



Key personality traits and career satisfaction of customer service workers

Career satisfaction
of CS workers

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the present study is to identify key personality traits which distinguish customer service (CS) employees from other occupations and are related to their career satisfaction. As hypothesized, 2,610 CS employees were differentiated from other occupational groups by higher levels of conscientiousness, customer service orientation, and lower tough-mindedness. Conscientiousness, customer service orientation, emotional stability, extraversion, and tough-mindedness were significantly, positively related to customer service representatives' (CSRs') career satisfaction. Results are discussed in terms of the adaptive value of these traits for the recruitment, selection, and management of customer service employees.

Design/methodology/approach – Data for this study were extracted from an archival database containing information on individuals' many different occupations and industries, including 2,641 CSRs and 76,788 individuals in other occupations. Measures included demographic items and the Big Five personality traits as well six other narrow personality traits.

Findings – As hypothesized, CS employees differed from other occupational groups by having higher levels of conscientiousness, customer service orientation, and lower tough-mindedness. Also, conscientiousness, customer service orientation, emotional stability, extraversion, and tough-mindedness were significantly, positively related to career satisfaction. Using hierarchical multiple regression, the Big Five traits (Openness, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, and Emotional Stability) accounted for 22 percent of the variance in CSR career satisfaction, while the narrow traits added an additional 6 percent.

Originality/value – The findings of the present study are original in that the authors used a relatively large sample to identify key personality traits which distinguish CS employees from other occupations and are related to their career satisfaction. An empirically validated personality profile of CS workers was presented. The typical CS representative is more: conscientious, optimistic, intrinsically motivated, tender-minded, deferential, conventional, willing to serve other people, and reluctant to work long hours or become workaholics.

Keywords Big Five, Narrow personality traits, Customer service, Career satisfaction, Vocational fit, Customer service management, Personality

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

The customer service (CS) industry is vital to the current US economy, employing over two million CS personnel (Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, 2010). Moreover, CS and related work accounts for an estimated 64 percent of the nation's gross domestic product (Chung and Schneider, 2002). Estimates of job market growth forecast approximately 400,000-500,000 job openings in CS by 2018 (Dohm and Shniper, 2007; Hecker, 2005; Lacey and Wright, 2009). Also, high-quality CS is directly related to increased consumer spending (American Express global customer service barometer, April, 2011), as well as profitability and repeat business (Zeithaml, 2000). Quality service is considered an antecedent to customer satisfaction (Durvasula *et al.*, 2005), which, in turn, is related to customer retention and positive word-of-mouth communication (Durvasula *et al.*, 2005; Szymanski and Henard, 2001). On the other hand, poor CS is associated with increased customer switching and lower corporate profitability (Keaveney, 1995; RightNow Technologies Inc., 2010) as well as a difficult and expensive problem to remediate (Bitner *et al.*, 2000). It is hardly surprising, then, that the study of characteristics of CS and customer dynamics has become a burgeoning research domain (e.g. Rod and Ashill, 2009; Kantsperger and Kunz, 2010; Wang and Mattila, 2010). The present study informs the CS knowledge base by identifying key personality characteristics of customer service representatives (CSRs), using Holland's (1996) vocational theory. We investigated traits which we expected would differentiate CS jobs from other occupations and those traits which would be related to the career satisfaction of CS workers. Before addressing the particulars of our study, we note first what we mean by the terms "personality" and "personality traits." Following Cervone and Pervin (2010), as a field of inquiry, we view personality as the study of what is generally true of people by examining consistencies in individual difference variables. We focussed on personality traits as the variable of interest for studying CS personnel because of the common meaning of individual traits over time and across many different situations. More specifically, we investigated personality traits from the perspective of the Big Five model – for which a general consensus has emerged that all, or nearly all, normal personality traits can be parsimoniously depicted by five main traits which are conceptually broad and inclusive of more narrow-scope traits. These Big Five traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion, and openness (de Raad, 2000) have been replicated in many different contexts and have been validated against a number of different criteria, including job satisfaction (Judge *et al.*, 2002), career satisfaction (Judge *et al.*, 1999), life and nonwork satisfaction (DeNeve and Cooper, 1998), and both job and academic performance (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003a). Recent studies have found that the Big Five model may be too broad and that more narrow-scope personality constructs may be needed to enhance validity in both work and nonwork domains (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003a; Paunonen and Ashton, 2001). As a case in point, Lounsbury *et al.* (2003b) found that six narrow traits (assertiveness, CS orientation, optimism, image management, intrinsic motivation, and work drive) were positively related to career satisfaction for individuals in various occupational fields.

Previous work research on personality characteristics of CS employees has mainly been of a job-analytic nature. For example, a job analysis of CS work found that the typical CS worker is "friendly, attentive, and empathetic" (Baydoun *et al.*, 2001). Subject matter experts with the US Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network (O*NET, Occupational Information Network, 2012) list a number of attributes important for CS work: attention to detail, integrity, and dependability; stress tolerance

and self-control; and social orientation and concern for others. The attributes cited by O*NET can be interpreted in terms of personality traits, particularly the Big Five model.

A number of investigators interested in CS research have utilized the Big Five in their studies. For example, in their meta-analysis involving 6,945 employees, Frei and McDaniel (1998) found that CS measures were positively and strongly related to the personality dimensions of agreeableness, emotional stability, and conscientiousness, moderately related to extraversion, but unrelated to openness. Along slightly different lines, but with similar results, Mount *et al.* (1998) meta-analysis ($n = 1,586$ employees) observed that conscientiousness, emotional stability, agreeableness, and openness were positively related to job performance for CS occupations. Additionally, in a series of four related studies, Hurley (1998) found that extraversion and agreeableness were positively related to superior CS.

The above findings underscore the importance of the broad-spectrum, Big Five personality traits in CS work. However, with few exceptions, research on CS has not attended to narrow personality traits. Narrow-scope personality constructs are useful because they augment the validity of the Big Five traits by contributing additional, unique variance above and beyond broad traits in the prediction of work outcomes, such as job performance and job satisfaction (Paunonen and Ashton, 2001; Schneider *et al.*, 1996) as well as both job and career satisfaction (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003b). With regard to narrow traits and CS research, one of the 14 different occupations in which personality traits were related to job and career satisfaction in the Lounsbury *et al.* (2003a) study was CSR. They found that a number of broad and narrow traits were related to the job and career satisfaction of individuals in CS occupations.

CS research has also not addressed whether the personality traits implicated as being important for CS work are different in magnitude from those same traits measured in other occupations. The aforementioned Lounsbury *et al.* (2003a) study did not compare personality traits between occupations for any group – including CS workers – nor has any other study we could locate. Accordingly, it is presently an open question whether, for example, extraversion and CS orientation are actually higher in CS jobs than other occupations.

Identifying personality traits which differentiate CS from other occupations can help us better understand the nature of CS work and affirm the importance of some of the attributes emphasized for the field by occupational classification schemes such as O*NET, as well as indicate some additional important attributes which might need to be included in future revisions. In addition, drawing on the construct specifications of the broad and narrow traits, we can offer explanations of how each distinctive trait has functional utility for the work of CSR and for the management of CS personnel, including selection, training, and ongoing supervision. Some of the traits under study here – like optimism, extraversion, and conscientiousness – have such rich theoretical traditions with elaborate networks of empirical findings that they can readily be applied to the context of CS work. Ultimately, the use of validated constructs in research on CSR's can help advance the larger body of CS knowledge by identifying the enduring and distinctive traits of CSR's. The current study is based on an appropriate conceptual model – Holland's (1985, 1996) vocational theory. Holland's central thesis is that individuals gravitate toward, are satisfied with, and remain in occupations where there is a good fit between their personality and the work environment. There are two logical corollaries of Holland's fit model which have been generally verified by subsequent research and are germane to the present study. First, there are differences

in mean scores on personality characteristics associated with occupations which help determine fit; and second, higher scores on these personality characteristics are related to higher levels of satisfaction with the occupation.

Rather than studying job satisfaction in CS workers as other studies have done (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Lebreton *et al.*, 2004), we were concerned with career satisfaction. Career satisfaction is defined as an individual's subjective appraisal of their level of success they have achieved with their career as a whole (Judge *et al.*, 1999). Lounsbury *et al.* (2008) further describes career satisfaction as being the sum of one's feelings about their work throughout their lifetime, as it changes and develops during the duration of their life span.

The present study utilized a measure of career satisfaction of CS personnel rather than job satisfaction for several reasons. First, career satisfaction is conceptually closer than job satisfaction to Holland's notion of satisfaction with an occupation. Additionally, career satisfaction represents a person's subjective attitudes about a lifetime of work – estimated to be about 100,000 hours for the typical American (Career Strategists, 2004) – rather than a singular job. It has also been shown that career satisfaction is a component of and is related to overall life satisfaction (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2004d).

In line with the two corollaries noted above, we advanced two main types of hypotheses. The first type specifically deals with whether trait levels for CS workers are different from those of individuals in other occupations, while the second deals with whether specific traits are related to career satisfaction. Thus, each hypothesis pairing first examines the trait relative to CS work: if that broad or narrow trait differentiates CS workers, and that trait has functional value for CS jobs, we expect that workers will experience higher levels of career satisfaction. Both types of hypotheses are presented below for Big Five and narrow traits followed by a brief rationale for each trait:

H1a. CS workers will score higher on conscientiousness than other occupations.

H1b. Conscientiousness will be positively correlated with career satisfaction for CS workers.

CS workers must perform their work reliably, dependably, and according to a set protocol, replete with standard answers for customer questions, established procedures for handling unresolved issues and complaints, and well-defined guidelines for proper language, decorum, pricing, record-keeping, and time spent on customer transactions. Moreover, as noted earlier, O*NET lists several conscientiousness-related traits among the work styles for CSR, including dependability, integrity, and attention to detail. Further, researchers have found that individuals who are high in conscientiousness perform well in the CS field (Mount *et al.*, 1998). In addition, successful CS requires that a service provider honor their commitments dependably and accurately, and routinely follow approved rules and procedures (Berry *et al.*, 1994), – all attributes which correspond to the trait of conscientiousness:

H2a. CS workers will score higher on emotional stability than other occupations.

H2b. Emotional stability will be positively correlated with career satisfaction for CS workers.

Owing to the stressful nature of CS work, individuals who can effectively control their emotions should manage challenging interactions better, such as multiple customer

requests, complaints, or demands. Conversely, individuals who are quick to express negative emotions should have a harder time dealing effectively with customers, coworkers, or supervisors. O*NET includes two essential work styles related to emotional stability – stress tolerance and self-control – when describing CS jobs. In addition, studies by Ones and Viswesvaran (1996) and Frei and McDaniel (1998) found CS orientation to be positively related to the trait of emotional stability (also with agreeableness and conscientiousness), although other researchers report more mixed findings (e.g. Hurley, 1998; Liao and Chuang, 2004):

H3a. CS workers will score higher on extraversion than other occupations.

H3b. Extraversion will be positively correlated with career satisfaction for CS workers.

CS work often pertains to the management of social relationships; customer encounters are frequent, and social alacrity and communication skills are crucial to maintaining positive customer experience (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985). “Social orientation” is listed as an O*NET work style for CS occupations. Further, researchers have found that extraverts are more likely to have well-developed social skills which can inspire customer commitment and help maintain customer relationships over time (Beatty *et al.*, 1996; Hurley, 1998):

H4a. CS workers will score higher on CS orientation than other occupations.

H4b. CS orientation will be positively correlated with career satisfaction for CS workers.

Individuals’ CS orientation (the extent to which a person shows willingness to serve others and derives pleasure from doing so) is already used as a predictor in CS selection instruments, and is a known correlate of emotional stability and conscientiousness (Frei and McDaniel, 1998). Readiness to respond to customer needs has also been identified as a determinant of service quality (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985) and is associated with more positive supervisor performance ratings (Brown *et al.*, 2002). As CS work provides no shortage of opportunities for addressing the requests, inquiries, and grievances of customers, this trait is both distinctive and important for CS careers:

H5a. CS workers will score lower on tough-mindedness than other occupations.

H5b. Tough-mindedness will be negatively correlated with career satisfaction for CS workers.

Empathy, warmth, and responsiveness are distinguishing qualities of CS workers, and have been associated with improved customer evaluations of service quality (Hurley, 1998). Such attributes should be partly accounted for in CS orientation, but also in the narrow trait of tender-mindedness (low tough-mindedness), or the extent to which a person is motivated by sentimental, subjective rather than analytical, objective concerns. Consonant with Hurley’s findings, O*NET work styles include “concern for others,” suggesting an ability to discern and be motivated by customers’ needs and feelings:

H6. Inclusion of narrow traits will predict incremental variance in career satisfaction above and beyond the Big Five.

Numerous studies have examined the influence of narrow traits over and above broad traits (Paunonen and Ashton, 2001; Paunonen *et al.*, 1999; Schneider *et al.*, 1996). Thus, we expected that the inclusion of narrow traits would add to the predictable variance in career satisfaction.

Owing to the lack of a clear rationale for making predictions about their relationship to the career satisfaction of CS personnel, the following traits were examined via nondirectional research questions: agreeableness/teamwork, openness to experience, optimism, assertiveness, and intrinsic motivation. While we could not make a priori predictions about whether CS employees would be higher or lower on these traits compared to other occupations, or whether they would be related to career satisfaction based on Holland's model, we believed that answering these research questions could further inform the construct validity of personality traits in CS occupations.

Method

Data for this study were extracted from an archival database provided by eCareerfit.com, a company which offers online, personality-based career assessments to companies for employee career development, succession planning, leadership development, mentoring, coaching, workforce planning, and outplacement/transition services. We acknowledge some advantages and disadvantages of using archival data sources for research (see, e.g. Hoyle *et al.*, 2001; Jex and Britt, 2008), but the former are considered by many to outweigh the latter as secondary analyses are becoming more frequently used as large-scale archival data sources continue to be made available to researchers (Shultz *et al.*, 2011). We chose to study an archival data source for the following reasons: the responses represented data from reliable and previously validated (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003b; Lounsbury and Gibson, 2011) scales which were readily available from the internet and, were collected via a nonreactive form of measurement in that respondents were not participating in a research study. Because participants were providing responses to questions so that they could receive information about their personality and personal style for purposes of self-awareness and career planning, the threat of positive response bias which typically characterizes personality assessment (cf. Pervin and John, 1997) was minimized. The database contained information on individuals from a wide range of occupations and industries. All data were originally collected on the internet as part of a career planning service offered by an international strategic human resources company. Data were collected from March of 2003 to January of 2010, including all available cases, though the career satisfaction measure was added later than the personality measures and data for this measure were available from August 2005 to January 2010.

Participants

The sample was comprised of 2,610 CS employees employed by a wide range of companies throughout the USA, where CS was one option on a pull-down menu of occupations which included broad occupational groups such as accounting and finance, CS, education, engineering, management, and sales. Many participants also listed their individual job titles, which, in the case of CS, were too many to list or to readily categorize as they included such diverse titles as these which began with the term customer service: customer service administrative representative, customer service advisor, customer service advocate, customer service agent, customer service analyst, customer service assistant, customer service associate, customer service coordinator, customer service engineer, customer

service manager, customer service professional, CSR (I, II, and III), customer service sales, customer service supervisor, customer service team leader, customer service technical analyst.

CS trainer, and CS VP

Of the total 2,641 sample CS participants in the present study, 65 percent were male; 35 percent were female. Relative frequencies by age group were: under 30 – 35 percent; 30-39 – 25 percent; 40-49 – 33 percent; 50-59 – 28 percent; and 60 and over – 4 percent. Race/ethnic data were not available. The participants came from a variety of industries, banking and financial services (16 percent), telecommunications (14 percent), technology services (11 percent), communications (7 percent), manufacturing (6 percent), professional and consulting services (6 percent), consumer products (5 percent), and hospitality (4 percent).

For the 78,127 individuals in the non-CS sample, 54 percent were male; 46 percent were female. Relative frequencies by age group were: under 30 – 8 percent; 30-39 – 26 percent; 40-49 – 36 percent; and 50 and over – 30 percent. Relative frequencies by occupational group were: accounting – 9 percent, business-general – 6 percent, clerical – 2 percent, consultant – 5 percent, engineering – 8 percent, executive – 4 percent, financial services – 4 percent, human resources – 6 percent, information technology – 15 percent, manager – 14 percent, manufacturing – 4 percent, marketing – 8 percent, and sales – 8 percent; and “other” – 7 percent.

Measures

Resource associates’ personal style inventory (PSI) was used to assess Big Five traits and narrow personality traits. The PSI is a work-based instrument that has been used in a variety of organizational settings, such as career development and pre-employment screening, and demonstrates criterion-related and construct validity (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003b, 2004a, c, d; Williamson *et al.*, 2005). Items are rated on five-point response scales with bipolar verbal anchors. For example, a sample item from the optimism scale reads as follows.

When the future is uncertain, I tend to anticipate positive outcomes	1 2 3 4 5	When the future is uncertain, I tend to anticipate problems
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Detailed descriptions of Big Five and eight narrow traits follow along with the number of items in each scale.

Big Five personality traits

Agreeableness/Teamwork. Propensity for being agreeable and working as part of a team as well as functioning cooperatively on work group efforts (six items).

Conscientiousness. Dependability, reliability, trustworthiness, and inclination to adhere to company norms, rules, and values (eight items).

Emotional stability. Overall level of adjustment and emotional resilience in the face of job stress and pressure (six items).

Extraversion. Tendency to be sociable, outgoing, gregarious, expressive, warmhearted, and talkative (seven items).

Openness. Receptivity/openness to change, innovation, novel experience, and new learning (nine items).

Narrow personality traits

For the present study, we used two criteria to select narrow traits likely to add variance beyond the Big Five: first, trait definition and meaning not readily subsumed by accepted Big Five taxonomies (e.g. De Raad, 2000; Digman, 1990); and second, established, empirical relationships with career satisfaction for occupations in general (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2003b). Based on prior research by the second author (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2002, 2003b), we selected six narrow traits for inclusion in the present study – assertiveness, CS orientation, intrinsic motivation, optimism, tough-mindedness, and work drive.

Assertiveness. Tendency to express ideas and opinions confidently, speaking up on important matters, defending personal beliefs, seizing the initiative, and exerting influence in a forthright, non-aggressive manner (eight items).

CS orientation. Striving to provide highly responsive, personalized, quality service to (internal and external) customers; putting the customer first; and trying to make the customer satisfied, even if it means going above and beyond the normal job description or policy (seven items).

Intrinsic motivation. A disposition to be motivated by intrinsic work factors, such as challenge, meaning, autonomy, variety and significance (six items).

Optimism. Having an upbeat, hopeful outlook concerning situations, people, prospects, and the future, even in the face of difficulty and adversity; a tendency to minimize problems and persist in the face of setbacks (eight items).

Tough-mindedness. Appraising information, drawing conclusions, and making decisions based on logic, facts, and data rather than feelings, values, and intuition; disposition to be analytical, realistic, objective, and unsentimental (seven items).

Work drive. Disposition to work for long hours (including overtime) and an irregular schedule; investing high levels of time and energy into job and career, and being motivated to extend oneself, if necessary, to finish projects, meet deadlines, be productive, and achieve job success (eight items).

Career satisfaction

A five-item scale was used to measure career satisfaction (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2004b). The scale includes items evaluating satisfaction with career progress and trajectory, career advancement, future career prospects, and career as a whole. As with personality traits, career satisfaction items were framed on a five-point response scale with verbally opposed anchors at each end (e.g. “I am very satisfied with the way my career has progressed so far” vs “I am very dissatisfied with the way my career has progressed so far”). Coefficient α was 0.82 for career satisfaction. The career satisfaction measure was added eight years ago to the inventory on which the database was derived; thus, the sample size for statistics involving career satisfaction was smaller ($n = 653$) than the sample size for the personality traits.

Results

Cronbach’s coefficient α for the personality scales is presented in Table I – indicating generally good internal consistency reliability. We computed t tests comparing the average personality trait scores of CS workers and other occupations as well as Pearson correlations for each trait with career satisfaction within the CS group. Findings are presented in Tables II and III. Before turning to the comparisons of mean trait scores, we should note that we first performed a series of parallel analyses separately for males vs females and older vs younger employees and did not find

Trait	Coefficient α
<i>Big Five traits</i>	
Agreeableness/teamwork	0.82
Conscientiousness	0.75
Emotional stability	0.85
Extraversion	0.84
Openness	0.79
<i>Narrow traits</i>	
Assertiveness	0.81
Customer service	0.74
Intrinsic motivation	0.84
Optimism	0.88
Tough-mindedness	0.79
Work drive	0.82

Note: $n = 653$

Table I.
Coefficient α s for the broad and narrow traits

Trait	Customer service M (SD)	All other occupations M (SD)	t
<i>Big Five traits</i>			
Agreeableness/teamwork	3.46 (0.77)	3.50 (0.79)	2.58**
Conscientiousness	3.53 (0.73)	3.36 (0.73)	11.57**
Emotional stability	3.43 (0.71)	3.42 (0.70)	0.96
Extraversion	3.78 (0.77)	3.76 (0.78)	1.24
Openness	3.55 (0.73)	3.74 (0.73)	13.07**
<i>Narrow traits</i>			
Assertiveness	3.32 (0.84)	3.53 (0.84)	12.52**
Customer service	4.31 (0.70)	4.20 (0.70)	7.61**
Intrinsic motivation	3.66 (0.77)	3.51 (0.81)	9.15**
Optimism	3.85 (0.76)	3.80 (0.78)	-2.74**
Tough-mindedness	2.94 (0.80)	3.21 (0.84)	11.54**
Work drive	3.19 (0.77)	3.33 (0.79)	8.87**

Notes: For t -tests, $n = 2,610$ for customer service jobs; $n = 78,127$ for all other occupations.
** $p < 0.01$

Table II.
Results of t tests comparing mean trait differences between customer service and all other occupations

significant differences (at the $p < 0.01$ level, to correct for the large relatively number of statistical tests) between the two groups as a function of either gender or age. We also tested for nonlinearity by examining variable plots for the correlations and did not detect any nonlinearity. For the regression analysis, we examined the plot of residuals against predicted values and did find any evidence of nonlinearity. Regarding nonnormality and any possible associated biasing of the data, we employed a multi-sample bootstrapping procedure (Manly, 1997) with 2,000 re-samples using identical sample sizes of 484 for both the CS and other occupations group for the correlations and regression analysis, which replicated the results presented here. In the case of the t tests, we ran 10,000 re-samples using identical sample sizes of 2,610 for the CS and other occupations groups and found that results for the observed t tests were replicated for all traits, except optimism and agreeableness/teamwork; however, in these two cases the differences were minor.

As can be seen in Tables II and III, and as we hypothesized, CS personnel scored higher than other occupations in conscientiousness ($t = 11.57, p < 0.01$), and this trait correlated positively with their career satisfaction ($r = 0.19, p < 0.01$). As for emotional stability, CS workers did not differ significantly from other occupations, but emotional stability was positively related to their career satisfaction ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$). CS personnel did not differ in extraversion from other types of jobs, though CS workers' extraversion was positively related to their career satisfaction ($r = 0.18, p < 0.01$). CS workers scored higher in CS orientation than members of other occupations ($t = 7.61, p < 0.01$) and CS orientation was positively correlated with career satisfaction ($r = 0.18, p < 0.01$). Interestingly, CS personnel scored lower on tough-mindedness than members of other occupations ($t = 11.54, p < 0.01$), but higher levels of tough-mindedness were not significantly related to career satisfaction ($r = 0.11, p < 0.05$).

We ran a two-step hierarchical regression analysis to evaluate whether narrow traits accounted for additional variance in career satisfaction over and above the traditional Big Five. The five Big Five traits were entered as a set on the first step while the six narrow traits were entered as a set on the second step. As can be seen in Table IV, the set of Big Five traits was highly correlated with career satisfaction ($r = 0.47, p < 0.01$), accounting for 22 percent of the variance in career satisfaction.

Table III.
Results of correlations of broad and narrow traits with career satisfaction for customer service workers

Trait	Correlation with career satisfaction
<i>Big Five traits</i>	
Agreeableness/teamwork	0.26**
Conscientiousness	0.19**
Emotional stability	0.42**
Extraversion	0.18**
Openness	0.21**
<i>Narrow traits</i>	
Assertiveness	0.16**
Customer service	0.18**
Intrinsic motivation	0.07
Optimism	0.34**
Tough-mindedness	0.11*
Work drive	0.29**

Notes: $n = 653$. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table IV.
Results of hierarchical multiple regression analysis for customer service representatives with broad and narrow traits predicting career satisfaction

Step	Variable	Multiple R	R ²	R ² change
1	Big Five traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, extraversion, openness)	0.473**	0.224**	0.224**
2	Narrow traits (assertiveness, customer service, intrinsic motivation, optimism, tough-mindedness, work drive)	0.533**	0.284**	0.060**

Notes: $n = 653$. ** $p < 0.01$

The addition of the set of narrow traits increased the multiple correlation to $r = 0.53$, which means that narrow traits contributed an additional six percent of the variance in career satisfaction (R^2 change = 0.06, $p < 0.01$). Thus, the sixth hypothesis was also confirmed.

Regarding our non-directional research questions, the CS group scored higher than other occupations in intrinsic motivation ($t = 9.15$, $p < 0.01$) and optimism ($t = 2.74$, $p < 0.01$); also, intrinsic motivation was not significantly related to career satisfaction of CS employees ($r = 0.07$, $p > 0.05$) while optimism was positively related to career satisfaction ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$). The CS group scored lower than other occupations on assertiveness ($t = 12.52$, $p < 0.01$), openness to experience ($t = 13.07$, $p < 0.01$), agreeableness/teamwork ($t = 2.58$, $p < 0.01$), and work drive ($t = 8.87$, $p < 0.01$). The following traits were all positively related to career satisfaction for CS personnel: assertiveness ($r = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$), openness ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$), agreeableness/teamwork ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.01$), tough-mindedness ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$), and work drive ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$).

While the correlations between the personality traits and career satisfaction are generally modest, they can, nevertheless, lead to substantive differences in career satisfaction. For example, consider work drive, for which there is a 0.29 correlation with career satisfaction. Using an expectancy table approach (Bittner and Wilder, 1946), we can group CS workers in our sample into roughly equal thirds on the work drive variable and list the percent in each group who were “satisfied” (had a score of 4.0 or greater) on the career satisfaction measure. As can be seen in Table V, only 10 percent of the low work drive group were satisfied on the career satisfaction measure; 22 percent of the middle group were satisfied with their careers; and 33 percent of the upper third were satisfied with their careers. Thus, it can be seen that there is a definitive trend here with a more than a threefold increase in the percent of CS employees who were satisfied with their careers as we move from low to high work drive groups.

Discussion

The present findings indicate that CS workers are markedly distinctive, differing from other occupations on ten of the 11 personality dimensions examined. In each case, these differences are consistent with what organizational theorists and CS management would interpret as an adaptive fit for CS work. Consistent with most descriptions of CS workers (e.g. O*NET, Occupational Information Network, 2012), we found that CS workers are more conscientious, CS-oriented, optimistic, interested more in the nature of the work itself than money (high intrinsic motivation), empathetic (low tough-mindedness), deferential (low assertiveness), and more independent and self-reliant in their work style (low teamwork-agreeableness) than members of

Table V.
Percent of CS
employees who reported
that they were
satisfied (average
score of 4.0 or
higher) with their careers
for low, middle, and high
work drive groups

Work drive group	Percent satisfied with their careers
Low ($n = 162$)	10
Middle ($n = 165$)	22
High ($n = 155$)	33

other occupations. Additionally, all personality traits but one (intrinsic motivation) were positively correlated with career satisfaction. Thus, all of the first five study hypotheses were supported. In the following paragraphs, we review the results for each trait and discuss theoretical and managerial implications.

Conceptual and theoretical implications

The current findings offer partial support for Holland's theory, in that person-environment (P-E) fit was found with regard to three traits, but not with the other eight. By way of illustration, CS workers exhibited higher levels of conscientiousness compared to other occupations, and conscientiousness was positively associated with their career satisfaction, as hypothesized. It may be the case that conscientious (detail oriented, organized, and dutiful) individuals are differentially attracted to CS work more than other careers, and their level of conscientiousness is related to their career satisfaction. These results are generally consonant with previous findings on CS performance and conscientiousness (Baydoun *et al.*, 2001; Frei and McDaniel, 1998; Mount *et al.*, 1998). However, the same P-E fit scenario was not found with regard to emotional stability. Counter to our hypothesis, CS workers did not differ from other occupations on emotional stability; yet, as hypothesized, emotional stability was highly correlated with career satisfaction. Thus, higher levels of emotional stability and resilience appear to have adaptive value for CS workers, as it could help them in handling the multiple, ongoing stressors associated with CS work (cf. Batt, 1999; Deery *et al.*, 2002; Grandey *et al.*, 2004; Witt *et al.*, 2004).

CS personnel could also not be differentiated from other occupations on extraversion, though extraversion was positively related to career satisfaction for CS workers. One possible reason for the latter result may be that extraversion includes being more sociable, outgoing, expressive, warmhearted, and energized by interpersonal interaction – all of which have functional value for CS work.

As hypothesized, and importantly for CS work, CS orientation was higher for CS workers than other occupations, and was related to higher levels of their career satisfaction – exemplifying good P-E fit from the perspective of Holland's theory. The present results indicate that workers with a tendency to “go the extra mile” and extend themselves to serve customers are, appropriately, more attracted to CS work than those with lower levels of CS orientation.

Also as hypothesized, CS workers were more tender-minded (more intuitive, feeling-driven, and sentimental) than other occupations. However, counter to our hypothesis and what Holland's theory would predict, tough-mindedness (objective, logic-oriented) was positively correlated with career satisfaction. One explanation for such a seeming inconsistency is that CS careers are differentially rewarding of objective, impartial job behavior vs subjective, and preferential job behavior, so that tough-minded employees are more satisfied than their tender-minded counterparts.

Additional research questions

Our non-directional research questions yielded a number of interesting findings. In particular, CS workers were found to be more optimistic than workers in other careers, and optimism was strongly correlated with career satisfaction. Such a result aligns well with a person-job fit perspective. CS work provides many opportunities for those with persistent, “can-do” attitudes, as their jobs are often centered on resolving conflicts and complaints (O*NET, Occupational Information Network, 2012). Optimism is defined in part by experiencing spillover of positive affect, such that

optimists favorably construe most all situations and experiences, including the multiple events and evaluation that make up overall career satisfaction.

The present results also indicate that CS workers are more deferential (low-assertiveness) than other occupations, yet CS workers report greater career satisfaction if they score higher in assertiveness. One possible explanation of such a pattern of results is that some employees are attracted to CS work because they are more deferential and respectful, which helps them project a caring image and avoid confrontation in customer interactions. That more assertive CS employees are more career-satisfied may result from them being more inclined to make difficult decisions, speak up for their own interests, and make requests of others – all of which may contribute to satisfaction of their desired job and career objectives.

Work drive, though positively correlated with career satisfaction, is lower in the CS group than in other occupations. It appears that CS workers typically prefer not to have to work long hours and may not be willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of their work. This may reflect them perceiving relatively few advancement opportunities or other incentives for hard work. CS workers scored lower in terms of teamwork than other occupations, though teamwork was positively related to their career satisfaction. Since CS jobs usually entail solo work performed in individual contributor roles (O*NET, Occupational Information Network, 2012), it is not surprising that individuals with lower levels of teamwork disposition would be differentially attracted to CS jobs. What seems, at first glance, counter-intuitive is that more teamwork-oriented CS employees reported higher levels of career satisfaction. It may be that CS supervisors and managers who often need to adopt an interdependent, team perspective are reinforcing those CS workers who display team-mindedness and are willing to work supportively and cooperatively with other employees (Garavaglia and McDaniel, 2010).

Our findings also indicate that CS workers tend to be lower in openness to experience than other occupations, but there is a positive relationship between openness and career satisfaction within CS workers. Being high in openness is associated with a preference for variety and novelty, which might not be desirable for most CS jobs in which tasks are relatively mundane, routine, and there is little need for employee creativity. However, some researchers have suggested that creativity is necessary for improved CS, since creative representatives can better handle the flux of customer interactions and adjustments to changing marketplace conditions while also striving to address unique customer demands (Coelho and Augusto, 2010).

Intrinsic motivation was also found to be higher among CS workers than other occupations, but it was unrelated to satisfaction. Intrinsically motivated workers may be more attracted to CS jobs because such jobs typically do not entail high salaries or other external benefits. Or, individuals seeking CS jobs may find the mix of customers and the diverse interactions with customers intrinsically interesting. As for intrinsically motivated employees not reporting higher levels of career satisfaction, one problem facing CS occupations is that their work environments often involve “controlling aspects” (Shalley *et al.*, 2004) and situations in which external forces (e.g. upper management; corporate requirements) exert pressure on employees to perform, which can have an adverse impact on employees who prefer to operate on the basis of autonomy and self-directedness (Coelho and Augusto, 2010). So, while intrinsically motivated employees are well-represented in CS jobs, they might be coerced by external job characteristics that deny them the autonomy and discretion they prefer (Coelho and Augusto, 2010; Coelho *et al.*, 2011).

Managerial and human resources implications

Below, we reference some of the main human resource management implications of the present study in two main areas. First, CS employers may want to consider recruiting and selecting candidates for CS positions based on traits which distinguish CS workers from those in other occupations and/or are related to their career satisfaction. In addition, for these traits, employers may want to provide specific coaching and training to help reinforce and cultivate workplace behaviors related to the trait.

With regard to conscientiousness, employers may want to consider recruiting and selecting candidates for CS positions based on higher levels of this trait. In addition, they may want to provide specific coaching and training to help reinforce conscientiousness-related behaviors – like time-management and organizational skills – for already hired CS personnel. All other factors being equal, employers could, in addition, endeavor to hire more extraverted candidates for CS positions. They could also train new hires and current incumbents on interpersonal and communication skills. Human resource managers may want to consider developing activities and programs which facilitate the expression of extraversion for CS employees, such as company-sponsored luncheons, happy hours, recreation programs, retirement parties, company picnics, and other social events that promote extraversion-related behaviors.

It has been suggested by some that optimism is trainable (e.g. Seligman, 1991). To the extent that this is true, CS employers should try to coach and encourage optimistic mindsets and dispositions among their CS employees, in addition to hiring individuals with higher levels of optimism. This might help CS personnel deal with one of the key challenges facing CS workers – handling customer complaints and resolving interactional conflict, which can lead to improved customer relations, more customer retention and word-of-mouth referrals (Stauss and Seidel, 2004). Similarly, it might be helpful to hire more resilient, emotionally stable individuals for CS positions to better deal with dissatisfied customers and the stress or resolving customer complaints. In this vein, employers may want to hire more assertive candidates for CS positions and engage CS employees in assertiveness training to help them stand their ground and defend the interests of the company when dealing with angry, irate, or even hostile customers (cf. Goodman, 2009, Chapter 1). A similar case could be made for hiring individuals with higher levels of CS orientation, as well as training and coaching CS employees on high-quality CS in line with the company's mission, corporate values, and customer mix (Goodman, 2009; Lovelock and Wirtz, 2011).

In the case of work drive, there may be a need to consider organizational tradeoffs in associated recruitment and hiring strategies. In view of the finding of lower mean work drive scores of CS vs non-CS occupations, it would appear that either individuals with lower levels of work drive are more attracted to CS jobs than their more hard-working peers – which may be because CS jobs are not overly demanding in terms of hours worked and they often offer flexible schedules (O*NET, Occupational Information Network, 2012) – or the company is recruiting individuals with lower levels of work drive because of lower pay rates or lack of advancement opportunity. Since work drive is related to job performance for many occupations (Lounsbury *et al.*, 2004c) – and likely also for CSR jobs – and it is positively related to career satisfaction for CS employees, the obvious implication might seem to be to hire individuals with higher levels of work drive. However, even if this were possible, doing so might set the stage

for voluntary turnover owing to unmet expectations or increased odds of those individuals finding a more high-paying job elsewhere.

One issue which might be seen as calling into question the practical utility of the present findings concerns the relatively small magnitude of observed differences (typically in the first decimal point on a five-point scale) in average trait scores for CS vs all other employees. In the “real world” of practice, particularly in the context of HR management for CS employees, there are several reasons why such small differences for individual traits are less problematic than one might think. First, it is more common to deal with combinations of traits, whether in aggregation or sequentially, when making, for example, hiring, placement, or training and career development decisions. By way of illustration, a pre-employment assessment battery might rely on a combined score derived from multiple traits, in which case the total scores may vary substantially between candidates. In actual pre-employment testing work in which the first author has been involved, eight to ten personality factors are routinely used to make hiring recommendations for candidates for CS positions in many different companies in the USA and elsewhere. Second, where a trait score is used to screen candidates, the differences between acceptable and unacceptable candidates can regularly range up to two to three scale points on a five-point scale. Third, one purpose of studies such as the present one is not to make fine discriminations between employees based on average score value, but to identify traits which are important for the recruitment, hiring, placement, training, and development of individuals for CS positions. In such cases, precise score values are less important than knowing whether or not, for example, a trait such as tender-mindedness is one which recruiters should attend to when identifying and influencing viable candidates. From a broader perspective, as companies focus more on personality traits important for CS work, the observed scores may increase for CS job incumbents, and, as such a trend extends over time and across employing organizations, the differences between CS workers and other occupations may increase as the CS field becomes more differentiated on the basis of personality characteristics. Finally, as was demonstrated in the expectancy table analysis, even relatively small differences in scores on a personality trait can translate to relatively large differences in a criterion variable such as career satisfaction. In the case of work drive, a difference of only 0.8 on the work drive score between the upper and lower third work drive groups was associated with nearly more than a threefold increase in the percent of CS employees satisfied with their careers. In our experience, similar differences are likely to be found on job performance, absenteeism, turnover, and other important outcome measures when the correlation between the trait and the outcome measure is in the 0.20-0.30 range.

Limitations and future directions

The current study has a number of limitations. Participants self-selected for this study, which creates the possibility for range restriction in our sample. Additionally, our data is cross-sectional, whereas longitudinal assessments of career satisfaction might offer different explanations as to the relationship between personality traits and satisfaction over time and help clarify causal directions of the study variables. Our sample is also limited by gaps in demographic and job-related information, and lacks information such as race, ethnicity, marital status, distance/time to commute, and a variety of career-related measures, such as tenure in the service role, number and types of jobs held, career continuity, and career advancement or progression, among others. Examination of such variables, particularly the career variables, might help us

understand the linkages between personality traits and career satisfaction. As but one example, we might find that career tenure moderates the correlation between relevant personality traits and career satisfaction such that stronger correlations are observed with longer tenure in a career because personality traits have had more opportunity to manifest themselves and exert their influence on a person's work and work-related experiences (Pervin and John, 1997). In support of such a proposition, one can see in Lounsbury *et al.*'s (2003b) study of job and career satisfaction in relation to personality traits for different occupational groups, that for each trait the common trait-satisfaction correlations are of larger magnitude for the correlations between the personality traits and career satisfaction than for the correlations between the personality traits and job satisfaction – because of the greater opportunity for the trait to have influence. As for other limitations, in terms of Holland's theory, a number of the traits we studied represented good P-E fit in CS work, while some did not. This may be due to a number of uncontrolled factors. For instance, maybe certain subgroups of the general population with regard to certain traits (e.g. teamwork-agreeableness, work drive) are not attracted to CS work, or perhaps there are not adequate means of pre-employment selection procedures in place. Furthermore, it is possible there is not enough being done to coach or encourage trait expression within existing CS employees. Future research should attempt to replicate and extend some of the current findings, perhaps correlating CS traits with measures of CS performance in the interest of validation and improving pre-employment selection measures. In particular, such studies should examine the relationship of CS extraversion, emotional stability, and tough-mindedness with job performance. Expanding research into personality trait profiles of CS employees could be helpful in improving the recruitment and selection of future workers.

Summary and conclusion

We observed several consistent patterns of traits which are theoretically consonant with Holland's theory in an important job class: CS occupations. Given our sample's size and diversity, we believe that the results obtained are relatively robust and generalizable. Based on the present findings, we offer the following personality profile of CS workers. The typical CS representative is more: conscientious, optimistic, intrinsically motivated, tender-minded, deferential, conventional, willing to serve other people, and reluctant to work long hours or become workaholics. The current findings carry implications for additional theory- and policy-oriented research as well as for human resource management in the areas of recruitment, selection, coaching, training, and career development of CS personnel.

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