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Voice of the Customer: Creating Client Centered Cultures in Accounting Firms for Retaining Clients and Increasing Profitability

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Abstract

Client satisfaction and retention books line the shelves of library business sections and are frequently the subjects at conferences and online blogs. The relationship between client satisfaction and profitability is often assumed, yet not prioritized or measured. Instead, industries and companies are continuously developing new clients by selling their goods and services. The ability to compete simply on product or service no longer exists, and with the evolution of technology, customers are continuously inundated with noise. However, one could argue the greatest voice to take cues from is that of the client – meeting their needs and solving their problems. Using a case comparison method, we found that a combination of voice of the client (VoC) and "Kaizen" leads to higher levels of client satisfaction and retention levels in accounting firms.

Keywords: voice of the customer (VoC), client retention, client satisfaction, customer satisfaction, net promoter score (NPS), customer feedback.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of partnerships and accounting firms, there has been the management philosophy that higher realization, premium fees and a bigger book of business are preferred. The path to partner or shareholder is paved by obtaining new clients and doing profitable work (Smith & Briggs, 2000). For years there has also been the discussion of consulting in practices, which is seen as the pinnacle of engagement. Accountants are often not formally educated on how to sell services however, they are passionate about serving their customers (Oliver, 1991). There is a stereotypical image of accountants as deep thinkers, calculators in hand, and an introverted personality that makes them better at numbers than building relationships (Oliver, 1991; Smith & Briggs, 2000). Accountant's reaction to service models and voice of the customer programs are not always supportive. The tie to client retention and voice of the client is expected to produce a return on investment that is immediately visible and as such accountants must be continuously reminded that these types of programs are long term producers (Bates & Whittington, 2009). While some immediate impact can be felt by a firm, it is a journey, not a sprint.

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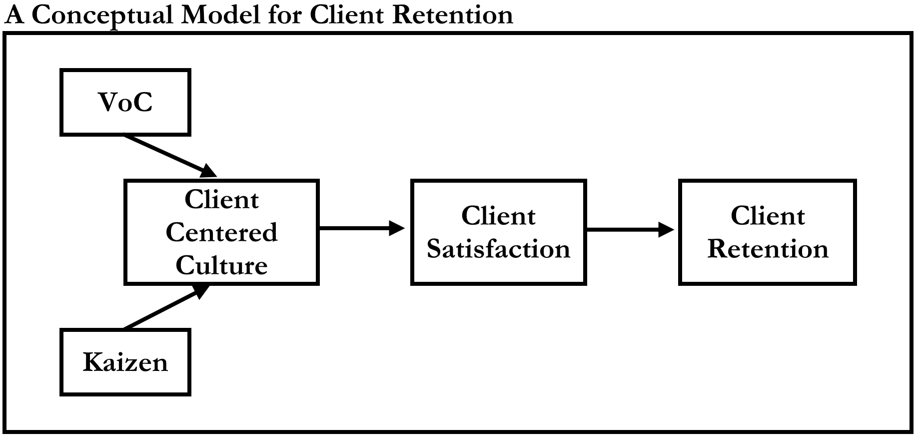
The challenge is developing new clients and servicing existing ones, are not mutually exclusive (Bates & Whittington, 2009). In fact, servicing is building and through building, new business is developed and existing business is expanded. The result, client development becomes a natural process. Client retention and continuous improvement of a practice happen almost organically.

When developed over time such dedicated and leadership supported programs extend the life value of the client resulting in ongoing revenue for the firm (Leventhal, 2006). Manufacturing, distribution, retail, hospitality and many online giants such as Amazon, all understand the direct correlation between a customer-centered company, client voice, feedback and retention – the accounting industry is still learning (Whiteley & Hessan, 1996; "Amazon launches new services", 2006).

Being customer-centered, listening to the customer and driving customer value also produce an environment for continuous improvement. Harvard Business Review writer, Power (2011), in Customer-Centric Continuous Improvement, discusses that organizations operate in functional silos, which focus on the function or department instead of the client. He argues that performance management systems further diminish continuous improvement (CI) at the customer level. To be successful at the customer level, accountability to customer satisfaction and customer experience must become the responsibility of everyone at an organization. Driving customer experience with VoC could possibly be the "secret sauce" of differentiation from other providers and provide a cultural foundation for motivating team members toward driving higher client satisfaction. One should also not discount the impact social media can make on a customer experience (Ramanathan et al., 2017). Should an incident occur, such as an unexpected error in a calculation or a misstep in service, a customer that has felt the positive impact of their preferred brand, and the value of the relationship, can often overcome an incident and an even stronger relationship emerge (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2015).

Companies often make bold statements as to how they drive customer value, but few embrace the role VoC plays in retention and growth. There are a variety of ways to integrate VoC into a company which we will explore as part of the research process. We propose the following model to illustrate the relationships between VoC, Kaizen, client centered cultures, client satisfaction, and client retention. VoC and Kaizen are directly related to creating client centered cultures which lead to client satisfaction from which client retention is more likely.

Figure 1
A Conceptual Model for Client Retention



II. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the competitiveness of accounting firms, client retention and client satisfaction are important for a firm's realization of long-term client relationships and value (Hart & Smith, 1998). There is evidence that high performing firms who engage in client feedback, through VoC, enhance client loyalty and retention (Bates & Whittington, 2009).

In a multi-year research study conducted by Caragher and Telberg (2010), also defined in the seven keys to successful CPA firm management, resulted in a list that included: 1) leadership and management, 2) technology trends, 3) marketing and business, 4) services and client satisfaction 5) creating a great place to work, 6) building the learning organization, and 7) strategic execution. The results were the outcome of thousands of survey responses and live interviews. When client service and satisfaction are priorities clients are 11 times more likely to not resist fee increases (Caragher & Telberg, 2010).

In the legal profession, a parallel industry to accounting, a study commissioned by LexisNexis of near 2,200 professionals revealed that more than one-third of respondent law firms do not measure client satisfaction and among those that did, 33 percent only did so every two or more years (LexisNexis, 2006). According to LexisNexis (2006) this lack of consistency and client feedback may explain the professions client churn with just under 50 percent termination annually (LexisNexis, 2006). Zineldin (2006) made the observation in his research on customer loyalty, quality and retention that "competition will undoubtedly continue to be a more significant factor" in business. He lso developed a framework of quality standards based on five quality dimensions that impact client satisfaction and loyalty as seen in Table 1.

Table 1
5Q Model for Customer Relationship Management

Q Model	Customer Relationship Management
Q1	Quality of object - the technical product, also known as the deliverable.
Q2	Quality of process - functional quality. How the product was provided.
Q3	Quality of infrastructure - resources needed to produce deliverables including tangible (i.e., technology, competence) and intangibles (i.e., motivation, activities, skills)
Q4	Quality of interaction - exchange of information, financial exchange, social exchange.
Q5	Quality of atmosphere - the specific environment where the company operates (poor environment is perceived as poor quality)

Source: Zineldin, (2006).

Client experience and satisfaction are linked to quality, retention, and the client relationship (The Disney Institute, 2016). Gaining customer insight or feedback through VoC becomes the true power to understanding the 5Qs of a firm. The ability to obtain insight through a well-orchestrated program and ongoing client interaction can be beneficial to uncovering issues, recognizing excellence, obtaining referrals, building client loyalty, and client retention (Leventhal, 2006).

What can make a client or customer leave a firm? It is likely not what you think. Clients leave firms due to "perceived indifference exhibited by someone at the firm" (Filip, 1994). How indifference is defined is debatable, but there are common elements.

These include slow response, lack of involvement, rude or inappropriate behavior, flawed deliverable, and lack of trust. Through communication, face-time with clients, training, client feedback programs and measurement, the client experience can be improved or corrected. This is important because as little as a five-percent improvement in retention rates increase profits as much as 15-50 percent (Filip, 1994). Retention rates range by firm with the most profitable ranging from 90-95 percent; average firms at 75-85 percent (Vincent, 2007). Peekna (2017) defines loyalty as "the holy grail of professional services providers, ensuring ongoing revenues and protection from competition." Clients no longer engage only one provider for professional services. Depending on the needs of the client, up to ten firms can be engaged for services in a typical year (Peekna, 2017). In order to differentiate a firm, it is important to be more than a service provider. In a survey of accountants across the U.S., "perceived indifference," obviously a failed client experience, resulted in the major reason clients leave firms (Caragher, 2014). Firms are focused on delivering a product, instead of listening and helping clients resolve an issue.

Another reason to focus on client loyalty and retention is the cost of onboarding a new client. In a study conducted by Forrest Consulting in 2015 for Fenergo, a financial services company headquarters in the US, with offices in Canada, Spain, Netherlands, Switzerland, Australia and Russia, found that new client onboarding was estimated to average $6,000-$25,000 in the first year as a new client (McLoughlin, 2015). This included costs associated with time, lost revenue, and "challenges involved in the onboarding process" (McLoughlin, 2015). Forrester Consulting reported that during the onboarding process a customer was contacted an average of 10 times resulting in opportunities to reinforce the firm's client experience and further the success of client retention. Nine of the 13 firms interviewed in the study agreed or strongly agreed that the onboarding process, as part of the client overall experience, greatly impacts the lifetime value of the client. Additionally, ten of the firms in the research claimed a loss of opportunities when a client experienced inefficient onboarding (McLoughlin, 2015).

2.1. A Client Centered Culture

For a company or organization to become customer-centered, they must develop performance measures that incentivize and motivate employees to adopt the new rules and values. By raising the visibility and embracing those who are catalysts for change, company leadership creates a foundation for cultural change through acceptance and reward. Employees are motivated and, according to Mennella et al. (2017), see a "clear connection between value adherence and career progression."

Historically professional services firms have built their reputation on the accuracy of the deliverable, also known as the end product. To innovate through the client and make a cultural change to continued innovation could present challenges with adoption by what may be perceived as black and white thinkers. Should a cultural shift change to include the client voice, a monetized impact will occur through retention and expansion resulting in a steady progress toward continuous improvement as a behavior (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2016).

2.2. Voice of the Customer

In its simplest form, the voice of the customer, or VoC, is customer feedback. It is the insight into how to improve service levels, products and processes. Companies who value customer insight and feedback need a VoC process (Lowenstein, 1993), a way that focuses on continuous improvement (CI) and building long-term relationships thus creating loyalty. Such a process will include a method for gathering, communicating, analyzing, and continuing to deploy the VoC in the firm.

Qualtrics, an international client experience platform has helped introduce VoC and CI to many highly successful companies such as Disney, Ford, Marriott, Coca Cola, FedEx, UPS, GE, Whole Foods, Lowes, and Yamaha to name a few (Terry & Maughan, 2018). These companies are known for their customer focus, active listening, and extraordinary customer service all while keeping their companies evolving. They are successful, profitable and sustainable companies. For the accounting industry, there is much to be learned from these successful brands.

Voice of the Customer for accounting firms involves a variety of components that, when aligned, can present a win-win for the firm and the customer. That information is then shared with the firm and disseminated to the team members. Through customer insight, ideas are shared, which is a catalyst for innovation. Training and implementation must be components of a customer-centered culture as consistency is key across various practice areas in a firm (Lawton, 2017). As improvements are made and recognized, through a survey or poll tool, or as recognized by increased firm revenue, the measurements should be shared among team members and customers.

2.3. Customer Loyalty

While customer loyalty can be defined differently depending on the focus of a company, there is one thing that is not flexible in the definition - the customer makes the decision to continuously purchase from the brand. Zhang et al. (2010), define customer loyalty "as the likelihood of previous customers to continue to buy from a specific organization" (p. 127). With an accounting firm, it is when trust has been established and a customer chooses the firm over competitors in the marketplace.

Trasorras et al. (2009) in Value, Satisfaction, Loyalty and Retention in Professional Services, argue that value is in the eyes of the customer.. It is a subjective term and specific to each customer or client - as such, it parallels the experience with the provider. The customer as part of VoC is an equalizer of perceived value. Through consistent interaction and feedback, acknowledged service levels, perceived care and respect, trust is gained and thus loyalty is generated. Loyalty in return drives 80 percent of additional business to a company. In a study published in the Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice, researchers positively associated customer loyalty to profitability using a framework of customer lifetime value (CLV) (Zhang et al., 2010). Additionally, customer revenue and retention were closely aligned and positively associated with CLV (Bellis-Jones, 1989). If we assume that the annual profit from a customer is \$50,000 (x) and the average client lifetime with a firm is 15 years (x*15), less cost of onboarding is 5 percent in year one. The lifetime value of a \$50,000 client would actually be worth \$747,500.

CLV=(X*15)-y

CLV= \$750,000-\$2,500

CLV= \$747,500

Customer profitability and valuation give firms a starting point for calculating ROI for quality improvement initiatives such as VoC programs, (Foster et al., 1996; Hart & Smith, 1998; and Dalci et al., 2010).

2.4. Kaizen as an Application for Client Loyalty

Kaizen is well known among Japanese manufacturers, its beginnings started post World War II, but has since been applied to logistics, government, banking, healthcare, distribution, as well as other industries around the world. Kai means "change" and Zen means "for the better," so Kaizen means continual change for the better, or continuous improvement, (Kaizen, 2016). Kaizen looks at improvement across all areas of a company with the goal of improvement through standardized programs that help initiate efficiencies and eliminate waste.

The Kaizen method aligns well with the result of VoC in that it provides the opportunity and insight to continuous improvements, strengthens and empowers the workers, and eliminates waste by focusing on the right priorities. Workers are engaged in the improvement process which provides for higher employee engagement inside the company and ultimately increases customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Continuous praise and accolades to employees who engage in Kaizen stimulates continuous improvement and encourages individual and team involvement, as well as increasing productivity (Manos, 2007). It eliminates tedious, often unnecessary steps in a work process as well.

As with meeting expectations of clients and a high level of client experience and satisfaction, Kaizen recognizes that good processes bring about good results. All levels of the employee body are engaged in Kaizen and a high level of success is achieved with teams (Kaizen, 2016). Companies such as BMW, Bosch, Shell, Toyota, Siemens, Herman Miller, Ford Motor Company, Lockheed Martin, Nestle, Mayo Clinic, and Starbucks to name a few are adopters of Kaizen. Mike Micklewright at Kaizen Institute in an article titled, "Should Kaizen activities provide an ROI?" shares that founder and President/Chairman of Toyota Motor Corporation, Dr. Shoichiro Toyoda, stated "one should know that before he starts process and quality improvements, he will be able to quantify a trivial part of the gain." Computing ROI for continuous improvement "is often underestimated and this must be realized." It is not an ROI process, and we still must attempt to quantify it, however insufficient it may be to do so. While there are elements of Kaizen that exist inside a firm's continuous improvement and client service program(s), in order fo VoC to gain credibility it must be defendable and measurable.

2.5. Differentiating between Customer Service and Customer Experience

Customer experience and customer satisfaction are not the same, but they are both directly tied to loyalty. Customer satisfaction is a component of customer experience, which leads us to take a closer look at what other components comprise a customer's experience (Ramakrishnan, 2006). Understanding the life cycle of a customer including onboarding and touch points along the client journey, can all relate to customer experience. Everyone likes to have happy clients, but retaining and continuing to solve their problems and help them expand their businesses is customer experience. Business Insider contributor, Linda Ireland, of customer experience for Profit shares in a 2011 post, "A satisfied customer is a good thing. If my doctor's main goal was to make me happy and satisfied, I would leave his office with some good drugs and a scale that lies. Does that solve my needs? No" (Ireland, 2011).

Even with Linda Ireland's explanation, one might still be confused by service and experience. Service does not always mean happy, but solved problems provide a great experience and elicit satisfied clients. According to the Harvard Business Review and the Disney Institute, customer experience is defined as the sum of all interactions a customer has with a company. As such, the customer experience is not owned by a department or a service area, but is the sum of all client encounters. It is best defined and prioritized as a strategic business priority (The Disney Institute, 2016). Disney has ten "Disney-inspired non-negotiables" (Loeffler & Church, 2015) that are part of driving value and retention. These include: communication, deliberation, personalize, affirmation, knowledge, interaction, respect, trust, relationship, and finishing what you started. All of these "non-negotiables" can be applied to an accounting firm of any size. The Disney Institute provides a starting point to developing client experience and defines their top three starters. These foundation basics also provide a framework for client experience in an accounting practice. In fact, they are foundational to any industry where customer experience is paramount and a component of VoC (The Disney Institute, 2015).

III. MEASUREMENT

3.1. Net Promoter System

Bain and Company created the net promoter system (NPS) in 2003 as a new way to measure customer loyalty. Customer responses are sorted into three categories, 1) promoters, 2) passives, and 3) detractors. A management philosophy, NPS is a proven system that looks at loyalty and promotability of customers. Loyal customers stay with a company longer, spend more, contribute constructive and helpful feedback, and promote the company to their friends, co-workers, family, clients and community. In addition, Bain goes further to correlate loyalty to sustainability, and organic profitability and firm growth (Markey & Reichheld, 2011).

Historic NPS success stories include Charles Schwab who in 2004 was struggling as a company with rising costs and loss of stock momentum. Schwab credits NPS as a key component in its turnaround by becoming a customer-centered and service focused organization. Additionally, when American Express CEO Ken Chenault believed his company was slipping in service quality and customer loyalty, he deployed NPS to help the company gain insight and improve the company from the inside out. Three years later, American Express increased service satisfaction levels, profit margins, greater efficiency, and decreased employee attrition.

The net promoter system (NPS) has four essential elements (Markey & Reichheld, 2011). These include:

1) A commitment from leadership;
2) A trusted metric, real-time feedback that provides an environment for solving problems and promoting continual improvement, enhancing the customer experience with the firm or brand;
3) Employee commitment to serving the customer and an understanding that they are an integral part of loyalty a customer has for the firm; and,
4) Finally, a closed loop feedback system, that captures, informs, manages, tracks and advocates for the client situation.

Figure 2, illustrates the continual process of NPS and the impact it creates for Continuous Improvement in a firm. Note that this does not just apply to a financial institution or accounting firm, but can be adopted for other companies with discipline and commitment (Markey & Reichheld, 2011).

Insert Figure 2 here.

According to Bain and Company (Markey & Reichheld, 2011), a NPS is not a solution for every company as it requires a commitment to the process and has the potential to redefine a culture. Without strong leadership support, it will not experience the positive outcome that is intended.

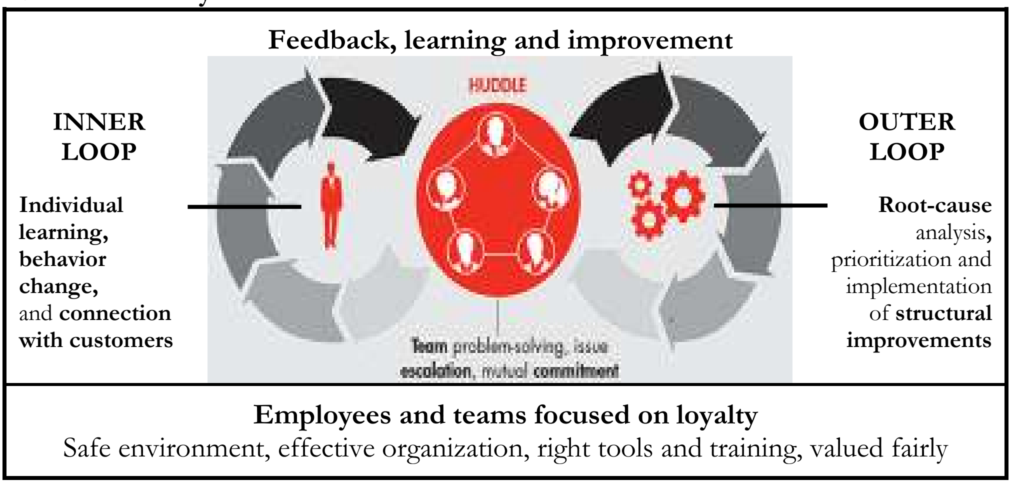
3.2. Defining the Scores

The NPS scoring is a ten-point scale scoring system that asks customers "how likely are they to recommend the firm to a friend."

1) Extremely likely, a score of 9 or 10 is a promoters. The customer is willing to share the 'good word' of a firm's work and promote them to acquaintances.
2) Somewhat likely, a score of 7 or 8 is a passive. This means they are not necessarily unsatisfied, but also not overly satisfied; they are just neutral.
3) Not likely, a score of 0-6, means that they are detractors. This score is detracting from the firm's brand if not resolved.

To compute a NPS score, subtract detractors from promoters. Passive are considered neurtral and as such have no value.

Figure 2
Net Promoter System Framework



Source: feedback, learning and improvement from NPS Client Feedback. Reprinted from "Introducing: The net promoter system," by Markey, R. & Riechheld, F. Bain and Company. Reprinted with permission (Markey & Reichheld, 2011).

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Using VoC to Drive Satisfaction, Retention and Profitability

To determine how voice of the client (VoC) benefits retention and satisfaction levels of an accounting firm we utilized the survey information from three independent firms of different sizes and revenue. The survey included a sampling of each firm's top clients to determine net promoter score (NPS) changes over a three-year period. In Table 2, we see the results of all three firms with each firm's marked improvements. While utilizing the same NPS scoring system, the individual firms did institute some additional changes or enhancements in soliciting the client voice based on firm priorities.

Insert Table 2 here.

Firm A, with revenues over $500 million, has seen an increased NPS from the mid 70s, to just over 80 in a three-year period. Primarily growth has been from existing clients, saving the company near $520,000 in new client onboarding costs. Firm A also saw a 9.2 percent increase in revenues from year 2 to year 3, and expressed experiencing low client turnover, with only anecdotal and few loss instances. Firm A did express that one of the four essential elements in NPS, a commitment from leadership had not reached full support and based on current trending and momentum for ROI related to client experience, there was an expected increase at the executive level. Further, Firm A believed that beginning client experience as a smaller to mid-sized firm provided an opportunity for it to become part of the firm's culture and that the momentum and overall buy-in to advance the customer's experience to a higher level would become an embedded firm behavior, improving and advancing over time.

Table 2
Year-Over-Year NPS and Revenue Changes

	Year	Revenue	NPS
Firm A	2017	$522,000,000	80
	2016	$478,000,000	80
	2015	$475,000,000	75
Firm B	2017	$125,000,000	76
	2016	$115,000,000	71
	2015	$103,000,000	62
Firm C	2017	$95,000,000	90
	2016	$89,000,000	74
	2015	$84,000,000	70

Firm B, with revenues over $125 million, deployed a VoC feedback program through a NPS system. The firm also prioritized its client experience model and focused on mandatory, regular meetings with clients. While the firm's revenue growth between year 2 and 3 was just under 9 percent, overall the firm has experienced 95 percent retention rate year-over-year for the last two years, and in highly competitive markets. The 5 percent loss was considered non-controllable, one-time projects and business transition i.e. company has been acquired. Prior the retention rate had been in the 70s. Firm B also noted that the firmwide client experience program had provided a platform for recognition of top performers. Statistics on client feedback made an impact on the attraction of top talent and established confidence in new clients who had not had prior working relationships with the firm. Thus, client development was enhanced by client feedback information, satisfaction numbers and overall respect for client feedback.

Firm C, with revenues of $95 million, when considering VoC as a priority for growth, initiated a NPS system combined with an in-depth client account planning program focused on existing clients. To better manage the program expectations, a limited number of account plans were completed in year 2. As a result, in two years the company moved from a single digit percentage of growth to over 10 percent, with retention rates better than 90 percent. In addition, the firms NPS jumped from 74 percent to 90 percent in the two-year period, an extremely high NPS for the accounting industry. When asked about changes in service levels after the program was instituted and executed, 77 percent of surveyed clients said that they had experienced an increase in service levels and satisfaction with the firm. In the same year, retention rates increased from 90 percent to 95, with attrition of 5 percent due to client acquisition.

Firm A, like Firm B has utilized the client feedback, and team recognition to drive staff retention and attraction of top talent. Additionally, the firm instituted a recognition program across the firm for those that were highly recognized by clients. Internal communications, recognition among peers and partners alike, boosting overall firm morale.

Firm C also experienced positive innovation through client feedback, and has now instituted an internal innovation program as a result. Continued training of team members has helped the firm realize faster ramp-up time on process changes and technology, enhancing both employee and client satisfaction levels.

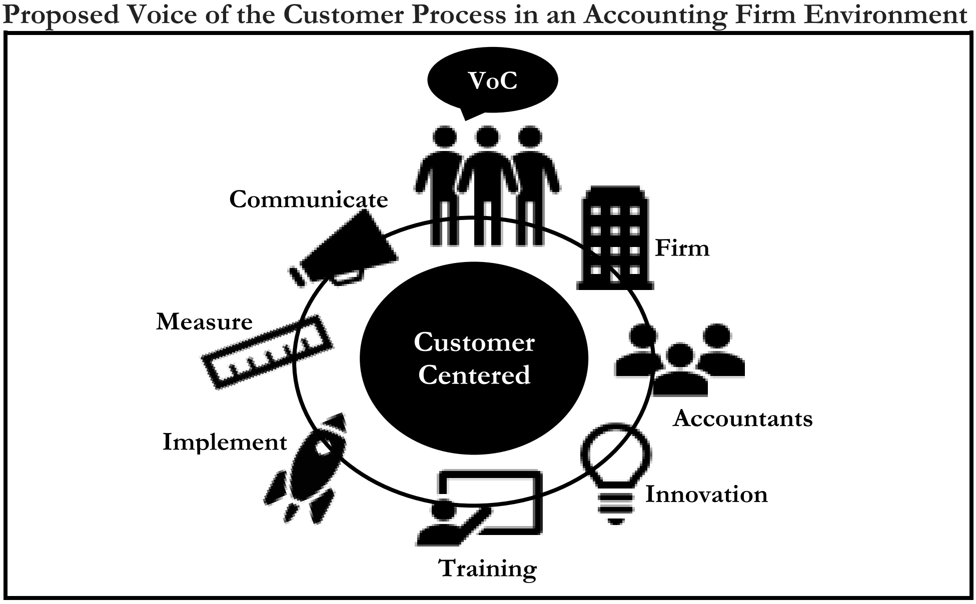
All three firms while results were similar, the level of formalization and acceptance of the programs firmwide became the sliding scale for success. For accounting firms A, B, C, it was important to take the firms from a state of "doing the work" to a level of client focus, satisfaction and innovation by engaging the client in transparent feedback. Firms B and C have taken their client experience programs a step further to incorporate it into the firm training programs. This has helped reinforce the client-centered cultures. While VoC programs sound complicated to some and fundamental to others, the accounting industry recognizes there are inconsistencies in service levels and few commitments to a structured program. More progressive firms are instituting programs and seeing positive, while varying, results.

V. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

How does voice of the client (VoC) benefit retention and satisfaction levels in an accounting firm? Mennella et al. (2017) reports that 89 percent of companies expect to compete primarily based on experience compared to 36 percent four years ago. This evolution requires a new way of thinking, a new way of doing business, and a customer-centered approach. As with disruption, it is change and in this change firms find increased retention and growth opportunities. Client retention, client satisfaction, and client feedback will improve firm innovation as firms progress with structured programs.

There were five main conclusions that emerged from this research. First, firms that utilize a VoC, such as NPS, and consistently monitor and communicate results, as well as implement training programs around proper service deliver experience a higher level of client engagement. Second, firms that utilize a VoC and consistently monitor and communicate results, as well as implement training programs around proper service deliver experience a higher client retention level. Third, firms that utilize a VoC reduce costs associated with new client onboarding. Fourth, firms that utilize VoC feedback to build and enhance their training see higher results. Finally, firms that utilize VoC, may experience higher employee satisfaction and retention.

Figure 3
Proposed Voice of the Customer Process in an Accounting Firm Environment



When existing clients become a priority, and resources and attention are given to VoC programs, firms grow by listening, responding and being more engaged with their existing clients. Based on the accounting firm environment, Figure 3, above proposes a client-centered VoC process that will enhance the firm's culture and position it to experience positive outcomes. Continuous client feedback inspires innovation. Training enhances consistency and continuity. Execution of NPS, or another monitoring program, provides measurement and accountability that can be shared throughout the firm. With an integrated program, the client (or customer) will continue to feel valued of which retention and client expansion will be realized. Sharing insights and outcomes from clients with the firm's learning and development program so that additional training around issues, or client challenges, become a part of ongoing training to further develop a customer-centered culture.

VI. STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

One limitation to this study is that relied on a small number (3) of case studies so it may not be generalizabile to all accounting firms. It also did not take into account the differences in firm sizes and clients served. It is also possible that VoC and Kaizen are latent variable of Client Centered Cultures. We recommend future research that surveys a broad number of accounting firms of all sizes and missions. We also suggest using PLS-SEM data analysis to analyze VoC and Kaizen as latent variable of the Client Center Culture variable.

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