

# **SERVICE IN IRELAND: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PRACTICE AND PERFORMANCE**

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## **Introduction**

Ireland, with its reputation for easy-going and friendly people, might be expected to have service organisations that perform well when customer contact is such an important contributor to good service performance. However, until relatively recently, with the exception of a few specialised areas, Ireland was seen as an under-performer in service (Dublin Chamber of Commerce, 1993). Yet, in the last decade, the importance both of the service sector and of customer care in the service mix have grown. Mounting evidence suggests that international travel and the globalisation of businesses, including the spread of service firms internationally and the transfer of management practices from one country to another, affect customer expectations (Carson & Gilmore, 1989; Meyer and Dornach, 1996; Voss, Blackmon, Chase, Rose & Roth, 1997). Throughout the 1990's, the Irish economy has been one of the fastest growing in the world, and much of this growth has been among Irish service organisations. The structure of the economy has continued to change and, by 1999, it was anticipated that there would be a gradual shift from high-tech manufacturing to market services, especially internationally traded services, over the following decade (ESRI, 1999). Yet, for example, few of the 83 Irish companies studied by Byron (1996) had in place a structured or planned approach to building relationships with their

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customers that would encourage loyalty. Even in 1999, there were still signs of problems. An article in the *Irish Times* noted:

The new "Ireland of the Welcomes" is over-priced, under-serviced and distinctly unfriendly (Sheridan, 1999).

This paper will present the results of an in-depth comparative study of practice and performance in the Irish service industry carried out in 1996. The objective of the study was to determine the relative strengths and weaknesses of Irish and UK service organisations, and, in particular, to determine if there were any substantial differences between service in Ireland and the UK. After introducing the underlying model on which the study was based, the paper will outline the approach taken to data gathering and analysis before presenting the findings and highlighting some emerging issues.

### **The Service Management Model**

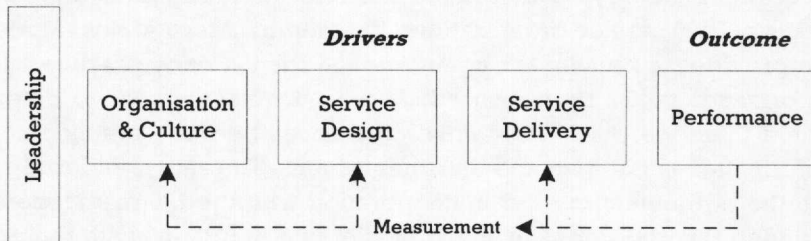
The study of practice and performance in the Irish service industry was carried out in 1996. The model on which the study was based, the Service Management Model, was developed in the UK as part of the "Service in Britain" study (Voss, Blackmon & Johnson, 1995) from which the UK data used for comparative purposes here were drawn.

The "Service in Britain" study set out to assess a representative cross-section of UK service organisations drawn from both public and private sectors. Between December 1994 and May 1995, a study team from London and Warwick Business Schools conducted face-to-face on-site interviews with directors and senior managers from 115 service organisations. These organisations ranged from small, privately-owned businesses to large multi-nationals and included public sector organisations and privatised utilities in the following sectors: professional services; utilities; public services; retail & leisure; finance; industrial services; and, transport.

The Service Management Model drew on established models of practice and performance in service organisations, including the service profit chain (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser & Schlesinger, 1994; Heskett, Sasser & Schlesinger, 1997), the UK Chartermark and the European Quality Award. These models were combined into the Service Management Model that linked practice in service management to service and business performance. This model was based on the underlying proposition that best practice in service management led to

high service performance which, in turn, led to superior business performance. The Service Management Model is illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: THE SERVICE MANAGEMENT MODEL



The Service Management Model combines a set of factors that should result in customer satisfaction and service value. The central hypothesis of the model is that best service management practice has a direct link to the attainment of high service performance which, in turn, leads to superior business performance. Here, practice refers to the established processes that an organisation has put in place to improve the way it runs its service. These processes range from organisational aspects, such as teamwork and service culture, to the use of techniques such as service guarantees. Performance refers to the way an organisation's service processes can be measured, including their business impact. Examples of service measures are reliability, responsiveness and courtesy; business impact measures are market share and customer satisfaction.

In the model, leadership is seen as the key factor driving the design, delivery and measurement processes, and the development of a customer and service-oriented culture. The service concept and its design require an understanding of customer needs. Delivery requires the design and development of service processes with the potential to satisfy those needs, at low cost, while maintaining a well-motivated staff. The processes include those for identifying, managing and responding to customer problems. Such response capability, in turn, requires the establishment of demanding standards, performance measurement and feedback to ensure that they are met.

## **The Irish Study**

### *Objective*

The objective of the Irish study was, through replication of the "Service in Britain" study, to determine the relative strengths and weaknesses of Irish service organisations. The Service Management Model also provided a benchmark against which Irish service practice and performance could be measured. A second objective was to determine if there were any substantial differences between practice and performance in the Irish and UK organisations. The study, undertaken with the agreement of, and in cooperation with the UK researchers, extended the geographical scope of "Service in Britain" with the potential to strengthen both sets of findings.

### *The Sample*

The study focused on 22 organisations in four sectors chosen on the basis of their importance to the Irish economy:

- Financial Services organisations (predominantly insurance and investment firms)
- Transportation (including airlines, road and sea freight companies, and couriers)
- Hotels (including both large hotel groups and single luxury hotels)
- Public Service organisations (including government agencies with specific statutory functions).

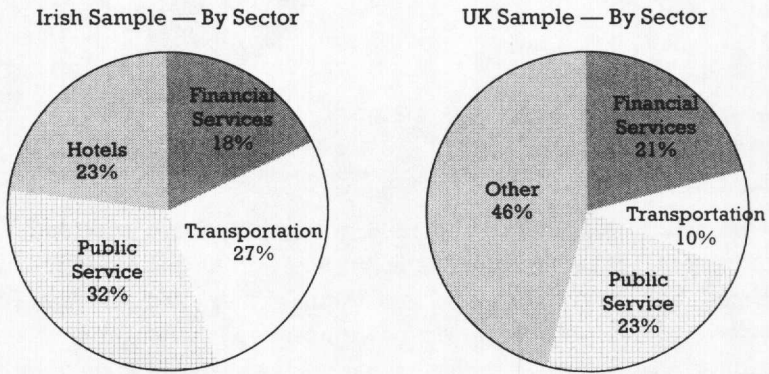
Financial Services and Hotels were two of the fastest growing sectors in Ireland. Business activity in the Irish Financial sector had increased by over 100 per cent in the previous four years (Central Statistics Office, 1997), while the number of hotel rooms available in the country grew by over 11 per cent in the year 1995-96 alone (Irish Hotels Federation, 1997). The Transportation sector was also growing quickly, matching the rate of development of the country's exporting industries. For a country as dependent on exports as Ireland, a high level of performance in this area was essential. Finally, the Public Services sector had been radically restructured during the nineties, with growing government expectation that it should be able to operate on a more commercial basis.

The four sectors had the further advantage of being concentrated in Dublin, offering the prospect of potentially representative results from relatively small samples. The participating organisations in-

cluded both indigenous firms and Irish divisions of foreign multinationals. The sample was drawn from a large number of sources, including trade databases. A decision was made to include organisations above a baseline of 50 employees, unless the organisation concerned was a sub-division of a larger concern.

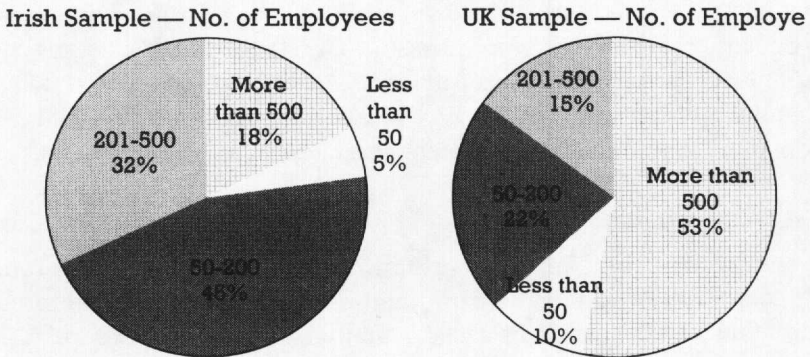
Figures 2, 3 and 4 compare the distributions of Firm Size, Number of Sites and Service Sector for Participants in the Irish and UK studies.

FIGURE 2



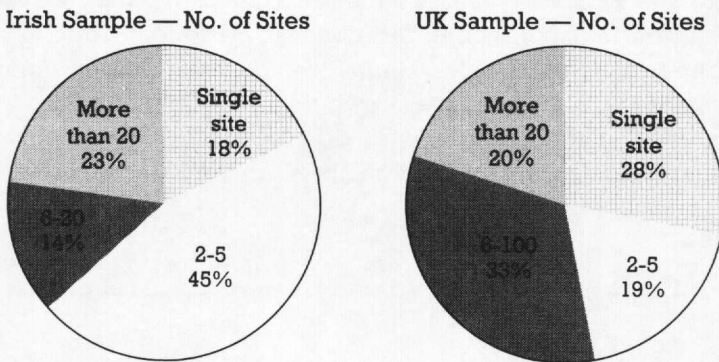
Source for UK Sample: Voss et al., 1995.

FIGURE 3



Source for UK Sample: Voss et al., 1995.

FIGURE 4



Source for UK Sample: Voss et al., 1995.

### *Data Gathering*

Between July and September 1996, interviews were conducted with directors and senior managers using a set of 80 questions which addressed key areas of the Service Management Model: leadership, service culture, service design, employee management, understanding customers, process management, quality management, service recovery, value creation, flexibility and performance standards & measurement. Responses to these questions were rated on a five-point scale, with qualitative indicators provided to illustrate the scales. The scores awarded for each of the core questions were used to construct indices that were used to relate the practice of respective organisations to their performance. Additional questions sought quantitative data on productivity, market position and financial performance, together with qualitative comments from interviewees.

### *Data Analysis and Feedback*

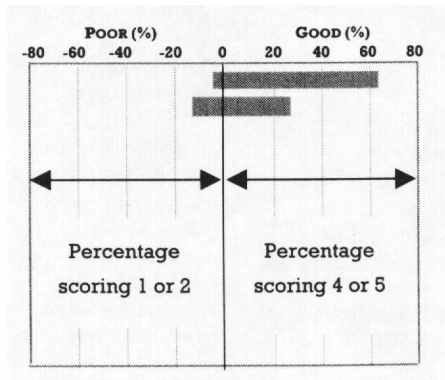
In conducting their "Service in Britain" study, Voss et al. (1995) found it necessary to produce a large number of feedback reports to participating organisations in a short time. To cope with this problem they developed an Excel-based program to generate company-specific reports. The customised reports compared each individual organisation's scores in a number of practice and performance categories with the corresponding averages in both their corresponding service sectors and the study sample as a whole. The presentation of each score was followed by a standardised description of accepted best practice as it applied to that category.

While the "Service in Ireland" study replicated, essentially, the "Service in Britain" study, on examination of the "Service in Britain" Excel-based program, it became apparent that, while useful, there was considerable scope for further development. Correspondingly modifications were made to customise further the feedback report output: for example, diagram titles and parts of the text, previously standardised, were customised to reflect the characteristics of the companies.

### Strengths and Weaknesses in Irish Service Organisations

A major objective of the study was to identify and to understand the areas in which sectors of the Irish service industry were strong, and where they still had challenges to overcome. Gaining that understanding was helped through comparing the results of the study with the UK data in order to isolate strengths and shortcomings specific to either country or areas where sectoral performance was similar.

To identify strengths and weaknesses in each area of the Service Management Model, the data collected in both UK and Irish studies were summarised and contrasted in two stages. First, as illustrated in Figures 5a and 5b (Voss et al., 1995), the percentages of organisations in each country scoring 4-5 on the indices of practice and performance, characterised as *good*, and scoring 1-2, characterised as *poor*, were identified. The key below illustrates the scale used.



Broadly, good and poor levels of practice and performance were evident in each area in Irish organisations, with the exception of two dimensions of performance: customer retention and cost versus competition. In the former, there was no evidence of poor performance, while in the latter there was no evidence of good performance.

FIGURE 5A: IRISH STUDY, 1996 — HOTEL PUBLIC SERVICE, TRANSPORTATION AND FINANCIAL SECTORS

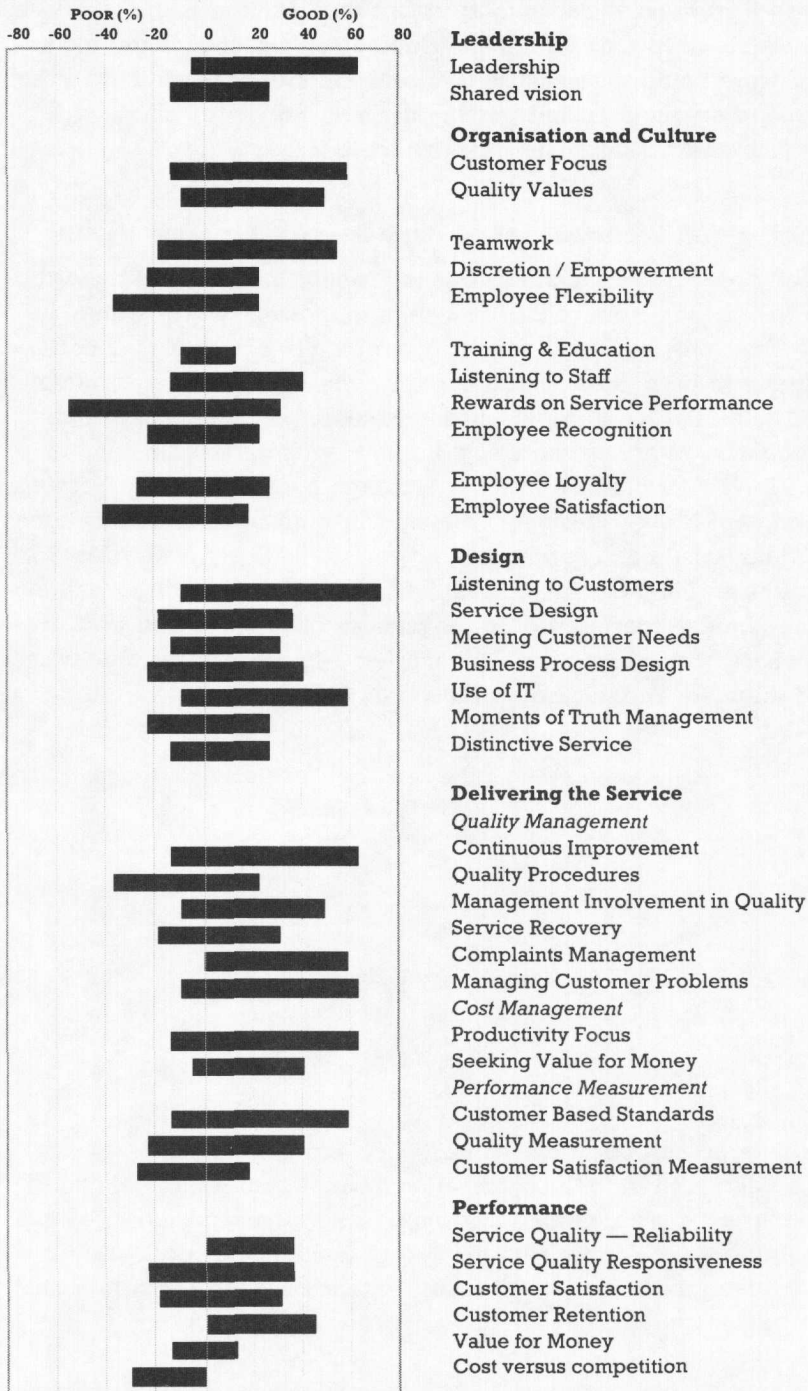
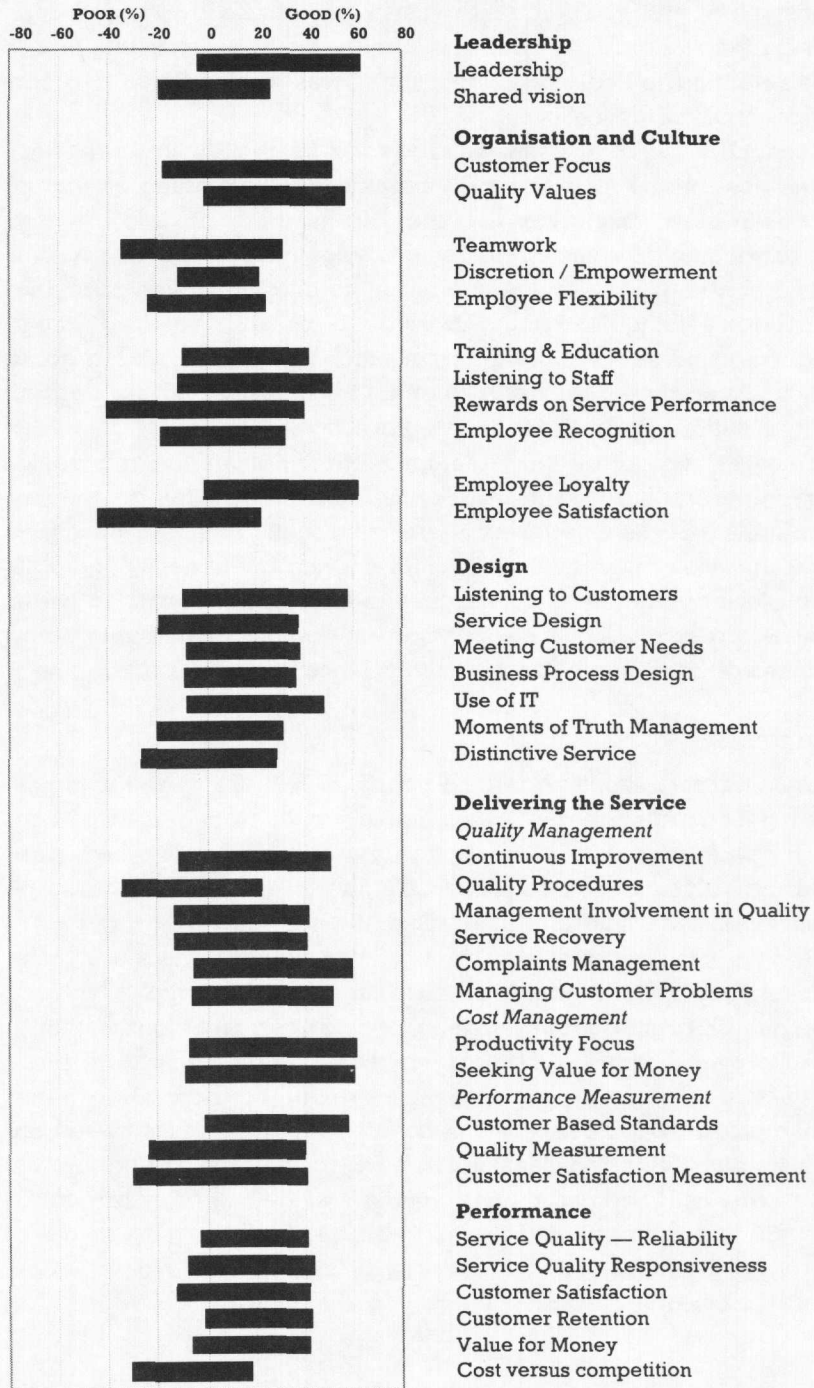


FIGURE 5B: UK STUDY, 1995 — PUBLIC SERVICE, FINANCIAL, TRANSPORT, UTILITY, RETAIL AND LEISURE, PROFESSIONAL AND INDUSTRIAL SERVICE



Similarly, good and poor levels of practice and performance were evident in each area in UK organisations, with the exception of three dimensions of practice — quality values, employee loyalty and customer-based standards — and one dimension of performance: customer retention. In all exceptions, there was no evidence of poor practice or performance.

A second stage of analysis was required to identify strengths and weaknesses unique to Irish or UK organisations, common strengths and weaknesses, and areas that may be strengths in one country while shortcomings in the other. For this stage of analysis, the profiles were screened to identify areas of strength and weakness, applying the criterion set and used in the UK study. Here, an area was deemed strong if over 50 per cent of the organisations studied exhibited good practice. Similarly, an area was deemed weak if over 65 per cent of the organisations studied lacked good practice.

Tables 1 a & b and 2 a & b demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses apparent in Irish and UK service industries relative to one another. In each of the categories, there were many common strengths and weaknesses between Irish and UK service industries. Yet it was possible also to identify factors unique to each country, and, in a few instances, areas that were strengths in one country while shortcomings in the other. We will discuss each of these categories in turn.

### *Performance*

UK service organisations performed poorly in both the speed at which they brought new offerings to the market, and in the management of their internal design processes. These factors were generally not weaknesses among the Irish organisations studied. Yet, unlike the UK, Irish firms appeared to have difficulties in innovating. Whether this arose from poor management practices or as a result of external factors, it was a weakness to be overcome before it posed a threat to survival and growth.

Despite UK organisations lacking the vision of quality found among Irish employees, they led Irish organisations in the breadth of their view of customer quality. Linked to this breadth of vision, UK organisations performed well in terms of basing their service standards on real customer needs. This fact should be particularly worrying to Irish competitors, as it seemed a shortcoming that Irish service organisations were struggling to overcome. It was, perhaps, the most extreme symptom of the more general tendency in Irish service organisations to keep the customer at a distance.

In contrast to the UK, Irish service organisations exhibited a number of shortcomings in their attention to social and environmental issues, management of customer loyalty, and in the number of new and innovative products generated. Most Irish organisations showed little interest in the environment in which they operated. There seemed an unwillingness in Irish service organisations to acknowledge that neighbours and society were also stakeholders in the business, with a direct influence on success or failure. Further, Irish weakness in service recovery and involvement in social issues was mirrored in the approach to managing customer loyalty. These shortcomings reflected a defective attitude to what constituted a customer: customers were considered only when they were availing of a service or buying a product.

TABLE 1A: STRENGTHS OF SERVICE ORGANISATIONS (AREAS WHERE OVER 50 PER CENT SCORED 4 OR 5 IN SELF-ASSESSMENT)

<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Organisation and Culture</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Delivering the Service</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Leadership	Customer focus	Listening to Customers	Continuous improvement	Seeking value for money
	Quality values	Marketing position	Complaints management	<i>Accessibility</i>
	Courtesy		<i>Quality performance</i>	<i>Use of IT</i>
	<b>Teamwork</b>		<i>Visibility of standards</i>	
			Productivity management	
			<b>Quality vision</b>	

Key: Normal – Same in UK and Ireland

Italic – Strength or challenge in Ireland, but not in UK

Grey box – Strength in Ireland, Challenge in the UK, and vice-versa

### *Delivering the Service*

There appeared to be a tendency in both Irish and UK organisations for quality management to be more informal than systematic. Neither set of organisations performed well at establishing quality procedures and frameworks. Where frameworks were in place, they tended to be implemented in terms of an established protocol or accreditation scheme. (e.g. ISO 9000 / BS 5750). The Irish data seem to

suggest that, where organisations served consumer markets, the Q-Mark was preferred; where organisations served industrial markets, the ISO 9000 / BS 5750 accreditation standard was preferred.

TABLE 1B: CHALLENGES FOR IRISH SERVICE ORGANISATIONS (AREAS WHERE OVER 50 PER CENT SCORED 4 OR 5 IN SELF-ASSESSMENT)

Leadership	Organisation and Culture	Design	Delivering the Service	Performance
Management style	Employee recognition	Customer-led design	Problem solving procedures	
Shared vision	Employee flexibility	Distinctive service	Service guarantee	
	Management rewards	<i>Number of innovations</i>	<i>Training for quality</i>	
	<i>Employee training</i>	<i>Attention to social issues</i>	<b>Service recovery</b>	
	<b>Employee loyalty</b>	<i>Management of customer loyalty</i>	<i>Focus on non-value-adding activities</i>	
		<b>Standards based on customer needs</b>	Service process management	
			Performance measurement	
			Use of back office	
			Benchmarking	

Key: Normal – Same in UK and Ireland

Italic – Strength or challenge in Ireland, but not in UK

Grey box – Strength in Ireland, Challenge in the UK, and vice-versa

Irish employees seemed to have a clear vision of what quality meant to their customers. In contrast, the lack of the same clarity among organisations in the UK was a shortcoming. Yet Irish service organisations appeared to be unable to exploit this inherent strength due to corresponding weaknesses in their quality systems. Training for quality was a weakness and, possibly as a consequence, so the development of a total quality mindset. Despite the existence of

ISO9000, service quality did not improve as the need for quality improvement was not impressed upon the employees. This observation is consistent with Dromgoole (1997) in his case study of rejuvenation in the freight division of a shipping company.

TABLE 2A: STRENGTHS OF UK SERVICE ORGANISATIONS (AREAS WHERE OVER 50 PER CENT SCORED 4-5 IN SELF-ASSESSMENT)

<b>Leadership</b>	<b>Organisation and Culture</b>	<b>Design</b>	<b>Delivering the Service</b>	<b>Performance</b>
Leadership	Customer focus	Listening to customers	Continuous improvement	Seeking value for money
	Quality values	Marketing position	Complaints management	
	Courtesy	<i>Broad view of customer quality</i>	<i>Complaints as information</i>	
	<i>Open culture</i>	<b>Standards based on customer's needs</b>	Productivity management	
	<b>Employee loyalty</b>		<b>Service recovery</b>	

Based on Voss et al., 1995.

Irish organisations surpassed their UK counterparts in both quality performance and in the visibility of their service standards. Most Irish organisations felt that their services stood up well in comparison to their competitors, not least because their internal service standards were usually made clear to clients as well as to their employees. However, in neither country could customers reliably expect adequate compensation in the event of service failure, nor could they hope that claims procedures would be straightforward.

Good practice was reported in the field of complaints management: customers rarely had to deal with more than two people. However, in neither country did service organisations perform well in the area of problem solving. Furthermore, in spite of assessing themselves as performing strongly in continuous improvement few participants in either country looked at problems as opportunities for further improvement. UK organisations seemed stronger in their focus on the elimination of non-value adding activities. In nearly two-thirds of Irish organisations studied, non-value-adding activities were only just becoming a focus of management attention.

TABLE 2B: CHALLENGES FOR UK SERVICE ORGANISATIONS (AREAS WHERE OVER 50 PER CENT SCORED 4 OR 5 IN SELF-ASSESSMENT)

Leadership	Organisation and Culture	Design	Delivering the Service	Performance
Management style	Employee recognition	Customer-led design	Problem solving procedures	
Shared vision	Employee flexibility	Distinctive services	Service guarantee	
	Management rewards	<i>Speed to market</i>	<i>Measurement systems</i>	
	<i>Employee involvement</i>	<i>Design process</i>	<i>Use of quality data</i>	
	<i>Employee support</i>		<i>Business process redesign</i>	
	<b>Teamwork</b>		Service process management	
	<i>Employee discretion/empowerment</i>		Performance measurement	
			Use of back office	
			<b>Quality vision</b>	
			Benchmarking	

Based on: Voss et al., 1995.

UK service organisations excelled over their Irish counterparts in the area of service recovery. Generally, they had well planned "damage limitation" procedures, while the concept of service recovery seemed alien to many Irish organisations. UK organisations tended to be stronger at using complaints made about their service as a source for new service improvements. However, they tended to lag the Irish in both collecting and using quality data for service improvement. In a related area, benchmarking service process management may require considerable development in both Ireland and the UK. For example, participation in this study by some of the Irish organisations was their first attempt at benchmarking practice and performance against others in its own or other service sectors.

Both Irish and UK studies showed that most organisations tended to create value through an integration of quality, service design and cost

management (including productivity) instead of a more traditional trade-off approach. However, organisations in both studies tended to exhibit weaknesses in the use of their "back office". This area was seen often as a separate operation to the front line service, instead of an intrinsic part of the overall service delivery process.

### *Designing the Service*

In the Service Management Model, customer value is related to both service quality and cost. It is pointless for an organisation to have high standards of service quality if the service delivered is at too high a price. According to the model, organisations can maximise quality while minimising cost through a focus on the management of their service delivery processes. However, even if an organisation provides service at a reasonable price it may still fail if what they provide does not match customers' needs and expectations. The best source of information in determining these needs are the customers themselves. The customer can also help an organisation to design new services to stay ahead of its competitors.

UK and Irish organisations both scored strongly in the areas of listening to customers and effective market positioning. In competitive market sectors, strengths in these two areas were seen to be necessary for survival. Nevertheless, both studies revealed inherent weaknesses among service organisations in the fields of customer-led design and distinctive service. On the one hand, organisations in both countries emphasised the customer as their main source of business advice and assessed themselves highly in the area of listening to the customer. However, there was an inherent weakness evident in both studies: the inclusion of customer requirements into the development of new products and services was rarely systematic. It appeared that, although organisations often went to considerable pains to collect useful information from their customers, in many cases these data were being let go to waste when it could have been of benefit to the new-product development process. Perhaps this shortcoming was linked to the lack of a truly distinctive service in many organisations. Most firms appeared to be satisfied with a "me too" approach to service development when a distinctive service was a key factor in converting potential into sustainable success.

Even the best employees cannot produce a quality service without support. The Service Management Model links the design of the delivery process and the fit of that design to the environment in which an organisation operates to the quality improvement processes. Irish

and UK organisations differed in their use of IT and business process redesign. Most Irish organisations assessed themselves as being strong in the use of IT, and over 40 per cent perceived themselves as strong in business process design. In contrast, in the UK, under 50 per cent of organisations were rated as having good practice in IT, while process redesign was perceived as being a shortcoming still to be dealt with. There is no clear indication as to why this difference should occur. However, it might be as a result of the rate of growth of demand in Ireland, which has forced organisations to redesign their processes without having to cope with the inertia of older systems. It may also be a reflection of the large number of high profile, high technology, internationally competitive organisations present in the country, which has brought the issue of process design onto the agendas of other companies.

### *Organisation and Culture*

In both countries, there was evidence of a strong customer focus with employees showing a good understanding of quality values. In particular, it seems that employees could be relied upon to behave with courtesy to the customer at all times. Yet, organisations in both countries failed to recognise exceptional performance adequately either at the management or employee levels, and demonstrated a lack of employee flexibility throughout their structures.

In most Irish service organisations, team working was a common practice, and there were examples of best practice in the area. For similar organisations in the UK, however, the introduction of team-work was an area that still held many challenges. Further, the UK study revealed shortcomings in the areas of employee involvement in improvement schemes and in the amount of discretion allowed to employees to solve problems on their own initiative. Irish organisations did not prove to be particularly strong or weak in these areas: a culture of openness was not seen often enough to be a strength, nor so rarely as to be considered a weakness. It would appear that, in Irish firms, employees were less free to voice their opinions or complaints than those in the UK. However, unlike the UK, they could expect that, once expressed, their views were more likely to be taken into account by management.

A key relationship in the Service Management Model is that between the success of a service operation and the motivation, training and management of its people. Employees with poor training or weak morale will not be able to provide a proper service, regardless of

how well planned the actual process is — the “satisfaction mirror” (Heskett et al., 1997). Irish organisations were found to be weaker than those in the UK in the area of employee training. Few Irish companies appeared to devote sufficient time or resources to the continuous training of employees. One impact of such weakness in employee training may be reflected in the relatively poor level of employee loyalty evident in Irish organisations, a particular strength of UK organisations.

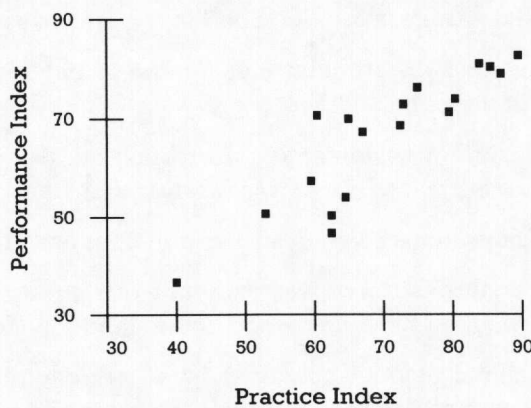
**Leadership**

In both countries, the studies indicated strong leadership by management. Yet, many organisations failed to translate this leadership into a vision of service shared with their employees. This weakness may relate to some of the shortcomings identified earlier in relation to service culture and customer satisfaction.

**Practice and Performance**

Figure 6 illustrates the summary relationship between an index of all performance indicators in the study, and an index of all practice indicators. The study showed a clear correlation between the levels of service management practice among participating organisations and their business performance. This relationship reflected a similar finding in the UK study, adding further support to the central hypothesis of the Service Management Model, that good service management leads to better performance.

FIGURE 5: PRACTICE VERSUS PERFORMANCE



Correlation Coefficient = 0.81 with 95% Significance

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The pattern of service practice and performance that emerges in the study reflects similarities and differences among and between Irish and UK service organisations. In comparing the data from the Irish and UK studies, a number of similarities and contrasts have been brought to light:

- the overall relationship between service practice and performance was largely similar in Ireland and the UK;
- Irish organisations appeared to have difficulties in innovating;
- UK organisations appeared to base their service standards on real customer needs;
- Irish weakness in service recovery and involvement in social issues was mirrored in a poor approach to managing customer loyalty;
- Irish employees seemed to have a clearer vision of what quality meant to their customers. Yet, Irish organisations appeared to be unable to exploit this inherent strength due to corresponding weaknesses in their quality systems which, in Irish and UK organisations, tended to be more informal than systematic;
- Irish organisations surpassed their UK counterparts in both quality performance and in the visibility of their service standards;
- while good practice was reported in the field of complaints management, in neither country did service organisations perform well in the area of problem solving;
- UK service organisations excelled in the area of service recovery;
- both Irish and UK organisations tended to exhibit weaknesses in the use of their "back office";
- the inclusion of customer requirements into the development of new products and services was rarely systematic;
- Irish organisations seemed stronger in their use of IT;
- in both countries, there was evidence of a strong customer focus with employees showing a good understanding of quality values;
- organisations in both countries failed to recognise exceptional performance adequately either at the management or employee levels;

- in most Irish service organisations, team working was a common practice;
- few Irish companies appeared to devote sufficient time or resources to the continuous training of employees;
- in both countries, many organisations failed to translate management leadership into a vision of service shared with their employees.

### **Next Steps**

The Irish study has raised many issues deserving of further attention. The next step with the present dataset will be to carry out sectoral comparisons, both within Ireland, and between Ireland and the UK. These comparisons will be strengthened by the more recent use of the Service Management Model to examine service management practice and performance in service organisations in the UK, USA and Germany (Voss et al., 1997; Meyer, Chase, Roth, Voss, Sperl, Menor & Blackmon, 1999). It is hoped to expand the study to cover a wider range of service sectors and to apply the study protocol more actively to help organisations (through their managers and workforce) to change, upgrade and become learning organisations.

As interesting as the substantive issues, however, is the prompt given by this study to improve the utility of benchmarking data. There is considerable scope for automating further the process of data collection and report generation, assigning most of the more repetitive tasks to a computer based system. By greatly improving the manageability of the data, and by streamlining data handling, a computer-assisted report generating and feedback system could greatly increase the size of questionnaire that could be handled effectively, thereby freeing time for both questionnaire preparation, and data analysis, two important parts of the benchmarking process. Simultaneously, by improving feedback times the system could enable such studies to become a great deal more valuable to their participants.

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