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Journal of Vocational Behavior 62 (2003) 320–340

Journal of
**Vocational
Behavior**

www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb

The role of individual differences in employee adoption of TQM orientation[☆]

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Received 31 December 2001

Abstract

While total quality management (TQM) has emphasized organizational-level factors in achieving successful implementation, human capital theory and person-environmental fit models suggest individual difference factors may also be useful. Accordingly, the ability of organizational commitment, trust in colleagues, and higher order need strength to explain variation in TQM adoption, after inclusion of organizational-level factors, is assessed using longitudinal data from a manufacturing setting. These three individual differences collectively explain 7–19% of incremental variation in TQM adoption and are found to be relatively better predictors of TQM adoption than organizational-level factors. The findings support increased consideration of individual differences in order to implement TQM and other forms of organizational change more effectively.

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1. Introduction

In spite of the phenomenal adoption of total quality management (TQM) in the last two decades among US and UK organizations (Mohrman, Tenkasi, Lawler III,

[☆] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Washington, DC, August 2001.

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& Ledford, 1995; Wilkinson, Snape, & Allen, 1993), the evidence of its impact on organizational performance is mixed (Choi & Behling, 1997; Fisher, 1992; Gilbert, 1992; Mohrman et al., 1995; Powell, 1995; Westphal, Gulati, & Shortell, 1997). When TQM initiatives do not succeed, “missing” elements (e.g., the initiative failed to include employee empowerment) or implementation problems (e.g., there was a lack of technical training in TQM techniques, lack of top management support) are cited to explain the failure (Reger, Gustafson, DeMarie, & Mullane, 1994). Detert, Schroeder, and Mauriel (2000) assert that the inability to change organizational culture may account for the success or failure of innovations like TQM. Perhaps the most common explanation for TQM failure has been that changes in human resource practices have not accompanied changes in technical systems (Snell & Dean, 1992).

A specific human resource factor that may account for the success or failure of TQM programs, seldom considered, is the nature of the individual employees who participate. Kerfoot and Knights (1995) state “the quality literature fails to consider the way that programmes and their content may be differentially defined or interpreted by employees” (p. 229). The implication, therefore, is that individual variability in terms of how TQM is interpreted or the willingness to adopt the principles of TQM is viewed as inconsequential. This study explored whether individual-level factors have a bearing on the extent to which employees adopt a TQM orientation (e.g., come to view their workgroup as a team, seek to engage in continuous improvement). In addition, in view of the disproportionate emphasis on organizational-level factors within the TQM literature, we compared the unique contributions of individual and organizational factors in explaining the outcomes of teamwork and continuous improvement.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Although there are divergent views regarding the extent of change involved in implementing TQM, there is general agreement on the importance of top management support and commitment to the success of TQM (Hackman & Wageman, 1995). DeCock and Hipkin (1997) argue that the behavior of senior managers as well as lower level managers may explain the success of a TQM change effort. The consistent emphasis on the role of top management as the key driver for change downplays the role of individual differences in the extent to which employees adopt a TQM orientation.

TQM has not emphasized individual differences because it has traditionally been defined as a system level intervention or management philosophy (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Schroeder, 1994). Deming’s (1986) work, for example, emphasizes that most variation in work performance is due to common causes, which affect all workers. Consideration of individuals or individual performance has been seen as a distraction from the organization’s effort to improve systematically (Lam & Schaubroeck, 1999). However, the neglect of individual differences is difficult to overlook with growing recognition that attitudes play a crucial role in the success of TQM type initiatives (Tiara, 1996). Parker, Wall, and Jackson (1997), for example, contend that

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