Blueprinting the EFL Service Provision

John Walker outlines Shostack's concept of service system blueprints and their usefulness to EFL managers.

Service system blueprints have been used with some success to analyse and improve service quality in such areas as financial services. banking, general practitioner services, retail services (Shostack, 1984, 1987) and health-care services (George and Gibson, 1991). This article discusses the use of service system blueprints as a quality tool in the management of EFL services.

The Service System Blueprint

The concept of service system blueprinting was developed by Shostack (1984, 1985, 1987) in response to what she perceived as poor service quality "used by " a lack of systematic method for design and control" (1987, page 133) of the service provision within organisations. Shostack pointed out that, compared to the design of manufacturing systems. service systems design suffers from a number of problems (Shostack, 1984):

- the difficulties involved in describing and documenting processes which are often associated with an intangible outcome
- the tendency to use a trial and error approach characterised by a lack of tests of completeness, rationality, need fulfilment
- the absence of an R & D department overseeing design
- a piecemeal approach to quality controls
- a tendency for systems to be descriptively documented rather than visualised

While Gantt and PERT charts are

commonly used in systems design to enable managers to visualise processes and plot alternative courses of action. such flow-charting methods are limited where services are

concerned. They do not, for example, chart the involvement of the customer in the service provision. They tend to ignore the marketing actions involved with the service (Shostack, 1984). In addition, they give little indication of the structure of the organisation and its significance in terms of the service process.

Shostack's solution to the problem is what she calls a service blueprint. a "tool used to depict and analyse all the processes involved in providing a service"(George and Gibson, 1991, page 73.). Put simply. a service blueprint is a snapshot of a service system. At the macro level, the service blueprint is often referred to as a concept blueprint (Kingman-Brundage, 1992) and comprises

- the total service system, including inputs, outputs, processes and controls

- external relationships e.g. interactions with customers, marketing actions
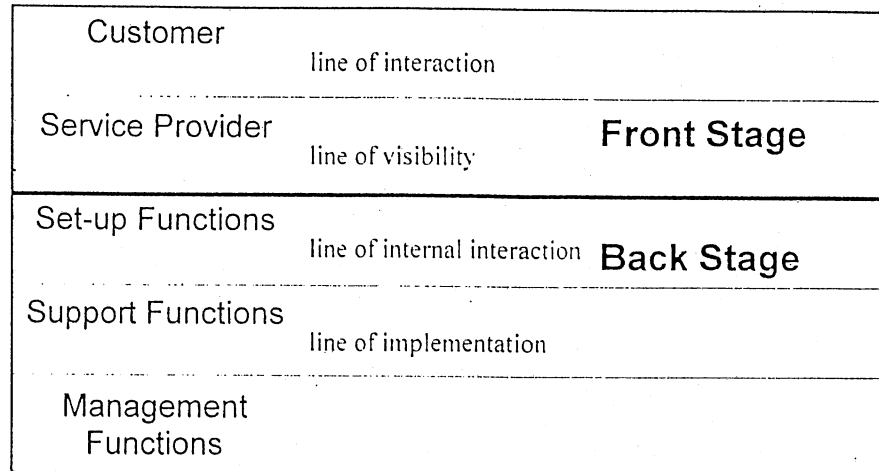- interrelationships between structural elements of the service organisation

Customer		
	line of interaction	
Service Provider		**Front Stage**
	line of visibility	
Set-up Functions		
	line of internal interaction	**Back Stage**
Support Functions		
	line of implementation	
Management Functions		

Figure 1 : Service System Blueprint Matrix

Figure 1 illustrates the basic matrix for a service system blueprint. The service system activities are separated by the line of visibility. Above this line are activities seen and participated in by the customer. Below the line are activities which are generally outside the customer's view. Activities above the line of visibility are subdivided into two fields separated by the line of interaction: the front stage, where the front-line service provider actions are charted, and a field for customer activities. Below the line of visibility, three separate fields are used to chart set-up, support and management activities. Within the backstage field, front-line personnel carry out setting-up actions prior to the service provision, as well as following-up actions afterwards. The line of internal interaction separates the backstage from the actions of

support personnel who contribute materials or services required in the provision of the service. Finally, the line of implementation separates support activities from management activities such as planning, controlling d decision-making.

The unique characteristic of such a blueprint is that, unlike a standard flow-chart, the blueprint charts both process and structure. The service processes are charted on the horizontal axis, from left to right. The structure of the service organisation is charted on the vertical axis. This means that lines of internal interaction can be drawn showing relationships between, for example, internal customers, support staff and front-line providers and providers and management.

Reading a service system blueprint from left to right gives a sense of its horizontal integration - the rationality of the service from the consumer's point of view. Reading the service blueprint from top to bottom gives a measure of the vertical integration - the rationality and the economy of hand-offs between departments and or work stations.
Kingman-Brundage, 1992, page 101

A number of conventional symbols from flow charting are used, for example arrows to show the directions of the process, rectangles to indicate actions or events and diamonds to indicate decision points. In addition, the letter W can be used to indicate a :ing point and F can be used to warn of a potential fail point in the process.

The service system blueprint therefore enables both managers and service staff to see "the big picture", to visualise the entire service system as an integrated whole.

Service system blueprints animate service details. They show managers the underlying pattern, that is, connections and relationships among key elements of the service system. When the patterns and connections are explicit, the rational basis for key decisions can be demonstrated objectively.
.ingman-Brundage, 1992, page 100

For similar reasons, a service system blueprint can be an invaluable device for both EFL managers and providers of EFL service systems. Not only can a blueprint assist in designing new EFL programmes ; it can also be used as a quality assurance tool to chart existing programmes with a view to, for example, identifying gaps in the service provision, setting up staff appraisal systems or identifying the need for equipment or service aids. What then is involved in creating a service system blueprint for an EFL service organisation?

Creating an EFL Service System Blueprint

Assuming that the system is already in place and that the blueprint is to be used in a quality assurance rather than a planning mode, there are a number of methods that the EFL manager can employ to gather the data required to chart an EFL service system:

• **Observation and analysis of work flows**
This would involve an on-site scrutiny of the entire service provision from the creation and distribution of public relations material through to the analysis of customer and employee quality feedback reports, language testing results etc. Given the extensive nature of the task it is likely that several people would be involved.

• **Interviews with service providers**
Compared to management, front-line service providers are sometimes better informed about and more in touch with customers' attitudes towards and perceptions of the quality of the service provided. This is particularly true in the field of English language teaching where a provider is likely to form a close relationship with a group of students over a period of weeks or months. Teachers are likely to be able to provide key information about actions, events and processes affecting the quality of the service provision.

• **Focus groups of providers/ users**
This involves semi-structured or unstructured interviews with groups of about 6-8 teachers and/or students. The EFL manager could act as facilitator or appoint an appropriate person to carry out the function, preferably from outside the organisation. Given a positive group dynamic, a focus group can unearth a wealth of valuable insights into perceptions of the quality of the organisation's output.

• **Document analysis**
Managers can use existing documents such as process descriptions, organisational charts and company brochures to analyse the rationale behind an existing set-up.

• **Participation as consumer of service**
"Mystery shoppers" can also provide valuable insights into the ongoing service provision from the customer's point of view, especially when provided with a framework within which to view the service. Once the data have been gathered, the manager can then begin to create the service system blueprint. The suggested steps in this process are:

1 Decide which actions occur onstage and which occur backstage.
2 Identify the start activity.
3 Flowchart the process above the line of visibility, separating consumer and provider actions at the line of interaction.
4 Identify the end activity/outcome and any repeat participation.
5 Identify and flowchart the backstage functions and actions.
6 Link the backstage and onstage activities with lines of interaction.
7 Identify any onstage-backstage feedback line.
8 Check for fail points and wait points.

Figure 2 provides an illustration of a service system blueprint of the operations of a typical EFL service provider. The entire process which the customer goes through is flowcharted above the line of visibility, from awareness of publicity materials

blueprinting

distributed by the EFL provider, through registration, introduction to host family, placement test, English language programme participation to a final evaluation of the quality of the service. Note the decision points as licated by diamonds and typical potential fail points such as student rejection of the host family assigned or possible student disagreement with the EFL provider's assessment of his/her language proficiency. Below the line of visibility the management structure and the six support teams are identified and lines of interaction running vertically indicate how the organisational structure interfaces with the backstage and frontstage activities. On the right-hand side, a feedback loop from providers to management furnishes information on customer and provider perceptions of the programme's success, enabling the manager to participate in such management functions as planning, coordination and quality control.

Figure 2 is intended merely as a depiction of what is possible in terms of EFL service blueprinting and EFL managers can use this illustration as a guide to developing a blueprint of their a particular EFL operation. The matrix shown in Figure 2 is a concept blueprint depicting a macro-level view of a possible EFL service process. From this concept blueprint it would be possible to produce a detailed blueprint of a particular segment, for example the processes involved in the homestay cc ination function.

EFL Service System Blueprint Applications and Benefits

An EFL service system blueprint can have a number of useful applications:

1. As a planning tool
• *Visualising the service*
A blueprint allows the manager to visualise the entire EFL service process from start to finish, to identify potential fail and waiting points in advance and in general to test the viability of the process before it has been implemented. Since the provision of services is, per people orientated, this implies input

from both providers and purchasers of the service.

• *Resourcing*
The manager can use the blueprint to determine the likely level of resourcing required in terms of front-line teaching staff, support staff, materials and equipment. The manager can also analyse how changes in resource utilisation are likely to affect service delivery and outcomes (Gronroos, 1990). Since time is a major cost determinant, time frames can be established for key segments of the service process (Shostack, 1984).

2. As an organising tool
• *The preparation of job descriptions /employee selection criteria*
The blueprint can enable the EFL manager to "see" exactly what service personnel do in the performance of their duties, especially if a number of detailed blueprints are prepared from the concept blueprint. For example, what exactly is involved in the process of student enrolment and what skills and abilities would be expected of administration staff in this function?

• *The development of rational work flows*
Again, the ability to "see" a picture of the entire service process enables the manager to manipulate processes in order to develop more logical and productive work flows. For example, how best to organise student orientation processes?

• *Equipment design and selection*
Here the manager can not only identify likely equipment required and its characteristics but also features like frequency of use, extent of use by different personnel, students etc. An example of this would be computer work stations or photocopiers.
• *Conceptualising the visual environment of the service*
The visual environment of an EFL provider's premises can often be a key element not only in the maintenance of smooth work flows but also in the way the EFL service is perceived by

the student customer. Taken together with on-site scrutiny, a concept blueprint can help to give the manager a better idea of the quality and effectiveness of the visual environment of his/her particular service provision.

• *The creation of tangibles*
In a service sector that struggles against its own inherent intangibility, the quality and appropriateness of the "tangibles" created by an EFL service provider can be of key importance. Service aids such as textbooks, workbooks, brochures, forms, newsletters, certificates etc. may be instrumental in enhancing both the efficiency and the effectiveness of the EFL service and the impression of the service gained by the student. A blueprint can assist the EFL manager to determine when and where such tangibles should be utilised or to identify service gaps which could be usefully filled by tangibles.

• *The creation of "scripts" for verbal interactions*
Service "scripts" - prescribed verbal formulae for service staff to be used in their interactions with customers - are, perhaps, more likely to be associated with services such as fast-food restaurants and 0800 telephone numbers. However, it is possible that the EFL manager may wish to develop a number of scripts for specific segments of the EFL service provision, such as in the administration or other support areas. Such scripts would be particularly useful when dealing with customers whose first language is not English and might go some way towards preventing miscommunication. Blueprints can enable an EFL manager to pinpoint when and where such scripts could be used and by whom.

3. As a communication/ training tool
• *Provider visualisation of the overall service*
Individual service staff may be focused on their particular area of the service provision and may have little opportunity to appreciate the processes of the overall service of which they are a part. This can lead to

Figure 2: An EFL Service System Blueprint
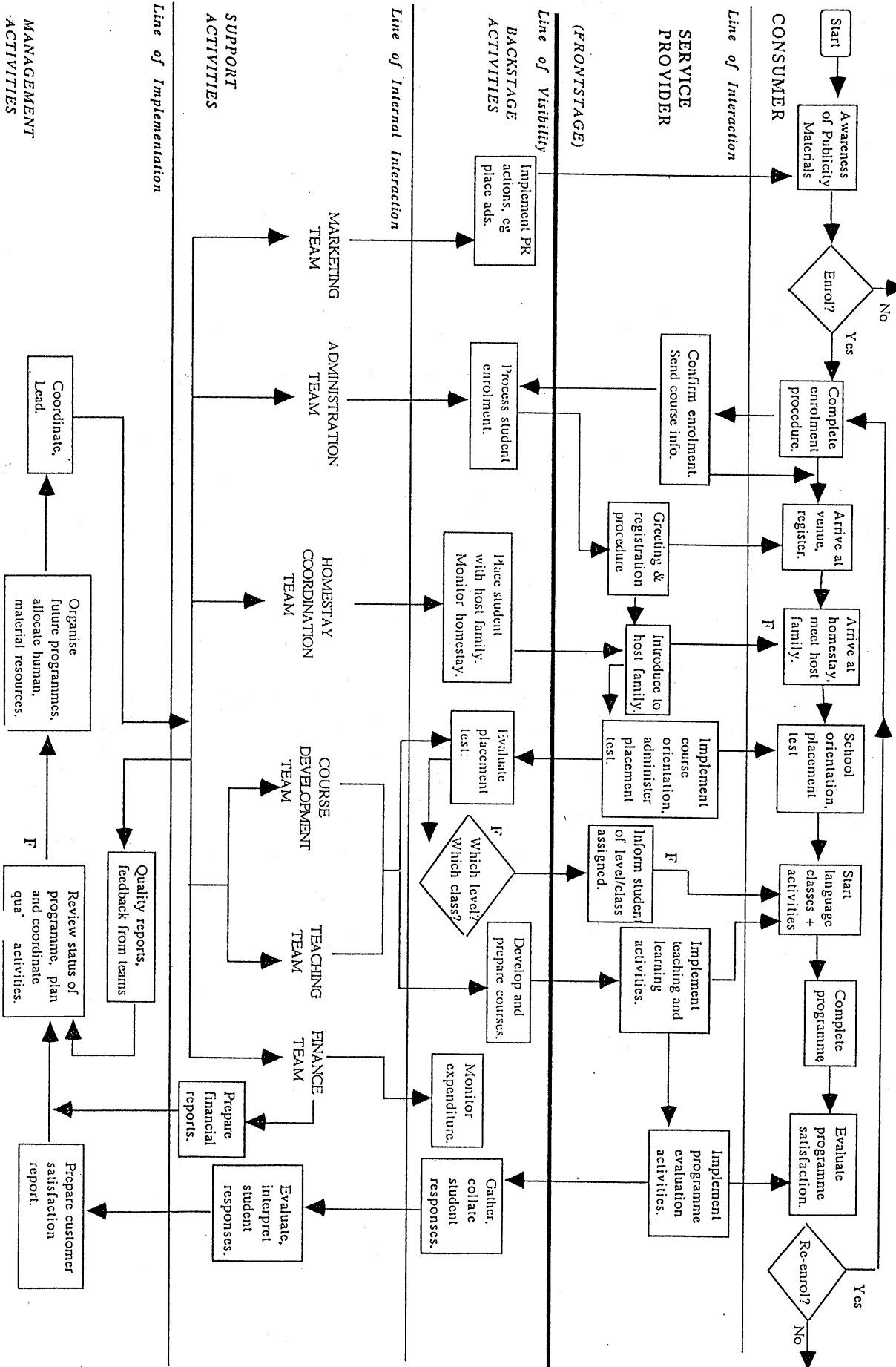
compartmentalised thinking and an inability to identify with the wider strategic goals of the organisation. This ability to see "the big picture" is, therefore, nowadays, expected not only of managers but also of all service providers if the organisation is to realise its goals in an effective and efficient manner. A blueprint is an excellent tool for allowing service staff to do this. "Employees can achieve a higher level of competence and can have more positive interactions with customers because the blueprint makes the service and its quality components easier to understand" (George and Gibson, 1991, page 88). The concept blueprint will give an overall picture of the service provision and enable staff to see where their particular function fits in to the whole. A detailed blueprint of a service provider's own area/function will provide a more specific picture and staff may be encouraged to develop such a blueprint themselves as a training exercise.

● *Communication of service details*
In any discussion of the details of the service provision, a blueprint could be invaluable, enabling participants quickly to identify particular areas of discussion and to clarify proposals, amendments and changes. This could be particularly useful in training sessions, planning meetings and in the work of groups such as cross-functional teams or quality circles.

● *Identification of customer contact personnel*
In larger EFL service providers, managers may not be aware of who exactly customer contact personnel are or when, where or how the contact takes place. This could lead to an inability on the part of the manager to exercise control over specific segments of the service process. A service blueprint should enable managers to identify such personnel and gain a clearer impression of the nature of the customer contact.

4. As a control tool
● *Identification of gaps in service provision*
This is probably one of the most important applications of a service

system blueprint. Gaps refer to deficits in either process or structure, indicating that key steps or elements may be missing. Gaps in the EFL service provision may be responsible for the creation of dissatisfaction among student customers with consequent negative implications for repeat business and word-of-mouth recommendations. Such gaps might be found, for example in the enrolment procedure or in the internal interaction between support staff and front-line providers. The use of a service system blueprint may enable identification of these gaps and subsequent action to rectify the situation will make for a more watertight set of service processes and - hopefully - satisfied customers.

● *Facilitation of quality control through analysis of fail points*
While potential fail points can be determined during the planning process, monitoring and feedback data from providers and customers should give the manager some indication of any actual fail points within the EFL service provision. A visual appreciation of these fail points and their environment within the context of a service blueprint will better enable the manager to analyse causes and develop solutions.

● *Development of monitoring/ feedback systems*
One of the basic problems a manager has in exercising the control function is knowing what exactly to monitor. By virtue of its visual nature, a service system blueprint allows the manager to get a clearer picture of the entire service process and to decide which parts of it he/she wishes to devote particular attention to in terms of control activities and which parts he/she desires feedback from.

● *Staff appraisal*
A service system blueprint can enable a manager to be aware of exactly what staff do. A blueprint can also assist in goal setting with the employee, as well as ascertaining whether goals have been achieved or not.

Conclusion
The service system blueprint is a tried and tested quality tool, the main benefit of which is its capacity to allow managers and service providers to visualise an entire service process and its integrated structure. It can thus provide EFL managers with a shortcut to key information about the EFL service process, simplify an otherwise complex set of concepts and render visible that which was previously hidden. EFL managers will find that merely going through the process of developing a service system blueprint will provide them with a number of useful insights into improving the quality, productivity and effectiveness of their own EFL operation.

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