

EDITORIAL

Introduction

This Special Issue of IBAR is the first pulling together of quality management research in Ireland. In this Special Issue contributors addressed some fundamental questions, including:

- what is quality?
- who has responsibility for it?
- how is it achieved?
- where should it be measured?
- how can it be maintained and improved?

How do managers and researchers confront these questions? They can see quality as something to inspect into a product or service, to control in, to build in, or to manage in. Each perspective or approach hits the definition problem.

The need for definition exposes areas in business operations where managers make choices without realising that they have made them — and, by implication, without realising where and how those choices could be changed. However, clearly defined concepts of quality do not occur "naturally" in organisations. As such, managers and researchers face a challenge when developing and applying a concept-based approach to quality management in order to put more orderliness into the often chaotic muddle of day to day events. The task has many components including:

- recognising the context;
- thinking about the interests to be served, including those of customer, staff, supplier and society;

- considering the positions on the organisation chart likely to be impacted by a concept-based approach;
- evaluating the commercial relevance of the approach, including its likelihood of impacting on the cost statement.

The purpose of this Special Issue is to present a range of research activities in Ireland in Quality Management and to stimulate ideas for further research or collaboration. A related objective is to encourage informed discussion of work in progress or recently completed. The Special Issue grew out of a Research Workshop organised by the Third Level Quality Network and Excellence Ireland in May 1996 and held at the Centre for Quality & Services Management, University College Dublin.

The seven contributions in this Special Issue illustrate the breadth of work in progress. All are grounded in the literature, some present new empirically-derived insights, none are constrained by the geographical boundaries of the island. As such, while the potential to be insular is considerable, the benefit of adopting a wider perspective of quality management is something this Issue strives for.

The contributors also reflect the diversity of functional and discipline perspectives in quality management including operations management, marketing management, strategic management, HRM and statistics.

The contributors each report on their own work. However, collectively, they have a story to tell. We have arranged their contributions so that the progression is from the managerial reality of firms' attempts to achieve excellence, through to a number of cycles of reflection: first, in a comparative way against practice elsewhere; then, in terms of the literature; and, finally, in another comparison, this time with another field of academic thought.

Eileen Drew's paper, "In pursuit of excellence: a survey of Irish manufacturing and service organisations" focuses on the degree to which quality initiatives have been developed in Irish organisations. Based on two large scale national surveys, the paper examines the motivation for adoption of standards; the role of teamworking and use of quality tools/techniques; relationships with customers, employees and suppliers, and the pattern of adoption of Total Quality concepts. The findings indicate that quality management interventions were frequently made in the context of company restructuring. While this might seem to suggest a cost-cutting focus, the most significant impact of such interventions was on product/service quality. Quality

management interventions were most evident in medium and large sized manufacturing firms that were unionised. Employee involvement and teamwork was widely utilised although whether or not this represented the form of true partnership suggested by O'Toole and Harrington in their paper is open to debate.

Coughlan and Harbison, in their paper, "Service in Ireland: a comparative study of practice and performance" sought both to measure the service practice and performance in the Irish service organisations, and also to determine if there were significant differences with similar organisations in the UK. They applied a model of service management, developed by London Business School and Warwick Business School, to benchmark four specific sectors: Financial Services, Public Services, Hotels and Transportation. The pattern of service practice and performance that emerges reflects similarities and differences in both Irish and UK service organisations. The central hypothesis of both Irish and UK studies was confirmed, that best practice has a direct link to the attainment of high service

Glynn and Brannicks' paper, "The listening organisation: a segmentation approach to service quality information", adopts a user's perspective and regards information as that which alters a mental representation. It is the changes in the beliefs, values or behaviour in a person from an encounter with any stimuli (formal written reports, numeric quantities, dialogue, non-verbal behaviours, personal reflections) which are significant. By adopting a user's perspective, the paper considers two approaches to becoming informed — scientific and narrative, equally legitimate but different. Their empirical investigation of Irish practitioners working in the services sectors shows that companies have very different cultures with regard to dissemination and usage of service quality information. The segmentation analysis identified four listening clusters; the deaf organisation, the hard of hearing organisation, the selective listening organisation and the total listening organisation. These four clusters can be found in any of the four sub sectors, in both Irish and foreign owned and in all company sizes.

Ennis, Zafarullah and Bhutta, in their paper "Lessons to be learnt from studying quality management in a developing economy", examine the relevance of quality management to small manufacturers of machinery in the context of Pakistan, a developing economy. The particular problems associated with the management of quality programmes in small firms are identified and discussed. It is argued that a contingency-based approach should be adopted in such circumstances. The paper presents empirical results reporting that a busi-

ness and technical assistance centre can accelerate the process of industrialisation by means of quality improvements in its products. It can act also as a broker in the process of educating and training local entrepreneurs about the merits of managing quality more efficiently.

Monks, Buckley and Sinnott, in their paper "The human resource implications of quality initiatives: sectoral differences?", consider whether manufacturing and service companies involve in the implementation of quality programmes adopt similar approaches in their handling of human resource matters. The research was undertaken within 88 manufacturing and 44 service companies. Differences were expected, as both the general management and the quality literatures emphasised difference. However, the study found that similarities abounded whilst differences were minor. This finding raises the issue of whether these two very separate literatures and research methodologies need to be integrated.

Brian Fynes reviews the literature on quality management practices from a manufacturing perspective. In doing so, he considers the problem of precisely defining quality as a construct and argues that this traditionally has undermined theory building and testing in the field which in turn is reflected in anecdotal and prescriptive literature. More recently however, a more rigorous body of both conceptual and empirical literature in the context of quality practices and quality performance has emerged which provides a platform for the conduct of scholarly research in the discipline. He reports in particular on the quality practices literature, including the role of top management, quality information, process management, product design, workforce management, supplier involvement and customer relationships.

Tom O'Toole and Denis Harrington, in their paper "Tracing the evolution of quality management: lessons from strategic management", draw an insightful parallel in suggesting that the discipline can learn much from the development of strategic management. They caution that quality management is in considerable danger of becoming passé and categorised as another "management fad". They note that strategic management underwent a similar crisis in its evolution but ultimately emerged as a more theoretically sound and rigorous discipline. Central to this re-emergence was the adoption of a more integrative and holistic approach to its philosophy, actors, formulation, and time horizon. For quality management, a core element of such an approach is to move away from the widely held toolkit perspective of the discipline. In order to achieve this, the authors empha-

sise the importance of real partnership between management and workforce rather than one based on rhetoric.

In a changing world, research must do more than to pass on current practice. Each contributor to this Special Issue presents an agenda for future research in the area of quality management, with particular reference to Ireland. Close reading of the papers will reveal the detail of these agendas and their ambitiousness. However, on reflection, the research to be done falls into three categories:

- developing further the philosophical underpinnings of the area;
- developing and improving the methods adopted by researchers;
- understanding and influencing managerial practice.

Through understanding the forces bringing about change, managers and researchers can develop and apply better techniques, methods and approaches, thereby continuously improving performance.

First, the philosophical underpinnings of quality management, which can be traced back to Shewart (1931) and Deming (1986), were frequently ignored or blurred in the prescriptive and anecdotal quality literature of the last twenty years. Recent theoretical developments in the area have begun to address this shortcoming, and the need to comprehensively define the meaning of the term 'quality'. There is a recognised need for continuing convergence and interfacing among disciplines as, for example, between the literatures on product quality (the operations management perspective) and service quality (the marketing perspective). Further, other disciplines such as strategic management can provide scholars with a diverse selection of conceptual frameworks, such as a contingency-based perspective, which can be adapted in the development of a more integrative view on quality management.

Second, the need for and emergence of more sophisticated theoretical frameworks has significant implications for the conduct of research. Further, the need for firms (and research teams) to become "total listening organisations" has implications for the nature, speed and timeliness of research-based but practice-oriented feedback. Theory development requires more "why" type research questions and, so, researchers are coming to recognise the value of alternative methodologies such as case and action research. Rapid and relevant feedback can benefit from further development of computer-assisted approaches to data gathering. As always, these challenges require researchers to pay particular attention to issues of reliability, validity,

selection of unit analysis/key informant and data analysis. Ultimately an even more pluralistic approach to methodological issues can only serve to enhance research rigour in the discipline.

Finally, there are many opportunities for researchers to understand and to influence managerial practice. The "quality management problem" is not solved. The contributors to this Special Issue recognise that, as managerial challenges, listening to and developing relationships with customers, employees and suppliers are neither trivial nor fully understood. Yet there is hope — manufacturing and service organisations can learn much from each other through the actions of researchers. With the development of even more pluralistic approaches in research, managers in these organisations can be assisted in making the connection, reflecting on the practice and establishing the benchmark.

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Brian Fynes
William J. Glynn

References

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