





## Dimensions characterizing internal customer loyalty in health services

Dimensiones que caracterizan la lealtad de los clientes internos en servicios de salud

Dimensões que caracterizam a fidelização dos clientes internos nos serviços de saúde

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** the satisfaction of the members of any type of organization and, in particular, of those providing medical services is a topic of great interest and importance if it is a matter of achieving high levels of satisfaction, and therefore, loyalty of patients and their relatives. **Objective:** to determine the dimensions and attributes for internal customer satisfaction and loyalty in health institutions in Barranquilla during the year 2021. **Method:** an exploratory descriptive study was carried out in 367 employees (n = 367) in facilities related to health services in Barranquilla together with a review of the corresponding literature. A questionnaire was applied in order to know the dimensions and attributes mentioned above. The attributes were grouped by axis according to their highest weight, and based on this, the name of the

dimensions was defined considering different studies and previous experience. Tests were carried out to determine the reliability and validity of the survey, as well as sample adequacy tests. Factor analysis and principal components were applied. **Results:** 79% of the total variance covered the dimensions: teamwork, job recognition, working conditions and work benefits. A distribution of the attributes in the dimensions capable of explaining the situation at a high level was shown. **Conclusions:** the internal customer is a key factor in an organization, and the attributes proposed for customer satisfaction and loyalty in health care institutions are considered adequate.

**Keywords:** loyalty; internal customer; satisfaction; quality control; health care quality

**RESUMEN**

**Introducción:** la satisfacción de los integrantes de una organización de cualquier tipo y, en particular, de aquellas que prestan servicios médicos es un tema de mucho interés e importancia si de lograr altos niveles de satisfacción y, por ende, de lealtad de los pacientes y sus familiares se trata. **Objetivo:** determinar las dimensiones y atributos para la satisfacción y lealtad del cliente interno en instituciones de salud en Barranquilla durante el año 2021. **Método:** se realizó un estudio exploratorio descriptivo en instalaciones relacionadas con los servicios de salud en Barranquilla en 367 funcionarios (n = 367) aunado con la revisión de la literatura correspondiente. Se aplicó un cuestionario con el fin de conocer las dimensiones y atributos antes mencionados. Los atributos fueron agrupados por eje de acuerdo a su mayor peso y sobre la base de esto fue definida el nombre de las dimensiones considerando diversos estudios realizados y la experiencia. Se realizaron pruebas para determinar fiabilidad y validez para la encuesta, así como pruebas de adecuación muestral. Se aplicó el análisis factorial y componentes principales. **Resultados:** el 79 % de la varianza total abarcó las dimensiones: trabajo en equipo, reconocimiento laboral, condiciones de trabajo y beneficios laborales. Se mostró una distribución de los atributos en las dimensiones capaz de explicar la situación en un alto nivel. **Conclusiones:** el cliente interno es factor clave en una organización, considerándose adecuados los atributos propuestos para la satisfacción y lealtad del mismo en instituciones de salud.

**Palabras clave:** lealtad; cliente interno; satisfacción; control de calidad; calidad de la atención médica

**RESUMO**

**Introdução:** a satisfação dos membros de uma organização de qualquer tipo e, em particular, daqueles que prestam serviços médicos é um tema de grande interesse e importância se pretendemos alcançar elevados níveis de satisfação e, portanto, de fidelização dos pacientes e seus parentes são tratados. **Objetivo:** determinar as dimensões e atributos para a satisfação e lealdade do cliente interno em instituições de saúde em Barranquilla durante o ano de 2021. **Método:** estudo descritivo exploratório realizado em instalações relacionadas a serviços de saúde em Barranquilla em 367 funcionários (n = 367) juntamente com a revisão da literatura correspondente. Aplicou-se um questionário para conhecer as dimensões e atributos mencionados. Os atributos foram agrupados por eixo de acordo com seu maior peso e com base nisso foi definido o nome das dimensões considerando diversos estudos e experiências. Foram realizados testes para determinar a confiabilidade e validade da pesquisa, bem como testes de adequação da amostra. Aplicou-se análise fatorial e componentes principais. **Resultados:** 79% da variância total cobriu as dimensões: trabalho em equipe, reconhecimento do trabalho, condições de trabalho e benefícios do trabalho. Foi apresentada uma distribuição dos atributos nas dimensões, capaz de explicar a situação em alto nível. **Conclusões:** o cliente interno é um fator chave em uma organização, considerando adequados os atributos propostos para a satisfação e fidelização do mesmo nas instituições de saúde.

**Palavras-chave:** lealdade; cliente interno; satisfação; controle de qualidade; qualidade do atendimento médico

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## INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years, human resources have become a fundamental element for any type of service organization; they are an important factor in the adaptive capacity of the institution, they make a difference and have a determining influence on the quality of perception of the institution by external clients.<sup>(1)</sup>

All this becomes even more relevant in institutions related to health services due to their specific characteristics, in particular, the special type of clients they have and the way in which the service is produced, in which several of the people who make up the organization participate.

The health service is characterized by the special doctor-patient relationship<sup>(2)</sup>, in which the treatment does not take place between equals (agency relationship), but rather the patient comes seeking advice, which can generate a great deal of trust from the patient in his doctor, which can translate into loyalty. However, many members of the health service institution also interact with the patient and his family, hence the relevance of the quality of the services and the attributes of the environment surrounding the service, both tangible (e.g. equipment, comfort) and intangible (e.g. professionalism, speed), which demonstrates the importance of the entire health service system.

If you add to the above reasoning that consumers are three times less likely to recommend their healthcare provider than their regular hotel or bank, yet they are almost twice as likely to criticize their healthcare provider, far above all other service providers they deal with on a daily basis, then you can understand the importance of making these special types of customers loyal to their service provider.

Customer service is the key for loyal customers, therefore, for a person to identify with an organization and be loyal to it, it will be necessary for the organization to show that person that its service objective is something worthwhile and to show with facts that the treatment of people and the environment that exists within the organization is adequate, which is why the periodic measurement of customer loyalty is a must: What is not measured, is not known, so it cannot be controlled and, therefore, cannot be improved; hence, the achievement of customer loyalty is a critical objective for any organization.<sup>(2)</sup>

For any organization, the quality of its services is a fundamental aspect for its operation, even more so with regard to health services, since it can guarantee patient safety by satisfying their needs; a satisfied customer can develop customer loyalty to the service.<sup>(3,4)</sup> It is necessary to strengthen within the organization the good treatment of its customers, being kind, polite and collaborate; thus the customer can have a positive perception of the organization and return to make use of the services offered by the same, as well as recommend it to others.<sup>(5,6)</sup>

In order to achieve quality service by health service providers, it is essential to have employees with a high level of job satisfaction, since human resources are an essential element in any type of organization, and quality service will yield benefits.<sup>(7)</sup>



Job satisfaction is an important variable for organizations, since it has a significant impact on work performance. It is advisable that organizations focus their efforts on promoting a favorable work environment that contributes to the satisfaction, and therefore, to the loyalty of the members of each of the sub-processes, and that to be reflected in their performance; which leads to user satisfaction due to the increase in the quality of service. Job satisfaction is a perception that reflects in the emotional state of the worker <sup>(8,9,10,11)</sup>.

Job satisfaction is defined as the worker's feeling of well-being when performing his or her job<sup>(12)</sup> On the other hand, Romani, Ferrer, and Zuta<sup>(13)</sup> consider that teamwork and job satisfaction have a significant relationship, primarily the indicators of coordination and commitment.

Satisfied employees (internal customer) is one of the first steps to have a committed work team, where their motivation, personality and skills are key factors that contribute to customer satisfaction.

In today's world, organizations must make it a priority to keep human talent motivated, considering that it is the most important capital for its contribution to provide development and productivity<sup>(14)</sup>. To achieve this, there must be an adequate work environment. It is every day necessity to have qualified, committed, professional workers<sup>(15)</sup>; the internal customer is key, as he is the one who directly performs the service provided. People need institutions to be important means to achieve their goals and, in turn, these organizations need people to achieve the organization's objectives.

Internal customers are the people who work in the organization and who, like external customers, have needs and expectations to be satisfied within the company through products or services provided by different means or processes.<sup>(16)</sup>

Conceiving the organization as an internal network of suppliers and customers, the internal customer can be considered as the element that receives the result of a previous process within the same organization.

Given the importance of the human resources working in a health services institution, it is necessary to determine the dimensions and attributes for the satisfaction and loyalty of the internal customer in health institutions in Barranquilla during the year 2021.

## METHOD

In order to determine the dimensions and attributes for internal customer satisfaction and loyalty, an exploratory-descriptive research was carried out in facilities related to health services in Barranquilla, together with a review of the corresponding literature and multivariate statistical methods.

Through a qualitative stage, the attributes that influenced workers' satisfaction were analyzed, both for direct patient care personnel (doctors, nurses) and paramedics, as well as the rest of the personnel and, as a separate segment, the managers of the health organizations.



Subsequently, a quantitative approach for the confirmation of the existence of different dimensions was developed by using multivariate statistics, to a population of 4.500 workers (N = 4 500), with a sample of 367 (n = 367) staff members of health institutions in the city.

A questionnaire was applied to a group of employees that integrate health services in public institutions of the city in order to know the dimensions and attributes that characterize the job satisfaction of these employees (internal customer) using stratified random sampling and applying the statistical package SPSS version 22, choosing those attributes that are above 80%.

Tests were carried out to determine reliability and validity for the survey, as well as sample adequacy tests.

The variance study table, rotated component matrix, KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test and Bartlett's test for internal customers were obtained using the SPSS statistical package.

Ethical aspects were considered by having the informed consent of the professionals of the health institutions, including managers.

## RESULTS

Based on the results of variance on the attributes of the internal customers demanded by them self, the validity of the principal components technique to explain the behavior of the study variables is considered.

The first four components explained 79% of the total variance, likewise the total variance explained by axis was: axis (1) 25%, axis (2) 45%, axis (3) 63% and axis (4) 79%; which showed a distribution of the attributes in the axes capable of explaining the situation at a high level.

The attributes were grouped by axis according to their highest score, and on this basis, the name of the dimensions was defined considering the experience and various studies carried out.

The first axis grouped the attributes referring to the Teamwork dimension, while the second axis included the Job Recognition dimension and the third included the Working Conditions dimension. Finally, the fourth axis contained the attributes referring to the Job Benefits dimension, as shown in Table 1.

The calculation of Cronbach's alpha coefficient was performed for each dimension, taking values above 0.5 as being a significant reliability coefficient; additionally, the KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) test was performed, equal to 0.635, which showed that the application of the factor analysis was appropriate, because the correlations between the pairs of variables were explained by other variables, thus corroborating that the desired dimensions and attributes characterized satisfaction and loyalty correctly for the employees of the health institutions studied.



The dimensions that characterized internal customer satisfaction in general, that is, for both workers and managers, were associated with Teamwork, Job Recognition, Working Conditions and Job Benefits.

In order to determine the dimensions and attributes, a qualitative analysis was carried out, which began with the evaluation of the attributes defined in the literature, taking then the opinion of the actors in question, as well as experts, to select those referred by more than 80% of the interviewed; as a complement to this, a quantitative analysis was carried out, with the application of a questionnaire to determine the importance that the workers gave to the attributes selected in the qualitative phase. This information was used to establish the data matrices, which were processed with SPSS 22, to finally obtain the attributes that determine the satisfaction and loyalty of internal clients in health institutions, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Dimensions and attributes that determine the satisfaction and loyalty of internal customers in health service facilities

Dimensions	Attributes
Teamwork	Identification with the institution
	Communication among employees
	Use of norms, protocols, procedures
	Personal and professional development programs
Job recognition	Salary earned
	Organizational commitment
	Appreciation of work performed
	Professional development opportunities
Working conditions	Safety in the work area (cleanliness, order, environment)
	Adequate material and equipment required
	Schedule
	Safety (safe working environment)
Job benefits	Training opportunities
	Incentives
	Individuals contribute in setting work goals and objectives

Source: Adapted from Steffanell De León, 2018.<sup>(17)</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The behavior of employees in the development of their work activity is due to various factors, such as good relationship between colleagues, good working conditions, salary, safety, among others. The satisfaction of a person at work is related to the satisfaction of the user, therefore, a commitment of the personnel is relevant; if they are not motivated with a good attitude, they will reflect it at the moment of interacting with patients, which would affect the health care entity.

After reviewing different works such as Arboleda<sup>(7)</sup>, Sanchez<sup>(9)</sup>, Steffanell<sup>(17)</sup> that generated attributes for service entities, it is evident the importance of identifying those relevant to health institutions in the region, as a way to solve the needs of these institutions in terms of human resources; recognizing the need to improve internal customer satisfaction, which will be reflected especially in the patients of the health entity, so it was necessary to identify those attributes that can contribute positively to that.<sup>(7,9,21)</sup>

An appropriate work environment will lead to better communication, better attitude towards patients or other users of the health entity, making the internal client feel satisfied and influencing the quality of service.

One of the main concerns of health institutions is the quality of care provided to users, and it is there where interventions should be directed in order to achieve improvement, that is, there must be professionalism in the organization, planning and control; patient care and safety is key to their care.

The commitment of the human capital in the effort of quality improvement for the institution is important for the satisfaction and loyalty of the users; personnel must be in constant preparation to improve the quality of the service provided, so a more active participation of the workers of the health institutions is necessary to provide better attention to the users every day; customer service is a prime element, therefore, it requires a satisfied and highly motivated staff with the work they perform and with the health institution for which they work for.

Finally, the results discussed were evidenced by means of statistical data (variance study for internal clients, rotated component matrix for internal clients), considering valid the technique used for the analysis of the variables studied, where dimensions and determining attributes for the satisfaction and loyalty of the internal client in a health institution were obtained.<sup>(18,19,20,21)</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

With the use of factor analysis, a statistical technique of multivariate analysis, it was concluded that the attributes can be classified into four components, which are related to the processes that contribute to customer satisfaction and loyalty, such as: Teamwork, Job recognition, Working conditions and Job benefits.

The identified dimensions explain 79% of the total variance.

Both workers and managers agreed in Teamwork dimension as the most important to achieve satisfaction.

The attributes proposed for internal customer satisfaction and loyalty are considered adequate, and the technique used to explain the behavior of the variables included in the study is valid because it has high levels of reliability and validity.



With the present study it was possible to identify the characteristic dimensions and attributes of internal clients in health institutions in Barranquilla in order to propose strategies aimed at improving them, with the consequent increase in the favorable perceptions of patients and their families, which leads to their loyalty both through repetition in the request for service and through positive recommendation to other people.

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**Conflict of interest:**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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**Supplementary information (Open Data):**

[Cuestionario diagnóstico para conocer las dimensiones que caracterizan la satisfacción laboral del cliente interno](#)  
(Diagnostic questionnaire to know the dimensions that characterize the job satisfaction of the internal customer)