

# Linking quality management to manufacturing strategy: an empirical investigation of customer focus practices

Rui Sousa\*

*Faculdade de Economia e Gestão, Universidade Católica Portuguesa at Porto, Rua Diogo Botelho, 1327, 4169-005 Porto, Portugal*

Received 26 February 2001; accepted 4 March 2002

## Abstract

Quality management (QM) has often been advocated as being universally applicable to organizations. This is in contrast with the manufacturing strategy contingency approach of operations management (OM) which advocates internal and external consistency between manufacturing strategy choices. This article investigates, using the case-study method, whether customer focus practices—a distinctive subset of the whole set of QM practices—are contingent on a plant's manufacturing strategy context. The study strongly suggests that customer focus practices are contingent on a plant's manufacturing strategy and identifies mechanisms by which this takes place. The findings inform the implementation of QM programs.

© 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

*Keywords:* Quality management; Customer focus; Manufacturing strategy; Contingency research

## 1. Introduction

Quality management (QM) has become an all-pervasive management philosophy having found its way into most countries and business sectors. Having been mostly led by practitioners, QM acquired a strong prescriptive stance in its initial diffusion stages (mainly the 1980s and early 1990s) with practices often being advocated as universally applicable to organizations. The emergence of awards such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award and the European Quality Award have reinforced the universal profile of QM practices at this time.

In the early 1990s, the initial enthusiasm over the universality of QM began to be tempered by numerous reports in the practitioner literature of problems in implementing QM (e.g. Harari, 1993; MacDonald,

1993; Papa, 1993). The proponents of the universal view of QM would argue that these implementation difficulties are part of moving an organization towards quality, but an alternative explanation is that those difficulties result from too great a mismatch between the proposed form of QM and the particular organizational context. This explanation had been largely overlooked by the predominantly practitioner literature on QM implementation.

More recently, rigorous academic studies have started to question the universal validity of QM practices by addressing the influence of the organizational context on QM practice (Sousa and Voss, 2002). Of these, only a few studies directly and rigorously addressed this issue within an explicit contingency framework, all of them suggesting that the effectiveness of QM practices is contingent on the organizational context. Relevant contextual variables include managerial knowledge, corporate support for quality, external quality requirements and product

\* Tel.: +351-22-6196200; fax: +351-22-6196291.

E-mail address: rsousa@porto.ucp.pt (R. Sousa).

complexity (Benson et al., 1991), organizational uncertainty (Sitkin et al., 1994; Reed et al., 1996), international competition (Das et al., 2000), manufacturing strategy context (Sousa, 2000; Sousa and Voss, 2001), firm size, capital intensity, degree of diversification, timing of QM implementation and maturity of QM program (Hendricks and Singhal, 2001). Other studies, whose main purpose was not to investigate QM contingencies, have tangentially uncovered other contextual factors affecting QM practices, such as industry (Maani, 1989; Powell, 1995), country (Madu et al., 1995), and product/process factors (e.g. manufacturing system, Maani, 1989; type of work an organization does, Lawler, 1994; breadth of product line and frequency of product changes, Kekre et al., 1995; work design, Victor et al., 2000). In addition, several large scale empirical studies examining the impact of QM on firm performance have found that some QM practices did not have a significant impact on performance (e.g. Powell, 1995; Dow et al., 1999; Samson and Terziowski, 1999), some of them suggesting that this may be due to these practices being context dependent (Powell, 1995; Dow et al., 1999). At a more general level, Dean and Bowen (1994) point out that the universal orientation of QM contrasts with the contingent approach of existing management theory.

The contingency perspective is not new in the operations management (OM) field. In fact, OM has been strongly rooted from its inception on a manufacturing strategy contingency approach. The assumption of this approach is that internal and external consistency between manufacturing strategy choices increases performance (e.g. Woodward, 1965; Hayes and Wheelwright, 1979; Hill, 1985; Ward et al., 1996). Internal consistency refers to the coherence between the different elements of a manufacturing strategy; external consistency refers to the match between this set and the wider organizational context (e.g. marketing strategy). Many of the potential contingency factors uncovered in the QM contingency studies cited earlier have strong associations with the manufacturing strategy context. Despite the tensions identified in the literature—apparent across different streams of research in the QM field—there is still little empirical research directly addressing the question: are QM practices contingent on an organization's manufacturing strategy context?

In order to contribute to this need, this article concentrates on a critical and distinctive subset of the whole set of QM practices, customer focus practices. The importance of investigating the specific links between customer focus practices and manufacturing strategy is two-fold. First, customer focus is seen as the starting point of any quality initiative. Second, while the concept of customer focus has been heavily researched from a marketing perspective, it has not received the attention, it deserves in the OM field. As defined in the context of QM, customer focus practices involve the establishment of links between customer needs and satisfaction and internal processes. However, the emphasis of existing research in marketing has been on the identification and measurement of customer needs and satisfaction, having virtually left untouched the links between these needs and a plant's internal processes. An OM perspective can therefore effect significant contributions.

This article tries to fill this specific gap by investigating links between customer focus practices and manufacturing strategy by addressing two related research questions: (i) are customer focus QM practices contingent on a plant's manufacturing strategy context (analysing)? and (ii) if so, what are the mechanisms by which manufacturing strategy context affects those practices (explaining)? The study adds to the sparse empirical contingency work in QM mentioned earlier in that while most studies were geared towards hypotheses testing based on large survey samples (e.g. Benson et al., 1991; Das et al., 2000; Hendricks and Singhal, 2001), the study in hand is mainly theory-building based on case studies with the objective of not only uncovering contingency effects but also to produce empirically grounded explanations for them. Survey type studies lack this explaining ability. For example, Benson et al.'s (1991) landmark study found that only one product/process factor—product complexity—among several others of this type (e.g. rate of product/process change) affected QM. But no explanation could be derived of why only product complexity mattered and how this factor affected QM. Subsequently, other studies found evidence of the influence of product/process factors on QM practices (e.g. Sousa and Voss, 2001). Understanding the mechanisms by which context affects QM may contribute to reconciling such results and is also valuable to develop levers for proactive managerial action (e.g.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات