

**SERVICE QUALITY AND  
CUSTOMER SATISFACTION:  
A STUDY AMONG OF  
SECRETARIATS' CUSTOMERS IN  
AMPARA DISTRICT**

*Journal of Social Review*  
Volume 5 (1)  
June 2018  
Department of  
Social Sciences

**Mujahid Hilal. M.I.**

***Abstract***

*There are many divisional secretariats functioning under each district in Sri Lanka. All of them are providing services to their customers (people). It is higher time to improve the quality of services rendered by these divisional secretariats. Hence, it is important to measure the service quality and find ways to improve the service areas lacking service quality. The aim of the study was to measure the service quality levels of divisional secretariats and to analyze its impact on customer satisfaction. This study, further, help to suggest strategies for the quality of service offered by the divisional secretariats. For this study, the SERVQUAL scale used by Parasuraman, Zeithmal and Berry (1991) was used. Convenience sampling techniques was adopted. 156 persons enjoying or enjoyed services of these divisional secretariats of 4 divisional secretaries were the respondents for the questionnaires. The SERVQUAL instrument consisted of 22 items on expectations and perceptions. Finding suggest that service quality dimensions such as reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness are contributing to the service quality of services of divisional secretariats and there are gaps between the customer expectation and perception of the items under the dimension of service quality. Findings indicate that service quality has an impact on customer satisfaction. There is a gap between the customer expectation and customer perception of the service quality in these divisional secretariats. Thus, it may be important to improve the services of these divisional secretariats and further increase the level of service quality. Government may attempts to take steps to provide all facilities to these divisional secretariats in order to further improve its quality of services.*

## Introduction

Service marketing is now vital component in academic researches. As a component of service marketing, service quality plays a major role in determining and creating customer (people) Satisfaction leading to profitability of any forms. Hence, service quality has been considered as central determinant to the success of service firms. Service quality is very difficult to measure, control and communicate. Management must get insight into to the quality that it is defined by the customer and not by the producer-seller. Further, management must strive to maintain consistent service quality level at or above the expectations of consumers (Williams, et al., 1994).

As far as public sectors are concerned, customer orientation is vital for any public sectors since the traditional administration hierarchic system is no longer in any organizations and therefore, public sectors should also focus on customers and provide services as private sectors do (Hsiao and Lin, 2008). Further, Osborn & Gabler (1999) notes that public services are also shifting towards implementation of market orientation in providing services with priority given to the consumers or people. This is due to the fact that providing services at public sector organizations are more complex since it involves finding out

stated needs, setting the priorities and allocating resources (Gowan et al., 2001).

It is worthwhile to note here that managerial level personnel are very concerned about satisfying the people in both private sectors and public sector organizations. Managers are very interested in satisfying customers demand and therefore, customer satisfaction is depending on the relationship between the customer and the service provider (Cengiz, 2010).

Services given by the public sector organizations in Sri Lanka is paramount for the people wellbeing and it contributes to the image of the service organizations. In this context, it is important to focus on the services provided by divisional secretariats functioning under the government. It is pertinent to state that services rendered by these divisional secretariats in the country assist people to uplift and enrich their lives in the country. Quality of services and satisfaction of consumers of service firm have been well recognized and imperative for firms' survival. Accordingly, research on service quality of divisional secretariats and how it leads to satisfaction of the people who get any services for their needs need to be studied.

Divisional secretariats offer very important services to the people.



Hence, it is important to improve the services rendered by them and if there is any deficiencies need to be rectified and remedy them. Therefore, researcher develops many research questions; what is the gap of service quality exist in the divisional secretariats? What is the level of the service quality at divisional secretariats? What factors affect the service quality of divisional secretariats? How the service quality affect the customer satisfaction? Thus, the objective of the study is to explore the relationship of service quality and customer satisfaction of divisional secretariats and understand the service quality level of divisional secretariats and to suggest strategies to improve the quality of service offered by the divisional secretariats. In order to attain the objective of the study, this paper, firstly, outline introduction addressing the research background. Secondly, brief review of literature and theoretical framework explaining the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction is addressed. Thirdly, the methodology adopted is explained and finally the discussion of the results of the data analysis is elaborated and finally, conclusion and recommendation are given.

## **Review of literature and theoretical framework**

### *Service Quality*

Quality is often used to imply 'excellence' of service product (John S. Oakland, 1999). Quality simply means that meeting customer requirements. This has been stated by many authors in different ways. Juran (1988) expressed that quality has different meanings. Two of his meanings dominate the use of words. Firstly, quality consists of features of the product which meet the needs of customers and thereby provide product satisfaction. Secondly, quality consist of freedom from deficiencies. Further, Juran (1988) defines that as fitness for use.

In order to measure the service quality of firms, Parasuramn et al. (1985) created SEVQUAL instruments which comprise five dimensions of service quality namely reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles. This also help managers to find the quality gap between expected level of service and customer perception of service level received. The five dimension of service quality are given as under.

*Reliability: The ability to perform the promised service dependable and accurately*

*Responsiveness: The willingness to help customers and to provide prompt service.*

*Assurance: The knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.*

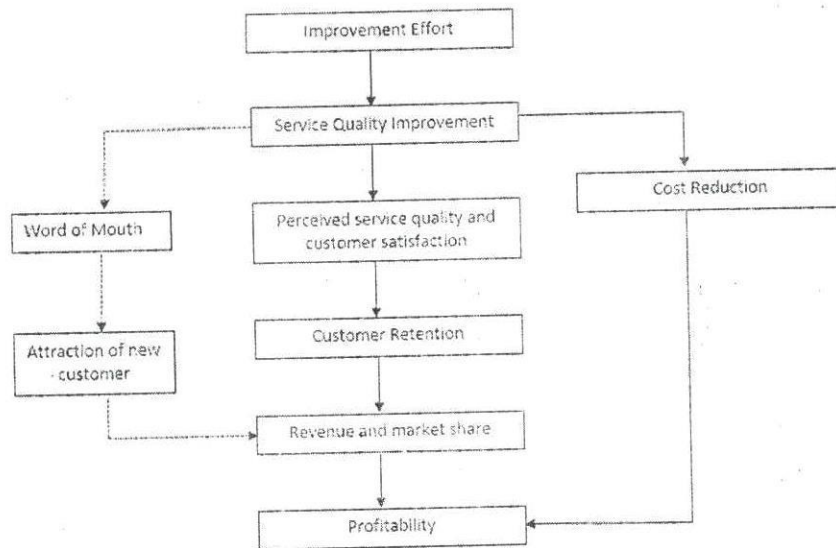
*Empathy: the provision of caring, individualized attention to customers*

*Tangibles: The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication*

materials. (Parasuraman et al., 1985)

Any service organizations need to improve the service quality that will lead to higher profitability. Rust et al (1995) show that there is a relationship between service quality and profitability of the service organizations. This is explained with the help of Figure 1.

**Figure 1 Relationship between Service Quality and Profitability**



Source: Rust et al (1995)

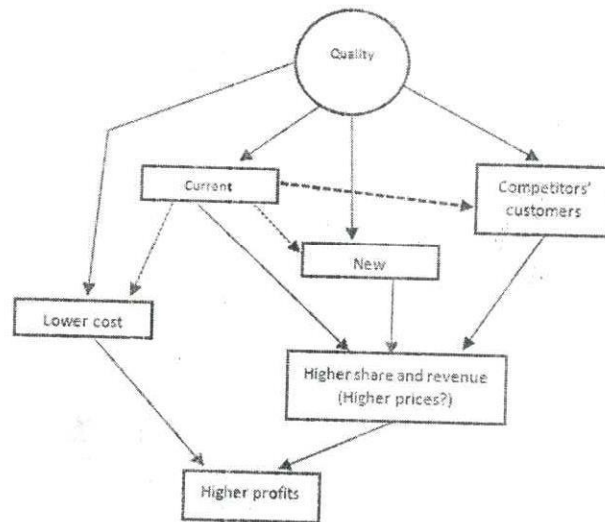
As per the model of Rust et.al (1995), if the improvement effort is successful, that will result in increased and improved service quality. Subsequently, this will improve the perceived quality and customer satisfaction and will reduce the cost. Improved

customer satisfaction in turn contributes to the retention of customers and positive word of mouth. Resultantly, there may be a possibility of increasing revenue and market share owing to the higher level of retention attracted by the positive word of mouth. The

increased revenues coupled with the decreased costs, will lead to greater profitability.

Service quality has direct relationship with profitability of the

organizations. Rust (1994) illustrated this relationship as in Figure.



Source: Rust (1994)

Rust (1994) explains that the general effect of quality on the costs and sales of a firm. The main effects of quality on profits are through lower cost due to efficiencies achieved, increased sales from current customers, greater attraction on new customers, and the possible ability to charge higher prices.

Parasuraman et al. (1991) developed a conceptual model of service quality with five gaps which are shown in Figure 2.

*Gap 1: Gap between consumer expectations and management perception. Management may think that it knows what consumer expect and proceed to deliver this when in fact consumer may expect.*

*Gap 2: Gap between management perception and service quality specification. Management may not set quality specifications or may not set them clearly. Alternatively, management may set clear quality specifications but these may not be achievable.*



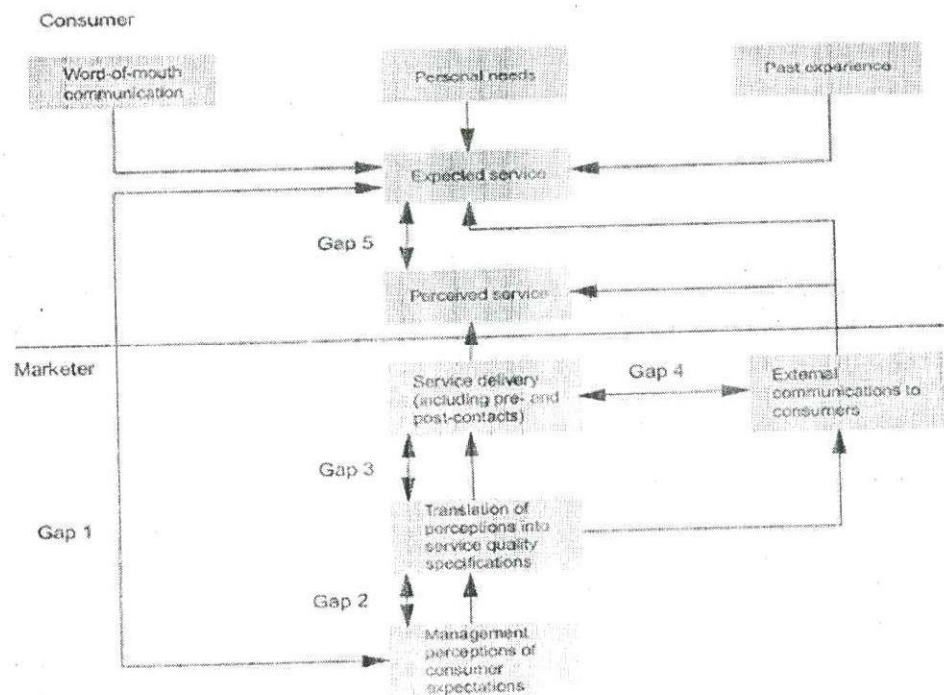
**Gap 3:** Gap between service quality specifications and service delivery. Unforeseen problems or poor management can lead to service provider failing to meet service quality specifications. This may be due to human error but also mechanical breakdown of facilitating or support goods.

**Gap 4:** Gap between service delivery and external communications. There may be dissatisfaction with a service due to the excessively heightened expectations developed through the service provider's communications

efforts. Dissatisfaction tends to occur where actual delivery does not meet up to expectation held out in a company's communications.

**Gap 5:** Gap between perceived service and expected service. This gap occurs as a result of one or more of the previous gaps. The way in which customers perceive actual service delivery does not match up with their initial expectations. (Parasuraman et al., 1991).

**Figure 2 Five Gaps of Service Quality**



Source: Parasuraman et al. (1985)

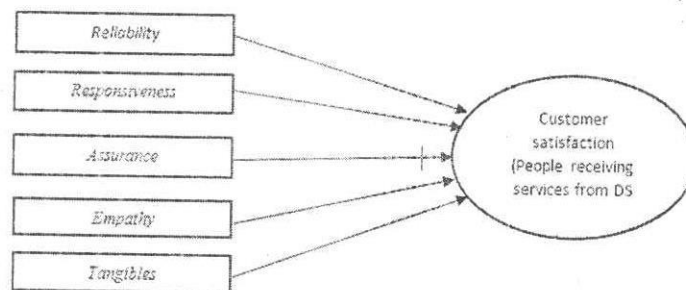
Parasuraman et al. (1990) also found that customers evaluate a firm's service quality by comparing service performance (perception) with what they think performance should be (expectation). In effect customers' service expectations provide a context for their assessment of the service. When service performance falls short of expectations, a service quality gap is resulted.

### Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the result of either pleasure or disappointment of service evaluation connected to the expectations of service buyer (Oliver, 1980; Leisen and Vance, 2001). Since the customer satisfaction is a key to the success of marketing strategy marketers give higher priority for the customer satisfaction and it helps retain customers. This will lead to

and determinant of repeat visitation to the stores, repeat purchase and word of mouth promotion (Anderson et al., 1994; Bearden and Teel, 1983; Zairi, 2000). Further, this highly satisfied customer will be loyal to the organization and will be retained for a longtime (Kotler, 2006; Anderson and Sullivan, 1993).

For any organization achieving the sustainable competitive advantage depends on delivering high quality service that should result in satisfied customers (Shemwell et al., 1998). Many researches have been carried out and found the direct relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction (for example Swanson and Davis, 2003; Ravichandran et al., 2010; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). With these review of literature, the research model is given as under;



Source: Review of Literatures

Thus, researcher hypothesizes that Service quality dimensions of the divisional secretariats contributes to the satisfaction of the people who obtain the service from the DS offices.

### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted for this research is quantitative in nature. Since all the people in the areas experienced the services of divisional secretariats, researcher used convenience sampling technique. Data was collected from 156 respondents who enjoyed or are enjoying the services of divisional secretariats at Sainthamaruthu, Nintavur, Kalmunai and Samanthurai. Data was collected with the help of undergraduate students.

Researcher used questionnaires to collect the data. The questionnaire adopted from Parasuraman et al (1985). SERVQUAL instrument included 22 items for customer expectation and perception and demographical characteristics of the respondents. Hence, people enjoying services of division secretariats were required to answer for expectation and for perception.

All items in the questionnaire was with five points lickert scales ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Collected data were fed into the SPSS and analyzed using descriptive statistics and multivariate analysis. Factor analysis was carried out in order for data reduction. Multiple regression was used to test the relationship between dimensions of service quality and customer satisfaction.

### **Results and discussion**

Factor analysis was carried out using principle component analysis. All communalities were more or equal to 0.5. The variances of service quality dimensions are given in Table 1. The cumulative variances for each variable for tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy were 63.74%, 76.30%, 76.19%, 60.56% and 62.80% respectively. This indicates that the data collected from the respondents well represented in the study.

Reliability statistics show that it had internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha value of 0.936 which is more than 0.70.



**Table I: Variances**

Variables	Variance
Tangibles	63.74
Reliability	76.30
Responsiveness	76.19
Assurance	60.56
Empathy	62.80

Source: Survey data

Demographical characteristics of the respondents are given in Table 2

**Table 2 Demographical Characteristics**

Characteristics	Percent (%)
Age	
< 25	20.0
25 – 34	21.1
35 – 44	26.9
45 – 55	19.2
> 55	12.8
Educational Qualification	
< GCE O/L	25.6
GCE O/L	33.9
GCE A/L	19.2
Basic Degree	17.9
Postgraduate Degree	3.2
People Belongs to DS	
Kalmunai	38
Sainthamaruthu	46
Nintavur	42
Sammanthurai	30

Source: Survey Data

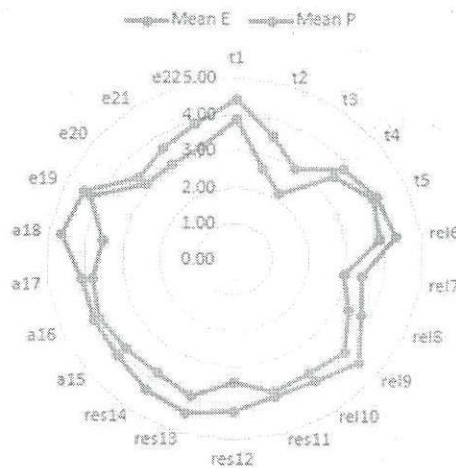
Table 2 explains the demographical characteristics of respondents. 20 per cent of the 156 respondents were in the age group of less than 25 and 12.8 per cent of the respondents fall in the category of greater than 55 of age group. In the educational qualifications 25.6 per cent of 156 respondents are with below GCE O/L qualifications. In order to explore the service quality level of divisional secretariats, the gaps of service quality using its mean score is depicted in Figure 3. Almost in all items of the SERVQUAL items, gaps are visible.

The radar figure explains the service quality gaps found (See

Appendix 1) and suggests that there should be actions to rectify or fill the gaps so that people will enjoy satisfactory services of the divisional secretariats.

Correlation analysis was performed to see the associations among the independent variables and dependent variables. There is significant correlation between dependent variable customer satisfaction and dimensions of service quality such as tangibles, reliability, responsiveness and assurance at the 0.01 level with  $p < 0.05$ . This indicates that there is positive association between these variables (see Table 3).

**Figure 3 Service Quality Gaps**



Source: Survey Data

### Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

Service quality and customer satisfaction as proposed in the hypothesis have direct relationship and thus, there is no evidence to reject the hypothesis. The contribution of the service quality to the satisfaction of the people who come for the divisional secretariats for their work is very strong with R Square value of 0.530 and Adjusted R Square value of 0.527 ( $\beta = 0.728$ ,  $t = 13.191$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $F_{1, 154} = 173.999$ ). This

indicates that 53 per cent of variation in the customer satisfaction is explained by the service quality of divisional secretariats.

Since service quality comprises five dimensions, the relationship or contribution of the service quality to the customer satisfaction need to be further explored. Hence, this association and relationship were further analyzed with the help of multiple regression. This is given in Table 4.

**Table 4 Regression Results**

Predictable variable	<i>Beta</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>t</i>	VIF
<b>Reliability</b>	0.516	0.000	7.863	2.565
<b>Empathy</b>	0.435	0.000	7.791	1.857
<b>Responsiveness</b>	0.714	0.000	7.532	5.363
<b>Tangible</b>	-0.483	0.000	-4.694	6.305
<b>Assurance</b>	-0.178	0.000	-2.760	2.479

Note: R Square = 0.748, Adjusted R Square = 0.740,  $F_{5, 150} = 89.240$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $n = 156$

As far as divisional secretariats are concerned, the model is best fitted with R Square of 0.748 and adjusted R Square of 0.740 with the contributing variables reliability ( $\beta = 0.516$ ,  $t = 7.863$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), empathy ( $\beta = 0.435$ ,  $t = 7.791$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), and responsiveness ( $\beta = 0.714$ ,  $t = 7.532$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This also shows that R-square value is 0.748 which is significant at 5% level ( $p < 0.05$ ). This explains that 74.8

% of the variation of customer satisfaction of these divisional secretariats are explained by the independent variables namely tangibles, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and reliability. Adjusted R-square of 0.740 reveals that model has accounted for 74.0% of the variance in the criterion variable. In order to check the multicollinearity, Variance inflation factor (VIF) were



calculated. The values are less than ten and therefore, there is no serious multicollinearity problem.

This is also confirmed with correlation matrix in Table 3.

**Table 3 Pearson Correlation Matrix**

	Tangibles	Reliability	Responsiveness	Assurance	Empathy	Customer satisfaction
Tangibles Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N	1	0.695** 0.000 156	0.859** 0.000 156	0.567** 0.000 156	0.464** 0.000 156	0.608** 0.000 156
Reliability Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N		1	0.590** 0.000 156	0.486** 0.000 156	0.421** 0.000 156	0.685** 0.000 156
Responsiveness Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N			1	0.608** 0.000 156	0.358** 0.000 156	0.642** 0.000 156
Assurance Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N				1	0.569** 0.000 156	0.435** 0.000 156
Empathy Pearson Correlation Sig.(2-tailed) N					1	0.583** 0.000 156

*\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)*

It is also worthy to note here that the customer satisfaction of the services of divisional secretariats is determined by the service quality dimensions as proposed by the

Parasuraman et al., (1985) with tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance. Thus the regression formula is given as under.

$$\begin{aligned}
 y &= -0.063 - 0.483_{Tangible} \\
 &+ 0.714_{Responsiveness} \\
 &- 0.178_{Assurance} + 0.435_{Empathy} \\
 &+ 0.516_{Reliability}
 \end{aligned}$$

Further, researcher tests the adequacy of multiple regression fitted model and the model adheres to the normality assumption. Histogram of the residuals is given in Figure 1.

In addition to the histogram of residuals, in order to test the model fitted with multiple regression, Normal Probability Plot is also tested. NPP is approximately a straight line and it can be said that variables of interest is normally distributed. NPP is given in Figure 2.

Responsiveness is the major factor that highly influence on the customer satisfaction at divisional secretariats ( $\beta = 0.714, t = 7.532, p < 0.05$ ). This means that the willingness of the staff who work at these secretariats helping them providing prompt services to people to complete their works. Second factor that contributes to the satisfaction of the people is that reliability ( $\beta = 0.516, t = 7.863, p < 0.05$ ) which infers that the employees of the divisional secretariats perform promised services dependably and accurately. The third dimension of the service quality contributing to the satisfaction of the people is empathy ( $\beta = 0.435, t = 7.791, p < 0.05$ ). This reveals that divisional secretariats provide services with caring and individualized attention to the people.

Figure 1 Histogram of Residual

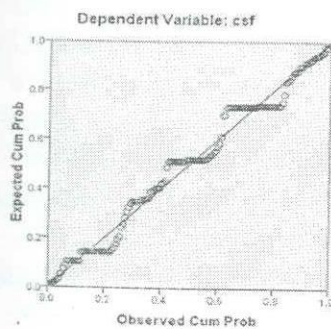
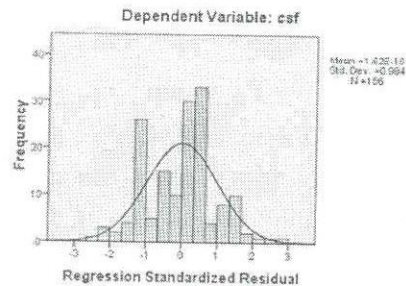


Figure 2 Normal Probability Plot



Other two dimensions of the service quality negatively contribute to the customer satisfaction of the divisional secretariats. The model has negative  $\beta$  value along with negative  $t$  values. If a unit of tangible and assurance are increased, customer satisfaction of these divisional secretariats will come down by - 0.483 ( $t = -4.694, p < 0.05$ ) and by - 0.178 ( $t = -2.760, p < 0.05$ ) respectively (see Table 4). These two dimensions of the service quality need to be given more attention by the top administrators of the divisional secretariats to make positive contribution of service dimensions such as tangibles and assurance to the customer satisfaction.

#### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The aim of the study was to measure the service quality levels of divisional secretariats and to analyze its impact on customer (people who visit for works) satisfaction. There are gaps in the service quality level in all dimension of service at divisional secretariats. Despite the fact that the two dimensions of service quality do not support to the customer satisfaction, overall model reveals that the contribution of the service quality to the customer satisfaction of divisional secretariats is still significant. However, top administrators /

government may attempt to take measures to improve further the mostly lacking dimensions to provide people with pleasant and pleasing services from divisional secretariats.

Tangible dimension is the physical appearance of the secretariats, staff, facilities and other materials. This specifies equipment used, visually appealing physical facilities, and employees' appearance with dress and physical facilities used in the provision of services. In the context of marketing, this tangible dimension is related to two extended marketing mix such as people and physical evidences. These elements are vital for the success of the service provider and one of the foremost determinants of satisfaction of the people. Ambient condition is also recommended for a service environment. This consists of air quality, noise, music and scent etc. These may also be introduced at Divisional secretariats that will create conducive environment where service provider and service buyer are likely to have official works. This is, in fact, due to the fact that employees are also a part of service environment. Computerized working environment with networking facilities are important. Networking should be done at the office levels and thereby all employees should be able to access



the network enabling them for quicker service to the customers. The service scape could be designed from customer perspective. There may be a possibility of implementing a colour culture and soft music as in the private sectors' offices which will differentiate the service of divisional secretariats.

Although divisional secretariats provide good service to the people, assurance dimension comprising knowledge and courtesy of the staff at the secretariats and their ability to convey trust and confidence is contributing with negative t value. This infers that trustworthy of employees at divisional secretariats, feeling safe when engaged with employees, politeness of employees and knowledge of the employees about customer request are need to be improved further. This is also related to people element of the extended marketing mix and it should be used as strategy to improve the services of the divisional secretariats. The people who work in the divisional secretariats are remarkably important since they are key determinant of customer loyalty or defections. Thus, they play a major role in satisfying the customers. Especially, the front line employees who have direct relationship with customers at the divisional secretariats are driver of

development of trust and confidence among the customers and they are representing the divisional secretariats by providing services from the customer perspective. Considering the justifications stated above, employees might be required to be trained in the way that creates knowledge about the operations and specific areas of expertise that will also lead to prompt services to the customers thereby customers will unquestionably be satisfied.

Another recommendation that will help divisional secretariats to improve the service quality is that implementation of effective service recovery system. People coming for the official works at divisional secretariats may experience unsatisfactorily. Hence, method of effective complaint handling should also be put into effect. Just keeping complaint box will not be worthwhile and that should be analyzed and root cause must be diagnosed and rectified. The service recovery procedures can be planned and employees must be trained and empowered appropriately.

Accordingly, top administrators or the government could identify the service quality gaps and fulfil it with relevant strategies and that will enable these divisional

secretariats to achieve service excellence as service provider.

### **Limitations, future direction and managerial implications**

This study was conducted after the services experienced by the people and when they are out of divisional secretariats and while engaged in other works. The perceptions of the respondents may be likely to be bias. The future studies should be conducted with the permission of the Divisional Secretariats inside the divisional secretariats once respondents experienced services of the office. Further studies need to be focused on tangible and assurance dimensions of service quality to identify what factors need to really be given attention. Only four divisional secretariats were taken for this study. Future study may extend to other divisional secretariats and the results will be more reliable. It is important to state that future studies can also consider other service quality models.

This study provides greater understanding of the factors that makes up service quality of divisional secretariats. This can be used as indicators of improvement of service quality at the local government offices and in case of applying the dimension of service quality as given found in the study, managers will be able to sustain the

quality in providing their services to the people. It has been pointed out by many researchers that the prime reason for the poor performance of a service firm is that firms do not have understanding about what customer expects from the firm. By this study, top administrator can understand customer expectation and formulate their strategy to improve further the service performance.

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#### Appendix I

	Items	Mean (Expectation)	Mean (Perception)
1	Up to date equipment are available at divisional secretariats.	4.42	3.85
2	Physical facilities that are visually appealing at divisional secretariats	3.53	2.59
3	Employees at divisional secretariats are well dressed and appear neat	2.98	2.17
4	Physical facilities that on appear to be in keeping with the type of service provided	3.79	3.49
5	When something is promised by a certain time, doing it.	4.12	4.04
6	When there is a problem, divisional secretariats show genuine interest in solving it.	4.30	3.89
7	The divisional secretariats will perform its services right the first time	3.43	2.95
8	divisional secretariats provide the service by the time promised	3.70	3.35
9	The divisional secretariats will insist error – free service	4.39	3.89
10	Telling the people exactly when the service will be performed	4.02	3.75
11	Receiving prompt service	3.97	3.82
12	Employees who are always willing to help people who come at divisional secretariats	4.22	3.42
13	Employees who are not too busy to respond to customer request promptly	4.42	3.95
14	Employees who are trustworthy	4.29	3.76
15	The feeling that you are safe when conducting transaction with the firm's employees	4.10	3.80
16	Employees who are polite	4.10	3.95
17	Staff at the divisional secretariats will have the knowledge to answer people's request	4.10	3.82
18	Employees are giving individual attention	4.64	3.54
19	The divisional secretariats will have working hours convenient to all of its customers	4.44	4.22
20	The divisional secretariats will have staff who give its customers personal attention	3.42	3.14
21	The divisional secretariats will have the customers' best interest at heart	3.60	3.10
22	The staff of the divisional secretariats will understand the specific needs of the customer	3.88	3.23

(A version of this paper presented at International Research conference – 2018, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University Sri Lanka)