

Assessing the Service Quality Gap of Freight Forwarding Sector during an Epidemic Situation in Sri Lanka

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Supply chains are vulnerable to disruption and volatility during epidemics. For example, during the COVID-19 outbreak, it is evident that freight forwarding firms experienced a major decline in business due to market collapse. In such conditions, it was necessary for businesses to maintain optimal service quality to win the limited market. This study examines service quality in the freight forwarding sector under epidemic conditions. Service quality of the freight forwarding sector is attendant on different industries and therefore, provision of services is volatile amid an epidemic. Improvements in existing processes using information technology could enhance existing service quality level during an epidemic condition. Therefore, a key aspect of this study is to identify the gap between expectations of the service quality and perceptions of quality based on technology usage. This study has three objectives which are to (1) identify existing procedures when providing freight forwarding services in Sri Lankan context, (2) identify the global approach to freight forwarding services and (3) determine the service quality gap between expectations and perceptions of the Sri Lankan freight forwarding sector in terms of information technology. For this, SERVQUAL method has been used in differentiating the expectations from perceptions. This method has been proven in literature reviews by considering the global freight forwarding sector. Analysis relates to the service quality in Sri Lanka's freight forwarding businesses and highlights possible areas for improvement to retain in an epidemic conditions and maintaining the required levels of service quality. The service quality gap has been identified by analysing the employee expectations relative to perceptions of services currently provided in the freight forwarding sector: these indicate the technology, people management, communications management and organizational performance-related enhancements that are needed. This paper concludes that shortfalls in service quality during an epidemic requires freight forwarding companies to focus satisfying the customer needs using modern technology to complement traditional procedure.

Keywords: *freight forwarding, service quality, epidemic situation, IT solutions, SERVQUAL method.*