lilien 2011; Roberts, Kayande & Stremersch 2014), why this knowledge is or should be used (e.g. Jaworski 2011) and when it is used (e.g. Lilien 2011). Yet, empirical studies on the topic are scarce (Bartunek & Rynes 2014).

This study advances the discussion of the theory–practice relationship by examining service quality, an essential marketing construct related to customer satisfaction and loyalty (e.g. Gummesson 2002; Halvorsrud, Kvale & Følstad 2016). Scholars and managers alike share the view that investments in achieving service excellence are a strategic priority for firms, and further, improving service quality has a pronounced effect on business success (Boksberger & Melsen 2011; Sivakumar, Mei & Beibei 2014). However, it is not uncommon for customers to complain about service quality (Gruber 2011), which suggests that there may be barriers, such as communication gaps, preventing the application of service quality knowledge into practice.

This study explores how 1) service quality knowledge is obtained (e.g. sources) and 2) used by managers in daily practice and 3) potential barriers to the exploitation of scholarly knowledge in decision-making. By comparing the knowledge managers use in their daily practice to the best practice according to service quality theory, the study unravels the state of this knowledge use and potential barriers for embracing it in practice. Finally, based on the findings, communication gaps are explored.

## **2 Scholarly Knowledge-In-Use**

### **2.1. Three Levels of Scholarly Knowledge-In-Use**

Scholarly knowledge can provide rational solutions to managerial problems (Cornelissen & Lock 2005), and managers who acknowledge the benefits of scholarly evidence can convert that information into improved performance strategies (Menon & Varadarajan 1992; Ottesen & Gronhaug 2004). The question is, what does it mean to implement scholarly knowledge in daily practice?

At best learning, understanding and communicating scholarly knowledge are embedded in daily organisational practices and are part of the decision-makers' mental models and the firm's holistic orientation (Strandvik, Holmlund & Grönroos 2014). A firm's culture, including its practices and logics, should support knowledge acquisition and sharing. Thus, the provision of service is a state of mind, and service quality is the responsibility of the entire organisation (Baron et al. 2011). This approach implies that knowledge is used on *instrumental level*; its effects are understood and can be implemented reliably (Menon & Varadarajan 1992; Cornelissen & Lock 2005). It also implies that knowledge

is used in specific and direct ways, and essential concepts are defined for strategic use across the firm (Menon & Varadarajan 1992). Best practice indicates that service quality knowledge is translated into context-specific definitions and then implemented as strategies based on clear statements that are communicated across the firm. Scholarly knowledge may also be used on *conceptual level*, which means that knowledge is utilised indirectly (Menon & Varadarajan 1992). On this level, knowledge is recognised and may indeed provide ideas and tools for understanding business practices (Cornelissen & Lock 2005), yet its potential is not fully recognised (Menon & Varadarajan 1992). Firms may use available knowledge in their decision-making processes, but they do not to exploit it in practice because of individual and/or organisational barriers. Consequently, the content of the intra-organisational communication is not detailed for practice, and there may even be flaws in the communication process. Finally, scholarly knowledge may also function on *symbolic level*. This means that knowledge is misused and oversimplified, and it is not truly understood or properly implemented (Menon & Varadarajan 1992). For example, service quality knowledge may be oversimplified, or the specific context of a given theory may not be considered. It is also possible that scholarly knowledge is recognised and used for its benefits under this framework, but this use serves only legitimising ends (Cornelissen & Lock 2005), indicating that firms use knowledge only to justify existing practices.

## **2.1 Barriers to Embracing Scholarly Knowledge**

Research has revealed a number of barriers that impede the full use of scholarly knowledge in practical decision-making (e.g. Roberts et al. 2014). For example, some practitioners do not deem scholarly knowledge valuable or relevant to their daily business practice (Cascio 2007; Storbacka 2012). Conversely, while practitioners may recognise the practical value of scholarly knowledge, they may be only vaguely aware of recent research, which implies an awareness barrier (e.g. Ankers & Brennan 2002; Baron et al. 2011). Klaus and Edvardsson (2014) found a negative attitude toward the field of marketing, including practical and scholarly knowledge, suggesting an attitude barrier. Knowledge may exist, but it may only be vaguely communicated within the organisation, or it may be acknowledged but have limited implementation in practice (Cornelissen & Lock 2005; Kauppinen-Räsänen & Grönroos 2015). An implementation barrier suggests that, even if managers become aware of scholarly knowledge and use it, it may not be fully exploited (Cornelissen & Lock 2005). Differences in logics (how problems are tackled) between practices and scholars (e.g. Feldman & Orlikowski 2011; Foltean 2019) further explain the limited integration of scholarly knowledge.

Integration is also hindered if scholarly knowledge is published only in academic journals (Cohen 2007), as managers typically do not perceive these publications as attractive information sources (Bartunek & Rynes 2014). Academic journals usually present knowledge through writing, which requires more effort to process than visual representation does (e.g. Kauppinen-Räsänen & Jauffret 2018); moreover, visual representation

better supports fast-paced business practice. Language and expression are linked to language barriers, such as academic ‘illiteracy’—the difficulty in reading and understanding written scholarly knowledge. Lilien (2011: 205) noted that ‘People won’t use what they don’t understand’, which implies that, if academic literature is perceived as vague, abstract or difficult to follow, practitioners will not use it. While the limited accessibility of scholarly publications is one barrier to utilising scholarly knowledge, the fast pace business environment likewise implies a barrier related to the amount of time required to seek out and interpret this information effectively (Rowley 2012).

## 2.2 Service Quality Scholarly Knowledge

The scholarly knowledge of service quality is presented as a holistic evaluation of evolving, co-created experiences of value in service systems (McColl-Kennedy, Cheung & Ferrier 2015). Perceived service quality, embedded in service processes and enabled by the service provider, is defined by the customer. From a firm’s perspective, insight and focus are critical for business success. Accordingly, the service provider needs to identify the critical dimensions that customers use when evaluating service quality (Åkesson, Edvardsson & Tronvoll 2014). Scholarly knowledge emphasises customer centricity to the extent that this notion is embedded in the logic of a given business (Gummesson & Grönroos 2012). This means acknowledging who customers are, why they are customers, as well as their needs, desires and behaviours (e.g. Heinonen et al. 2010). Moreover, service quality knowledge emphasises the importance of understanding how customers perceive quality, and defining quality and its dimensions explicitly from customers’ perspectives (e.g. Vaziri & Beheshtinia 2016). Studies have concluded that customers’ perceptions of service quality relate to their expectations of the service compared with their actual service experience. The key factor here is the communication of promises. Customers’ experiences relate to a firm’s ability to provide the service as promised; physical aspects, such as the servicescape (including the cleanliness and functionality of the physical service setting); the practitioners’ willingness to serve the customer; the company’s engagement in fulfilling service promises; and the customer’s perception of caring in the provision of services (Parasuraman 2002; Keyser & Lariviere 2014).

The definition of quality and its dimensions vary across businesses and industries. For example, *technical quality* implies how a client evaluates what is provided by the service, such as a consumed meal or postal delivery, while *functional quality* is a client’s appraisal of how the service is created and delivered and comprises elements of service production and consumption (e.g. Grönroos 1984). Functional quality relates to the human components of the service provider and its employees (e.g. competence, attitudes, behaviour) and to customer perceptions of security, credibility, trustworthiness and reputation (i.e. corporate image) (e.g. Mishra et al. 2014). Functional quality also relates to the firms’ actions and tangible practices, such as connectedness (accessibility, flexibility), service recovery, the physical environment and its servicescape (e.g. cleanliness) (e.g. Drach-

Zahavy & Somech 2013). Service quality knowledge emphasises value co-creation and interaction, and acknowledges customers and employees as major stakeholders in the firm's attempts to achieve service excellence (Grönroos & Voima 2012).

One key to achieving service excellence is consistency, which requires setting operational service standards according to the best business practice (e.g. Sivakumar et al. 2014). At the instrumental level, best practice denotes situating customers at the centre of the business, seeking their insights on how they experience and perceive service quality and defining quality at the strategic level (e.g. Heinonen et al. 2010).

### **3 Method**

#### **3.1 A Qualitative Study Approach**

We employed a qualitative research approach and conducted individual interviews with managers. The research was done in Finland. The sample consisted of 10 case companies and 20 interviews, which were selected using purposive sampling. The firms were all within the B-C service sector and in the process of developing in a services- and customer-oriented direction with an emphasis on service quality, as confirmed by the CEOs. The cases varied, representing different types of services (banking, insurance, delivery and logistics, hotels and food), and they were all large competitors in terms of measured sales. The interview questions were designed with an in-depth focus on a particular phenomenon—service quality—within a real-life context (Yin 1994). This approach is preferred when “how” and “why” questions are posed within the interview. As the research query is not only exploratory but also partially descriptive and organisational, we believed a qualitative research approach was appropriate.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

Interviews were initiated by contacting the case firm's CEO, who provided first-hand information regarding the firm's views on service and customer orientation as well as on service quality. Thereafter, targeted gatekeepers were contacted with the snowball sampling technique and the key informant approach (Rossomme 2003). The interviewees were all senior managers with at least five years of business experience, with titles such as CEO, concept manager, district manager and marketing manager. Eighteen out of 20 informants had university degrees. Three assistants helped to collect the data. An interview guide was designed to capture the defined key issues, including customer orientation, service quality and information sources, and to ensure a consistent interviewing procedure. The interviews began with a short and broadly stated explanation of the study. The interviews included questions like ‘What is the meaning of the constructs for the company?’ and ‘What do you do to provide service quality and why?’. These questions were followed by other questions seeking to reveal the interviewees' views of customers and their customers' expectations of quality. The interview locations were selected by the

interviewees to ensure accessibility and provide comfort. The recorded and transcribed interviews were an average of 40 minutes in length.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The data were analysed in four phases. The first was descriptive, aiming at gaining an initial impression of scholarly knowledge use. This involved analysing how managers perceived service-inclined culture (service as a process and service and customer orientation), service quality and human interaction in providing service excellence. The data were first analysed informant by informant and then compared within and across firms. In the second phase, managers' perceptions were compared to the best practice according to the scholarly knowledge. This analysis was guided by the three conceptual knowledge levels (instrumental, conceptual, symbolic) to identify the level at which the scholarly knowledge is used (Menon & Varadarajan 1992) (Chapter 4.1). The sources—how service quality knowledge was gained—were analysed in the third phase (Miles & Huberman 1984) (Chapter 4.2). The potential gaps or discrepancies between scholarly knowledge and practice were revealed in the fourth phase (Chapter 4.3).

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 Service Quality Knowledge-In-Use**

#### **4.1.1 Perceptions of Service-Inclined Culture**

First, service was acknowledged as a process and a journey that contributes to a customer's overall experience. Companies had written guides in which the entire customer service process was described in detail, and they were frequently cited during the interviews. Notably, these instructions were rather technical and rigid. The written guides explained the service process as a procedure rather than revealing the antecedents of service quality or articulating how service excellence is achieved and what its consequences are within this process:

We have a handbook in which the whole operation model is described ... We have defined the whole customer experience in detail from the customer entering the premises ... and being greeted. We assume that she will get the [products] and will be served briskly in a clean environment. [Case 2]

We educate all new employees regarding how to behave, try to explain our business idea and emphasise customer satisfaction. We also have written instructions: step-by-step models for how to advance customer contact. [Case 3]

The analysis revealed that the firms' strategic vision was the provision of services, and the pursuit of this goal was founded on customer insights. Additionally, the communication loop was emphasised. The informants stated that service knowledge and customer orientation were key to improving business performance, and they took initiatives to achieve these aims:

We try to keep up with the changing needs and wants of the customers ... we are in a constant learning process. [Case 10]

Yet, the data showed that the service-inclined culture was not fully embraced, as customers were not fully integrated in creating value and achieving service excellence.

#### **4.1.2 Perceptions of Service Quality**

Service quality was considered to be easy to define, and the managers recognised the advantages of providing service excellence. Service quality was considered to have a technical dimension:

Explaining our offering is sometimes very difficult, but we really try to make sure that the customer understands the service that she gets. [Case 4]

However, the analysis showed that service quality was most often expressed as a functional dimension — that is, as something indicated by the speed of service, the reliability of the service provider and the quality of the service performed:

We really try to give our customers (asking for a loan) a decision very fast ... this has proved to be one of our unique selling points. [Case 3]

... it [speed] is nearly the same as reliability... [Case 2]

The analysis also showed that the dimensionality of service quality was only implicitly acknowledged. In fact, service quality was often related to basic customer service, whereby customer contact was sometimes viewed as inherently good:

We have well-elaborated procedures for how to face customers in the first meeting discussing different services. [Case 7]

Sometimes, even product quality was viewed as service quality:

We have a clear recipe [for the served food]. [Case 1]

A conclusion was that the perceptions of service quality varied even within firms. Hence, the concept of quality was not defined or implemented systematically, and thus consistent understanding of the concept could not be guaranteed (Menon & Varadarajan, 1992).

#### **4.1.3 Acknowledging Human Aspects of Service Quality**

The data revealed that customers' perceptions of quality were less readily defined. Hence, although customer orientation was noted, it was not exploited to its fullest extent:

In contact with the customers, we try to listen to [their] needs and wants and see what we can offer; we have a package of service offerings, and our task is to find the most suitable one. [Case 5]

It is a field of art or science to understand the customer ... What they want exactly, they must be able to express it concretely [expressed in a negative manner]. [Case 1]

In their encounters with customers, employees were directed to follow the firms' written instructions. The managers emphasised that everyone was responsible for delivering service quality. Scholarly knowledge stresses that to assure service quality and its quality dimensions like empathy, accessibility, reliability, responsiveness and flexibility require a degree of situational employee empowerment. Then again, the quality dimensions require certain types of transient skills, such as the mental readiness to serve. Yet, a conclusion was that the proclaimed intention to deliver services consistently—especially with regard to service excellence—was not monitored consistently.

The data supported the importance of achieving service excellence. Moreover, some antecedents of service quality were emphasised, including professional staff. However, the consequences of the executed activities for delivering service quality (employee training) were not apparent. Many of the efforts related to the employees appeared to be single events, separate from company-wide protocols. Additionally, less support was found for service- and customer-oriented management to facilitate work environments in which employees were empowered to provide an excellent service experience. The informants' responses to the queries about the consequences of such readiness, training or a reward system in internal marketing activities included the following:

We try to look for new employees [who have] the right attitude. I think we have been successful so far. We do also practise systems where we ask our employees if they know of a suitable person ... of course, I interview [the applicants], and they have to pass all kinds of tests. In the end, we have a good team spirit. [Case 3]

We offer our employees different types of courses to keep them updated with the latest rules and regulations, and, of course, we do also offer seminars when new services are launched. [Case 6]

To conclude, while managers acknowledged the importance of service quality, the management of service quality appeared to be founded on habits, conventions and trial and error. Thus, even though the firms had standards prescribing the provision of services, service quality was realised in every service interaction. Instead of maintaining operational quality standards, service quality was perceived as a personal issue that was defined case by case. One manager expressed that it was

... up to each person in the organisation to do her/his best in each situation ... [to] make a deal and look after it so that the customer is satisfied. [Case 4]

The co-creation aspects of service quality were noted, yet what comprises quality in a given service experience is based on each employee's interpretation of the concept.

In conclusion, responses to queries regarding service quality expressions were abstract and wide-ranging, implying *conceptual use* of scholarly knowledge (Menon & Varadarajan 1992). The responses did not indicate a coherent inter-organisational definition of service quality, and professed understandings of service quality were not followed up in practice. Functioning on the conceptual level means that scholarly knowledge is used indirectly, without acknowledging the benefits of using it instrumentally. Although such a broad application can be beneficial (Cornelissen & Lock 2005), invoking abstract concepts at the managerial level may cause problems, including a lack of understanding among employees, resulting in confusion and miscommunication. Such circumstances could indicate that scholarly concepts are being used *symbolically* and in the wrong context. Thus, despite the professed strategic priority of providing customer-oriented service, quality and its related dimensions remained *undefined* at the strategic level. Furthermore, as management views of service quality are not explicitly documented and communicated across the organisation, it is challenging to ensure the true execution of service excellence.

#### **4.2 Sources of Managers' Service Quality Knowledge**

We found insufficient implementation of scholarly knowledge, as the firms failed to use and communicate service quality based on academic theory. Thus, we also endeavoured to identify how knowledge is gained or the sources of the interviewees' existing knowledge.

The informants had trouble identifying the origin of their knowledge regarding service quality. Those who had university education recalled studying customer focus, customer satisfaction and the concept of service quality. However, they did not remember the origins of their understandings of the meanings and dimensions of service quality. This suggests that knowledge about service quality was not updated as part of the firms' routines or procedures, and thus skills were not improved.

Years of work experiences contributed to the managers' scholarly knowledge base, although they also participated in occasional seminars and courses (Table 1). The informants emphasised that it was essential to follow the trends and potential fads, or '*what is happening in the market*' [Case 9]. Additionally, the informants stressed the importance of acknowledging current market practices—what competitors are doing and the kinds of services they offer. This type of knowledge is absorbed in the field through customer contacts. Managers gathered explicit information about the market by asking their customers about competing offers, and the customers shared that knowledge to receive competitive services. Indeed, such knowledge contributes to business intelligence systems, particularly with respect to core offers and services provided and therefore to service quality. Yet, the informants did not strongly emphasise the benefits of market research for service quality development.

The interviewees emphasised that they were using benchmarking practices for quality development. Studies support the notion that such practices inform organisations about how they are performing, providing assurance about the current practices (Sivakumar et al. 2014). As such, the respondents did not perceive scholarly knowledge as irrelevant; rather, they experienced challenges expressing its importance or effects on service quality practices in customer interactions. Nevertheless, it was evident that this type of knowledge had made organisations ready to accept and discuss the conceptual knowledge of service quality and to use it as a platform for service development. Generally, a positive attitude was identified toward scholarly knowledge; however, as there were no explicit and systematic processes showing involvement with academic theory (e.g. attendance at seminars or courses), the use of scholarly knowledge appeared to function at the conceptual level only, without scholarly knowledge-based content.

**Table 1.** Sources of service quality knowledge

	Knowledge in use				
	Internal information		External information		
	Scholarly	Work experience	Business culture	Research	Intelligence
<b>Importance</b>	+	+++	++	+	++
+ = not that important, ++ = important, +++ = very important					

### 4.3 Barriers to Embracing Service Quality Knowledge in Practice

We detected ten barriers divided into the individual and/or organisational level, explaining why the companies did not fully embrace service quality knowledge in practice (Table 2): awareness; relevance; mental; skills; cultural; empowerment; implementation; information and communication; organisational; and routine and procedural.

**Table 2.** Barriers to using service quality knowledge

Level	Type of barrier	Definition
Individual level	Awareness	Limited awareness of topical knowledge.
	Relevance	Scholarly knowledge is not perceived relevant for daily practice.
Ind. and org. level	Mental	Lack of mental models for knowledge acquisition and sharing; creativity not supported.
	Skills	Lack of skilled staff for knowledge acquisition and sharing.
Organisational level	Cultural	The organisational culture may hinder openness and sharing.
	Empowerment	Empowered behaviour is not supported.
	Implementation	Scholarly knowledge is not exploited in operation due to weak conceptual definitions on the strategic level.
	Information and communication	Barriers in understanding, learning and communicating knowledge.
	Organisational	The hierarchical structure hinders knowledge sharing.
	Routine and procedural	The routines and procedures do not support knowledge acquisition and sharing.

The existence of an *awareness barrier* is supported by studies claiming that marketing practices do not reflect best practice according to scholarly theory, as managers have little awareness of current academic research and theory (e.g. Baron et al. 2011). Therefore, managers may use insufficient and possibly outdated information when making decisions or simply rely on their ‘gut’ feelings (Baba & HakemZadeh 2012). However, this appears to be only partially true in the present study, as service quality was well recognised but not fully deployed. Moreover, limited awareness of theoretical knowledge resulted in adopting a fragmented approach to service quality, where customers and employees were not fully integrated into the process of achieving service excellence. Similarly, we also detected a *relevance barrier*, as the informants’ experienced difficulties in describing the practical benefits of scholarly knowledge. While the managers had some ideas regarding what constitutes service quality within their business, the concept itself was expressed using wide-ranging and abstract expressions. There was also a lack of consistent involvement in true knowledge acquisition or sharing, implying individual *mental* and *skills barriers*.

Limited awareness of scholarly knowledge was due to the built-in structures and dominance of everyday practices, which were perceived as the best practice based on available knowledge. Although the benefits of using scholarly knowledge were recognised, the attitude of ‘learning by doing’ seemed to prevail in the organisations. Thus, organisational *mental* and *skills-related barriers* to using scholarly knowledge were detected. The informants from hierarchical organisations (cases 3, 9) indicated the following about their organisations:

... have a strong business culture [regarding] how to do things.... [Case 9]

... have made mistakes, but we have also improved our way of meeting customers. It is not always perfect [but] we are improving year by year. [Case 3]

These excerpts reveal *cultural* and *organisational barriers* to scholarly knowledge acquisition and sharing, including potential challenges to listening, interacting and articulating scholarly knowledge. As discussed previously, even when there was awareness of the constructed notion of service quality, it was not fully shared, revealing *information and communication barriers*; nor was it exploited to its full potential, thus revealing an *implementation barrier*.

Successful implementation—the operational instrumentalisation and exploitation of existing conceptual knowledge—requires that such knowledge is translated into well-elaborated definitions and dispersed within the organisation (Menon & Varadarajan 1992; Cornelissen & Lock 2005). An implementation barrier thereby implies the existence of an *empowerment barrier*, which potentially hinders the creation of a service-inclined culture that embraces employees’ willingness to provide a good service experience and to

fix issues in real time (e.g. Drach-Zahavy & Somech 2013). The interviews revealed a lack of practical understanding regarding the organisations' purported service- and customer-inclined visions, in which customers and employees would be integrated in co-creating a valuable service experience (e.g. Grönroos 2008; Heinonen et al. 2010). Successfully delivering consistent and excellent service quality requires the communication of clear conceptual statements throughout the firm. Such internal communication was not apparent, resulting in misunderstanding, confusion and miscommunication, suggesting a *routine and procedural barrier*.

## 5 Conclusions with Communication Implications

This study sought to contribute to the discussion of the theory–practice relationship by providing empirical insights on how service quality knowledge is gained and used by managers in daily business practice and detecting potential barriers hindering the exploitation of scholarly knowledge.

The study's findings are threefold. By comparing managers' perceptions of service quality to best practice according to service marketing theory, the study contributes 1) by showing that scholarly knowledge was recognised and internally communicated, and it affected business practices. By applying a systematic approach to explore the use of knowledge (instrumental, conceptual, symbolic), the study found that the relationship between theory and practice was loosely defined. Hence, the study contributes 2) by improving our understanding regarding how knowledge was embraced in practice. With a focus on potential barriers, the study contributes to the ongoing discussion of the theory–practice relationship by 3) detecting ten barriers. The barriers reveal why available service quality knowledge is not fully employed as evidence in decision-making. The identified barriers—awareness, relevance, mental, skills, cultural, empowerment, implementation, information and communication, organisational and routine and procedural—were categorised into individual and/or organisational levels. Related to knowledge acquisition, the current study did not—in contrast to past research (e.g. Rowley 2012)—detect access, attitude, language or time barriers to accessing service quality knowledge. This discrepancy could be explained by the informants' high level of education; they expressed their academic readiness and, in general, had a positive attitude toward scholarly knowledge. They also had potential access to scholarly knowledge through university alumni programmes.

We conclude the article with managerial implications. First, we suggest that organisations should acknowledge the identified barriers when making quality improvements. We also urge organisations to stay abreast of the latest scholarly knowledge, translate it into practice and dare to take “ownership” of such knowledge. Furthermore, we encourage firms to develop procedures for communicating scholarly knowledge into business practice.

Additionally, we propose that organisations develop customer-oriented systems for inclusion, involvement and co-creation, where customers and employees are included in the processes of fulfilling service promises. Accordingly, we also propose that organisations challenge their existing cultures and intelligence systems.

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