

Relationship between quality management practices and knowledge transfer

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the relationship between quality management (QM) and knowledge transfers. The study of QM was tackled by analyzing the degree of implementation of the different practices that compose it. Hypotheses are developed on the relationship between some QM practices and knowledge transfers. Both the proposed model and the hypotheses were tested on a sample of 197 Spanish firms. The results confirm the importance of the different QM practices on internal and external knowledge transfers. © 2006 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Quality management (QM) is one of the most relevant research topics in the field of operations management (Filippini, 1997), and academia has recognized its importance internationally (Chen, 1997; Corbett and Rastrick, 2000). QM has thus reached a state of maturity in the area of research (Sousa and Voss, 2002). Many studies have concentrated on determining the relationship between QM and financial and business performance (Haynak, 2003), operational performance (Samson and Terziovski, 1999), the importance of contingent factors in the relationship (Hendricks and Singhal, 2001; Lloréns et al., 2003), and through its evolution on the financial markets (Easton and Jarell, 1998). However, the results have not always agreed. This study approaches the problem of the relationship between QM and performance from a different perspective. It

analyzes the implications of QM practices for knowledge transfers. It does not analyze the relation between the QM practices and performance directly but rather through improvements in internal processes whose importance in generating competitive advantages has been demonstrated previously.

Studies of strategic management explain improvement in the firm's performance along two lines: (a) the classic studies of the industrial economy, which believe that improvement in performance comes from better positioning of the firm, that is, from finding an environment that favors the firm; and (b) the vision of resources and capacities, which believes that the firm should focus on improving its knowledge and abilities to improve its performance (Hoskinson et al., 1999). The link between QM and firm performance is thus based on management of internal factors, since improvement is achieved by implementing the principles and elements of QM within the firm (Chiles and Choi, 2000). QM also parallels the works from the perspective of resources and capabilities (Barney, 1991), which asserts that resources and capabilities characterized as rare, non-substitutable and

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inimitable (Barney, 1991) determine the obtaining of competitive advantages. To achieve these characteristics, capabilities must be path dependent (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003), enacted ambiguously from the coordinated conduct of the organization's members (Berman et al., 2002). Thus, the firm's capacities that provide a source of competitive advantage are based on the integration of knowledge in the firm so that it can be used in a coordinated way (Grant, 1996a). This genesis is what leads Conner and Prahalad (1996, p. 477) to state that "a resource-based theory of the firm thus entails a knowledge-based perspective". Within this framework, knowledge transfers and the firm's ability to transfer knowledge are fundamental in explaining some of the basic questions of business management (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Kogut and Zander, 1992). They have thus been considered crucial in questions as basic as the existence or limits of firms. This work, however, is primarily interested in the repercussions for firms' organizational performance.

In this paper, we study the relationship between the implementation of certain QM practices and internal and external knowledge transfers. Our objective is to find foundations in a knowledge-based view that confirm the link between QM implementation and organizational performance. By a knowledge-based view, we mean studies that find knowledge to be a basis for explaining the firm's competitive advantages over its competitors and other systems of economic coordination, such as markets. Thus, the study follows the same line of research as, for example, Reed et al. (2000), who studied QM's capacity to create competitive advantages. In spite of the importance of knowledge management within the firm (Grant, 1996a), few empirical studies examine its relationship with QM. The current study analyzes the influence of QM practices on knowledge transfers, taking into account that the degree to which firms facilitate knowledge transfers has been considered fundamental to explaining the differences in performance between firms.

In the next section of this paper, we review the literature on QM and knowledge transfer. We then examine how certain QM practices and knowledge transfers are related and present the hypotheses. In Section 4, we provide a description of the methodology, followed by presentation of the results. Finally, we discuss the implications of the results and conclusions.

2. Quality management and knowledge transfers

2.1. Quality management

Quality management has been defined as an approach to management made up of a "set of mutually

reinforcing principles, each of which is supported by a set of practices and techniques" (Dean and Bowen, 1994), which has achieved discriminant validity with respect to other strategies for improving the organization's performance (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). To determine the degree to which quality management has been implemented in a firm or simply what quality management is, we must return to the study of the practices observable in quality management, since these are very general principles while the techniques are extremely detailed (Sousa and Voss, 2002).

From the pioneering works of Saraph et al. (1989), many studies have drawn on the quality management literature to identify the key practices of QM and have developed measurement instruments to analyze its implementation in the firm. Reviews of these studies were developed by Haynak (2003) and by Sousa and Voss (2002). The studies show that QM includes practices for improvement that affect both the firm's internal environment and its relationship with its environment. Likewise, it includes practices focused on both the technical and social parts of the firm.

In the area of the relation between the firm and its environment, QM drives the practice of cooperation with both customers and suppliers. By cooperation with suppliers and customers, we mean the organization's propensity to engage in non-competitive activities with customers and suppliers and to establish and maintain an open relation with them (Flynn et al., 1994). One of the main ideas of QM is the assumption that the firm acts as an integrated system (Hackman and Wageman, 1995). However, this idea of the system is not limited only to the relationships established within the organization. It can also be extrapolated to the relationships that the firm establishes in its relationship with the outside world. The full product value chain is thus seen as a system, which for its optimization must be considered as such, and the final quality of the products to be achieved is that which satisfies the customers (Dean and Evans, 1994). Schonberger (1990) asserts that QM sees the firm as part of a chain of consumers and suppliers.

In the strictly internal arena, QM includes practices highly focused on the social component of the firm, on areas such as autonomy and teamwork as well as on others of technical nature, such as process control. By teamwork, we mean the tendency to develop tasks in a group rather than individually. Autonomy refers to the capability of groups or individuals to be self-regulating in relatively complete tasks. Process control focuses on making the organization's processes comprehensible to the people who carry them out

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