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THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPLAINTS HANDLING STANDARDS IN SPA COMPANIES: A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS IN SPAIN

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze the key features of an effective complaint management process as well as to explore whether these systems are formally constituted in terms of standards or other models for complaints management. We use four case studies of spa organizations from Spain. The case studies illustrate the organizations' approach to managing complaints and customer satisfaction effectively. The results of this exploratory study show that all four organizations have some mechanisms implemented to handle complaints although different levels of formalization have been achieved. The analysis unveils some common difficulties and key success factors of implementing a complaints handling system. The results of this paper suggest that managers should prioritize managing customer complaints effectively in order to enhance their chances of meeting customer expectations. This strategy can result into turning customer complaints to customer satisfaction, especially when the organization views complaints as an opportunity to improve.

Keywords: service quality, customer satisfaction, complaints handling, ISO 10002

1. Introduction

Maintaining high levels of quality and customer satisfaction is a significant challenge by many organizations today, including service organizations (Kotler and Keller, 2006; Simon *et al*., 2013). Moreover, there is agreement that the quality of a service encounter is significant to business success or failure (Crompton and Love, 1995).

The delivery of services in certain settings such as in the spa sector, involves high contact encounters with significant interaction among customers, staff and facilities (Lovelock and Wright, 1999; Kang *et al*., 2014; Nowicki *et al*., 2014; Lin, 2014). According to several authors, spa (and other health-related services) will be a major component of future hotel and other care-related service companies' revenues (Foster and Mandelbaum, 2005; Foster and Wohlberg, 2006; Porja, 2008). Furthermore, the expansion of the spa sector will be based on service quality to ensure the effectiveness of tourism strategies and practices (Cohen, 2008; Chen *et al*., 2013). The challenge for companies that provide such services is to

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675

balance the need to treat customers as individuals with the requirements for routine and standardization. In order to achieve these goals and maintain satisfied customers in the organization, organizational performance evaluation measures of customer satisfaction need to be put in place. Managers need to learn about problems and take appropriate corrective action to ensure that mistakes do not recur, thus complaints made by dissatisfied customers are a good opportunity to achieve this goal.

Complaint management has become increasingly important in the tourism and hospitality fields, yet little is really known about how companies deal with the organizational response to complainers (Davidow, 2000). Complaints should be considered an indicator of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, pointing at problems or failures in internal processes that need fast recovery in order to avoid losing profitable customers. *The first aim of the present study is to draw attention to the key features of an effective complaint management process, as a system of diagnosing and learning a company's weaknesses and an improvement tool.*

One of the mechanisms that organizations have in order to enhance customer satisfaction and deal with complaints is the implementation of customer satisfaction standards from the ISO 10000 series which can be easily applied in any service organization, as they can be targeted on different "customers", for example, the clients of a spa, the employees or any other stakeholder relevant to the organization. The study of implementation of a complaints handling system and of ISO 10000 standards in a specific sector, such as spas, is a topic that has received very little attention so far.

Hence, *the second objective of this investigation is to explore what kind of complaints systems do spa organizations implement and whether these systems are formally constituted in terms of a standard or other models for complaints management.*

In particular, *the purpose is to analyze whether spa companies use the ISO 10000 standards for customer satisfaction and more specifically ISO 10002 for complaints handling in order to deal with the feedback received from customers.*

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review on customer satisfaction, complaints handling and ISO 10000 standards is provided. Then, the methodology used for this investigation and the main results found are explained. The paper concludes with an analysis and a summary of the findings and the proposal of some implications and future research lines in the field.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Customer satisfaction and complaints management

Customer satisfaction is a research area that has been increasing the attention of researchers (Lam and Dale, 1999). According to Kotler (2003), customer satisfaction is the pleasure felt by an individual after comparing the perceived performance of a product or service with his or her previous expectations of its performance. According to several studies, one way to achieve a high level of customer satisfaction by an organization is to establish a complaints handling system that allows customers to complain and give feedback about the product/service received and the organization to provide service recovery and improve (Petnji-Yaya *et al.*, 2011). This results into a more satisfied customer that is less likely to change to a different provider (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987; Kau and Loh, 2006; Nyer, 2000). In fact, complainants who have a highly efficient complaints handling experience are more likely to be satisfied and to fell that they have received a good quality product or service (Buttle, 2004; Petnji-Yaya *et al.*, 2011). Thus, both service quality and customer satisfaction research have consistently emphasized the

value of complaints for improving service quality, loyalty and customer satisfaction and retention (Dewitt and Brady, 2003; Snellman and Vihtkari, 2003; Boshoff, 2007; Marimon *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, receiving complaints and handling them properly and effectively is a powerful tool in the hand of organizations to use the feedback to improve customer confidence and in general to find the causes of dissatisfaction and improve all of the organization processes (Fornell and Wernerfelt, 1987; Johnston, 2001; Hallen and Latino, 2003; Ramsey, 2003; Clemes *et al.*, 2011).

Many studies have pointed out the importance of a better understanding of complaints handling to improve business performance (Hughes and Karapetrovic, 2006). Dee *et al.* (2004) define complaints handling as a "process that addresses issues that concern customers". For their part, Stichler and Schumacher (2003) describe complaints management as "fixing the policies, systems, or protocols so that the problem would not occur for future customers". Other investigations classify complaints handling into several sub-processes that include: a) receiving the complaints; b) investigating the cause of the complaints; c) resolution with the customer; d) creating preventive action and e) developing recovery (Johnston, 2001). In the end, organizations need to make sure that customers are satisfied with the complaints handling process by effectively providing a solution to the customer and thus ensuring customer retention (Davidow, 2003; Estelami, 2000; Stauss, 2002; Stauss and Schoeler, 2004).

According to the above mentioned literature, some contributors emphasize the importance of studying dissatisfaction and in turn complaints (Davidow, 2003). This includes topics such as employee behaviour, service reliability, and the simplicity of information and design (Friman and Edvardsson, 2003). On the other hand, other authors signal the importance of focusing the attention on complaints satisfaction which includes issues

such as the adequacy or fairness of the outcome, the access to organisation contact points, friendliness, empathy, active feedback, and speed of response (Stauss, 2002). Customer responses to a poor product or service are not unique (Voinea *et al.*, 2011) thus, organizations need to provide different responses within their complaints handling system depending on the type of action the customer takes, namely a public action which may consist of sending a complaint to the organization, complaining to a third party such as to a consumer organization, or in some cases trying to legally solve the complaint (Filip, 2013); in other cases, customers can make a private action and send negative messages to other current or potential customers; another option of customer behavior reacting to a bad complaints handling is the ending of the business relationship, followed most likely by a migration to a competitor; finally, there is also the possibility that passive customers will not execute any action, due to a low level of interest in that specific product or service (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004; Filip, 2013).

Another relevant consideration is the result complaints can produce on the organisation's profitability. According to several authors (Johnston, 2001; Stauss and Schoeler, 2004; Zairi, 2000), effectively developing a complaints handling system enhances customer retention which in turn has a direct positive impact on revenue, since loyal customers maintain purchases, generate long-term revenue streams, tend to buy more, and may be willing to pay more for products and services (Petnji-Yaya *et al.*, 2011).

Once the organization is aware that customers are dissatisfied because a product or service performance has not lived up to their expectations, the company needs to understand the possible sources of dissatisfaction and customers' reactions to negative situations in order to be able to design effective service recovery strategies. Complaint management is "the process of

diffusion of information aimed at identifying and correcting various causes of customer dissatisfaction" (Fornell and Westbrook, 1984). The process involves defining a strategy to solve and learn from the preceding errors in order to re-establish customer confidence in organizational reliability (Hart *et al.*, 1990). For that reason, the feedback collected from customer complaints is of vital importance for the quality and service management processes, as "it can be used to correct and learn about weaknesses in the service quality and delivery system" (Filip, 2013).

2.2 ISO 10002 standard for customer satisfaction and complaints handling

As mentioned in the previous section, it is important that service organizations maintain high levels of quality and customer satisfaction. Traditionally organizations have applied the ISO 9001 standard for quality assurance for this purpose (Simon *et al.*, 2013). However, some organizations are beginning to apply a series of standards that can be deployed for the same purpose of providing quality assurance customers and other stakeholders of the organization, but can be much more easily applied than ISO 9001 (Karapetrovic and Doucette, 2009).

Meant to complement an ISO 9001 Quality Management System (QMS) by providing a set of guidelines for the establishment of a Customer Satisfaction Complaints System, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) has developed three interrelated standards to manage quality and customer satisfaction (Dee *et al.*, 2004; Karapetrovic, 2008):

- Quality Management: Customer satisfaction. Guidelines for Codes of Conduct (ISO 10001:2007).
- Quality Management: Customer satisfaction. Guidelines for Complaints Handling in Organizations (ISO 10002:2004).

- Quality Management: Customer satisfaction. Guidelines for External Customer Dispute Resolution (ISO 10003).

Additionally, ISO published ISO 10004, a standard that provides guidance in defining and implementing processes to monitor and measure customer satisfaction. The focus of ISO 10004 is on customers external to the organization:

- Quality management: Customer satisfaction Guidelines for monitoring and measuring (ISO 10004).

More recently, in 2013, ISO published ISO 10008, a standard to provide guidance for planning, designing, developing, implementing, maintaining and improving an effective and efficient business-to-consumer electronic commerce transaction system within an organization:

- Quality management: Customer satisfaction. Guidelines for business-to-consumer electronic commerce transactions (ISO 10008).

In this paper we only look at the ISO 10002 standard because its focus is on customers internal to the organization and on managing their complaints.

ISO 10002 is intended to help organizations to satisfactorily resolve customer complaints and improve customer satisfaction. Additionally, the feedback from such complaints can serve to improve the customer satisfaction and complaints system itself as well as the product or service provided. The standard is structured according to nine guiding principles that help the organization establish the policy, responsibilities and authority for the customer satisfaction and complaints related processes. Also, it helps the organization to structure the mechanisms so that the customers can contact the organization when they have a complaint, it provides information on how to plan and design the system, on how employees can handle

complaints in an effective manner and also on the improvement mechanisms that should be established. Complaint feedback should be used to motivate improvement by analyzing and evaluating the complaints system, determining the customer satisfaction levels, monitoring and auditing, performing a management review and finally using all the information available to enhance the whole system (Hughes and Karapetrovic, 2006; Nowicki et al., 2014).

3. Methodology

The objectives of this study are twofold. The first goal is to describe how spa organizations implement complaint handling processes or systems to effectively help increase customer satisfaction and organizational improvement. The second aim of the investigation is to analyze whether these organizations use a formalized model or standard to implement complaint handling processes and specifically whether they use the standard specifically designed for such purposes, ISO 10002.

We focus on the spa/leisure service sector because we have not found previous literature that studies the formalization (in terms of standards and models implemented by companies) of complaints handling and customer satisfaction in this industry. Also, because the knowledge and implementation level of such customer satisfaction standards is very low, it makes sense to study them more in detail and also in a specific sector (e.g., Karapetrovic and Doucette, 2009; Simon et al., 2013; Nowicki et al., 2014). In addition, the spa service is one that is provided in a high contact setting, very close to the customer (Porja, 2008), thus it is interesting to study how the feedback is collected on the service provided because the evaluation of the overall experience by the customer before, during and after the encounter gives strong clues as to the quality of the service provided (Lovelock and Wright, 1999).

The research on which this paper draws involved four case studies of spa organizations from Spain. The case studies illustrate the organizations' approach to managing complaints and customer satisfaction effectively. A case study approach was adopted to allow causes, processes and consequences of behavior to be investigated (Yin, 2009). A multiple case study approach was preferred because it enabled the collection of more accurate and comparative data (Yin, 2009; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

In this investigation, a case study is defined as, "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used" (Yin, 2009). The case study approach is useful in exploratory modes of research and can provide initial understanding of particular situations which may then be utilized inductively to create better theory. The case studies analyzed are not meant to be generalizable but rather they are utilized here to gather information about the reality of spa organizations regarding the topic investigated (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

The cases were chosen for both convenience and as exemplar cases for exploring how some particular spa organizations manage complaints and customer satisfaction.

3.1 Data collection and analysis

Fieldwork has been a fundamental part of this investigation. The initial contact with the four case study organizations was established by telephone or by email during the months of January and February 2014, and the interviews were conducted in the first quarter of 2014 in Spain. The prerequisite for the selection of a particular spa was existence of formal or informal quality promises in the spa. This requirement was verified by checking spa websites and

advertisements or direct contact with spa personnel (phone calls, visits, emails). Regarding the interviews with the managers for quality/customer satisfaction and complaints handling of the organizations, we used a semi-structured questionnaire which included questions about how the organizations dealt with customers and whether they used the guidelines of the ISO 10000 standards. While we stuck to our interview protocol, we allowed respondents to guide the flow and content of discussion and tried to reduce interviewer-induced biases by maintaining objectivity. The interviews consisted of three main parts concerning the code of conduct, complaints handling and dispute-resolution process. All interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and included in a case study protocol (Yin, 2009). In addition, we collected secondary data from organization reports, annual results, web pages, academic articles and other company information that the authors had access to when studying the organization and which were available internally and publicly, thus allowing for empirical triangulation of the data.

A within-case interpretation was the first level of data analysis, analyzing each case separately, and compiling a case study history based on the interviews and secondary data (Yin, 2009). The second step was a cross-case search for patterns, our second level of interpretation, which involved all of the researchers looking for within-group similarities coupled with intergroup differences. Conducting cross-case analysis has been supported by researchers or Stavros and Westberg (2009) as it increases the validity and reliability of the case-study methodology.

According to this methodology, in the next sections of the paper, we proceed to perform the analysis of the case studies. Because the studied companies did not allow using their names, they have been replaced with the names of mountains.

4. Presentation and analysis of the case studies

4.1 Case organizations characteristics

In this section we will present the organizations included in this investigation and we will analyze how they manage their complaints handling process and whether they follow the procedures proposed by the standard ISO 10002 for complaints handling. Table 1 shows the four firms with their main characteristics.

Table 1. Case organizations

	Kilimanjaro	Aconcagua	Montblanc	Elbrus
Standards certification	They had previously had "Q de calidad" (Spanish quality certificate for tourist firms)	Certificate of Excellence (Trip Advisor) 2013	ISO 9001 (2014)	None. They are planning to implement ISO 9001
Knowledge of ISO 10000 series	No	No	Yes. ISO 10002 implemented in another firm of the group	No
Type of customers	-Mainly retired people In second place young couples and families -Individual and mainly local	-Mainly golfers but also families and young couples -Individual and up to 40% foreign	-Mainly young couples and families Secondly, retired people -Individual and mainly local	-Mainly retired people In second place young couples and families -Individual and mainly local

Only one of the Spanish organizations was aware of the existence of a specific standard for complaints handling and it had just certified to ISO 9001 for quality management. When asked about obtaining ISO 10002, the interviewee answered that another firm of the group had the certificate up to 2012 but that had too much cost to maintain it. Thus, they followed the procedures proposed by the standard but without the cost of the certificate.

4.2 Formalization of complaints handling procedures

Although none of the organizations has implemented the standard ISO 10002 for complaints handling, we can observe from Table 2 above that all the organizations follow most of the procedures proposed by the standard to manage complaints.

Table 2. Operation of the complaints handling process according to ISO 10002

ISO 10002 complaints handling process	Kilimanjaro	Aconcagua	Montblanc	Elbrus
Communication	✓	✓		
Receipt of complaint	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tracking of complaint	✓	✓		
Acknowledgement of complaint	✓	✓	✓	
Initial assessment of complaint	✓	✓	✓	
Investigation of complaints	✓	✓	✓	✓
Response to complaints		✓		✓
Communication of the decision		✓		✓
Closing the complaint	✓	✓		

The first two companies provided their customers information about the complaints handling process. Specifically, they had pamphlets in different languages in the reception available to customers which specified where and how complaints could be made as proposed by the standard. The third and fourth organizations also had these type of pamphlets although they were not visible for the customer but needed to be purposely requested in order to make the complaint. Some examples of such information provided by the four spa organizations are the place where complaints can be made, how complaints can be made, the information to be provided by the complainant and the complainants options for remedy. On the other hand, other issues suggested by ISO 10002 that should be communicated to customers and that were not information that the four spas provided were the process for resolving complaints, the time periods related with each phase of the process or how the complainant could obtain feedback on the status of the complaint.

Upon receiving the complaint, all four organizations recorded it in electronic format but only the first two tracked it through the entire process until the complaint was closed. Up to day information about the status of the complaint to the customer was not accomplished any of the organizations. The following steps carried out by all the companies except the Elbrus were the acknowledgement, initial assessment and

investigation of the complaint, which involved assessing the importance and investigating its circumstances. Although all the organizations offered a response to the gravest complaints, only the Aconcagua and the Elbrus gave response to all of the complaints received and communicated the decision and actions taken regarding the complaint. Finally, the first two organizations recorded the action taken, thus closing the complaints process according to ISO 10002 requirements.

Having formal tools and mechanisms to monitor the data received from customers is another direct indicator of a complaints handling system performance according to ISO 10002. All four organizations interviewed had in place monitoring mechanisms to receive and analyze customer information. Specifically, the first two, the Kilimanjaro and the Aconcagua, used software in the company for customer feedback register and analysis while the Montblanc and the Elbrus used basic calculus programs to perform the analyses. The data gathered and analyzed comprised questions such as the number of complaints and suggestions received, the number of complaints resolved and the response times, the number of unresolved complaints, the priorization of urgent complaints, the number of clients satisfied with the process and the improvement (preventive and corrective) actions of the process.

4.3 Difficulties for complaints management

When talking to the organizations, some common important points came out regarding the complaints handling process. Their main concern was regarding the difficulty of obtaining customer feedback. They acknowledged the need of actively encouraging customers to express dissatisfaction, taking into account the reluctance of customers to make complaints. Therefore, a good way to stimulate complaints for the firms studied was to

identify which were the customer reasons for not sending a feedback to the organization, and then solutions could be sought to decrease or remove these obstacles. In general, the barriers perceived by the organizations' customers to express dissatisfaction were related to:

- the consumption of time and energy to complain,
- the customer inconvenience with complaining procedures,
- the lack of customer confidence in the actions performed by organizations to solve the problems or to address the causes of dissatisfaction,
- the customer apprehension of being treated in an offensive manner or to feel uncomfortable in discussions with employees,
- the customer uncertainty about their own ability to evaluate the quality of the products and services.

Various strategies were followed by these companies, specially the first two, the Kilimanjaro and the Aconcagua, in order to decrease the above mentioned communication barriers and engaging the whole business with good internal communication. The first consisted of feedback facilitation through free phone numbers, postal and electronic addresses written on all customer correspondence, business documents and communication materials. They also tried to ensure customers about the importance of their complaint messages and organizational actions that would be performed to solve the problems. Thus, the customers were informed about the service recovery procedures and product improvements by using telephone, mailing or e-mail contacts. The third strategy was to turn customer feedback into a positive experience by sending thanking messages to customers that complained and training employees to be courteous and polite to customers.

A. Simon, P. Kafel, P. Nowicki, M. Casadesus

Another concern raised by the first company, the Kilimanjaro, was the difficulty of getting commitment and support from senior management. Top management played a vital role in defining objectives and responsibilities, in mapping out the processes, responsibilities and timescales and in establishing a process of performance monitoring, evaluation and improvement. However, the firm considered that the design, maintenance and improvement of the complaints handling systems did not receive enough attention or resources from the top management and that they were not involved in creating a quality and customer oriented service culture in the spa.

4.4 Key success factors for complaints management

One important factor regarding communication issues was raised as key for success for effective complaints management. Sending feedback to the customers was considered very relevant for one of the organizations, the Aconcagua, which had implemented procedures for contacting the customers to inform them about complaint handling activities, causes that generated the problem and measures to be taken by the management in order to avoid a similar negative incident in the future. The message sent to the customer was standardized (for routine problems) or customized (for special complaints) in terms of problem magnitude or customer value. An important objective for the company at this stage was researching customer perceptions on the quality of complaint management process. Customer feedback was requested in order to identify the level of satisfaction with the compensation received, the speed of problem solving and other issues of complaint handling. Although the other two companies had not formalized these communication procedures, they both stated that they did e-mails and phone follow-ups of the customers complaints.

Identifying the trends and causes of complaints was considered essential to achieve operational efficiency. Although this was considered a difficulty by the organizations, as mentioned in the previous section, the firms believed that understanding the reasons of customers for complaining was the most important factor for effective complaints handling.

Another success factor mentioned by the companies was the importance of engaging staff with new customer service training opportunities. Training was considered the way to improve the communication skills and competences of the staff as well as to boost their quality and service awareness. Having a quality and service oriented culture by adopting a more customer-focused approach was one of their main objectives.

Finally, the firms also commented on the importance of monitoring and continually improving their complaints handling process. One of the spas, the Aconcagua, did this by regularly reviewing all the aspects of their complaints system to make sure it remained effective and that they were continually improving it. Although the firm was not certified with ISO 10002, they followed the guidelines suggested by the standard to continuously improve the system. For this reason, process performance and outcomes were regularly monitored to identify and remove causes of potential and existing problems, as well as to uncover any opportunities for improvement. Specifically, the organization assessed the conformity of the complaints handling procedures with their policy, the extent to which complaints handling procedures were being followed and their strengths and weaknesses.

5. Conclusions

The objectives of this study were twofold. First, we wanted to investigate the key success factors of an effective complains handling system as well as the potential difficulties that could arise from the complaints process. The second objective of

this investigation was to analyze what type of complaints systems did spa organizations implement and whether these systems were formally constituted in terms of standards or models for complaints management such as ISO 10002.

In order to interpret the results, three aspects should be emphasized. Firstly, the four organizations see the importance of putting in place an effective complaints management system – helping them to identify complaints, their cause and how to eliminate them. The system also allows them to identify areas in their business where they can improve and eventually remove the cause of complaints. Thus, all the case study organizations have put in place management controls and processes that help them to handle customer complaints more effectively and efficiently, making sure that more customers are satisfied with the service they provide (Johnston, 2001; Stauss and Schoeler, 2004; Zairi, 2000). Although none of the companies has implemented the ISO 10002 standard for complaints management, the mechanisms and procedures implemented in the four cases follow some of the suggestions proposed by the standard (Karapetrovic and Doucette, 2009) although different levels of formalization of these procedures can be observed among the case study organizations.

In particular, the first two companies, and more specially the second one, have achieved a high level of formalization of the procedures related to the provision of information on how to complain, the reception and assessment of the complaints, the communication of the response (in the case of the second company) and the closing of the complaints process, while the third and fourth companies analyzed missed some of these steps to be followed when designing and implementing an effective complaints handling process.

Second, another significant aspect to take into account when implementing an effective complaints handling system is building the appropriate culture and awareness of quality and service level among all the employees and senior management. The level of implementation or formalization of complaints handling procedures in the company is irrelevant if the employees and top management are not in line with them or adapted to changes. Thus, top management commitment and resources allocation is also important and the evolution of managerial practices related to customer complaints should be simultaneous and in line with the objectives for the entire organization. Related to this, training and communication are variables to be considered when continuous improvement is one of the main objectives of the company.

Finally, taking in consideration the above mentioned key success factors, the organizations also acknowledged that some difficulties arose in the process. Customers who make complaints provide the organizations with the opportunity to solve certain operational malfunctions, to learn from negative situations and consequently to re-establish their satisfaction and trust (Hart, 1990; Filip, 2012). However, the organizations found it difficult to encourage customers to give their feedback and to establish efficient communication mechanisms to receive such feedback. Also, the lack of resources and of top management commitment was motioned as major concerns by the organizations.

The results of this paper suggest that managers and other interested parties regarding customer satisfaction should manage customer complaints effectively in order to have more chances of meeting their expectations. This strategy can quickly turn customer complaints into customer satisfaction, especially when the organization views complaints as an opportunity to improve what they do and how they do it. Managers should view implementing a customer complaints management system as a basic and essential requirement for having a successful business.

Two main limitations can be highlighted about this study. The first is the use of four particular case studies which does not allow the extraction robust conclusions about the process of complaints management in organizations. The second main limitation is the fact that the employees interviewed were all part or had responsibilities regarding the complaints handling management system, thus their vision could be biased. For future research, interviews with employees from all the levels could enrich our findings.

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