

Client Qualities Varies due to Changes in Business Cycles

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Competitive paper

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ABSTRACT

A study of the Swedish architectural industry shows that the architects' perception of client qualities vary due to business cycle. In times of boom the focus is on the contents of the service. As in times of recession the service providers stress the terms of the relationship between the parties instead.

INTRODUCTION

Client qualities are essential in professional services because of the role of the communication between the service provider and the client in these services (Bitran and Hoech, 1990:92). Professional services are by definition complex and the professional service firms cater a variety of clients which all has their own special needs (Hart et al., 1992:122). These services are customer tailored why the cooperation between the service provider and the customer is fundamental (Day and Barkdale, 1992:89; Kelley, Dommelly, and Skinner, 1990:315; Yorke, 1990:349). Due to the importance of the cooperation between the service provider and the client in professional service it is of interest to investigate factors that will ease this cooperation. On such factor may be the client's qualities.

It is possible to go as far as talking about the client as a partial employee because of the intensity of the cooperation between the architect and the client (cf. Lovelock & Young, 1979; Mills, 1986; Mills et al., 1983). Naturally, it never comes as far as having the client working as an employee. There are some different characteristics between the client and a potential employee. For example, the client does not need to have the same level of knowledge as an architect. Also for the criteria relationships, especially concerning personality, it does not have to reach the level of an employee. Trust in a client has to be at least on the same level as for a potential employee; cooperation with the client is probably more intensive than with some of the employees in the firm.

The relationship between the architect and the client can be applied to the communication model developed by Shannon and Weaver (1949, p. 98). Knowledge is the criteria clients should possess. The client should have the ability to understand the architect. Due to the demand for knowledge, the client will decode and code in a similar way as an architect does and therefore the sender and the receiver in terms of the model will give the words similar meanings (cf. Yorke, 1990).

The purpose of this paper is to report about the impact of changing business cycles on the perception of valuable client qualities among architectural firms in Sweden. At first sight, this might seem like a very narrow, specialized study. That criticism can of course be made, but to the author the study seemed more like a laboratory experiment in a controlled environment. That is, Sweden is reasonably typical of industrialized countries; its average GDP/individual is \$26.9 thousand compared to \$29.3 thousand in the U.S. (Europa, 1999). Thus, many of the consumption patterns that depend upon income may be thought to be typical of industrialized countries. Further, the architectural industry was a reasonable one to follow. It is composed of approximately 1565 firms (Boström, 2001). This number is large enough to make randomized sampling practical, but at the same time the number is small enough that many participants literally know their competitors. Thus, personal interviews prove to be particularly insightful and effective.

BACKGROUND

A customer receives a certain quality experience from the interaction with the service provider—interactive quality (Lehtinen 1985); however, high degrees of interactive quality are often difficult to obtain due to the different perceptions of responsibility among the parties. Ayodele (1982) found, in a study about architects and their clients, significant differences between the two parties' perception of each other's responsibilities; i.e., it is the

client's responsibility to clarify the user's needs and the client's responsibility to provide information with respect to the initial budget.

Yorke (1990) has investigated what clients of two different professional services expect from their providers and what the providers think that their clients want. Providers initially appeared to think that clients wanted expertise when they in fact wanted benefits. The longer the relation lasted, the more confidence the clients wanted. The perception among providers was that they were more perceptive to clients' changed needs than the clients experienced. Over time, however, the gap in perception lessened. The providers' perception of the ability to generate mutual trust was exaggerated compared to the clients' perception. Over the years, mutual trust was established between the parties, but after five years, there was a considerable gap in perception and reality. Clients' perception of service quality changed over time from an efficient service to an individual treatment from the provider. These findings showed that there were perception gaps between providers and clients concerning what they wanted in the situation and over time. Yorke (1990) expressed a successful cooperation over a long time as a "meeting of minds" (cf. Robinson, 1992). He therefore suggested that providers of professional service use an interactive model in their communication with the market and that the providers be aware that at different points in time clients need different treatments (1990, p. 352).

The behavior of both the service provider and the customer affects the quality of the service (Kelly et al., 1990). The service provider behavior should appear professional (Normann, 1992, p. 32). Professionalism here incorporates the individual provider's skill, motivation, and the instruments that the provider uses.

Lehtinen stresses the customers' role by stating that "The client interprets service quality in a subjective way according to own quality criteria" (1985, p. 117). The service provider may affect the client's quality perception by using "client participation guidance" (Lehtinen,

1985, p. 117). This guidance refers to the contact in various forms, personal or physical, that the customer has with the service provider. It also refers to how the customer is helped by the provider in each contact in the service process. The objective of this guidance is to influence the customer's quality criteria and make the customer feel significant in the service production process, which will make it easier for the customer and provider to reach the quality goals.

Thus, the performance of a service from a professional service firm seems to be done in cooperation between the provider and the customer. Both parties are essential for the success of the final outcome. A communication between them is necessary, as they both are dependent on information from the other. Depending on how the cooperation between the parties works out, the client decides the level of quality. Cooperation is a significant part of service quality in professional service. Factors affecting the cooperation between the parties may change the customer's quality perception. One such factor might be the qualities of a client. These qualities are central for the service provider's possibilities to offer a service considered having high quality according to the client's perception.

Service quality is somewhat special in professional service, a common perception applied to a situation with one-of-a-kind solution. In the in-depth interviews the architects repeatedly stressed that each job was different than the others (cf. Day & Barkdale, 1992, p. 89; Kelley, Dommelly, & Skinner, 1990, p. 315; Yorke, 1990, p. 349). Naturally, the differences of the services varied, but central are the limited possibilities to satisfy a new client with the solution used for a prior client. In an architectural service situation parts of a prior solution may be usable in a new one but the possibilities to directly apply an old solution to a new setting was limited, according to the in-depth interviews with the architects. To deal with the construct service quality in such a situation is challenging and it has to be related to some broader and

average guidelines—how to satisfy the average customer (cf. Liljander, 1995; Parasuraman et al., 1994, p. 122).

METHODOLOGY

To examine the stability in the perception about client qualities, a longitudinal study was used (cf. Churchill, 1987, 85) and the research design was centered around two surveys, S1 and S2. An initial mail survey was done to produce a descriptive picture of the Swedish architectural industry. The follow-up survey provided data for a description of the industry at the second stage (S2).

Thirty-one in-depth interviews, primarily with people in executive positions, were conducted to assist in questionnaire design. The sample for the in-depth interviews was a judgmental, non-probability sample (cf. Burgess, 1984, 55; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 224). Firms that were considered as progressive were selected for these interviews, i.e., firms that had the image in the industry of starting new behavior (cf. Bancroft, 1992:1). Subsequently, a random sample of 805 firms in the industry was surveyed, about every second architectural firm in Sweden, with an extensive questionnaire (S1). A conservative estimation of a response-rate of 50% would produce an error of estimation of $\pm 4.9\%$ at a confidence level of 95% (Naresh, 1999, 358). After two reminder-letters and a follow-up by telephone, a response-rate of 65 percent was achieved. Comparative analyses of key-characteristics showed no indication of non-respondents' bias (cf. Traynor & Traynor, 1994).

After about four years, 46 months, of S1 a follow-up mail survey (S2) was conducted (cf. Tyebjee, 1979). Six in-depth interviews were conducted to get information of the situation in the industry at that time. Information collected during this second set of in-depth interviews was used to revise the initial questionnaire. A judgment sample of two architects and an engineer and three clients were selected (cf. Gummesson, 1991) for these interviews. The

redesigned questionnaire was distributed by mail to firms who had responded to the initial questionnaire. Responses from this survey made it possible to compare results with the ones in the initial survey, i.e., 274 firms had provided useful questionnaire in the initial survey, and these firms were approached with the follow-up questionnaire. Of the responses to the second questionnaires, 201 were considered usable for processing.

The adopters and the non-adopter firms were of specific interest for this study. These groups of firms have shown to have significantly different characteristics (Boström 2001, cf. Sakr, 1991; Wikforss, 1993). To make the characteristics as distinctive as possible between these two groups of firms only the firms that could be classified into respective group during the whole study were included. About 34 percent of the firms in the industry were adopters and 47 percent of them were non-adopters.

Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were made of the information that had been gathered. The in-depth interviews were content analyzed in the spirit of Glaser and Straus (1967) and central concepts were created for describing firms. It is primarily this information that is presented here. Beside these analyses, however, the data from the questionnaires were processed and effort, e.g., chi-square tests and t-tests, was put into finding significant differences between the adopters and the non-adopters. Due to the exploring nature of this study the significance level of these observations was set to 0.1.

When the initial questionnaire study was made the economic climate in the architectural industry was booming. This boom was concerning the whole industry of Sweden. There was a continuous shortage of supply and a continuous abundance of demand and money in whole society. The architectural industry had an abundance of potential customers. The architectural firms had a very heavy schedule. Architects worked day and night to serve the market even though potential customers had to be turned down. Instead, they were referred to colleagues in the industry (Boström, 1991).

In this situation the architectural firms had a possibility to choose which potential customers they wanted to serve. This situation is important because results would seem to suggest that suppliers in a situation like this tended to look for ideal customers. This is a customer that fulfils the wanted demands that a supplier has on his customers.

At the time for the follow-up study the economic climate had changed totally. The architectural firms, in fact the whole Swedish industry was experiencing a severe recession. Especially the building industry was affected by this recession; there were people in this industry that labeled the economic situation as a depression.

RESULTS

About 43% of the respondents noted that the most valued client quality at S1 was knowledge. Knowledge had a very wide definition;² it covered everything from specific knowledge to an ability to express what they wanted from the architect—“A client that has knowledge” and “Professionalism.” The adopters and the non-adopters had similar opinions about client qualities at S1³ (Chart 1).

“Relationships” was the next most often group of responses and it reflected answers about personal characteristics. In the group labeled “Understanding,” answers concerning agreement were gathered—“That the client has ambitious, understands and respects the work of an architect, and values good architectural work.” Responses about “Ability to decide” and “Clear decisions” were all noted in the group “Straight Answers.”

Knowledge. The largest single response tended to be knowledge with a size of 42%. Knowledge had a very wide definition. It covered everything from specific knowledge to ability to put though demands on the architect. General knowledge was the dominating

subgroup with a size of 63%. This subgroup covered a whole range of different knowledge, from general to specific. For instance, citations were "A client that has knowledge," "Experience," "Competence," "Knowledgeable," "Knowledge about the building process," and "Professionalism." The second largest subgroup was interest with 23%; i.e. the customer has an interest in the architectural work overall and in its different stages. Citations from this group were "Involvement," "Involvement in the project," "Interest for the result," "Interested seriously," "Interest for the issue."

Relations. The next group in size was relations, 34%. This group reflected answers about personal characteristics. Some stick-words were: trust, honesty, nice person, confidence, has a sensitive ear, ability to co-operate with, and regular customer. The largest response in the subgroup was trust; its size was 57%. Trust was expressed by the respondents in the following ways "That he trusts us," "That he is serious," "Confidence in our services," "Confidence in our ability," and "Honesty and fair play." The second largest subgroup was ability to co-operate. Citations from this subgroup were "Ought to be able to be a friend," "Good personal chemistry," "Good co-operation," "Personal chemistry is right," "Ability to co-operate," and "Willingness to co-operate."

Ambition & Understanding. The next group was ambition and understanding with a size of 10%. In this group answers concerning agreement were gathered. Examples were: that the customer has ambition, understands and respects the work of an architect, and values good architectural work. In this group there was no clearly dominating subgroup. The subgroup ambitions concerning aesthetic values had a size of 33% and was the largest subgroup. Quotations from this group were "Aestetical thinking," "High ambitions concerning architecture," "Interest for good architecture," and "Ambition to create good architecture." Another large subgroup, 26%, is understanding, understanding for the work of an architect. Citations in this group were "That he understands our ideas," "Understanding for that it is the

architecture that shall be guiding,” ”Understanding for the need of a maturing process,” and ”Mutual understanding.”

Straight Answers. Straight answers was the next group in a ranking of decreasing scale, 10%. If the respondent had answered something concerning ability to decide it was noted in this group. So were clear decisions, good organization, and straight dialogue. There were two dominating subgroups in this group. Ability to decide had a size of 52% and open dialogue had a size of 40%. Citations from the first subgroup were ”That he knows what he wants,” ”Simple way for decisions,” and ”Ability to decide.” Some citations from the second one were Ability to communicate,” ”Open dialogue,” and ”Frankness in discussions.”

Economy. Economy was a small group with a size of 3%. Answers in this group concerned economy. Some examples were customers proper paying, willingness to pay, and financial stability. The top ranked subgroup was willingness to pay 71%. Citations from this group were ”That he can pay,” ”Pays without fighting,” and ”Good payer.”

There were no particular changes for the distributions of the second most important client quality at S1. Knowledge and relationships were the dominating qualities. An architect wanted a client to have knowledge about the work that the parties were going to do, a sense of “equality,” and the architect wanted to have a good relationship with the client, a sense of “fair play.” These wishes seemed to be the same for both adopters and non-adopters.

One architect expressed the thoughts about good clients in the initial in-depth interviews in the following way:

My opinion is that when one [an architect] really gets to know them [clients] there are very many that are good, really. It is not so many that are totally impossible. Even if it is tough and hard and the money is short, they understand. It is hard to rush a good solution.

Obviously, according to this architect, it is possible for clients to understand an architect’s point of view, the architectural work, and the architect’s work-process. A frank dialogue was

used to educate clients about how architect's work and to express the intentions of the architectural firm's work:

We try to explain how we look at it [the architectural work] and we hope that they [the clients] understand what we say. It is very important to be clear. It is possible to be clear when you have a large firm 'behind' and it is a well-known firm, if so it is possible to be frank. When you says what is your opinion I think that most [clients] respect it, understand what we say. In that case, it is possible that there is discussion, we understand, but now the situation is like this. It is natural that it happens.

Due to the changed economic situation between S1 and S2 the client qualities changed too. There was a dramatic decrease in the number of respondents who had noted a client quality classified in the group knowledge and an increase for the number of respondents who had noted responses belonging to the group relationships at S2. About 50% of the adopters and the non-adopters had noted "Relationships" as the primary client quality (Chart 2). A good relationship became the most important client quality at S2. It was especially important during a period of recession that the client could be trusted and that the agreements were honored, according to the intermediate in-depth interviews. Frequently clients could not or would not pay for the work that the architectural firm had done according to the architects. There were no particular changes in the distribution for the second client quality.

Related to the architects' opinions about client qualities is the use of these qualities. Where these quality opinions just opinions that the architects had or did the architects use these qualities in any way? There was a significant difference between the adopters and the nonadopters to what extent they selected clients due to the expressed qualities of a client⁴. Chart 3 shows client selection on a five-point scale with the endpoints "Not At All" and "Completely," adopters selected their clients in larger extent.

Due to the grading shown in chart 3 it may seem ambiguous if there was any selection of the clients at all or if the selection is what clients the firm happened to get – a reconstruction of what happened. The responses have to be judged as heavy influence by the intensive competition that prevailed between at S2. There were limited possibilities, if any, to select clients; more or less all clients were served as a desperate attempt to try to manage during the recession, without having any people go. On the other hand there would be probably me limited interest of going into business with a client that have qualities which will make situation to a disaster for the service provider. There is probably an act of delicate balancing.

One architect, an adopter, expressed the thoughts about good clients in the following way:

My opinion is when one really gets to know them there are very many that are (good), really. It is not so many that are totally impossible. Even if it is tough and hard and the money is short, and everything, they understand. It is hard to rush a good solution.

Obviously, according to this architect, there was a possibility to make most of the clients to understanding ones, i.e., they had an understanding for the architectural work and the architect's work-process⁵. A frank dialogue was a method used for making the clients to understand the architect's working conditions and at the same time to state the intentions with the architectural firm's work:

"We try to explain how we look at it (the architectural work) and we hope that they (the clients) understand what we say. It is very important to be clear. It is possible to be clear when one has a large firm behind and it is a well-known firm, than it is possible to be frank. When one says what is ones opinion than I think that most (clients) respects it, understand what we say. Than it is possible that there is discussion, we understand, but now the situation is like this. It is natural that it happens."

Closely related to a discussion about client qualities is the retention of clients. This assessment might serve the purpose of giving an indication of how well the architectural firms managed in getting clients with the “right” qualities, i.e. clients that would continue to be clients in the firm. Adopters seemed to do significantly more business with old clients⁶, client for the fourth time or more at S2. About 54 percent of their clients were found in this category compared to 46 percent for the non-adopters, chart 4.

Nonadopters, on the other hand, did significantly more business with new clients⁷, client for the first time. Approximately 22 percent of their clients were new ones and about 17 percent of the adopters’ clients were of this kind. The nonadopters seemed to be able to, or being forced to, get new clients to a greater extent than the adopters were.

DISCUSSION

There were no significant differences between the adopters and the non-adopters regarding their opinions about what qualities a client should have either at S1 or at S2. A favorable client should at S1 as primary quality have knowledge and at S2 the architects stressed the relation to the client. At S2 it was important to do business with a client that was to be trusted, agreements should be kept. This change in opinion about client qualities seems easy to relate to the change in economic climate that appeared between S1 and S2. At S1 there was abundance clients and the architect could take basic assumptions in a business relation for granted, e.g. the client would pay. The architect could therefore focus on the quality of the job assessed in architectural terms. Due to the shortage of architects at S1 it was possible for the architects to enjoy a large artistic freedom. The want of a client with knowledge should probably be seen in the light from this situation.

Successful cooperation over a long time between the professional service provider and the client can be expressed as “meeting of minds” (Yorke, 1990, p. 355). The architects’ perception of client qualities as expressed in the initial questionnaire indicates that the meeting of minds was fundamental. The most important client quality for an architect at S1 was knowledge about architectural work (cf. Gummesson, 1978, p. 95; Östnäs, 1984, p. 29). The second most frequently noted quality for a client, according to the initial questionnaire, was a good relationship. Ideally, the architect wanted a client with whom he/she could communicate professionally and clearly (cf. Yorke, 1990, p. 355). CAD has the possibility to level the knowledge between the parties and the time before the parties understand each other may be vastly shortened. One impact of CAD leveling the knowledge of the service provider and the client may be that the architects change their sharp opinion of a knowledgeable client.

One way to increase the quality of the architects’ final outcome, according to the architects in the initial in-depth interviews, was to have clients that had knowledge about the architectural work process and architecture. This client quality would ease communication between the architect and the client. The communication between the parties has been labeled a negotiation (Cuff, 1982), which underlines the importance of equality in knowledge level between the parties.

The conditions for service quality changes continuously due to the interests present in an architectural project. In addition, the planned building affects the perception of service quality especially since every project was unique. According to the in-depth interviews the clients want to be surprised by the architect and to be confronted with unique solutions. To be able to have this type of relationship with the architect and the client there needs to be a lot of confidence between the parties (cf. Huemer, 1998). The social bond in terms of Hammarkvist et al. (1982) needs to be strong. Partial employee is a concept that has been used for capturing the tight relationship between a service provider and the client (cf. Lovelock &

Young, 1979; Mills, 1986) and it seems appropriate to use it for capturing the relationship between an architect and a client. A client with the appropriate qualities seems central.

At S2 the architects' focused on the terms of the relationship with the client. In terms of "The Customer Relationship Life Cycle," the situation might be described as a transition in focus from the "Consumption Process" to the "Purchasing Process" (Grönroos, 1990, p. 130). This change is a transition from the phase where the service is delivered to the phase where the terms for the service are stated. A transition like this one will probably also change the quality perception of a service. There will be much lesser time for the service provider to affect the client's quality perception as relatively much time in the relationship is spent on stating the terms (cf. Lehtinen, 1985, p. 117). The key to success was the cooperation between the parties because cooperation allows the architect to have the possibility to influence the involved interests and their view of quality (cf. Lundin, 1993; von Matern, 1989; Yorke, 1990).

The significant difference between the adopters and the non-adopters regarding new and loyal clients suggest that the adopters had to put lesser time into building relationships with clients than the non-adopters had. One way to look at the loyal clients is to see them as a continuous learning process. The architect develops along with the client (cf. Yorke, 1990). Hammarkvist et al. (1982) use the concept bond when they describe the relation between the provider and the customer. Thus, there is a great deal of investment that needs to be done with a new client. The non-adopters' significantly larger portion of new clients suggests that these firms had to put a substantially larger effort in developing the cooperation between the parties.

Most frequently, new jobs as well as new clients were secured through contacts and prior clients according to the follow-up questionnaire and the initial in-depth interviews. The situation suggests that different clients wanted different kinds of jobs regarding the size of a

job. A non-adopter's client mainly offered small jobs and adopter's clients mainly offered large jobs. The ways used to secure new jobs and clients suggest that a firm was active in a certain network, a defined sphere of actors. It was in the network that the architect got referrals for new clients (cf. Coxe, 1990; Day & Barkdale, 1992, p. 89). Probably the actors in the network had certain characteristics in common; e.g., they all had a progressive attitude (cf. Yorke, 1990). The importance of belonging to the right network is stressed by the fact that the firm usually had some key clients who stood for the main part of the revenues. The importance of these clients is probably stressed in a situation where there is a change in economic climate. As a consequence of the increased importance of these clients the selecting of the key clients according to desired client qualities pays off. Clients with whom the firm has a better relationship with is probably easier to manage even in a situation of a recession.

CONCLUSION

The architects seem to want clients with different qualities depending on the prevailing business cycle. In times of boom the architects wanted clients that were knowledgeable about architectural service and in times of recession the architects wanted clients with which they had a sound relationship. The situation may in terms of the network model be characterized as a variation between the knowledge and the social bond (Hammarkvist, et al., 1982:23). Adopter firms seem to be more able to manage this transition in client qualities than non-adopter firms are. This result suggest that a larger firm size is favorable, i.e. a larger network of clients.

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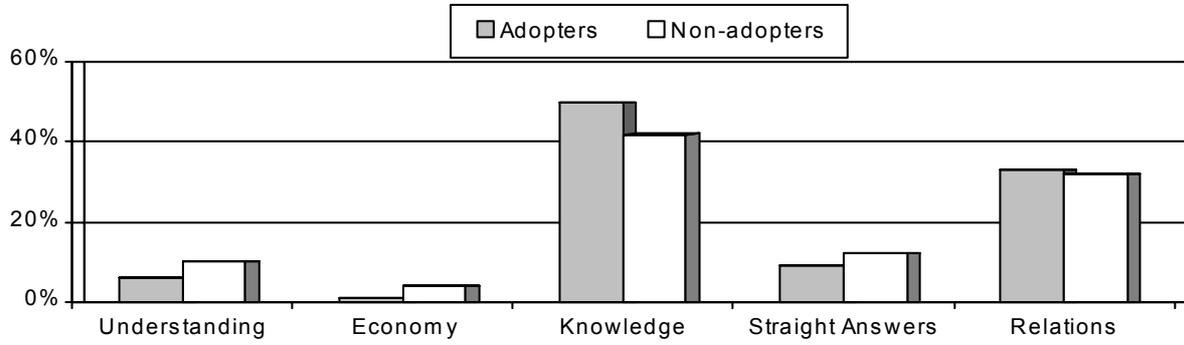


Chart 1. First Client Quality at S1. The abbreviations in the chart were expressed as follows in the questionnaire, (from left to right), “Ambitions and understanding,” “Economy,” “Knowledge,” “Straight Answers,” and “Relationships.”

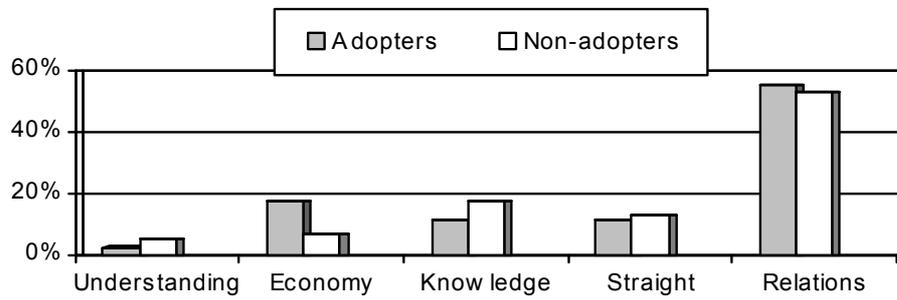


Chart 2. First Client Quality at S2. The abbreviations in the chart were expressed as follows in the questionnaire, (from left to right), “Ambitious and understanding,” “Economy,” “Knowledge,” “Straight Answers,” and “Relationships.”

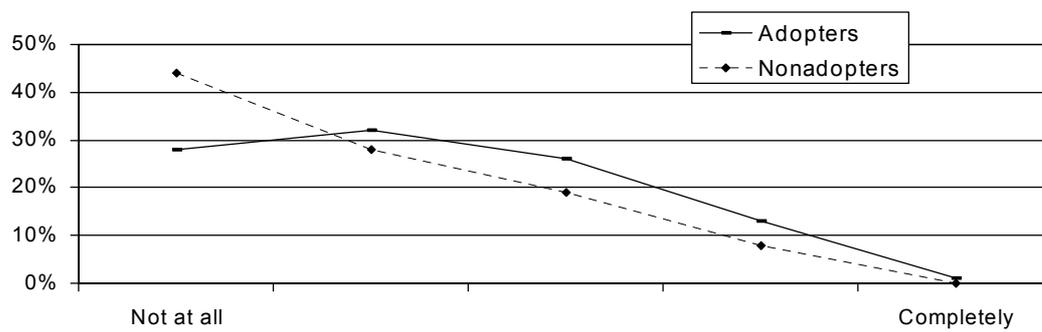


Chart 3. Selection of clients according to expressed client qualities at S2.

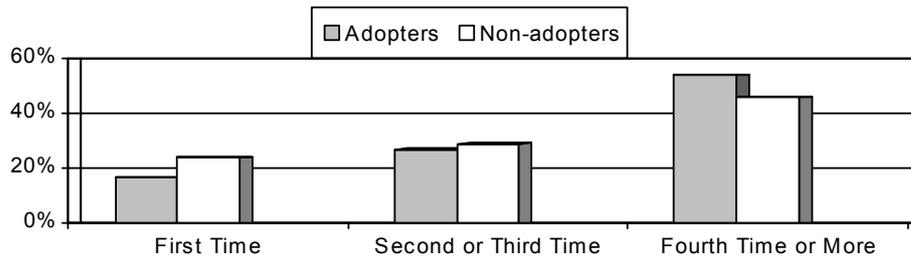


Chart 4. Client Retention at S2. The abbreviations in the chart were expressed as follows in the questionnaire (from left to right), "First time client," "Second or third time client," and "Fourth time or more client."

- 2 Respondents were given room to note three response alternatives—the first one being the most important one. Each response alternative was processed in the same way. The answers to the question were content analyzed according to responses and their sub-texts. Within each group, the answers were coded into subgroups to achieve a better structure of the answers and a possibility of elaborating the findings. In every case, each group and each subgroup covered a range of different answers. Similar answers were first coded into subgroups. These subgroups were organized into larger groups. The name of a group and a subgroup were chosen to reflect the answers. This information should be considered when the results are interpreted.
- 3 P value for the primary client quality was 0.545. “Economy” was excluded in the analysis because so few respondents noted it.
- 4 P-value 0.069. The group completely was excluded in the cross tabulation due to few responses.
- 5 For more information about the architect’s work-process see appendix O.
- 6 P value 0.053.
- 7 P value 0.013.