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Temporary Contractors & Full-Time Employees: Contextually Driven Decision-Making and the Customer Experience in Higher Education Information Technology

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Introduction

Colleges and universities face an increased number of technology-reliant events and activities yet often do not have the in-house event services staff to meet the demand for technology support. Many institutions hire contractors temporarily to fill this gap, as opposed to hiring additional permanent staff. The issue with contracted labor is that such personnel are temporary, implying a perpetual state of newness. Contractors will not have the institutional knowledge of their permanent staff counterparts and will not be empowered to make the same decisions. Additionally, contractors will not have the same keys, access, or geographical knowledge of the campus. They will likely not be invested in the college community to the same degree as their permanently employed colleagues. Furthermore, institutions often cannot invest in temporary contractors in the ways they can with permanent full-time employees. Customer service, engagement, relationship building, and overall quality of service often suffer as a result.

Customer engagement is an integral part of any higher education institution. The interface between staff and clientele within information technology services and event support is crucial to a college campus's successful operation and is cited in academic sources as among the most critical drivers of clientele satisfaction and student/customer retention. This research project aims to explore a primary factor impacting customer service within higher education information technology as well as the positive and negative effects that full-time employees and temporary contractors can have on the higher education customer experience.

A common trend within the information technology event support sector, particularly in large institutions such as colleges and universities, is the use of both outside contractors and permanent staff in varying capacities. Research into this topic is increasingly relevant as college communities form increased reliance on technology inside and outside the classroom. Findings could influence the direction of hiring and staffing trends, scope of work, and service catalog policy within these service departments moving forward. Additionally, a study of this nature can inform contract and project management best practices, human capital investment and development, and strategic planning initiatives in the higher education information technology sector, in closely related sectors, and in more generalized customer service best practices.

Using the customer experience within the greater Boston College community as a case study, this research project will rely on relevant literature to inform and enhance data gathered from a customer satisfaction survey presented to clientele following completion of services by the Boston College event support staff, operating under the umbrella of Boston College information



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technology services. The survey will be voluntary and ask customers to rate their service experience in six key areas. Data gathering will take place over the course of a six-month period and will be cross-referenced with service personnel classification using procedures and methods detailed in this paper's body. This project will answer the question: is the customer experience negatively impacted by differences in contextually driven decision-making opportunities between temporary contractors and full-time employees?

In seeking to answer this question, this study will examine contextually driven decision-making, a term coined specifically in the context of this research, which refers to decisions made by either temporary contractors or full-time employees that require precedential knowledge beyond institutional best practices. It is hypothesized that temporary contractors with less contextually driven decision-making opportunities will have a negative impact on the customer experience. In the context of this study, negative impact refers to customer dissatisfaction with event support staff courtesy, technical knowledge, and communication, as well as timeliness, results, and overall quality of service provided. The researcher hypothesizes that temporary contractors' lack of institutional knowledge, lack of familiarity with a specific institution's technical setup, and limited to no prior experience with the specific needs and personalities of clientele will negatively impact the customer experience.

If data favors this hypothesis, Boston College and similar higher education institutions utilizing contracted labor may choose to inform and develop future staffing policies directed toward sustainable, high-quality customer service models that place engagement, relationship building, institutional knowledge, and employee development at the forefront. In other words, this study's findings may lead institutions to proactively create a change initiative that favors hiring and investing in full-time staff as opposed to temporary contractors. Therefore, not only would data of this kind help drive change toward proactive sustainable policies for Boston College in general, but it could also narrow the scope of work for information technology event services in higher education, inform contract and project management best practices, human capital investment, and strategic planning initiatives, and bridge gaps in the literature between staffing policy and customer service in higher education information technology.

Literature Review

This research will be supplemented by a review of relevant literature that will showcase how prior research within the broader field of customer service in information technology services and higher education supports the stated hypothesis, why this study is relevant to filling in the gaps in existing research, and how the projections and data gathering mechanisms of this project have been informed by reliable academic sources. Additionally, the literature review will also explicate the relevance of this specific study to the customer experience in higher education information technology event support services, and the impact on the wider topic of customer service in information technology services in general.



Three major themes emerged in the literature review, and sources will be grouped under these subtopics accordingly: research surrounding contracted employee opportunities and challenges from varying perspectives, research into customer service policies, and literature documenting customer service impact within a large institution. These three subtopics speak to the research topic's primary facets, lend support to proposed research methods, help answer the research question, and provide background and context for the topic at hand. Worth noting is the lack of literature around contracting versus in-house staffing in the higher education sector specifically. This study's results can hopefully fill in some of those gaps. Additionally, it is important to recognize literature supporting a third staffing alternative: the use of automated, customer-operated self-service. However, this research focuses on current and future information technology and event support operations in higher education, the nature of which relies on and will continue to demand customer-facing person-to-person interactions. At this time and in the foreseeable future, it is unrealistic to project total reliance on self-service within the context of this research study proposal. Therefore, automation will not be considered as a viable third option. The literature on this topic will not be reviewed in detail and only referred to as appropriately related to the topics discussed within the scope of this proposed research study and literature review.

Contracted Employee Opportunities and Challenges from Varying Perspectives

Within the literature on contracted employees in information technology, there are numerous articles and studies concerning the financial benefits, recent regulatory changes, and legal ramifications of employing contractors, particularly from employers' perspectives in the tech/app startup, information technology securities, and industrial appliance industries. From the employer perspective, for example, there is a difference in control over temporary contractors' actions and expectations versus full-time employees (Hagiu & Biederman, 2015). This indicates that contractors have a different level of accountability with regard to the company they are working for. In turn, this suggests that there could be a potential difference in contextual based decision-making and the customer experience with regard to contracted versus full-time staff. For example, Kunda, Barley & Evans (2002) describe a dichotomy in contracting perceived by many contractors as a set of matched pros and cons. These outline positive and negative aspects of contracting from a contractor's perspective that mirror the employer perspective in many ways and suggest underlying tensions from both perspectives. These four sets of pros and cons are as follows: independence versus being an outsider, security versus uncertainty, enhanced income versus hidden costs, skills as expertise versus skills as a commodity.

This study does not intend to go into great detail on the dichotomy presented. Still, it is important to highlight similarities in perspective between contractor and employer as well as the marked absence of the customer's perspective. A study by Koch, Späth, and Strotmann (2013) on the importance of employee development and human capital in business growth is another source



relevant to this research. This study cites human capital as among one of the most decisive drivers of the post-entry growth of an organization or newly founded initiative. They define human capital as employee qualifications, experience, ideas, and networks. Therefore, in a strategic customer service plan, investment in human capital or employee development is critical to an initiative's success.

In this research, two of the main keywords being focused on by this review are temporary contractor and full-time employee. In many cases, a company cannot invest in a contractor as they would a full-time employee, and there are often little to no opportunities for human capital development among temporary contracted staff. While an institution like Boston College has a customer service initiative in place that involves action items such as customer service training programs for personnel, measuring existing service procedures against industry standards and creating a plan for improvement, and identifying best practices for managing relationships between information technology staff and clientele, this development cannot be extended to contracted staff in the same way it can to full-time employees. Furthermore, contracted staff not only lack access to employee development, but they do not have the institutional and social knowledge advantage, nor are they empowered to make decisions in the same way as employees. Thus, as this research study proposal hypothesizes, the customer's experience of services rendered will likely suffer as a result.

Research into Customer Service Policies

There are also many journal articles and studies concerning the importance of the customer experience in the hospitality industry, which primarily uses contracted staff. These articles detail organizational policies directed at improving customer satisfaction, customer retention, and various customer feedback models. For example, the food service industry is statistically a highly contracted industry, there is often an observed difference between service (the steps to complete a task) and hospitality (how the customer experiences those steps) (Sullivan, 2000). This point relates to the depth of the institutional knowledge and contextual decision-making in contractors versus employees and how this affects the customer experience. Also supporting this notion is a study by Gazzoli, Hancer & Park (2012), which suggests that institutional policy and company culture can be customer-oriented in nature. As long as that policy is coordinated well with outside contractors, customer satisfaction will be high. Lengnick-Hall (1996) also emphasizes the importance of customer contributions to quality. An institution must become customer-oriented to maintain quality and competitive advantage. They also note that quality management programs often lack customer involvement in the process. While information technology services event support services at Boston College employ customer feedback methods, this research project aims to cross-reference existing customer satisfaction data with who delivered the service (contractor or employee). That way, Boston College event support services can use the findings to determine any customer satisfaction trends in relation to the source of service and move forward accordingly with staffing policy.



Kunas (2012) explains that "in order to successfully realize service quality, [an institution] must first successfully implement a robust and streamlined service management system. This service management system allows [institutions] to manage and implement information technology services quickly, effectively, and responsibly. This management system could even extend to "governance of processes operated by other parties in documentation, policy, plan, procedure, process, control records, and resource management" (Kunas, 2012), proving that an effective service management system in one area may be utilized for other areas as needed by the institution. This research study proposal also aims to inform policy that could benefit the current service management systems or any new service management systems put forward within Boston College information technology services.

Griffin and Hauser (1993) discuss "voice-of-the-customer," which similarly highlights the relevance of customer feedback, or "the task(s) of identifying customer needs, structuring customer needs, and providing priorities for customer needs." This affirms the use of post-service surveys in event support as a driver for positive change and an accurate determinant of possible trends in perception of service delivered via contractor versus full-time staff. Similarly, a study conducted by Suvittawat (2015) outlines a service quality questionnaire according to a number of customer satisfaction dimensions. This establishes the precedent that determining customer satisfaction through a series of questions in a brief survey is an acceptable method of gathering data pertaining to the customer service experience and continuing customer satisfaction.

Research by George and Jones (1991) on customer service quality notes that providing too much service (i.e., service that exceeds customer desires) can be just as detrimental to service quality as providing too little service. As a way of avoiding this, they suggest striking a balance using mechanisms of adjustment that facilitate the accurate perception of/responsiveness to customer desires. This includes a service culture and climate, a service catalog scope and selection, as well as "socialization and training, and monitoring and reward systems" (George and Jones, 1991). However, few to none of these mechanisms could be easily, quickly, or inexpensively instituted in a service environment reliant on temporary contracted staff. Rather, these mechanisms required time, effort, and necessary expense to cultivate in the more permanent context of full-time employed staff. In higher education, when student and faculty member satisfaction is often a preeminent priority of the institutional mission, mechanisms to improve customer service are vital, and most successful (and in many cases, only possible) in permanent over temporary staff settings, a position predicted in this proposed research study's hypothesis.

Ray, Muhanna, and Barney (2005) support the idea that a method of gathering customer service data is not a one size fits all. Their study maintains that it's not productive to use a generic or generalized customer feedback questionnaire because many institutions are unique. Therefore,



this proposed research study will use Boston College's existing infrastructure, including the current media technology services event support approved service experience questionnaire and the current Boston College information technology services strategic plan. Operating the proposed research study within a Boston College departmentally specified context will yield the most relevant data for the perspective of this specific clientele of the greater Boston College community, faculty, staff, and students. In this way, the information gathered will be oriented from the contextually correct customer experience perspective. Also supporting this idea, Setia, Venkatesh, and Joglekar (2013) emphasize customer-centric organizations and shifting the focus from "building production-side competencies" to "customer-side digital business strategies." A study supporting customer-centric methods of data gathering in particular was conducted by Wang, Liu, and Izadi (1998) on customer feedback information systems. These authors claim that "in the competitive global economy every organization needs to continuously improve the quality of services to meet the needs of ever more sophisticated customers" (Wang, Liu, and Izadi, 1998, p. 59). Their study cites that systems which gather data and enable prompt responses to customer feedback were most critical in measured service quality improvement. According to their study, organizations benefit from taking a customer-centric approach to developing customer service best practices that "begin[s] with what the customer needs and expects and [ends] with what the customer sees and believes concerning the quality of service" (Wang, Liu, and Izadi, 1998). A similar study by Ellis and Curtis (1995) defines the customer as "not only an end-user or consumer but as a downstream counterpart of R&D" to be considered when measuring the "measures of responsiveness, technical capabilities and products, quality [of service], reliability [of service], and overall indications of customer satisfaction" within the greater institution.

Customer Service Impact Within a Large Institution

If the proposed research study's hypothesis is true, supplemental research supports the idea that customer service indicators are much better discovered proactively rather than reactively. If left unchecked, customer dissatisfaction can create significantly damaging domino effects that often require institutions to pull resources from all sectors or pay steep premiums to address incompetencies (Kollinger, 2016). Additionally, Ballard (1996) cites the importance of buy-in at all levels of an institution in order to effectively plan policies that lead to customer satisfaction and notes that staffing and teamwork best practices can help solve design and service related problems. Similarly, there is research emphasizing the importance of thorough training and coordination of contractors and forming relationships with repeat contracting vendors (D'Amico and Cederquist, 2006; Fernandez-Mateo, 2005; Newman, 2007). Furthermore, Brenders, Hope, and Ninnan (1999) conducted research based on students' perceptions of service in a large university setting, reinforcing the importance of service quality as "the primary value that should motivate all action." The article claims universities need to come to terms with: "they are in a competitive battle for students, and students are customers" and that "educational providers are beginning to understand that perceptions of services transcend the area of quality teaching and



encompass the students' overall experience with the university" (Brenders, Hope and Ninna, 1999). This solidifies this proposed research study's relevance to higher education, placing students' perceptions of service both inside and outside the classroom as drivers of student/customer retention and growth. It also supports the relevancy of student feedback in gauging quality of the contractor versus permanent employee service experience and general quality of service improvement. Along that vein, keeping the 'student as customer' perspective, Dickson's (2015) research suggests that customer service improvement practices are often adopted at higher rates in "firms that claim service excellence superiority," suggesting that, if higher education institutions, especially ones which claim a high degree of service excellency, are indeed placing service at a high priority, they will be open to data collection and student/customer feedback, and adaptable to student/customer needs in the rapidly changing world of information technology and event support services. For an institution like Boston College, a highly regarded institution of higher education with a well-established calling of men and women in the service of others, this is particularly relevant. To that end, conducting research like this proposed study, and using the results to reflect upon and inform new opportunities in policy, strategic initiatives, customer relationship management best practices, and quality of service improvements, is essential.

Dužević and Časni (2015) cite student and faculty perceptions of service in a higher education context. This study highlights the importance of institutional knowledge—what this proposed research study classifies as contextually driven decision-making—as one of the highlights of the proposed study's permanent employee over contractor hypothesis. Dužević and Časni state that "[In many ways] students and faculty [perceive] service quality dimensions in a similar manner. Ownership status, research orientation, and [institution] size significantly moderate customer perceptions of the service quality." (2015) The study found that the role of clearly communicated and demonstrated institutional characteristics strongly influences customer perceptions of service quality within the greater institution.

Supporting both the methods of research and the hypothesis surrounding this research study proposal is the claim that rapid changes in information technology lend themselves to more opportunities for institutions to "establish, nurture, and sustain long term relationships with their customers" (Sun, 2006). Sun's study claims that this is truer now than ever before. Customer service is no longer defined as a stand-alone marketing decision aimed at increasing satisfaction, but rather a dynamic 'learning relationship' that has the potential to be integrated into every step of the customer experience. Sun describes moving from "mass marketing to customer-centric marketing" and "from reactive service to proactive relationship building." (2006) Echoing these ideas is Yim, Anderson, and Swaminathan (2004), who make similar claims with regard to the effect of customer relationship management on customer outcomes. Not only do these two studies support the notion of tapping into the customer voice to create



service policy, but they also emphasize the importance of relationship building. This is another key factor that can set an institution like Boston College apart from other higher education communities – full-time employees with technology infrastructure access leveraging technology's communicative aspects to build relationships over simply delivering service. In other words, technology infrastructure-based customer relationships may be established, aided, and maintained over time more easily by full-time employees rather than contractors, who may interact with clientele only once or even not at all.

Sun (2006) moves on to claim that one key "challenge faced by today's customer relationship management practice is: how best to learn about individual customers and act on an [institutions'] knowledge of a customer for the purpose of growing a relationship and improving long-term customer value." This reinforces the concept of institutional knowledge informing and empowering employees to make decisions, knowledge that contractors can't possibly develop in their short time on campus. This foundational value is one of the motivating factors behind conducting this research – that is, to demonstrate the power of relationship-building in customer service and provide direction for the future of the event support services department at Boston College, potentially influencing future hiring and staffing trends, scope of work, and service catalog policies.

Research into Automated Customer Self Service

While this research project seeks to compare service delivered by full-time versus contracted employees, Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, and Bitner (2000) offer a third option that is important to note. They offer automated services/customer self-service as an alternative to human delivered services. They note that the fast pace of today's world has resulted in an increase in customer interactions with technology as opposed to person-to-person interfacing. Self-service technologies "enable customers to produce a service independent of direct service [member] involvement" (Meuter et al., 2000). It is important to note a potential shortcoming in the literature around this subject. The emphasis in academia has been on interpersonal dynamics of service encounters. As of this review, not enough research has been conducted to draw any meaningful conclusions about customer interactions with technology-based self-service alternatives to consider the impact on satisfaction and whether or not it would be a reasonable alternative to the contractor versus full-time staffing demanded of primarily customer-facing, person-to-person service. And while the authors maintain that technological progress will continue to change the face of the service industry, it is reasonable to conclude that the nature of information technology and event support services within higher education will rely on some level of person-to-person interaction indefinitely. Furthermore, while increased reliance on automated services can decrease workload while maintaining customer service standards, many such systems can often be expensive to implement and difficult to scale if applied to the full scope of information technology and event support services in higher education.



In conclusion, the body of literature surrounding this topic, particularly the emerging trends and themes, has helped justify, define and direct the scope of this research topic surrounding the impact that temporary contractors versus full-time employees can have on customer service in higher education information technology. The prior research into these subtopics and the gaps in the literature surrounding the higher education context, in particular, support this proposal and validate the need for further study in this area. These academic sources also lend support to the project's proposed research methods, provide evidence that legitimizes the hypothesis, and provide background and context for the topic at hand. And as mentioned, the lack of literature around contracting versus in-house staffing in higher education information technology increases this project's relevance. Much of the existing research centers around generalized customer service best practices. While there is a substantial amount of research surrounding contracted versus full-time service, there was nothing found that presented this within the context of a higher education institution specifically. This study aims to help fill in some of the research gaps, inform hiring practices in the industry, and improve the overall culture of service in higher education institutions. This proposed research project also seeks to improve customer engagement and retention, build lasting customer relationships, and help to define scope of work and service catalog policy in higher education information technology service departments. Additionally, a study of this nature has the potential to enhance the conversation around customer service best practices and enrich the body of research on this topic in general.

Definition of Terms

Several important terms will be used and defined within the context of this study, some of which have already been mentioned. Among those is the term *temporary contractor*, which for the purposes of this research will be defined as a third-party individual who is temporarily engaged by an institution to be paid a flat amount for completion of an agreed-upon project or product by a specified deadline. *Temporary* refers to a work period length within a set institution no greater than 150 hours a year. A *full-time employee* is an individual who works full time under an extended contract of employment with ongoing and recognized rights and duties within that institution.

Higher education refers to a traditional institution with a similar demographic to an ethnically diverse, multigenerational working community similar to Boston College. This community of approximately 50% men and 50% women provides services to customers and impacts the customer experience through engagement in complex institutional policy informed largely by contextual precedent.

Information technology event support is defined as a full range of audiovisual services provided to the Boston College community, including event and classroom audiovisual technology and on-site technology support, digital audio and video recording, and digital photography.



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This study defines *contextually driven decision-making* as decisions made by either temporary contractors or full-time employees that require precedential knowledge beyond institutional best practices. Two examples of contextually driven decision-making include:

1. I know this keynote speaker does not like to stand at the podium microphone because I have done this event before. I should provide this speaker with a backup hand-held wireless microphone to use.
2. This workgroup usually asks to play music during their lunch break but forgot to ask for a music hook-up today. I should take the initiative to provide a music hook-up just in case.

Serviced event is defined as any event support ticket which requires a person-to-person, customer-facing interaction that may or may not involve contextually driven decision-making.

Customer feedback is defined as repeated and widespread customer response polled by a voluntary automatic survey continuously over a period of approximately six months. Customers are asked to choose whether they are (1) very dissatisfied, (2) somewhat dissatisfied, (3) neutral, (4) somewhat satisfied, or (5) very satisfied regarding six defined areas of the customer experience.

Customer experience refers to how the customer reports on six different areas: courtesy of the staff, technical skills and knowledge of the staff, communication to the customer regarding expectations for service, timeliness of service provided, results of the service supplied, and overall service experience.

Positive impact is defined as customers who report an average rating above three across these six areas of the customer experience. *Negative impact* is defined as customers who report an average level of dissatisfaction (below three) across these six customer experience areas. *No impact* is defined as customers who report an average level of exactly three across these six areas of the customer experience.

Participants

The participants in this study encompass students, administration, faculty, staff, and guests of the greater Boston College community who put in an event services ticket request through the event request portal, attend the event, and subsequently fill out the brief customer experience questionnaire. This researcher considers this sample to be representative of the population that the study is sampling, namely a customer who has had a serviced event experience with information technology event support staff in higher education. Over the study's proposed timeline, approximately 1,300 events will occur, yielding 500 participant responses (n=500) to the voluntary survey. The time period can be adjusted accordingly to meet this quota.



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Materials

After the conclusion of the event, participants will receive an email containing a link to an optional customer experience survey. The email text is as follows:

Greetings,

We hope your recent request for technology help was completed to your satisfaction <TICKET #>. For a description of this particular ticket, please read the details below. <CUSTOMER TICKET DETAILS (DATE, TIME, LOCATION, ETC)> We would like to get your feedback about the technology help you received. Please feel free to fill out this short survey to tell us how we are doing. <CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE SURVEY LINK URL> In order for Boston College ITS (Information Technology Services) to better serve you, please complete the short customer satisfaction survey below. If you need assistance, please contact the Help Center at 617-552-4357 or help.center@bc.edu. The link will take the participants to a survey in which they rate their satisfaction level from 1-5 (Very Satisfied, Satisfied, Neutral, Dissatisfied, Very Dissatisfied) in the following categories: courtesy of the event support staff, technical skills/knowledge of the event support staff, communication regarding expectations of service, timeliness of service provided, results of the service supplied, overall service experience.

Sincerely,

Information Technology Event Support Staff

Design

This research seeks to explore the impact of contracted versus full-time staff on the customer experience. Therefore, the dependent variable is the customer experience and the independent variables are the two sources of service delivery: contracted versus full-time staff. This research can be categorized as a between-subject design because customers will be receiving service from either contractors or full-time staff—not both. Control variables that will remain consistent throughout the data gathering period include timing in which the survey is delivered, questions in the survey, and type of event (requires technology support), event location (on-campus). As a blind experiment, the participants in this study give informed consent in filling out the survey but do not know the specific parameters of the study or how the data is being analyzed and cross-referenced with the type of service delivered. Furthermore, they may have no knowledge of the fact that contractors are delivering their service as opposed to full-time staff or that an option between the two service types exists. This blind-experiment design protects against problems such as confirmation bias. The participant may report poor service based on the service delivery source's knowledge or the hypothesis in question. Additionally, it is essential to note that the survey is designed to accept all data: positive, negative, and neutral ratings are all valuable to the study, though the optional nature of the questionnaire could potentially affect results on a smaller scale. This is why the research aims to gather data on a larger scale of at least 500 participant responses. If too few data points are accumulated during the duration of this study, the time period may be extended.

Procedure

The proposed research project procedure is as follows:

- **Subject requests event support:** Service is requested through an online portal. A support ticket is automatically generated and assigned a unique number that can be easily referenced.
- **Service is provided:** Event support service is provided either by a temporary contractor or full-time employee. This data is also recorded automatically by the ticketing system.
- **Customer service questionnaire sent:** At the conclusion of the event, participants are automatically sent a brief survey with their event ticket closure notification. The survey asks customers to rate aspects of their experience on a scale of one to five (five being the highest) in six categories: courtesy of event support staff, technical skills/knowledge of staff, communication to subject regarding expectations of service, timeline of service provided, results of service provided, and overall service experience. See Figure 1.

EVENT TICKET #290441	(1) Very Dissatisfied	(2) Dissatisfied	(3) Neutral	(4) Satisfied	(5) Very Satisfied
Courtesy of the event support staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Technical skills / knowledge of the event support staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Communication to subject regarding expectations of service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Timeliness of service provided	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Results of service provided	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Overall service experience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

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Figure 1.

- **Questionnaire data is cross-referenced:** Data from the customer experience survey is cross-referenced with whether a temporary contractor or full-time employee provided the service. The average of the six customer service ratings is calculated. This information is gathered and organized on an excel spreadsheet in three columns (Ticket Number, Type of Service, Satisfaction Average). This process will be repeated each month for a total of six months,

gathering approximately 500 participant responses over the entire survey period. See Figure 2.

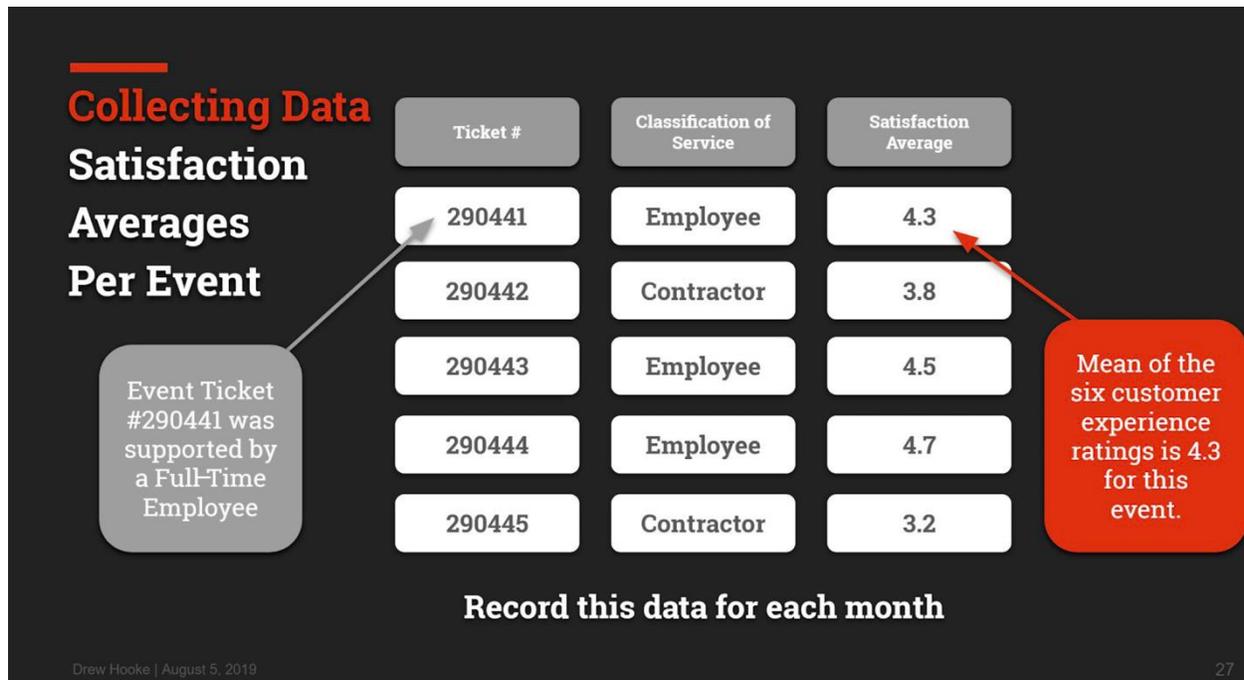


Figure 2.

- Data Plotted:** The satisfaction rating averages from individual survey results will be accumulated and calculated into a single monthly average for contractor delivered service and full-time delivered service separately. These results will then be plotted on a bar graph with ratings (1-5) on the y-axis and monthly averages on the x-axis. Bars will be color-coded, indicating contractor (gray) versus full-time employee (gold). See Figure 3.

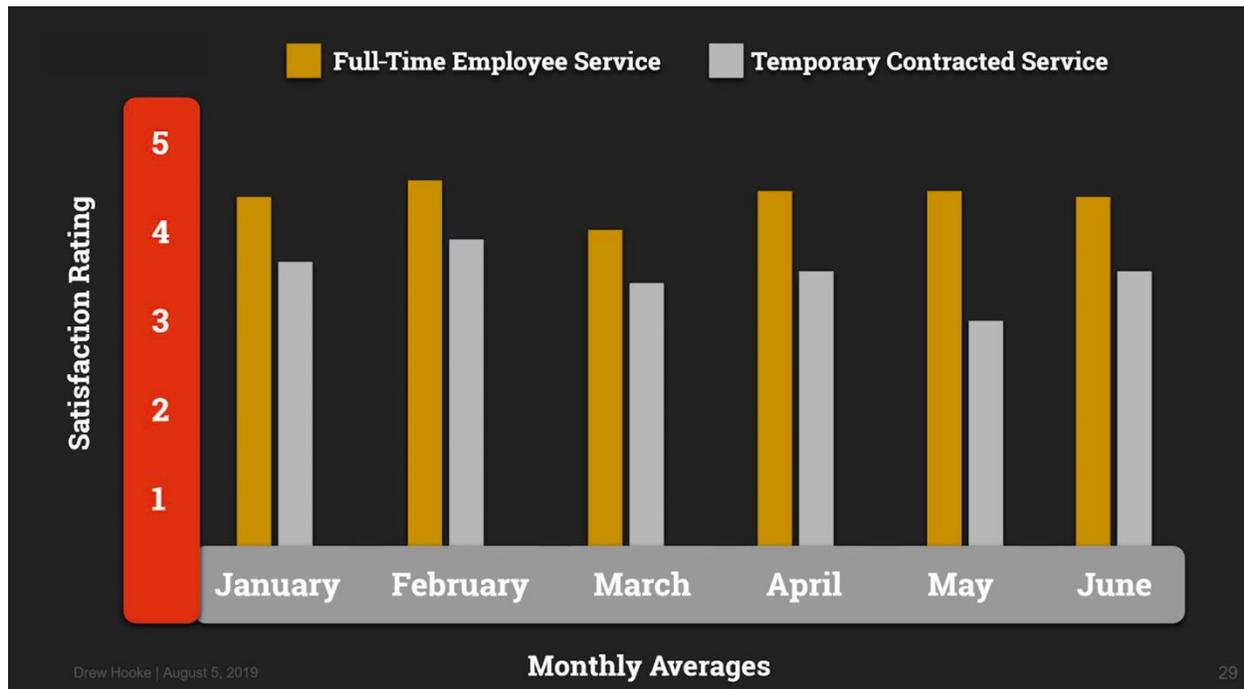


Figure 3.

Because this study compares customer satisfaction expressed as a numerical value in two distinct categories, a double vertical bar graph is ideal. This kind of graph generates a concise visual interpretation of data that can be analyzed based on trends.

- **Graph Analyzed:** The graph will be visually analyzed to determine whether the data supports the hypothesis—i.e., is the bar data for employee-delivered service consistently higher each month than the bar for contractor-delivered service?
- **Results Presented:** Results will be presented to relevant audiences and discussed. Research design, analysis, and discussion will be published in relevant journals.

As mentioned, the data-gathering phase will take place over the course of six months from January to June, a time period when the event schedule is consistent and should allow sufficient time to reach the proposed participant response quota. Data will then be graphed and analyzed. The data will be presented to the media technology services department and published in both the information technology services newsletter (specific to Boston College) and as a scholarly article, relevant to the larger body of literature around the subject. From there, it will ideally be used to inform staffing policy at Boston College and to create a more comprehensive conversation around the topic of higher education staffing policy in general.

It is reasonable to conclude that an initial sample size of 500 participant responses is sufficient to yield at least an initial picture of how contracted versus full-time staff delivered service impacts the customer experience. However, it is important to note that at its conclusion, results and findings may indicate a need for further research and additional data gathering in order to develop a more holistic picture of the trends being explored.

Results

In this research proposal, hypothetical results will be presented and analyzed in support of a true hypothesis. In this case, the graphed data would demonstrate a trend toward a positive customer experience rating for service delivered by full-time staff and a negative experience rating for service delivered by contractors. Hypothetical averages for ratings of contracted service from January to June are illustrated below. See Figure 4.

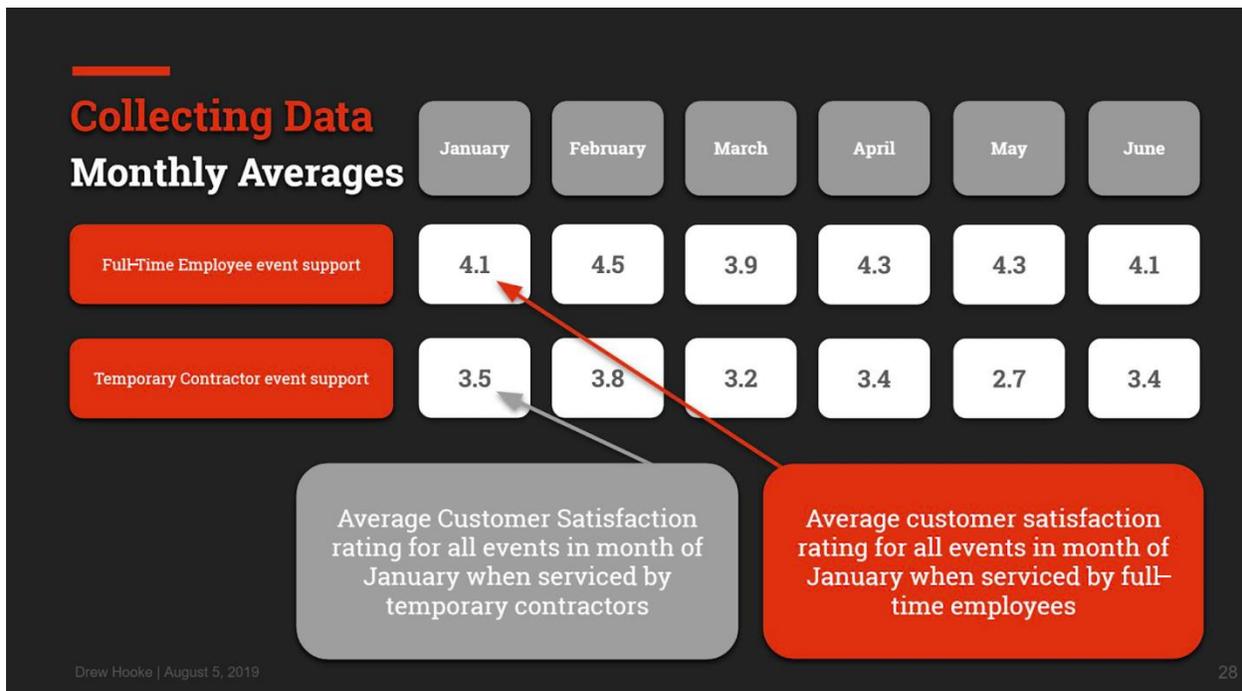


Figure 4.

These averages would then be organized in a double vertical bar graph. See Figure 5.

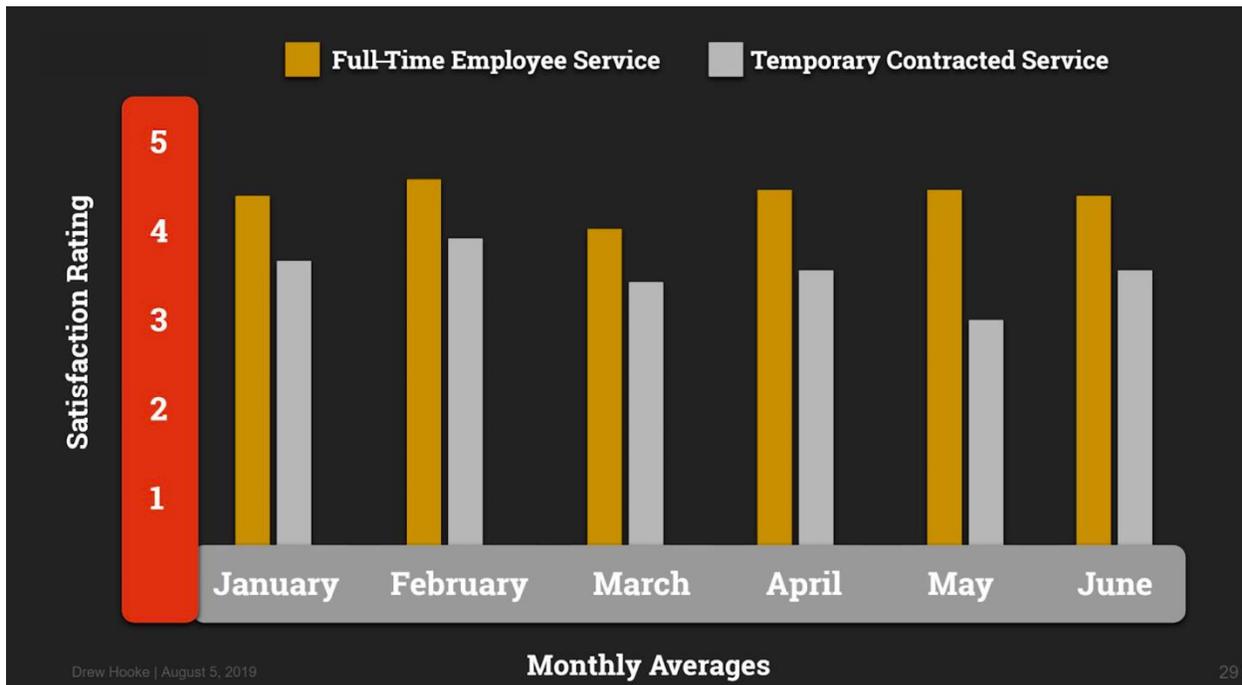


Figure 5.

As demonstrated in the graph, the gold bars representing full-time staff ratings are consistently higher each month than the gray bars representing contracted staff ratings. The monthly averages for full-time employee event support are as follows for January-June respectively: 4.1, 4.5, 3.9, 4.3, 4.3, 4.1. The monthly averages for temporary contracted event support are as follows for January-June respectively: 3.5, 3.8, 3.2, 3.4, 2.5, 3.4. These results support the hypothesis and indicate that temporary, contracted service has a negative impact on the customer experience compared to service delivered by full-time employees.

Scope of Research and Potential Limitations

The body of literature surrounding this topic, particularly the emerging trends and themes, has helped justify, define, and direct the scope of this research topic surrounding the impact that temporary contractors versus full-time employees can have on customer service in higher education information technology. As a result, this researcher has taken great care to define the scope by which the study will focus its research question, thesis, data gathering, findings, and discussion. Therefore, it is also important to highlight related or relevant areas and topics outside of the scope of this proposed research project.

As mentioned, the survey is designed to accept all data. Positive, negative, and neutral ratings are all valuable to the study. Though the questionnaire's optional nature and participants abstaining from self-reporting after a good experience could potentially affect results, this possibility is



likely to be more relevant on a smaller scale. The research seeks to amend this potential skew by gathering data on a large scale of 500 participant responses. If too few data points are accumulated during the duration of this study, the time period may be extended. It is reasonable to conclude that an initial sample size of this magnitude is sufficient to yield at least an initial picture of how contracted versus full-time staff-delivered service impacts the customer experience.

This proposed study also does not directly address or account for differences in the customer experience informed by gender, age, race, religion, culture, status of nationality, politics, economic status, etc. However, it is important to note that this researcher prefers these differences to be present because service provider response to a diverse customer base is one of the factors that can result in a positive or negative service delivery rating. For example, it is hypothesized that full-time employees who have more opportunities for contextually driven decision-making informed by precedential institutional knowledge would be better equipped to appropriately serve diverse audiences of said institution.

There are many instances where contextually driven decision-making has the opportunity to address many of these sociopolitical differences by approaching each interaction and individual within the context of precedential knowledge. Furthermore, in the context of this study's defined terms, all precedential knowledge is built on a foundation of institutional best practices that attempt to proactively understand, discuss, account for, and address issues of immigration, poverty, differences in religious beliefs, social and financial inequality, and racial diversity. Additionally, this study is meant to inform higher education policy in a demographic similar to Boston College. Therefore, it is acceptable that it reflects the Boston College population, whatever the demographics may be. Worth noting is the potential for repeat customers and multiple survey responses from the same participant for different events. As opposed to being a limitation, however, the fact that the rating surveys two or more separate events allows the data to remain viable and even beneficial for the purposes of this study.

A related area not explored in this study is a hypothetical "third option" for service in the information technology event support industry. As mentioned in the literature review, automated services or customer self-service are alternatives to person-to-person interactions. But again, not enough research has been conducted, nor does the structure of the industry in the foreseeable future support this as a cost-effective or scalable alternative. And while many aspects of technology-based industries will continue to expand and change, it is reasonable to conclude that the nature of information technology event support services in higher education institutions will continue to be customer-facing and rely on person-to-person interaction in a significant capacity.

Implications



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As mentioned, for the purposes of this study proposal, the discussion will be conducted under the assumption of a true hypothesis that service delivered by temporary contractors with less contextually driven decision-making opportunities will have a negative impact on the customer experience in higher education information technology event support in a demographic similar to Boston College.

As previously discussed, institutional policy and company culture can be customer-oriented in nature as a best practice in many industries, including higher education. As customer experience opportunities increase, the role of customer experience provider will become increasingly essential. For example, many colleges and universities like Boston College have expanding student populations and infrastructure, which means an inevitable increase in events. Events at Boston College have nearly doubled since 2013, while staffing numbers in information technology sectors such as audio and event technology services have remained stagnant. Contractors and contracting agencies are often used to fill in some of these gaps in staffing, though as the literature and research shows, such practice can be at the cost of quality service. In industries like information technology that involve frequent customer-facing service, many employees must bridge the gap between technology and the customer. This role has become an essential part of the customer experience and the ability to remain relevant in contemporary academia. Positive experiences encompassing interactions with technology and the ability to communicate knowledge across multiple platforms are, as the literature points out, among the most critical factors in customer retention.

Successful customer service in higher education information technology stems from numerous sources, including relationship building with clients, patience and investment in the greater college community, diversity training, and other aspects of human capital development. Ease of service is enhanced by prior knowledge of both clients and the campus layout, familiarity with specific equipment, teambuilding, and precedential institutional knowledge. Employees who feel empowered to make context-based decisions are a significant part of cultivating a customer's positive experience. Managing personnel, time, and equipment to meet annual event capacity are crucial as technology-reliant events increase. Change of this nature demands strong leadership, resource allocation, and proactive strategic planning initiatives. With this in mind, what do the research results suggest, and what steps should schools like Boston College, and by extension any institution with customer facing-technology services, take moving forward?

It is important to conclude that more research of this kind should be conducted. And should additional research, particularly at Boston College, continue to support the hypothesis, these findings could have significant implications on the staffing policy in the customer-facing branches of information technology services. Managing a change of this nature would include taking a step toward hiring more full-time staff and making sure to invest in employee development for areas such as diversity, customer service, tech-teaching workshops, and



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certification training. Additionally, managing this change would include ensuring mechanisms for human capital investment were in place. These mechanisms would consist of decisive leadership and communication around meeting increasing demand, strategic planning for future development, and effective time management. Change managers may also wish to reflect upon contractor-reliant events and find ways to rely less on outside staff, or at the very least, consider an increase in permanent employees on-site alongside contracted staff to ensure the expected levels of service quality.

Long-term benefits of this kind of change initiative could include increased customer satisfaction and retention through enhanced customer experience, more opportunities to use technology to empower and give a platform to the Boston College mission and vision, more inclusive services for diverse populations, remaining at the forefront of cutting edge academia, more positive opportunities for students to take part in their college communities via non-classroom events and activities, greater ease for faculty and staff to engage students and impart knowledge, and more opportunities for successfully executed and highly engaging public events. Each of these components can be seen as essential to a thriving college campus focusing on service excellence.

The first step in implementing this strategic change initiative in higher education information technology staffing policy is posing relevant questions: What are the next steps for Boston College or any institution which this data impacts? What should stakeholders do with results from this proposed study and other relevant bodies of research? If the results of this study indicate a need for change, what are the critical things to consider when moving forward? What practical and ethical responsibilities do leaders have?

After recognizing the need for change, organizations must answer four questions in order to effectively drive that change. The first is: who are we as an institution? The answer to this question should outline the shared mission and identity of the institution. The second question is: where are we as an institution? The answer should provide a clear appraisal of the institution's current state. The third and fourth questions are: where are we headed, and how are we prepared to handle roadblocks or obstacles along the way? The answers to these questions delineate the vision or goals a leader has for the future of the institution and what resources and infrastructure are needed to support a change process toward those goals. In other words, what kind of capabilities do we have or need to focus on to set ourselves up for success?

In addition to answering important questions, there are various factors that come into play when leading successful change within an organization, on both small- and large-scale transitions. Dr. Foster Mobley (2011) defines leading as "building capacity in yourself and others to create breakthrough results" Strong leadership requires strategic thinking, overarching and long-term vision, aligning and inspiring followers, innovating, expressing a moral compass, navigating obstacles, and flexibility. A leader's role can be complex and can even shift



according to circumstances within a given situation. Consider proactive versus reactive circumstances that drive change within an organization. Companies that take a proactive approach often do so with a long-term plan in mind. They are likely choosing to change practices within a workplace to avoid future problems, remain relevant with the times, or take advantage of potential opportunities that might arise in the future. A proactive approach involves deliberate and calculated decisions made with foresight. Using data and analysis, such as that yielded in this research, is an essential part of driving proactive change, and ensuring it is successful. The reactive approach to change, on the other hand, is often less of a choice. In the reactive case, an institution is forced to change its practices and policies after a problem (or opportunity) has already presented itself. Reactive change can still be deliberate, and calculated, but many decisions made reactively may likely be under considerably different constraints than decisions made with foresight.

Proactive decision making highlights why research on current trends that take the pace of industry changes into consideration is so critical. In many circumstances, it's better to be prepared and transition accordingly than to be forced to change due to consistent low quality of service experience or loss of clientele. What can one learn about leading successful change campaigns from these approaches? The answers lie in outlining a leader's role in both situations. In some ways, the role stays the same, and in others, it differs. A factor that should always remain the same in either circumstance is vision. An organization should remain committed to the overarching vision, spreading the mission, and getting stakeholders on board. Both proactive and reactive situations demand a look at the bigger picture and ask leaders to compartmentalize issues and set direction for followers. Furthermore, those instigating transitions should pay attention to the timeline of the change. This timeline can help dictate the course of action. While a proactive change may have different risk, time, process, and task management than a reactive change, knowledge of timeline and a sense of urgency can be utilized in both scenarios to keep things moving forward. All these things need to be considered when making staffing changes in any institution. Timing and gradual transition may be particularly relevant when the industry undergoing change has relied on a certain mode of operation and staffing structure for many years. Organizations initiating change may need to take steps to ensure that the framework and timeline adhere to a successful transition.

Developing human capital is also an important factor in sustaining change. As mentioned in the literature review, service staff's continued development is a critical element in ensuring a high-quality service experience for customers. Human capital is essentially an investment in people. Boston College places a high value on service and makes service and service experience a top priority. It is suggested in the literature review that treating students like customers in this capacity is important not only in maintaining the institution's values but also in reinforcing customer satisfaction and retention. The term *human capital* encompasses knowledge, wisdom, habits, social tendencies, skills, and mindsets of an organization that produce measurable value.



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Investing time and research into creating a successful staffing policy includes developing human capital. In addition to fostering incremental improvements and goal setting over extended periods of time, positive developments can be accomplished by sending employees to training, workshops, and webinars. It is important here to again stress the key word, employees. As mentioned before, contractors do not have the same developmental and educational opportunities as full-time staff. Not only is this relevant to current staff, but it is essential in times of change that demand the hiring of new staff. Institutions can find success in investing in their employees and, correspondingly, their clientele. This action affirms both parties and can help maintain a commitment to the vision of a change campaign or transition on both micro and macro levels.

In terms of the ethical implications of this research, let's refer to Boston College specifically. A private Jesuit institution like Boston College is built upon a foundational culture of service excellence. Boston College incorporates self-reflection, self-examination, and the Ignatian Examen into leadership, team building, and employee development. With a mission committed to "the highest standards of teaching and research" and "the pursuit of a just society through its own accomplishments, the work of its faculty and staff and the achievement of its graduates," Boston College has the opportunity to be a leader in this transition into an increasingly technology-based academic experience. It can seize opportunities to continue its mission of academic and service excellence in the Jesuit tradition and embrace an industry-leading role in its strategic approach to increased technology-based events and classroom demands. This change initiative is an opportunity to more closely align with the mission and vision of Boston College, which advocates for the "advance[ment of] insight and understanding, thereby both enriching culture and addressing important societal needs." All institutions with a commitment to excellence in technology and customer experience will likely benefit from further research into this area as higher education information technology is such an essential part of many successful campuses. In the case of Boston College, in particular, this topic is also closely aligned with the mission of the institution.

As noted in the literature review, research suggests that customer service improvement practices are often adopted at higher rates in firms and institutions that claim service excellence superiority (Dickson, 2015). This finding indicates that if higher education institutions, or any customer-facing business that claims a high degree of service excellence, are indeed placing service at a high priority, they will be open to data collection and customer feedback, as well as adaptable to customer needs in the rapidly changing world of information technology. For Boston College, a highly regarded institution of higher education with an established moral and ethical calling of men and women in service of others, this topic is particularly relevant. One could safely postulate that it is soundly within the moral and ethical mission of Boston College to place a high value on the customer's experience of service. To that end, conducting research like this proposed study, and using the results to reflect upon and inform new opportunities in policy,



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strategic initiatives, customer relationship management best practices, and quality of service improvements, is prudent.

One goal of this research is to provide more opportunities to develop the *cura personalis*, or "care for the whole person" This term is frequently referred to in Jesuit education. In terms of this research, it can be applied to employee development and staff-customer relationship building and management through institutional knowledge. These two factors can only be obtained in permanent staffing positions, contracted positions being too brief to include significant employee development or cultivation of positive relationships with clientele. Further goals include creating sustainable, high-quality customer service models; informing and developing future staffing policy and change initiative; and informing contract and project management best practices. This study also aims to support and integrate with larger strategic planning initiatives. It can be used to narrow the scope of work in information technology event services as restructuring occurs to accommodate a higher volume of events and classroom technology needs.

The relationship between this project and the larger body of literature and research into this subject is important. Primarily, a thorough literature review revealed some significant gaps in research around contractors and full-time employees in higher education in particular. Research has yet to address how employing contractors impacts the customer experience in this context. Considering the documented importance of service experience within higher education institutions with rigorous academic programs and tech-based event schedules, additional research into the topics referenced in this study should be conducted.

This research project seeks to enhance the discussion on this topic in higher education but also in the technology and customer-facing service industry in general. This study also aims to inspire further research on the subject outside of the Boston College community as well as combine this research with that on strategic planning and change initiatives to facilitate successful change management. Additional research could also be conducted regarding the potential for an increase in technology reliance for college communities of the future. In all cases, there needs to be additional data collection and further discussion around these topics and more research into the importance of prioritizing engagement, the institutional knowledge of employees, and relationship management within information technology services. At the very least, this proposed study hopes to bridge gaps and inspire further research into staffing policy and customer service best practices in higher education and the field of information technology in general.

This research has the potential to influence not only the Boston College community but has the aforementioned academic, practical, ethical, and moral implications for institutions of higher education and any technology-reliant customer-facing company utilizing contracted labor. This research's findings can be used to inform and develop future staffing policies directed toward sustainable, high-quality customer service models that place engagement, relationship



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building, institutional knowledge, and employee development at the forefront. With this research and supporting literature as backing, this study and others could inspire proactive steps towards change initiatives that favor hiring and investing in full-time staff instead of temporary contractors.

In essence, this project seeks to enhance the discussion on this topic and inspire further research and more comprehensive data. In turn, this study has the potential to drive change toward proactive sustainable policies in relevant institutions; narrow the scope of work for information technology event services in higher education; inform contract and project management best practices, human capital investment, and strategic planning initiatives; and bridge gaps in the literature between staffing policy and customer service in higher education information technology services.



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