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**UNCOVERING THE ‘AHA MOMENT’: DIGITALISATION
AIDING CUSTOMERS BETTER IN THE SHARED SERVICE
INDUSTRY**

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discover how the phenomenon of digitalization has aided in serving customers better in the shared service environment. This study remains unique and scarce because there is very limited research conducted focusing on customers in shared services organisations. Therefore, there is a great need to delve deeper on this area and look for possible solutions to enhance customer experiences. It is important to note that the study did bring to light the support of digitalization as a catalyst to improving customer satisfaction and customer needs in shared services. Findings also revealed that during the pandemic, the role of digitalization has been a boon to many industries including shared services. Further in-depth research is still required in this area to strengthen the findings. This paper looks at drawing a connection between digitalization and customer satisfaction in shared services. The paper is a concept paper and literature support the idea that there is a strong link tying together digitalization and enhancing customer experience.

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1. Introduction to Shared Services

The pandemic has caused doom in businesses across the world and only some organizations were operating in a stringent condition. Undeniably, the COVID-19 has parted its print in shared service industry with new challenges. But somehow the survival of shared service was much prominent than other industries with the adjustment and shifts from brick and mortar to virtual (Naidu et al., 2021).

The shared service has gradually developed their services into a successful and supportive host towards their customers over the decade. They ran the pre-COVID operation through the model of certain tinge of centralization with establishment of shared service centers in different region around the world. However, pandemic has created the urge to remove the siloed traditional shared service to intense and greater operating models and automation (Searle, 2021).

The COVID impact on shared service has redefined its delivery modes. As a result, from the survey by SSON industry based on APAC respondents, digitizing the shared service through automation was a highly supported model to reduce the fallout in crisis (Hodge, 2020). The early stage of the pandemic has left most of the business with a question mark on customer optimism whereby the customer's trust, loyalty and confidence were on rock bottom (Deloitte, 2020a). During pandemic, shared service organization faced challenges on pleasing customers, employee morale and attrition as virtual work and learning was a huge shift for them (Deloitte, 2020b)]. Digitalization emerges as a bridge to strengthen serving customers better during the pandemic in a shared service climate.

1.1. Digitalisation and how it aids with serving customers in shared service environment during the pandemic

Digitalisation is not a new phenomenon but has been an established trend for some years now. The imprint of digitalization as a possible contributor for growth in any industry for that matter, let alone shared services was already showing even before the pandemic hit the world in late 2019. However, the catastrophic effects of Covid 19, has solidified digitalization and what it has to offer to the world.

The reality is this; in the current business climate with the pandemic as a major impediment, business do rely on online platforms but this does not constitute all businesses because some of them use virtual platforms as a form of boost to their business to minimise human contact. This seems logical from a business perspective not just because of the pandemic but due to how the trends of the future would look like for businesses all over (Sahoo & Goute, 2021).

It is not too dubious to say that many of the businesses that survive today are being helmed through digitalization. Digitalization has paved the way for businesses to grow and take advantage of opportunities. Digitalization is now becoming a widely accepted trend in all service industries, particularly the ones which are targeting high-profile customers (Malhotra et al., 2021).

Ryynänen and Hyyryläinen (2018) continues to add that by having digitalisation, it brings astounding changes to practically all areas of the contemporary life: everything that can, will be digitalised. Especially the everyday routines and consumption practices are under continual change. New digital products and services are introduced at an accelerating pace.

Prior to the pandemic, shared services were already known as a viable business strategy involving the consolidation of support functions managed by a hub as a shared service organization or shared service center. The main objective of implementing shared services is for organisations to be more effective and efficient. To ensure that the service quality of the shared services is consistently excellent, customer satisfaction is one of the best tools to measure the performance level of the services provided (Shahar et al, 2019). The pandemic has made it evident that attention should be given to serving customers well as Covid 19 puts the businesses at potential risk of disruptions and hence may indirectly impact the process of serving customer needs.

It is made evident time after time that customers wants should be fulfilled but one must understand that customers have certain expectation on how their needs; whether it's a product or service should be delivered to them. This most certainly revolves around the idea of customer satisfaction and customer experience. Renowned and distinguished organisations have the right skills to understand, deliver and also exceed expectations. Ultimately, what is expected and what is delivered eventually is how customer satisfaction is perceived as. Understanding these changing expectations is a vital component of designing the right solutions and experiences (KPMG, 2020).

According to Shahar et al (2019), a current review of shared services pointed out that only 4% of research in shared services were conducted around the area of customers. This information is quite baffling in retrospect because shared services is a customer-oriented concept and supposedly requires the understanding of customers' needs.

Customers today have expectations that make them desire fast resolutions and high-quality services such as 24/7 availability, immediate responses, and individually tailored answers. This isn't because today's customer is impatient or demanding but rather the consequence of over 250 years of technological innovation and globalization that have gradually shrunk the gap between service provider and customer. On paper, the idea that one can improve customer service by cutting costs and reducing the amount of interaction with a real person seems beyond reach, but it is possible. Technology exists nowadays that can significantly improve the efficiency of customer service agents and satisfy the customer (Hoogen, 2021)

With the presence and arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is apparent that digitalization has accelerated and proliferated to the extent that it benefits many industries. Concurrent to the Covid 19 pandemic, it is poignant to note that wireless internet-enabled devices have soared tremendously through digitalization and technological evolution (Akram et al, 2021). The pandemic has pushed the envelope to what digitalisation can do and clearly the shared service environment has benefitted during this catastrophic transition. Shared services which started in the 1980s, functioned for over a decade without the technologies and digitalisation trend we have today. However, the uniqueness of shared services is that it's able to adapt through times and remain relevant after three decades. Customers are benefitting even more after three decades due to the inception of digitalisation as an aiding tool for superior services.

1.2. Digitalisation precipitate the way forward for shared service

Digitalization represents one of the most important levers of all for the evolution of shared services (Siemens AS, 2021). Given that it is deemed as a driving force, this only reinforces the need to include digitalisation as a force of change to a better shared service. The latest research done by Deloitte (2020a)

has also highlighted the significant adaptability that shared service organisation have undergone to improve and manage situation during and post Covid 19. Service delivery models are always evolving. For many multinational corporations, there seems to be a transition in the way businesses operate where remote or virtual platforms took place as an aftermath of Covid 19. These transitions are here to stay because there is a recognition and comfort in knowing that these changes in the way we work has improved efficiency and created an ease. Apart from expanding the traditional functional scope, they are developing specialized capabilities such as analytics, reporting, digital, and enhancing the customer experience. These shared and global business services (GBS) constructs are creating an environment where new capabilities can be rapidly adopted to position their customers for success (Deloitte, 2021). This new environment is supported clearly by digitalisation and the new technologies that exist around us.

In the context of shared services, it is difficult to envisage operating and thriving without the help of digitalisation. Digitalisation will be one of the key elements that will continue to boost the business of shared services hereafter and its role should be celebrated. The epiphany that digitalisation is a much bigger contributor to shared services would have been swept under the rug if the world was not hit with the pandemic in late 2019. It is interesting to note the journey of discovering the ‘aha moment’ where digitalisation emerges as a definite trend that won’t be dismissed anymore. It took the world to realise such a discovery only after a crippling event.

2. Future Research and Recommendations

In summary, digitalisation is a stimulant to shared service business operations whereby it helps service providers to serve customers better. Hence future research should be done on areas of digitalisation and customer satisfaction by getting the input from customers of shared services. This is crucial to provide sufficient evidence of how digitalisation has quickened operation and serving customers greater. Another potential area is to get the viewpoints of other stakeholders like the employees providing the service in the shared service environment. It is hopeful that more research to be done on their transition during the pandemic and their adaptability to virtual platforms. Some of the limitations of the study is that data and literature on shared services remain limited and scarce. Hereafter, research should include other modes of research such as interview sessions, focus group discussions and even surveys to understand the business units receiving the shared services so that further input is gathered.

3. Conclusion

To enclose the shared service during pandemic and post pandemic, we could conclude that resilient operations has been defined through the digital transformation. As mentioned by (Hodge & SSON, 2020), “staying ahead could be the soar to uphold the business operation. Sharing resources, resilient working modes and optimization of resources and services will provide a hand to handle the upcoming challenges in business (Gooding et al., 2022). Digitalization could be a catalyst toward a better customer service. Humongous impact could be seen on customer experience when companies offer greater number of digital contributions. A survey by Accenture proved 84% of respondents opted for digitalized service through automation which would be an important strategy on customer satisfaction (Sheth, 2020). Shared service

has definitely helped many organizations during the crisis to enhance their business transformation. Organizations should continuously seek and learn to thrive in the new norm of digitalization. This topic should be explored further in shared service as digital transformation after the pandemic is outsized.

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