Investigating the human resources context and content on TQM, business excellence and ISO 9001:2000

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Summary

Purpose – *The main objective of this paper is to theoretically investigate the human resources (HR) context and content on total quality management (TQM), business excellence and ISO 9000:2000.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The HR-quality relationship has largely been ignored or underestimated. This paper investigates the existing literature and digs into the various approaches and frameworks in order to evaluate the rhetoric and the reality of this relationship. The examination of differences, similarities and convergence is of high importance in understanding the contribution of HR issues to all of these quality approaches.*

Findings – *Besides the ''good stories'' of implementation of the European Quality Award (EQA) model, the ISO 9000:2000 certification and TQM, the paper reveals a number of problematic areas in relation to effective HR utilization such as: low utilization of employees' skills and knowledge, lack of a vision and a mission for HR followed by systematic design and implementation of strategic human resource management (HRM) practices.*

Research limitations/implications – *This is the first step towards an understanding of the current status of the HR context and content on TQM, business excellence and ISO 9000:2000. The paper addresses a series of issues concerning organizations worldwide in their road to quality improvement and business excellence. There is a need to further evaluate organizations by measuring their HR performance and the degree of quality implementation in the future.*

Practical implications – *The paper is aiming at both Quality and HR people within the organization. Quality cannot be achieved without fully utilization of organization's HR, and the HR function needs a new vision and practices that are focused on internal customer satisfaction.*

Originality/value – *The paper provides a reliable and objective depiction of the current status of the HR context and content on TQM, business excellence and ISO 9000:2000 through the examination and analysis of a state-of-the-art literature review studies, including all the various approaches, practices and perceptions recorded so far in the literature -some of them based on empirical data and some deriving from rhetoric and ''good-stories'' or ''how things ought to be'' perspective.*

Keywords *European Quality Award, Business excellence, ISO 9000 series, Human resource management*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

Defining and implementing quality has always been a problem. Today, organizations approach quality using a wide range of frameworks and models for implementation, based on the work of well-known theorists and academics as well as practitioners. The widespread application of the new ISO 9000:2000 and the business excellence movement through the American and European quality awards are the prevailing approaches to quality improvement according to the majority of quality academics. Both provide a basis for the implementation of a total quality management (TQM) philosophy, a ''unique'' way of improving organizational performance and attaining competitive advantage.

The TQM rhetoric calls for a cultural shift emphasizing self-control, autonomy having a significant effect in the way people are managed. In the context of these awards and the new ISO 9000:2000, new realities and perspectives emerge for the effective utilization of the organization's human resources (HR). In the literature, aligning certification, quality improvement programs, and initiatives with HR-effective utilization requires radical changes in the way the organizations perceive their ''human capital'' and the way the organizations' HR functions operate (Hart and Schlesinger, 1991; Blackburn and Rosen, 1993). In the quality literature the importance of the ''human or people element'' in the quality improvement efforts are often overlooked and according to Wilkinson *et al.* (1991) organizations are often engaged in a ''production-oriented'' perspective. Until recently, academics and practitioners seemed to be preoccupied with the study and implementation of the ''hard'' elements of quality improvement (mainly ISO 9000 certification), and the evidence is on the few books and articles published in the 1990s and of the following years. Only recently have a number of authors suggested a shift in thinking about quality having major implications for the management of labor and in parallel a shift in thinking about strategic human resources management (SHRM) has occurred (Hart and Schlesinger, 1991; Blackburn and Rosen, 1993; Beaumont *et al.*, 1994; Baruch, 1997; Vouzas, 2004; Conti, 2002; Soltani, 2003; Soltani *et al.*, 2004). It has been argued that TQM cannot be applied in isolation. TQM is a total philosophy involving all organizational members and has high HR content.

The new ISO 9000:2000 and business excellence (quality awards)

ISO 9000 series

Since the introduction of ISO 9000 15 years ago there were a series of controversies and doubts over its role and significance in improving product and service quality, achieving internal and external customer satisfaction, and improving performance (Dick, 2000; Van der Wiele *et al.*, 2000; Withers and Ebrahimpour, 1996; Magd and Curry, 2003; Stevenson and Barnes, 2001; Kartha, 2002). According to Douglas *et al.* (2003):

> ISO 9000 is a multi-million-pound industry with many individuals and organizations reliant on it for their livelihood, including quality consultants, lead auditors, internal auditors, supplier auditors, quality representatives/managers and software designers/sellers as well as the numerous training companies and certification bodies and their employees.

However, other authors, among them Kartha (2002), argue that the new standards main purpose is to assist organizations to ''identify mistakes, streamline their operations, and be able to guarantee a consistent level of quality''. Vouzas and Gotazamani (2005) state that:

> [...] careful analysis of the ISO 9000:1994 standards' requirements compared to the basic principles of TQM and the requirements of the two most representative business excellence awards, the European Quality Award and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, reveals several main shortages.

The authors argue that the old ISO 9000:1994 series lacked strategic quality planning, top management commitment; focus on customer satisfaction, and systematic training in quality. Furthermore a number of studies (Douglas *et al.*, 2003; Vouzas and Gotazamani, 2005; Kufidu and Vouzas, 1998; Seddon, 1997; Stevenson and Barnes, 2001; Buttle, 1996; Curkovic and Pagell, 1999) strongly criticize the previous ISO 9000 series claiming that it is a paper-driven process, is lacking HR content and context, is too general, not related to TQM main principles, is costly, and relies heavily on external auditors. Finally, Brown *et al.* (1998) in a study in small size organizations found that there was a relatively high level of disappointment of the ISO 9000 certification regarding issues such as standards interpretation and assessors' knowledge of specific industry.

The new revised standard was launched at the end of 2000 and, according to Beckford (2002), is ''an attempt to harmonize all the standards and remove the manufacturing bias''. Several authors stated that the new ISO 9000:2000 is directed towards performance rather then conformance (Najmi and Kehoe, 2000). Coleman and Douglas (2003) argue that organizations in order to achieve the new ISO 9000:2000 should demonstrate that have quality processes and procedures in place, but they are sceptical about what happens after

ISO 9000 certification. Casadesús and Karapetrovic (2005) studying the relationship between the ''new'' and the ''old'' ISO found that ''the evaluation of the new ISO 9001:2000 standard is generally positive''. Vouzas and Gotazamani (2005) argue that there is no really negative impact but mention that the perceived benefits are less than the previous standard and that the level of reported benefits of ISO 9001/2/3:1994 decrease with time, evidenced by two empirical studies conducted in 1998 and 2002. Overall they argue that there is ''an erosion of the perceived usefulness of ISO 9001:2000 in the future, especially in terms of short-term benefits''. Martínez-Lorente and Martínez-Costa (2004) further argue that organizations certified by ISO 9000 ''may have gone a part of the way to TQM''. However, the authors claim that it is only the ''first part of the way, not its end, because there is a large amount of TQM requirements that ISO 9000 does not satisfy''. Research on ISO 9000:2000 all over the world is still ongoing and the perceived benefits and its integration to other quality initiatives is expected to clear the picture and provide a basis for further improvement of the standard (Laszo, 2000; McAdam and Jackson, 2002; Najmi and Kehoe, 2000).

However, many authors believe that the new revised ISO 9000:2000 series of standards is a significant improvement on the previous version in terms of its conceptual simplification, its process-based vision and its acknowledgement of the importance of customer satisfaction as a key requirement for verifying the effectiveness of the quality system (Conti, 1999). The basic principles on which the new standards' requirements are based (as found in the ISO 9000:2000 document) are much more TQM-oriented.

Business excellence and quality awards

Peters and Waterman's (1982) best selling book *In Search of Excellence* actually set the birth for the excellence movement and the establishment of various quality awards around the world. The emerge of excellence and the publicity gained so far led Dale *et al.* (2000) to wonder if ''quality and TQM simply been scrubbed out and replaced by excellence, or is excellence different in some important ways from TQM?'' Hermel and Ramis-Pujol (2003) describe a so-called evolution of excellence based on a series of phases started form the pre-excellence and leading to today's excellence 5.0 which describe as an ''innovative integrated development which is fundamentally viewed as a combination of strategic management and change''. According to Adebanjo (2001) the basic idea behind the European Quality Award (EQA) award was to ''reflect shifts in business emphasis and new management ideas as well as fulfil the requirements of large, small and medium-sized enterprises in the private and the public sectors. Their objective became: to provide a model that ideally represents the business excellence (TQM) philosophy that can be applied in practice to all organisations irrespective of country, size, sector or stage along their journey to excellence.'' On the other hand the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) in the USA:

> [...] aims to promote the understanding of the requirements for performance excellence and competitiveness improvement, the sharing of information on successful performance strategies and the benefits derived from using these strategies (Withers and Ebrahimpour, 1996).

Bohoris (1995) in a comparative analysis of the two main awards stated that ''Quality Awards' assessment procedures seem to be the only comprehensive means available to date by which TQM initiatives can be thoroughly monitored and assessed, providing any business with a competitive internal mechanism necessary to face the imposition of future new barriers to trade in the form of technical or quality standards requirements. McDonald *et al.* (2002) state that the literature on the MBNQA and EQA awards reveals that:

> [...] both encourage continuous improvement of leadership techniques, strategic plans, company processes and stakeholder relationships, through the analysis and change of business results.

Eventually, business excellence literature is mostly based on rhetoric and ''good stories'' of EQA and MBNQA awarded organizations in Europe and USA. Only recently a number of studies tried to investigate the effect of the EQA ands MBNQA on business results. McAdam (2000) argue that:

[…] organisations scoring over or around 600 points on these models are deemed to have reached a state of excellence. However, the failure of many of these organisations to maintain their positions shows that a defined state of organisational excellence does little to bolster business confidence beyond the hype of quality or excellence awards.

The criticism over ''excellence models and awards'' is growing (Dale *et al.*, 2000; Laszo, 1996; McDonald *et al.*, 2002; Hewitt, 1997; Steventon, 1994; McAdam and O'Neill, 1999) According to Dale *et al.* (2000), the EQA:

[…] acted in response to the perceived tarnished image of TQM, whilst the consultancies sought to address the diminishing demand and increasing competition for their services.

McAdam and O'Neill (1999) further state that:

[…] the EQA model does not formulate strategy, nor does it properly evaluate strategy, rather it evaluates the process of forming strategy.

Quality improvement and HR − a literature review

As mentioned earlier, only recently quality experts, researchers, academics and practitioners realized that HR issues can be at the core of the quality philosophy and that employee involvement and commitment is essential for the successful introduction and implementation of quality initiatives, programs or practices and techniques (Blackburn and Rosen, 1993; IPM, 1993; Hart and Schlesinger, 1991; Soltani *et al.*, 2004; Soltani, 2003). It is widely accepted that TQM has a high HR context and that quality movement recognizes the importance of HR utilization and states a conceptual and well-defined image concerning human behavior and motivation (Pfeffer, 1994). Wilkinson *et al.* (1991) state:

[…] putting human resources issues in the top management agenda is a prerequisite for the effectiveness of all quality improvement efforts.

Research evidence suggest that as TQM improvement efforts proceeds, a change in the corporate culture occurs, resulting in the establishment of a work climate in which participation, trust, responsibility for goal achievement and employee involvement takes place (Lawler, 1994).

ISO 9000 series implementation and HR

The literature on HR utilization and quality improvement efforts is rather limited, especially when the focus is on the relationship and the impact of the implementation of the ISO 9000 series. The majority of these studies is descriptive in nature, with many generalizations, and basically put the basis for a better understanding of the role of the personnel function in quality improvement efforts. TQM is often confused with quality initiatives, short-term projects and ISO 9000 series certification (Soltani *et al.*, 2004; Hill and Wilkinson, 1995; Ho, 1993).

The launch and implementation of the new ISO 9000:2000 series of standards increases companies' expectations and the likelihood that the new systems will bring firms one step closer to TQM and business excellence (Vouzas and Gotazamani, 2005). The introduction of the five building blocks and the introduction of the process-based approach are an attempt by ISO to reduce the amount of documentation required. Even more, the new elements that it introduces to the certified companies belong to the ''soft elements'' of TQM, that have been proved to be the fundamental ones in the TQM system, with a very strong effect in improving company results (Costa and Martinez-Lorente, 2003). However, up to now there has been no major research done on the effects and impact of the new ISO 9000:2000 series of standards in SHRM. The relationship between SHRM and ISO 9000 series certification is often seen as part of the HR function involvement in the design, introduction and implementation of a quality assurance system certified by an external evaluator. Wilkinson *et al.* (1991) and the IPM (1993) study suggest that the HR function actually plays an important role in the design and implementation phase of a quality assurance system. On the other hand, there are cases in which a quality assurance system had been implemented within the HR department.

Furthermore, in the literature, it was found that in many organizations the HR function plays an important role in the design and implementation of a quality assurance system (Blackburn and

Rosen, 1993; Wilkinson *et al.*, 1991). On the other hand there are cases in which a quality assurance system had been implemented within the HR department. Its integration with human resource management (HRM) is increasingly recognized as all managers' and employees' commitment is a major component of success. Another striking finding is that HR professionals are willing to digest and implement the fundamental principles and practices of quality into their HRM practices. They also strongly believe that quality improvement efforts and the ISO 9000 series certification is one of the major challenges in their job (Lawler, 1994).

Research evidence shows that when quality management evolves from quality control or quality assurance, it tends to focus on the ''process'' (technical) aspects of quality rather than on the ''human'' aspects (IPM, 1993; Kufidu and Vouzas, 1998). Thus, organizations being engaged in a quality assurance approach to quality improvement, do not usually allow sufficient room for staff contributions, and training is targeting only towards people involved in the production process. The personnel department usually is a peripheral function with a very traditional role. The IPM study shows that organizations placing emphasis on a ''process'' approach to quality tend to exclude human resource department from the design and implementation of quality assurance system such as ISO 9000 series. In most of the cases its role is limited and oriented towards increasing the awareness of the quality standard and handling the administrative aspects of quality efforts (IPM, 1993). HR professionals seem to participate in the various phases of quality initiatives and play a vital role (usually a facilitator role) in these efforts. Overall, the involvement of HR function in quality improvement efforts is usually materialized in three ways:

1. by participating in the design, introduction and maintenance of various quality initiatives;

2. by changing traditional personnel practices in order to support a total quality culture; and

3. by establishing a quality orientation within the function itself.

However, we have to consider that the quality stage or level an organization is at, instantly influences the embodied organizational changes, which in turn affect the way human resources considerations are formed in relation to strategic quality goals.

The excellence movement and the HR element

Hendricks and Triplett (1989) suggest that implementing total quality initiatives requires continuous adjustments of every facet of work environment and corporate culture and the effective utilizations of organization's human resources through the HR department can play an important role in TQM assessment, planning and implementing process as well as in annual monitoring and review. Furthermore, improving quality, meeting customer's needs according to the literature is part of everybody's job and everybody should feel responsible. Quality efforts should be based on a long-term perspective and be part of the overall business strategy including people-related issues such as education and training, performance appraisal, employee involvement, recognition and improving quality of work life. Absolutely necessary is also a quality policy that is understood and easily applicable by organizational members through a use of a common language.

It is widely suggested that successful TQM implementation changes the dominant values, organizational structures, the way people work together and the way they feel about participation (van Donk and Sanders, 1993).

The above support the argument made by many authors stating that quality improvement efforts should become part of everybody's job and everybody should feel responsible. Quality improvements should be based on a long-term perspective and be part of the overall business strategy. In this context people should be considered as assets rather than as additional cost upgrading that way the role of the human resource function. Research in the USA shows that in organizations, which were awarded the MBNQA, the human resource function's role was essential, but the overall rating on the HR utilization category was not satisfactory. In these cases the personnel professionals were part of the top management team and fully participated in the design and implementation of the organization's quality strategy (Blackburn and Rosen, 1993). There are limited studies concerning the HR element of the EQA and the reason is that in the academic community the EQA framework is not

considered synonymous with that of TQM, but rather such as a business audit approach and a technique within TQM. (McAdam and O'Neill, 1999; McDonald *et al.*, 2002) A study in Denmark shows that:

> Danish companies are acting in order to improve the use of human resources in the company and to keep up with competition in the market. The increase in the resource score reflects that companies are also more focused in 1996 on the effective use of non-human resources in such a way that company goals and strategies are supported (Kristensen and Jørn Juhl, 1999).

Hamzah and Zairi (1996) in a study of British organizations winning the EQA give the following statement concerning people in one of the organizations studied:

> LL Bean Inc. is about people and respect for people. This is a way of respecting the talents within the organization. A lot of companies see people as the problem. We saw people as part of the solution.

Xerox a winner of the EQA uses extensively benchmarking for HR in the areas of ''management development, recruiting, compensation and other personnel processes with the world class competitors'' (Sherer, 1995). Vouzas and Gotazamani (2005) in a study in Greece found that:

> EQA seems to provide a new platform for introducing new practices and upgrading the role of the HR function. Management and utilization of people is at the core of the EQA and it seems that the sample organizations are striving to focus on specific issues and measures, covering all HR-related activities. In some organizations the strategic role of people is still not dynamic. It is considered to be very costly and complex, while respondents realize that there were still high opportunities for improvement in this area. It is obvious that human resources issues were not at the center of the quality strategy formulation and implementation within the sample companies.

Conclusions

It is quite obvious from the above analysis that there is an enormous distance between the HR requirements of the major quality awards and those of ISO 9000. The new ISO 9000:2000 is no more than an ''audit of procedures'' with a minimal substantial HR context and content and on the other side the major quality awards are concerned with HR issues in relation to people management and employee satisfaction/results. The ISO 9000:2000 seemed to represent the minimum effort on HR practices and policies an organization should present in order to achieve third party certification but quality award and specifically EQA award requires proof of systematic design and implementation of HR policies and practices. However, many argue that a company cannot win one of the quality awards without first being able to satisfy the requirements of the ISO 9000.

It seems that ISO 9000:2000 certified organizations although are aware of the fundamental principles and tools of continuous quality improvement but still are in the early stages of a company-wide approach to quality improvement. The author believes that one of the most prevailing factors contributing to the delay of the establishment of a ''quality-based'' culture and a move towards strategic TQM is the short period of systematic implementation of quality assurance systems and the preoccupation with the so-called ''hard'' aspects of quality.

The current status and the role of the HR function in certified organizations implies that HR function had no direct and substantial role in total quality efforts, either by establishing a culture that supports a quality improvement effort, designing and implementing plans for employee empowerment and development or applying TQM principles, practices and techniques within the HR function. However, evidence shows that top management seemed to be aware of the value and the benefits stemming from both ISO 9000:2000 certification and the implementation of the EQA model. Furthermore, HR departments in many cases are not well-organized and lacking professionalism and strategic orientation. The existence of a vision and a mission for HR followed by systematic design and implementation of SHRM practices seemed to be the main issues that differentiate ISO 9000:2000 organizations from EQA organizations. However, EQA organizations seemed to have a better way to approach and implement HR issues comparing that of ISO9000 organizations and this is due to the nature and the context of the award requirements (Vouzas and Gotazamani, 2005; McAdam and O'Neill, 1999).

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