

SUPPORTING CLIENTS AS PARTIAL EMPLOYEES

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One of the unusual aspects of service delivery is that clients often participate as “partial employees.” For example, you often need them to collect information or documents and supply those to you in a timely manner so that you can do your work. Client roles can vary from complete self-service to complete “turnkey” (i.e., no client effort required). The trade-off of lower fee for more self-service is a common one so fees should reflect the degree of self-service expected of clients.

Some organizations view clients as creating uncertainty (even havoc!) because they are untrained in their role and so try to buffer the firm from client influence as much as possible. You have probably heard comments like, “Our office runs so much smoother when there are no clients around.” Other organizations see clients as playing a positive role as long as they learn to perform appropriately and so try to manage that training process. Actually, research shows that many (though not all) clients are more satisfied with a service if they feel they have contributed in some way to its success, so we would suggest the second view as more useful. However, if clients feel incompetent in their role or don’t understand what is expected of them, they will become very dissatisfied. Instead, communicate directly to clients what is expected of them and be sure that it is a role they can perform well.

If you expect clients to participate as “partial employees,” then you need to reward them for doing so. After all, they have made an investment of time and energy. Different clients respond to different types of rewards. Here are some examples: increased control over the service delivery process, time savings, and monetary savings.

If clients do not see an appropriate role for themselves in the service delivery process in relation to the fee they are expected to pay, they are likely to opt out and become self-service competitors. Factors that may increase the likelihood of self-service include the client’s degree of expertise, time availability, sense of value received for money spent, and degree of trust in external service providers. There is often the chance that, if client roles are not well-managed, the client will opt to self-serve.