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TQM implementation: an empirical examination and proposed generic model

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Abstract

Total quality management (TQM) is considered by many as an important quality and business performance improvement tool. The popularity of the concept has led to an explosion of TQM-related literature. A careful review of the literature suggests that most publications recount the experiences or perceptions of the authors or deal with single case organisations. Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical research and literature dealing with TQM's implementation process. This paper reports the findings of a research project that empirically examined the process of TQM implementation in a sample of organisations widely regarded as leading exponents of TQM. The paper presents a non-prescriptive model of the TQM implementation process derived from the findings and proposes an "outcome driven" approach as an alternative to the more commonplace TQM implementation strategies. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Total quality management; Implementation process; Organisational change; Non-prescriptive model

1. Introduction

Total quality management (TQM) is one of the most popular and durable modern management concepts. This position is rooted in its development which has passed through a number of phases since the 1920s: quality control (QC); quality assurance (QA) and total quality control (TQC). Each subsequent phase has extended the scope of the concept. Amongst the most significant factors that have contributed to the persistence and strength of the TQM model are: (i) recognition and demonstration of the importance of "quality" as a source of superior competitiveness [1–4]; (ii) the success of Japanese firms in taking and retaining market share from their Western counterparts [5,6]; (iii) influence of the teaching and writings of scholars such as Deming, Juran, Crosby and Feigenbaum, collectively referred to as the 'quality gurus' [7], and (iv) introduction of internationally recognised quality awards such as the Deming Prize, and the Malcolm Baldrige, European and Australian Quality Awards [8].

As with most management interventions TQM has not been without its critics. A number of publications have suggested that TQM has failed to deliver expected results [9–11]. Such views are countered by the argument that to dismiss TQM on the basis of "loose" negatively oriented evidence is irrational. Ever since the late 1980s when the positive correlation between introduction of TQM and enhanced competitiveness began to be understood, evidence has suggested that the majority of organisations that have introduced TQM believe that it has helped them to increase their market share and improve their competitiveness [6,12,13]. Furthermore, studies that have been devoted to examining the relationship between TQM and performance using factual rather than perceptual data for example [14–16], by and large have concluded that there is a cause and effect relationship between TQM practices and healthy or improved corporate performance.

2. The influence of the implementation process

The importance of TQM as a means of improving performance has captured the attention of many researchers and

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writers. An examination of relevant databases bears witness to the large increase since the early 1980s in the volume of TQM-related publications and the range/variety of types of publications where TQM-related contributions appear.¹ Furthermore, these publications range from those dedicated to the subject to those concerned with marketing, economics, general management, personnel and human resource management, industrial engineering and strategic management.

2.1. Importance of implementation process

It is broadly agreed that central to the long-term success of TQM within an organisation is the implementation process [17–21]. Motwani [20] proposed that TQM will nearly always work when the proper methods to execute it are employed. Shin et al. [21] argued that when TQM has failed, it is not because there was a basic flaw in the principles of TQM, but because an effective system was not created to execute TQM principles properly. Similarly, Reger et al. [17] noted that as instances of TQM failures begin to surface,² the weaknesses are usually, though not entirely, attributed to implementation problems. Newall and Dale [22] studied the problems encountered in implementing TQM and other quality improvement initiatives in eight UK-based companies. They concluded that one of the key reasons for future difficulties was poor planning in the introduction stages. Moreover, they pointed out that lack of detailed planning prior to the introduction of quality improvement initiatives had a “knock-on” effect throughout its development and subsequent advancement. These views indicate that the introduction of a TQM approach is not without difficulty. It may be argued that the sheer scale of the change inherent in moving away from the conventional management model towards TQM contributes heavily to this difficulty. Grant et al. [23] suggested that the implementation of TQM provided a challenge similar to those involved in the management of other revolutionary transitions—once underway how does the organisation “keep the lid on it?” [5].

Implementation process is important for a number of reasons. Central to these is the requirement that for TQM to take root successfully in the long term, it must have a positive influence not only on employees’ behaviour, but also on their attitudes and values. Ahire and Rana [19] proposed that as with any new concept, the extent to which TQM will be successful in any organisation is determined by its initial impact and its perceived worth as a new way of operating. According to Ahire and Rana [19], the literature dealing with

participative decision making and organisational dynamics points to the fact that any new technical or management approach is either accepted sincerely or rejected based on the first few experiences with it. This led them to postulate that the first impression of the initial phase of TQM implementation contributes significantly to the long-term confidence and support of all participants in a TQM approach.

2.2. Implementation process: a brief review of the literature

Despite TQM’s perceived importance, examination of the published material reveals that little attention has been devoted to examining the TQM implementation process. This is in contrast to identification and examination of its prevalent components [14,24–27]. Moreover, it appears that examination and discussion of TQM implementation is dominated by single case evidence [28–31]. When these case study contributions are examined it becomes clear that in many the implementation “process” is only cursorily examined. Rather, attention is paid only to the introduction process of specific parts or elements of TQM approach. More substantial case studies that do deal with the process of implementation can be found in [32–35] for example. Review of these contributions is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is clear upon examination that most concern organisations that at the time the study took place were relatively new to TQM, and thus provide a fairly limited picture. An extensive review of the literature revealed only three empirical multiple-organisation studies primarily dedicated to the examination of TQM implementation process [22,24,36,37]. Mann and Kehoe [24] examined the process of TQM implementation in 21 UK-based organisations with at least two years experience of TQM and concluded that the implementation processes used were largely diverse and there appeared to be no one dominant approach. The data led them to conclude that there appeared to be no optimum approach to implementation. Harte and Dale [36,37] examined the process of TQM implementation in eight professional service organisations. They too found that a variety of means for launching TQM were used, though most followed the same basic process: diagnosis; goal determination and implementation. Newall and Dale [22] concluded from their study of eight UK organisations (seven were manufacturers) that despite the different interpretations and descriptions of the development of the quality improvement process, companies do pass through a number of discrete phases during the introduction of TQM. They identified six phases: awareness; education and training; consolidation; planning, problem identification and problem solving; implementation of quality improvement plans; and assessment.

A number of studies have examined the process of implementation as a part of a broader study of TQM [25,38,39]. The common conclusion of these studies was that implementation was firm specific. Based on their own review of the TQM literature, Shin et al. [21] concluded that

¹ For example, the ABI Inform CD-ROM Database, which provides citations of articles in a large and diverse number of journals dealing with management-related issues, revealed that between January 1986 and December 1991 a total of 407 articles were referenced. Between January 1992 and December 1995 the number of articles referenced was 2281—a significant increase in volume.

² Reger et al. [17] did however note that studies reporting the failures have provided scant theoretical justification for their results.

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