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'Hello, how can I help you?' Greeting jobs and their professional skills and practices

Greeting jobs require an extensive set of professional skills and practices. Over and above the wide range of jobs involved, the most obvious aspect of this skill set is the relational component. It also has a less visible aspect, namely self-organisation and the ability to 'go fishing for information'. However, a number of current developments may well be preventing workers from making full use of the skills they have acquired.

training
greeting occupation
ETED method
standardised job
professional skills

Long ignored and often regarded merely as positions for employees being regraded or coming to the end of their careers, greeting jobs now occupy an increasingly important place in companies and government departments. Users and customers are now the focus of all employees' activities, and this is particularly true for those in direct contact with them. Organisations today are particularly sensitive about the image their reception staff present to users and customers and have made it a decisive factor in determining their performance and the quality of their service or output. After all, the development of the Internet and the automation of certain counter services have by no means eliminated interaction, whether in person or on the telephone.

Against this background, those jobs in which greeting users or customers plays a major part are tending to become professionalised. This is reflected in the increased diversification and adaptation of such jobs to the context in which they are carried out, as well as in the development and deployment of a skill set with a strong relational dimension that is both specific to greeting jobs and common to them all.

A wide range of jobs

There are many work situations in which greeting or welcoming occupies a central place. They include not only actual greeting jobs but also, more broadly, all occupations that, in one way or another, involve welcoming users or customers or receiving telephone calls and of which greeting or welcoming is an essential facet. Sales, after-sales technicians' and secretarial jobs are typical examples.

Actual greeting jobs go under a number of different names: receptionist, greeter, telephone receptionist, etc. Some are now outsourced and managed by specialist service firms, while others remain an integral part of the organisations in question. The job descriptions are themselves as varied as they are vague; the functions may include welcoming customers and directing them to the appropriate person or department, responding to user or customer requests or even anticipating their wishes and ensuring that they are complied with.

The analysis carried out using the ETED method (cf. Box 1) confirms the wide range of jobs that directly involve greeting. On the basis of this analysis, a distinction can be made between two distinct types of ●●●

Jean-Paul **Cadet** (Céreq)

Valérie **Gosseau**

(centre associé régional du Céreq pour la région Pays de Loire)

Samira **Mahlaoui** (Céreq)

Fred **Séchaud** (Céreq)

Céreq's Recommendations

Ensure that training programmes for receptionists take account of the relational and 'hidden' dimensions of the professional skill set.

The decisions and changes that have created the tensions hampering the deployment of this professional skill set should be debated within organisations.

Box 1 • The ETED method

The ETED method (it stands for *Emploi-type étudié en dynamique*, which could be translated as a dynamic approach to the study of standardised jobs), developed by Nicole Mandon, emerged from sociological research and the analysis of work. It helps to improve knowledge of jobs, of the changes they are undergoing and of the demands they make of workers. It focuses on individuals and their actual practices and is based on one-to-one interviews. This method leads to the identification of standard jobs, i.e. groups of jobs or work situations put together on the basis of common remits and organisational roles. These standard jobs may take very different forms, depending on the individuals who hold them or the organisations in which they are located.

As far as our investigations were concerned, the ETED analysis was based on surveys carried out in four local authorities, two ministries, a bank, an agro-food company, a railway station, an airport and a shipping company.

- reception function, namely generic and sectoral reception functions.

The first type equates to the standard receptionist jobs commonly found in public and private organisations, whether they involve direct contact with customers or answering the telephone. The principal task of a receptionist of this kind is to greet visitors or callers while complying with the security procedures in force and to direct them to the person or department best able to deal with their requests or requirements. A receptionist must manage flows in order to reduce waiting times but without going so far as to become involved in providing the service offered by the organisation employing him or her.

As far as the second type is concerned, their sectoral nature impacts significantly on the reception function, since it is an integral part of the service production process. This can be illustrated by taking the example of two occupations: check-in or station agent and bank receptionist. A check-in or station agent's task is to ensure that passengers' needs for information and guidance are met while at the same time assisting in the fight against fraud and contributing to the safety and security of transit areas. It is his or her responsibility to minimise as far as possible the difficulties caused by the uncertainties associated with the various problems that may adversely affect services. He/she helps passengers to find alternatives when connections are missed or departures are significantly delayed. For their part, bank receptionists have a part to play in ensuring the satisfaction and loyalty of private and business customers by greeting them, whether in person or on the telephone, welcoming them to conduct their everyday banking business and offering them additional banking products and services.

A demanding interface role

Receptionists act as the interface between their organisation and the public as well as between

the organisation's various internal mechanisms that facilitate user or customer support. Thus relational activities, which are heavily dependent on the context in which they take place, lie at the heart of the receptionist's job description. The efficiency with which they are performed determines to a large extent the quality of the service provided. This is why a skill set is required in which the relational dimension occupies a central position. This dimension is based on communication and customer service skills that find expression in a wide range of verbal and gestural interactions.

Receptionists' relational work is embodied in a set of activities intended to welcome customers or callers and provide them with information, direction or guidance, in the course of which they address the person they are speaking to, adapting their intonation, body language and gestures to the circumstances. Adapting the register of language they use to different categories of visitor or caller, using appropriate vocabulary and acting politely and decisively require very close analysis of information gleaned from attentive listening. The same applies when receptionists accompany visitors to their destinations, walking alertly or discreetly in front of them in a manner based on assessment of a problem situation that is immediately observable in a given space (station concourse, town hall entrance lobby etc.).

Here it can be seen how, in behavioural terms, it is difficult to reduce receptionists' relational skills to the application of communication 'scripts' designed to channel interactions into a standardised sequence of predetermined questions and answers. After all, the task of a receptionist dealing with customers or other members of the public is to observe their behaviour and analyse a series of verbal interchanges in such a way as to decode and understand a situation as clearly as possible.

The 'co-production' of services, with each party engaged in an exchange of information, also brings professionals' subjectivity into play. Their assessment of a situation is necessarily based on the sincerity of the actions and words of the person they are speaking to. This subjective assessment enables them to adjust their responses, even if it entails bending the prescribed rules in order to satisfy a customer's requests. However, despite the apparent simplicity with which it progresses, 'greeting behaviour' is faced with various uncertainties and the possible malfunctioning of the organisation's internal mechanisms over which receptionists themselves have no influence (a queue, a computer breakdown, etc.). Consequently, they have virtually constantly to be assessing the resources available to them in order to devise solutions that will enable the reception work to carry on.

ETED • Emploi-type étudié en dynamique • Dynamic approach to the study of standardised jobs

RGPP • Révision Générale des politiques publiques • The General Review of Public Policies

However, certain economic, organisational and sociological developments are tending to create problems and uncertainties that are likely to hamper receptionists in their work. In public services, budgetary constraints, intensified in France by the General Review of Public Policies (RGPP) and similar measures in other countries, are leading to job cuts, which in turn are impacting adversely on reception functions. In both the public and private sectors, the development of quality certification and outsourcing are changing relations with users, which are becoming more prescriptive.

Furthermore, receptionists are becoming aware of an increasing lack of politeness and respect among the general public, which is making reception work more difficult. In their view, users and customers are becoming more and more demanding and impatient and less and less receptive and likely to listen to what is being said. More generally, they continue to suffer from a downgrading of their occupation in the eyes of the public, without necessarily benefitting in return from adequate training or exchanges of experience that might help them consider the approaches to be adopted in particular situations.

Thus these various developments are subjecting reception work to considerable stress, with all these constraints ultimately limiting receptionists' ability to develop their autonomy and professional skills and competences.

The hidden dimension of receptionists' professional skills and practices

In order to perform their interface role, receptionists put in a considerable amount of effort behind the scenes as they prepare and organise their work. This activity, which takes place out of public view,

requires additional knowledge and expertise that is certainly less evident than that displayed at the receptionist's desk but is equally necessary.

Firstly, it is their responsibility to manage their work space and working time, particularly when they have to combine face-to-face reception with answering the telephone. Thus they must be able to organise their work environment in the most ergonomically appropriate manner possible in order to carry out their work in optimal fashion, whether face-to-face or on the telephone, and to maximise their comfort and safety. They must also know how to organise their own working time in such a way as to strike the best possible balance between the time given over to the two forms of reception work.

All the effort aimed at gathering and assimilating information is also essential. In order to provide a high-quality service, receptionists have, after all, to memorise a wide range of information on remits, products, organisational structure, regulations and procedures. This process of assimilation is a constant one, but takes place mainly during slack periods. The challenge for receptionists is to keep up to speed with changes, if necessary by 'going fishing for information' in order to update their knowledge. Receptionists also have to update, if not create, their own information tools and media (lists, databases, documentation, labelling systems, etc.). This requires both a methodical approach and an ability to use information and communication technologies.

Moreover, while receptionists are the most exposed representatives of the 'front office', some of their work also takes place in the 'back office'. They perform their tasks there as part of a team or network. Attached to a department and therefore to a management line, they often form work groups or units, at least in large organisations. It is these groups that are largely

Full report :

Au cœur des activités d'accueil - Certifications, emplois, savoir-faire, évolutions, prospective, S. Mahlaoui (coord.), J.-P. Cadet, C. Guitton, V. Gosseume, P. Kalck, F. Kogut-Kubiak, C. Labruyere, F. Sechaud, *Net.doc*, n° 80, 2011.

To be download from : <http://www.cereq.fr>

Box 2 • Two situations, two illustrations of professional competence

Understanding a user's telephone query

It is not easy to understand callers' queries and provide them with the required information or direct them to the appropriate department. Queries are sometimes vague or even poorly expressed. Operators then have to help callers clarify what they require by asking them questions and reformulating their requests. They also have to be able to sift through the information callers provide and put it in some kind of order. They then have to direct callers to the appropriate department, taking care to say: 'If that's not the right department, call the switchboard back and we'll try another department'. In many cases, operators also try to call the department in question themselves in order to check whether it is really the right one. Of course, this way of doing things conflicts with the requirement that operators should process queries quickly. When someone does not formulate their query very precisely, operators have to be able to take a bit of time in order to help rather than 'messing up the job of directing the caller to the appropriate department'.

Acting as a 'one-woman band'

When a receptionist is responsible both for welcoming visitors and fielding telephone queries, it is important that she is able to juggle the two tasks and act as a 'one-woman band'. When on the telephone, she cannot answer visitors' enquiries and vice versa. Except during slack periods, there is bound to be someone waiting on the telephone or in front of her desk, possibly even several people. Receptionists tend to put telephone callers on hold because in their view visitors generally take priority. At the same time, they must be able to ask visitors to be patient while they return to the telephone queue. Nevertheless, some annoyance can arise, particularly on the telephone if callers have been waiting a long time and have not managed to reach the department they were looking for. Since they are not physically present, they tend to be less restrained in their language. In all cases, receptionists must never lose their cool, but ask disgruntled callers to forgive them for the wait and explain the reasons for it while appealing to their good sense.

Box 3 • A study investigating reception work in all its dimensions

In 2010-2011, Céreq conducted a study on the work of receptionists commissioned by the Ministry of Education's General Directorate of School Education (DGESCO). This study followed the changes made to the vocational baccalauréat in Reception, Assistance and Advice Services (now Reception and Customer/User Relations) and was intended to investigate in depth the issues raised by the changes.

The study examines reception work in all its complexity and diversity. It investigates jobs, their purpose, the professional skills and practices involved and current developments. It combined several approaches: status report on the certification schemes for jobs in which reception work is at least one of the activities identified; job analysis based on ETED method; coordination of a group of reception professionals from various institutions and prospective analysis

responsible for seeking out and producing information of use to receptionists in their work.

Viewed in its entirety, reception work gives rise to various forms of solidarity and cooperation, particularly when an appropriate response has to be found for a complex question or a difficult situation has to be dealt with (a dispute, large numbers of visitors or callers, etc.). Moreover, it requires dialogue with other departments internally and with outside organisations. This contact enables receptionists to direct visitors or callers correctly, to check, update and pass on information and to play their part in keeping the premises safe and secure, particularly by working together with the security department and its staff. Thus the ability to work in a team and to become involved in the corresponding internal and external networks is another essential element of a receptionist's skill set.

However, this hidden aspect of receptionists' professional skills and practices may well not be receiving the recognition it deserves. Behind-the-scenes work is likely to be neglected as reception services are increasingly outsourced and it becomes more difficult for reception staff to integrate themselves into a network of internal and external relations. This work is also likely to be disregarded at a time when many organisations are putting in place quality management systems leading to the increased formalisation and monitoring of reception work. These systems focus on the number of people greeted and consequently tend to undervalue the important work that goes on behind the scenes. It also has to be said that they are frequently put in place against a background of reducing staffing levels, which reduces the room for manoeuvre and increases the time reception staff spend greeting visitors and answering the telephone.

Moreover, there has also been an increase in functional flexibility, which further complicates receptionists' work. Staff are being allocated additional functions, including a range of administrative and sales tasks, first-level maintenance of IT equipment made available to the public, etc. These additional responsibilities are sometimes experienced as enriching, but they may also reduce the time staff have to prepare and organise their core greeting function.

Thus far from being reduced to mere politeness, reception work requires real professional skills. However, deployment of those skills is being hampered by a number of developments that are leading to the imposition of rules that are as systematic as they are inappropriate.

This gives rise to two fundamental challenges. Firstly, it is essential that training programmes take account of the various elements of the skill set receptionists need to acquire. The expansion of continuing training programmes and dedicated professional certification schemes and, above all, the existence in France of a specific vocational baccalauréat, are all developments heading in the right direction. However, it has to be ensured that the contents of these training programmes and the teaching methods used emphasise the relational and 'hidden' dimensions of reception work. Secondly, the challenge for management is to alleviate the tensions that have been identified. It may be necessary, for example, to find alternatives to reductions in staffing levels and to put in place quality management systems designed with greater input from reception staff. In any event, all these developments will have to be discussed internally. What is at stake is nothing less than the quality of service provided and organisations' ability to welcome customers and meet their needs. ■

Further reading

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Publications manager

Alberto Lopez

Editor in chief

Annie Boudier

Translation

Andrew Wilson

**Centre d'études
et de recherches
sur les qualifications**

10, place de la Joliette,
BP 21321,
13567 Marseille cedex 02
T 04 91 13 28 28

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