

THE HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS OF QUALITY INITIATIVES: SECTORAL DIFFERENCES?

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Introduction

This article reports on the human resource implications of quality initiatives and then considers whether manufacturing and service companies involved in the implementation of quality programmes adopt similar approaches in their handling of human resource matters. The article begins with an introduction to the development of total quality before considering the product service interface and the role of human resource issues in quality initiatives (QIs). The research is then considered.

Quality Management

Many companies are engaged in the implementation of quality initiatives. These range from the standards advocated by the ISO 9000 series to award systems such as the Malcolm Baldrige Award, Deming Prize and European Quality Award System (see Bohoris, 1995, for a comprehensive overview). Such standards provided organisations with the opportunity to both chart and benchmark their quality progress. However, the effective management of quality requires more than simply meeting specifications and many companies have moved towards the process of total quality management (TQM) which can be described as a system "designed as an integrated, customer-focused approach to improve the quality of an organisation's processes,

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products and services" (Waldman, 1994: 31). Views differ on the precise nature of TQM but there is general agreement that it will involve a commitment by top management to quality, a focus on continuous improvement, employee involvement, concern with customer satisfaction and process orientation. Organisations that are engaging in the process of TQM are also changing their work arrangements and are emphasising teamworking, leadership, employee involvement and communications.

Approaches to Quality in Manufacturing and Services

While research into the area of management and quality is not new, the study of both from a service perspective dates only from the late 1970s. Discussions of service characteristics emphasise intangibility, heterogeneity, inseparability and perishability (Baron and Harris 1995). These characteristics can combine to result in a situation where "the type and degree of controllability that a service provider can exercise over the output is different from the controllability that can be exercised by a manufacturer" (Gummesson, 1991: 9). Variability of service quality can cause major problems and the consequent reluctance to measure and control service quality results in a situation where the implementation of quality management in the service sector lags behind the manufacturing sector generally. Also it is the case that as services become more important for manufacturing businesses, the servitisation of business (Vandermerwe and Rada, 1988) may have important implications for the way in which quality initiatives are implemented.

Until recently, TQM has been associated with manufacturing rather than services. Gronroos (1993) postulates that instead of using quality concepts from manufacturing, services researchers have based their work on developing a service quality concept on models from consumer behaviour. Therefore, the consumer has become the focal point of quality. Indeed much of the empirical work on services quality deals with consumers rather than organisations (Lapierre and Filiatrault 1995). Service quality research thus differs in its scope from the more general or manufacturing based quality research. Additionally, the literature supports a view that differences exist in the management of quality in the two sectors. Dale et al, (1997) report that "without doubt the management of quality in services and manufacturing is different with each presenting their own set of difficulties". A contrary view is presented by Quinn et al, (1990) who believe that management must break out of the mindset that considers manufac-

turing (or goods production) as separate from the service activities that make such products possible and effective. Certain themes are increasingly common. For example, a focus on employee involvement, teamwork and empowerment are all stressed and these topics have received much attention from researchers in services marketing. Indeed, it is the field of services marketing which has produced the concept of internal marketing so central to the philosophy of TQM with its focus on the idea of the internal customer which helps the total organisation to work as a team. Little attention, however, has been focused on the specific area of HRM in services despite the assertion that quality initiatives represented an opportunity for HR managers with appropriate knowledge and skills to make a significant contribution to strategy, especially in service organisations (Giles and Williams, 1991). It is notable also that no sectoral comparison has been undertaken despite the finding by Wilkinson et al, (1988) which stresses the importance of appreciating that different versions of TQM and its implications for HRM are likely to be different in different sectors.

Quality and Human Resources

There are many similarities in the literatures on total quality and human resource management (Smyth and Scullion, 1996). In both there is a focus on unitarism and an underlying assumption of mutual benefit to employer and employee from changes in work organisation. Within HRM there are both "hard" and "soft" dimensions (Storey, 1989). The "hard" model focuses on "the crucial importance of the close integration of human resource policies, systems and activities with business strategies" (Legge, 1995: 66) with human resources themselves often viewed simply as another factor of production. In contrast, the "soft" model "while still emphasising the importance of integrating HR policies with business objectives sees this as involving treating employees as valued assets, a source of competitive advantage through their commitment, adaptability and high quality (of skills, performance and so on)" (Legge, 1995: 66). These contrasts and contradictions in the two HRM approaches, albeit under the same banner, can be ascribed also to TQM (e.g. Wilkinson, Allen and Snape, 1992) with the distinction made between the "hard", statistical process control elements of quality and the "softer" customer care perspectives. The latter approach is characterised in practice by a quality driven philosophy where the focus is on effective organisational communications, consultative decision-making, teamwork and

employee development programmes. In effect, the quality movement and "soft" HRM appear to share both a common language and common goals, characterised by a fidelity to the optimisation of employee participation and potential, while maximising internal and external customer satisfaction (Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992; Wood and Peccei, 1995).

There are tensions also common to both the quality and the HRM literatures. The rhetoric of HRM and quality is at times divorced from the reality experienced by those at the receiving end of these initiatives. For example, although empowerment is a concept critical to the success of quality programmes, with employees required to take responsibility for the product or service, there are suggestions that the introduction of such programmes may actually increase the degree of monitoring and control of employees' work (Preece and Wood, 1995; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). At the same time, a recent study of employees in a major British supermarket (Rosenthal et al, 1997) found no support for this interpretation, finding instead that employees utilised the rhetoric of the quality initiative "to bring managers in line with *their* expectations" (p. 496). However, while there is a general acceptance that work may need to be restructured with the introduction of quality initiatives, there is little evidence that much attention has been paid to altering the terms and conditions of employment to accompany such restructuring (Hill and Wilkinson, 1995).

The Research

In May 1995 a survey was undertaken of the 249 listed Irish *Q Mark* companies. The *Q Mark* is an Irish quality audit and accreditation scheme originally based on ISO 9000 but also embracing a Service Quality Mark formulated on ISO 90004 guidelines and the Malcolm Baldrige Award criteria.

The survey utilised a postal questionnaire and 133 companies replied, giving a 54 per cent response rate which is acceptable for surveys of this nature. The respondent was the person who had responsibility for human resource matters within the organisation. The questionnaire was divided into a number of sections which dealt with various aspects of quality initiatives, including communications strategies (Buckley et al, 1998). There are limitations to the data as it is primarily quantitative and relies on information obtained via a postal questionnaire and from a respondent who held a management position within his or her organisation. However, given that so little information is available on the Irish situation, it does provide a useful

initial overview of some of the key HR issues facing both manufacturing and service sector firms.

The respondent companies are quite diverse in terms of sector, size and other structural characteristics. Two-thirds of the companies (88) are involved in manufacturing and one-third (45) are in the service sector. They are a mixture of small (30 per cent), medium (49 per cent) and large (21 per cent) firms. Just over half (58 per cent) are Irish and in nearly two thirds (62 per cent) quality initiatives had been in operation for less than five years. What is of most interest for the present purpose are the similarities found between the manufacturing and service sector in their approach to managing human resource issues. The role that the human resource department might play is considered briefly as only 52 companies, most of which were involved in manufacturing, had specialised personnel departments. A summary of the findings on this particular issue is included (Monks et al, 1997). This summary is preceded by an overview of the findings arising from the main study.

The Findings

Overview: Aims in the Introduction of Quality Programmes

Of the 133 respondents in the main study the majority were positive about the success of the initiatives undertaken within their organisations; 37 per cent described them as "very successful" while 60 per cent considered that they had been "successful". Only 3 per cent felt that the quality initiative had been unsuccessful. These findings replicate those reported by the IPM (IPM 1993). Of interest is the fact that just under half of the organisations were considering the wider organisational and cultural changes which are likely to be critical to the success of these quality initiatives (Hackman and Wageman, 1995, Niven, 1993).

Table 1 indicates that there were many similarities between manufacturing and service companies in the aims identified for their quality programmes. Manufacturing firms tended to identify a wider range of aims in their introduction of QIs, but only two significant differences were found: respondents within manufacturing firms were more likely to identify the need "to improve competitive advantage" and to "improve productivity" as aims of their quality programmes. Perhaps this could be interpreted as indicative of a slightly "harder" approach to quality within the manufacturing sector. There were only limited indications within either sector of consideration of the wider

organisational and culture changes which have been seen as critical to sustaining rather than merely implementing quality initiatives.

TABLE 1: AIMS OF THE QUALITY PROGRAMME

Aim	mfcg %	service %
To improve quality of service or product	91	95
To improve competitive advantage	83	61*
To stay in line with/ahead of competitors	74	68
To increase employee involvement	67	57
To reduce costs	65	50
To improve productivity	65	39*
To streamline work practices	42	52
To support organisational/culture change	49	37

N = 88 manufacturing and 44 service * = significant at the 95% level

The Role of the HR Department in Quality Initiatives

The findings reported in this section refer only to those 52 organisations which had specialised HR departments (Monks et al., 1997). Less than 10% were in the service sector.

Changes to the HR Department

Quality initiatives precipitated considerable change in most of the HR departments studied (see Table 2). These findings raise interesting issues for HR departments. Quality initiatives on the one hand may lead to an increased level of participation in strategic decision making but, on the other hand, may lead to the increasing marginalisation of the HR department as HR activities are devolved to line management.

Findings in relation to the HR departments' role in problem solving mirrored the findings of the 1993 British study (IPM, 1993). HR departments' involvement in solving problems was evenly divided with one third indicating that the HR function was heavily involved, one third reported some involvement and one third was not involved at all.

TABLE 2: CHANGES TO THE HR FUNCTION

Changes	%
More focus on training and development	67
Involvement in a greater range of activities	53
Increased involvement in strategic decisions	53
A more business-oriented approach	51
A consultancy role for the personnel department	51
Decentralisation of personnel activity to line	47
More focus on administrative issues	24
Decrease in staff in personnel department	14
Increase in staff in personnel department	10
No changes to the personnel department	6

N=52

The overall approach to HR issues taken by respondent organisations is shown in Table 3. Small numbers in each category make generalisations difficult. Nonetheless, organisations which adopt a strategic approach to HR were much more likely to be involved in quality initiatives from the early stages. Involvement by the HR department at this stage is likely to have long-term implications for the success of the programme while exclusion may have long-term repercussions for the department.

TABLE 3: THE APPROACH TO HR PRACTICE

Approach to HR Practice	%
HR function is closely integrated with the business needs of the organisation and people are seen as business resources. Sophisticated systems operate and HR issues are integrated into strategic planning	44
HR function is staffed by specialists with high levels of expertise in selection, training, pay and industrial relations. It is well integrated into the business and valued by line managers	21

HR function is concerned to ensure that industrial relations conflict is minimised and the grievances and disputes are quickly resolved	10
HR function is mainly engaged in administrative work such as the preparation of reports and statistics and the maintenance of records. It acts as a resource for the line manager.	10
HR function is concerned for both its staff and its customers. There is an emphasis on selection and training staff and on providing excellent conditions and facilities at work	15

N=52

The Impact on Human Resource Practices

Returning to the total study cohort of 133 organisations, the survey also investigated the impact of quality initiatives on HR practices by considering the approach adopted towards employee involvement and the specific changes effected in human resource practices and the employee relations climate.

Involvement Initiatives

Table 4 shows the general changes which had occurred in these firms following the introduction of the quality programme.

In general, the changes comprised a mixture of increased involvement and communications as well as some devolution of responsibility, but at the same time improved reporting systems. Infrequent outcomes included fewer control systems, the creation of semi-autonomous work groups and performance-based reward systems. In terms of the cross-sectoral comparison, some differences are identifiable between the two sectors. The main outcome differences to emerge concern the devolution of responsibility and the flattening of the hierarchy (more frequent in the manufacturing sector) and the introduction of performance-based reward systems (more frequent in the service sector). However, it is the similarities rather than the differences between the two sectors which are more striking.

TABLE 4: CHANGES RESULTING FROM THE QUALITY PROGRAMME

Changes from the Quality Programme	mfcg	service
	%	%
Improved communications	79	84
More emphasis on team working	69	72
Improved reporting systems	61	61
Focus on participation & involvement	58	61
Improved management systems	53	50
Change to organisational culture	48	52
Devolution of responsibility	51	34
Cross functional teams	39	43
Flatter hierarchy	32	18
Creation of semi-autonomous work groups	22	23
Performance based reward system	15	28
Fewer control systems	17	11

N = 133

The communications and involvement measures used within these firms are shown in Table 5. Clearly, companies were using a range of communications and involvement measures as part of their quality programmes. Team briefing and team working, along with specific communication programmes, are more characteristic of quality initiatives in the manufacturing sector whereas the service sector firms display a marked preference for quality teams and suggestion schemes. Responsibility for driving and steering the quality programme, an issue thought to be critical to the success of these programmes (Hackman and Wageman, 1995), was found to lie generally at the top of respondent organisations. In facilitating quality initiatives, middle management was found to take an active role in less than one third of organisations.

TABLE 5: COMMUNICATIONS AND INVOLVEMENT MEASURES

Measure	mfcg	service
	%	%
Team briefing	77	67
Team working	76	66
Communication programmes	74	55
Quality teams	49	67
Suggestion schemes	46	64
Special newsletters	35	42
Attitude surveys	30	39

N = 76 manufacturing and 39 service

Involvement of the Union

Of the 133 organisations involved in the survey, 38 per cent were non-union, 24 per cent had one union and the remainder (38 per cent) had two or more unions. The manufacturing firms were more likely than their service counterparts to be unionised. Table 6 indicates the extent of union involvement in the various stages of the quality initiative.

TABLE 6: INVOLVEMENT OF UNIONS IN QUALITY INITIATIVES

Stage	Very Involved		Somewhat Involved		No involvement	
	%		%		%	
	Mfcg	Serv	Mfcg	Serv	Mfcg	Serv
Foundation/ Development	6	6	23	11	70	83
Implementation	12	5	33	16	54	80
Maintenance	10	5	19	5	70	90

N = 69 Manufacturing, 19 Service

Unions appear to be marginal to the quality initiatives in both manufacturing and service firms with this lack of involvement being more marked in the service organisations. While there was little evidence

of union involvement, there was equally no evidence of any major industrial relations action as a result. In addition, there was no evidence that where unions were involved the quality programme had been any more successful. This finding is similar to that reported by Lovelock (1995) in his investigation of the role of unions in the service sector but contradicts the findings of Kochan et al, (1995) who found that strategic partnerships between unions and management provided "significant potential for advance in workplace innovation". The issue of how to operationalise the stated desire of Irish unions to become involved in QIs (SIPTU, 1993) remains a challenge for HR departments.

Changes in Human Resource Practices

Respondents were asked to indicate whether human resource practices had intensified following the introduction of quality initiatives, since such intensification does appear to have been occurred in some organisations (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992). The responses are shown below.

TABLE 7: CHANGES IN HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTICES

	Much more intensive		More Intensive		Unchanged	
	%		%		%	
	mfcg	serv	mfcg	serv	mfcg	serv
Staff training	24	27	64	61	12	12
Management training	20	34	67	49	13	17
Induction	20	18	64	53	17	30
Performance appraisal	18	21	60	56	22	23
Recruitment/ selection	14	11	45	58	41	32
Pay systems	0	8	39	31	61	61
Performance related pay	2	8	26	36	72	56

N = 85 Manufacturing, 40 Service

Both sectors had made similar changes to HR practices following the introduction of QIs. Both appear to have concentrated on the training of staff, a finding which is not unexpected given the new techniques and tools which have to be learned by employees once their organisations adopt a quality stance. Some changes have also been made to recruitment, induction and appraisal practices, perhaps indicating that a different type of employee, with new skills and abilities, is required within a quality-focused organisation. Yet approximately two thirds of firms had not changed their pay systems following the introduction of quality programme, even though the level of responsibilities associated with work often change substantially as a result of these programmes.

Impact on Employee Relations Climate

Table 8 indicates the extent to which training, communications, employee relations, absenteeism and labour turnover had improved as a result of the quality programmes.

TABLE 8: CHANGES IN EMPLOYEE RELATIONS CLIMATE

	Greatly improved		Improved		Remained same		Dis-improved	
	Mfcg	Serv	Mfcg	Serv	Mfcg	Serv	Mfcg	Serv
Training	42	35	50	50	8	13	0	3
Communications	23	33	61	58	15	8	1	3
Employee relations	12	11	61	63	26	24	2	3
Absenteeism	5	6	12	11	77	83	6	0
Labour turnover	4	3	16	11	78	80	2	6

N = 88 Manufacturing, 40 Service

Both sectors reported significant improvements in training, communications and employee relations resulting from the introduction of quality initiatives. Very few improvements were noted in the case of absenteeism and labour turnover but, as the base level from which to measure improvements was unknown, it could be the case that no real problems were being experienced in these two areas.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to consider firstly the HR issues faced by organisations undertaking quality initiatives; its second aim was to investigate the impact of sectoral differences.

The evidence from those organisations with structured HR departments suggests that there is a clear division between those which have become fully involved in the planning and implementation of QIs and those which have not become involved. HR departments which involve themselves fully have experienced a change in their role to one which is more strategic in nature (Wilkinson and Marchington, 1995) while HR functions which remain uninvolved do not experience these positive changes. It is likely that this division is reflective of the HR role already adopted within the organisation. Thus, organisations with an administrative or industrial relations approach to HR issues must question their long term viability (Monks et al, 1997).

It was expected that differences would be found between the manufacturing and service sectors in their approach to HR issues, as both the general management and the quality literatures emphasise this difference. The expectation that there might be differences was reinforced also by the HRM literature which has identified both "hard" and "soft" approaches and it could have been expected that approaches would mirror choices within quality, with a "harder" focus being more easily identified with the "conformance to specification" (Deming, 1986) approach which originated in manufacturing firms.

However, while there were some indications that manufacturing firms have "harder" aims in introducing QIs, and that service firms are better at developing some of the "softer" aspects of quality, these differences are minor when compared to the similarities that were found to exist. It might be inferred from this finding that the manufacturing/service distinction which has prevailed is no longer particularly useful as an explanatory tool. Therefore, it may be helpful to return to the idea of a continuum, first suggested by Shostack (1977), as an alternative to the strict division between these two sectors. The increasing convergence between the two sectors means that products and service are becoming more widely substitutable and so very rigid distinctions based on sectors are no longer particularly appropriate.

While there may be convergence in the approaches taken within the two sectors, there is still the issue of whether these approaches will result in an enduring attachment to quality, given that so many

initiatives fail. The results from this survey are mixed. There was certainly a focus on participation and involvement within many of these organisations and measures had been introduced to encourage teamworking and communications. Yet, there was a greater emphasis also on reporting systems and these may be used to monitor and control employees' contributions (e.g., Preece and Wood, 1995). Few organisations were including the union in any element of QIs, yet such partnership has been found to be valuable in introducing quality programmes (Kochan et al, 1995) and the Irish unions have indicated an enthusiasm for such an approach (SIPTU, 1993). Finally, it would appear that many of the basic principles underpinning the successful operation of HR systems are being ignored by many of these organisations. Firms seem to be concentrating on changing specific elements of the HR system without considering the ramifications that such changes have on other elements or on the system as a whole. For example, there were few indications of the restructuring of reward systems. Yet, given that individuals often take on additional responsibilities with the reshaping of work arrangements caused by the introduction of QIs, a review of pay arrangements may be critical to the long-term success of such initiatives.

Conclusions

There is evidence to suggest that some Irish organisations are embracing the concepts of participation, involvement and teamworking while simultaneously tightening their command and control structures. There are indications also that quality initiatives are changing the role of the HR function within organisations. Those which have moved from traditional personnel approaches are rewarded with more involvement in strategic decision making.

An investigation into the differences found between manufacturing and service sector companies in their evaluation of the human resource implications of quality initiatives has found that similarities abound while differences are minor. This finding raises the issue of whether the two very separate literatures and research methodologies which have developed need to be integrated into one more comprehensive approach to managing organisations. As the borderline between service and goods industries continues to blur, the need to develop quality models which integrate services quality and goods quality becomes more urgent.

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