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Worker Responses to Quality Organisation: Discourse and Materiality in Organisational Change

Chris Rees

Kingston University

ABSTRACT This paper explains varying degrees of employee commitment to organisational change across four organisations. Of the many workplace innovations in recent years, Quality Management (QM) is one of the most common and also, potentially, the most far-reaching. QM is the backdrop for a focus on variations in worker acceptance of change and the factors which explain this. These factors are split into two dimensions. First, the *discursive* aspects of quality are analysed, that is, the management ideology or ‘culture of quality’ and the way this is communicated to employees. Second, the more *material* bases of work and employment are examined. Neither discourse or materiality are privileged in the analysis; rather, it is argued that only by grasping the interrelationship between the two can a thorough explanation of employee responses be derived.

This journal has recently featured a number of papers on QM (Knights and McCabe 1998; McCabe 1999; Rosenthal *et al.* 1997; Webb 1996). This paper seeks to build on this body of knowledge, whilst at the same time advancing upon these contributions in important ways.

Webb (1996) describes the rhetoric of QM as stressing the need to overcome bureaucracy and instil an open management style, teamworking and employee empowerment. The reality, she argues, is that standardisation is not replaced, the intensification of work is reinforced, and the underlying hierarchy of control is maintained. She thus concludes that QM is not able to ‘resolve the historical tension between the functions of management as co-ordinators of production and management’s role in motivating and disciplining labour’ (p. 268). The current author has similarly argued elsewhere that QM reflects this fundamental contradiction between control and motivation at the heart of capitalist employment relations (Edwards *et al.* 1998; Rees 1998); as Hyman has put it, ‘solutions to the problem of discipline aggravate the problem of consent, and vice-versa’ (1987: 42). This paper, however, goes beyond the argument that QM is *in general* contradictory

Chris Rees is a Reader in the School of Human Resource Management at Kingston Business School, Kingston University.

by drawing out some of the *explanations for variation* in organisational outcomes.

It is also necessary to move beyond a concern with the *general* effects of QM as this can lead to an increasingly sterile debate in which, as Rosenthal *et al.* observe, 'discussions of quality management and HRM have a tendency to polarise' (1997: 483); that is, between proponents who simply assert that QM brings empowerment, responsibility and commitment (Bank 1992; Dale *et al.* 1994; Oakland 1993), and critics who focus on management control, work intensification and increased surveillance (Delbridge and Turnbull 1992; McArdle *et al.* 1995; Parker and Slaughter 1993). This polarisation is also reflected in the recent contributions to this journal. It is clear, for instance, on which side of the debate Webb's sympathies lie; in her three case-study organisations 'TQM was used ... as a means of ... justifying increased corporate control and intensifying work. Overall it appeared to reinforce instrumental rationality and seems unlikely to contribute to authentic empowerment at work' (1996: 251). Conversely, Rosenthal *et al.* argue that 'modern techniques of quality and human resource management can benefit employees' (1997: 481), and conclude that 'the optimism of the management writers and others is better supported ... than the pessimism of the control school' (1997: 497). Knights and McCabe (1998) seek to move beyond this polarisation, but still present their results by reference to these two positions; in response to Rosenthal *et al.*, they say they would 'not necessarily draw the same "optimistic" conclusions regarding the effects of TQM' (1998: 435). Reflecting on current debates, Knights and McCabe offer something of a 'middle position', arguing that

TQM is not nearly as effective or rational in controlling employees as its gurus exhort or its critics fear ... The uncertainty of organisational outcomes renders the situation far more unpredictable than either gurus or critics foresee. (1998: 433 and 434)

This paper also focuses on this uncertainty in outcomes, and seeks to move debate forward by offering suggestions as to *how* and *why* outcomes vary according to context. The 'empowerment vs. intensification' debate has been extensively rehearsed and is by now well documented elsewhere (Collinson *et al.* 1998; Hill and Wilkinson 1995; Wilkinson *et al.* 1997). The point here is that it is misleading to be overly concerned with locating oneself in one or other of the competing camps, since the outcomes that each posits are not mutually exclusive. In other words, both empowerment and intensification can and do occur *at the same time* (Rees 1995, 1998; Wilkinson and Willmott 1995), employees can gain 'detailed control' at the same time as management consolidates its more 'general control' (Edwards 1986, 1990), and the outcomes of quality management initiatives are always *contingent* rather than universal (Hill 1991). As such, what is required is a 'context-dependent approach' (Edwards *et al.* 1998: 452), which specifies the conditions which encourage certain sorts of QM initiative and which produce variations in the extent to which QM is accepted or rejected by employees.

The need for this kind of contribution is acknowledged by two of the recent contributions to this journal. Referring to the polarisation in debate, Rosenthal *et al.* remark that 'to date there has been more attention to theoretical critique and argument than to substantiation of these positions. More fundamentally, there is a lack of good quality empirical data on *employees' experiences* of these initiatives' (1997: 489). Similarly, Knights and McCabe, in drawing a more 'pessimistic' interpretation from their evidence of employee support for QM than do Rosenthal *et al.*, suggest that 'only further research can arbitrate between these differing findings' (1998: 453–4). It is to this end that the current paper addresses itself.

Whilst Knights and McCabe (1998) present purely qualitative data, this paper offers quantitative data on employee perceptions as well as qualitative material. More importantly, the study covers four cases rather than just one; all three of the most recent contributions offer just one case study: a bank named 'Qualbank' (Knights and McCabe 1998), a manufacturing firm named 'Carco' (McCabe 1999), and a supermarket chain named 'Shopco' (Rosenthal *et al.* 1997).

Two of the four organisations operate in manufacturing, and two in private services; within each sector, one is unionised and the other non-union. 'Auto Components' is a unionised, brownfield site company in the East Midlands, manufacturing a range of specialist parts for motor car engines, concentrating in particular on valve guides and valve seat inserts. 'Office Tech', a non-union, wholly owned subsidiary of a Japanese parent company, was established on a greenfield site in the West Midlands in 1986, and is primarily involved in the manufacture of photo-copying machines. 'New Bank plc' is a major financial services institution, employing around 40,000 people across a network of retail banking branches and business centres throughout Britain. 'Hotel Co' is one of the leading hotel groups in Britain, with fifteen hotels (eleven full-service and four limited-facility) situated throughout the UK.

At the heart of the analysis is a distinction between the discursive and the material aspects of work. The term 'discourse' is used here to refer to the dissemination by management of a particular organisational culture focused on quality; that is, it refers to the way that the ideology of quality is used by management to shape the values and beliefs of employees (Tuckman 1995). Since 'discourse' is used by post-structuralists as a way of undermining distinctions between language and practice, Webb (1996) prefers to use the term 'ideology', but she too maintains the distinction between this and the more 'material' conditions of work. Following Thompson and Ackroyd (1995: 626), this should not be seen as 'such a sin', since sociological dualisms of this kind operate as valuable heuristic devices to help make sense of complex organisational realities.

In maintaining this dualism, and in giving credence to both discursive and material factors, the theoretical position of the paper is closely aligned to that advanced by Casey (1995). First, it acknowledges what she refers to as the

importance of “what is said” as well as what is done ... Considering the “discursive practices” of work draws attention to the way communications (about work) are formulated, legitimated and accepted as “true” and “correct” (1995: 20). By ‘discursive practices of work’ Casey is referring to ‘communicational and symbolic relations in production and work organisation that include organizational cultural programs’ (1995: 11). The particular discursive practices focused on here are those relating to the ‘culture of quality’ and the way this is legitimated through management communication. Second, the paper utilises the distinction that Casey then draws between ‘the materiality of production ... and discursive, that is, communicational and symbolic elements in production and work organization’ (1995: 205).

The paper is split into three sub-sections. First, the extent of any connection between the discourse of quality at each organisation, the means by which this is communicated, and employee commitment is considered. Second, differing levels of commitment are discussed with reference to the material circumstances of work at each organisation. Third, it is argued that an appreciation of the conditions facilitating employee support for QM requires an understanding of the inter-relationship between both the discursive and the material elements.

The Discourse of Quality, Management Communication and Employee Commitment

The data discussed in this and the following section are summarised in the methodological note on pages 00–0. Perhaps the most successful of the four organisations in terms of levels of employee commitment to QM is Auto Components, where QM can be traced to the introduction of statistical process control in the mid-1980s, closely followed by a heavy capital investment (of around £2.5m) in new plant. This new plant was located in a new factory, where a section of the workforce has been trained in quality control techniques and operate in task-based teams with full functional flexibility. An integrated package of communication and involvement measures has been established, emphasising training and the involvement of employees in quality improvement activities. The company refers to its overall QM strategy as ‘continuous on-going improvement’ (COI).

The company employs a wide range of methods for communicating quality-related issues to employees, many of which employees find very useful (Table 1). There is widespread use of noticeboards, both general and specifically COI-related, as well as monthly employee briefings from one of the Production Directors (the minutes of which are then displayed on a factory noticeboard), a twice-yearly address by the Managing Director to all employees, and an in-house magazine called ‘Quality Matters.’ Managers are also encouraged to adopt a more ‘open’ style,

frequently spending time on the shop-floor talking to employees.

The vast majority of employees at Auto Components consider this communication to have increased trust between themselves and managers to a large degree (Table 3). They also show consistently high levels of awareness of the 'COI programme', and equate continuous quality improvement squarely with customer satisfaction and product quality (Table 4). Employees generally made positive comments on their questionnaire returns in this regard, such as: 'Since I've been here management have never given me any reason to disbelieve what they say. Honesty has always been 100 per cent, even on bad things like redundancies. Secrecy was always a problem in other companies I've worked for.'

In contrast, there is a significantly lower level of awareness of the principles of QM among employees at Office Tech. Far fewer feel that the increase in communication has increased trust between themselves and management, with a number saying it has made no difference at all (Table 3). Newsletters and noticeboards had markedly lower levels of recognition; only team briefings scored highly, with just over half of the sample describing them as 'very successful' (Table 1). At Office Tech there has been markedly less investment in formal communication methods like noticeboards and newsletters, and more reliance on the management chain.

Office Tech has had a strong quality ethos from the day it was established, with the emphasis very much on consistency in product quality, achieved through a range of quantifiable production techniques and standards. Central is the idea of making continuous incremental improvements to the product, embodied in the Japanese principle of 'kaizen'. Office Tech works to the principle of 'zero defects', so that if one defect is found the whole batch has to be re-checked. Management also try to ensure that their own decision-making procedures follow an identifiable format leading to continual increases in efficiency; this is embodied in the 'plan do check action' (PDCA) cycle, whereby department heads submit quantifiable activity plans to the Managing Director on a regular six-monthly basis.

Whilst Office Tech may employ a broader range of procedures for measuring and quantifying product quality than Auto Components, the 'softer' elements of QM are less well established. The company has experimented with quality circles, made more rigorous attempts to increase the flow of communication from management to shop-floor operatives, and begun to encourage employees more frequently to put forward their own suggestions and ideas for quality improvements. In general, however, the approach to QM involves far less of a commitment to formal communication methods than does that at Auto Components. There is very little communication via noticeboards, newsletters are used infrequently, and there is no in-house company magazine. Communication of quality-related issues is instead primarily through the management chain, the Managing Director giving a presentation to the whole workforce every two months, which is then filtered down through a series of team briefings and more informal meetings.

However, although Office Tech may communicate less than Auto Components, the company's relative lack of success in generating employee commitment to the ideology of quality is due to more than merely the extent of communication. Rather, employees may lack commitment to QM because management lack a coherent

Table 1
Communication methods

	1	2	3	4	
<i>Auto Components</i>					
noticeboards	66	34	—	—	(50)
company newsletters	24	54	20	2	(50)
team briefings (NS)	24	68	4	4	(25)
MDs address	56	38	4	2	(50)
directors briefings	24	33	24	18	(33)
informal communications	22	62	8	8	(50)
<i>Office Tech</i>					
noticeboards	6	58	36	—	(36)
company newsletters	6	56	28	11	(36)
team briefings	53	44	3	—	(36)
MDs address	14	43	34	9	(35)
informal communications	33	42	17	8	(36)
<i>New Bank</i>					
noticeboards	23	47	28	2	(47)
procedural circulars	4	68	25.5	2	(47)
staff-related circulars	17	66	15	2	(47)
communications meetings	45	53	2	—	(47)
video communications	34	40	21	4	(47)
informal communications	48	48	4	—	(46)
<i>Hotel Co</i>					
noticeboards	40	50	10	—	(48)
company newsletters	28	48	24	—	(46)
team briefings	60	36	4	—	(47)
quarterly meetings	56	40	2	2	(48)
informal communications	44	42	12.5	2	(48)

Note: 1 very successful; 2 moderately successful; 3 of little use; 4 of no use at all.

Methodological note

Interviews were conducted with a wide range of senior and middle managers, and structured questionnaires were administered to a representative sample of 50 employees in each organisation. In the tables, all figures are percentages (all except those divisible by .5 have been rounded to the nearest whole number). The figures in brackets indicate the number of respondents to each question. In some questions the sample at Auto Components is split between respondents from the 'new' (N) and the 'old' (O) parts of the factory. Key: AC=Auto Components; OT=Office Tech; NB=New Bank; HC=Hotel Co

approach and have differing views on the nature of the ideology they are trying to disseminate. The Personnel Director admits to failures in this respect, particularly with new recruits:

The one area that we have a problem with is trying to persuade newcomers to the company that this *is* the culture ... Where we fail is getting the message to everybody from day one that everything we do and they do is contributory to quality. They think at times that it is over-the-top, or too detailed, and we fail to get our message through.

Interviews revealed numerous tensions between managers at Office Tech. It would be misleading to present these as a simple polarisation between, on the one hand,

Table 2

Change in management communication under QM

	<i>AC</i>	<i>OT</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>HC</i>
a great deal more	42	29	62	55
a little more	34	47	30	24
hardly any difference	18	18	8.5	16
not as much	6	5	—	5
	(50)	(38)	(47)	(38)

Table 3

Increases in trust as a result of communication

	<i>AC</i>	<i>OT</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>HC</i>
a very large extent	20	16	11	33
a fairly large extent	46	29	34	35
some extent	32	34	38	31
not at all	2	21	17	—
	(50)	(38)	(47)	(48)

Table 4

Definition of quality

	<i>AC</i> (<i>N</i>)	<i>AC</i> (<i>O</i>)	<i>OT</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>HC</i>
quality of product	44	29	53	14	6
customer satisfaction / service	28	25	6	68	36
securing orders/competitiveness	16	29	6	—	3
quality of working environment	8	—	—	—	6
everything company does	4	17	31	18	44
quality circles	—	—	3	—	3
personal responsibility	—	—	—	—	3
	(25)	(24)	(32)	(44)	(36)

Japanese managers sticking rigidly to the policies of the parent company and, on the other hand, British managers fighting to introduce greater flexibility. Regardless of nationality, there were clear differences of opinion about the nature of the ideology of QM within the company, and about the extent of an identifiable corporate culture. If management lack a consistent message, it is no surprise to find confusion and indifference among employees. At Auto Components, by contrast, managers appear to have a more clearly defined quality message, which they communicate with greater consistency and uniformity. They also believe they have been largely successful in disseminating an ideology which reinforces the importance of employee commitment to continuous improvement. In the words of the Training and Safety Officer:

When I came to the company I detected quite a bit of resistance, cynicism, quite a few hard attitudes to what was going on ... The first six guys to go into the [teamworking] cell were ... seen as management stooges ... What is clear is that attitudes are changing ... They perceive their jobs as being under threat [and] they're actually coming on board with the new thoughts and ideas ... Previously they were very dogmatic, but they see the necessity now I think.

The views of employees at Auto Components do indeed reflect a generally high level of awareness and commitment to the principles of QM as disseminated by management. The themes of 'quality' and 'customer satisfaction' scored highly when employees were asked to rate key concepts in the discourse of QM in terms of their level of awareness among the workforce (Table 5), and many of the comments made on the questionnaire returns also reflect an appreciation of the links between them. Typical among these were: 'Improving quality and reducing scrap allows you to produce at a cheaper rate. And this will affect my wage packet and give me more job security'; 'If I buy something, I don't want it breaking down every five minutes. Our customers want the same.'

Returning to Office Tech, it may be that, due to the influence of the Japanese parent company, QM initially entailed a far grander cultural project than at Auto Components. According to many of the senior managers, the parent company wanted the British plant to be almost an exact replica of the Tokyo factory, not only in technological terms but also in terms of management practices. Many feel this led to an inevitable 'culture clash'. The views of the Finance Manager are typical:

The Japanese come in and they have these very good ideas, proven in Japan ... but where they fall down, I believe, is that they are just bolted on as if it was a Japanese factory ... We have tried to instil this cultural thing of 'customer service' ... but [it is] ... not really in the fabric of the company, and so as soon as you stop applying the pressure it drifts away or collapses ... The things they do in Japan, like quality circles and suggestion schemes, all these sorts of ideas we have tried and failed at least once on them because we have simply taken the Japanese model and just applied it.

Whilst Office Tech appears in this way to be burdened by its history, managers at

Table 5
Awareness of QM concepts

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
<i>Auto Components</i>							
quality	50	44	4	2	—	—	(50)
continuous improvement	30	28	24	18	—	—	(50)
customer satisfaction	70	16	10	4	—	—	(50)
internal and external customers	14	10	24	18	14	20	(50)
employee empowerment	8	12	26	20	20	14	(50)
total quality management	20	30	22	14	8	6	(50)
changing work culture	16	34	32	10	6	2	(50)
<i>Office Tech</i>							
quality	46	18	25	4	—	7	(28)
continuous improvement	18	32	32	11	7	—	(28)
customer satisfaction	36	11	18	25	—	11	(28)
internal and external customers	14	11	21	29	18	7	(28)
employee empowerment	11	4	15	33	22	15	(27)
total quality management	15	27	23	11.5	15	8	(26)
changing work culture	11.5	15	35	31	—	8	(26)
<i>New Bank</i>							
quality	23	56	13	4	—	—	(45)
continuous improvement	18	53.5	20	7	2	—	(45)
customer satisfaction	33	53	11	2	—	—	(45)
internal and external customers	12	28	30	19	9	2	(43)
employee empowerment	4	7	40	31	13	4	(45)
total quality management	4.5	16	27	36	14	2	(44)
changing work culture	11	38	20	31	—	—	(45)
<i>Hotel Co</i>							
quality	36	33	19	7	5	—	(42)
continuous improvement	19.5	32	29	15	5	—	(41)
customer satisfaction	58	25	10	—	7.5	—	(40)
internal and external customers	24	22	27	17	7	2	(41)
employee empowerment	36	38	14	9.5	—	2	(42)
total quality management	37	22	24	10	5	2	(41)
changing work culture	17	17	24	24	14	5	(42)

Note: 1 it is built in to everything that workers do; 2 there is a very high level of awareness; 3 there is a fairly high level of awareness; 4 there is some awareness; 5 there is little awareness; 6 there is no awareness at all.

Auto Components are in some ways liberated by theirs. Employees there tend to have been at the company longer than those at Office Tech. Many of them know how close the company came to closing during the recession of the early 1980s, and they have a respect for management for having 'saved' them from this fate.

The ideological aspects of QM at Office Tech seem, then, to have been characterised by a certain rigidity in approach, with a defined quality culture almost being forced upon the company. Similarly, although for different reasons, New Bank has attempted to impose a new culture upon less than fully committed employees. Senior management are determined to push ahead with fundamental restructuring, but many employees perceive the pace of change to have been too quick, and the widespread job losses that have occurred across the industry heighten their sense of insecurity. The data show that, across the four companies, feelings of loyalty are markedly lower among New Bank employees (Table 6). Moreover, many of them feel that despite their commitment to customer service, the continuation of inadequate staffing levels will render delivery of the bank's 'vision' impossible.

The data suggest that employees at New Bank do see 'quality' as important, and also define it largely in terms of customer satisfaction and customer service (Table 4). However, comments made on the questionnaire returns indicate that while they recognise the importance of providing a quality customer service, and are committed to doing so, they feel that the pace of change has been too quick and that the standard of customer service has actually reduced. Typical comments were: 'The bank is going through a major change. But things are happening too fast, and not enough thought has been put into ... implementation'; 'We have been pushed from pillar to post, given targets to reach, sales to make, and double the workload and responsibility. The result will surely show that quality of service has fallen'; 'The "vision" is a good idea in theory, but in practice it cannot be carried out due to inadequate staffing levels.'

The QM strategy at New Bank has involved a considerable increase in the range of methods for communicating with employees; these include noticeboards, staff circulars, newsletters, management briefings, weekly communications meetings, and an increasing use of video communications. Managers are also encouraged to be more 'open' towards staff by spending more time out of their offices and among the other employees, both behind the counter and in the public space. There has recently been an identifiable shift in emphasis from the purely qualitative aspects of

Table 6
Levels of loyalty towards the company

	<i>AC</i>	<i>OT</i>	<i>NB</i>	<i>HC</i>
a great deal	70	35	21	48
a fair amount	26	30	38	48
a little	4	24	23	2
hardly any	—	5	15	2
none at all	—	5	2	—
	(50)	(37)	(47)	(48)

QM towards attempts to measure and quantify customer service initiatives. One example is the introduction of so-called 'mystery shoppers'; detailed reports are compiled following branch visits, providing managers with quantifiable data on levels of staff courtesy and efficiency of service. More generally, the company is making more stringent attempts to elicit and monitor customer feedback, such as through the use of customer questionnaires, which are used to compile an overall 'customer satisfaction index' with scores for individual branches and offices.

The data show that employees at New Bank are more aware of increasing communication than are employees at the other three companies (Table 2), but at the same time they are by far the most sceptical about what is being communicated. They show distinctly mixed reactions when asked how useful the various communication methods are; 'informal communications' are judged of far more value than noticeboards or video communications, despite these being pushed as major tenets of the new quality communications strategy (Table 1). Moreover, a majority do not think that increasing communication has led to any significantly greater degree of trust between themselves and management (Table 3).

Employees at Hotel Co are also aware of there having been a significant increase in the level of communication since QM was introduced (Table 2). Unlike their counterparts at New Bank, however, a large majority believe this has had a positive effect in terms of increasing trust between themselves and management (Table 3). Moreover, the largest proportion define quality improvement in terms of a company-wide standard encompassing 'everything that the company does' (Table 4). The TQM programme has been explicitly designed as a company-wide approach, encouraging employees to think that quality relates to every aspect of the hotel rather than just direct dealings with customers. Clearly, then, this aspect would appear to have been internalised by a majority of employees. In a similar fashion to New Bank, Hotel Co is beginning to put more emphasis on measuring and monitoring the nature and effectiveness of employee 'empowerment'. A variety of measures of QM initiatives are being introduced, and attempts are being made to utilise customer feedback to greater effect. Standardised procedures for dealing with customers have also been introduced.

Hotel Co uses a variety of methods for communicating the principles of QM to employees. Quarterly meetings involving all staff in a particular hotel are used as a vehicle for disseminating and discussing information relating to the TQM programme. More frequent forms of communication include team briefings and the widespread use of noticeboards, which report quality circle activities and display quantitative data on performance against targets for various customer satisfaction indices. There is also an in-house monthly magazine called 'Quality Times'. Hotel Co also follows New Bank in encouraging managers to be more 'open' towards employees and to spend more of their time with staff in the public space.

Differences in the nature of the ideology of quality, and in the ways that it is

communicated by management clearly impact upon employee perceptions of QM. It is also apparent that historical and cultural factors, conflicting views among managers, as well as simply too much change, can in different ways undermine managements attempts to generate employee commitment.

Variations in Employee Responses: Organisational Contingencies

The previous section considered the influence of *management discourse* on employee commitment to QM, examining the 'culture of quality' and the way this is communicated. It was evident that the discursive aspects of quality are affected and constrained by the *material context* in which they operate (such as the nature of product markets, industrial relations history, company parentage etc.), confirming the need to address a range of factors within specific organisational contexts. Other contingent factors are also important. In a parallel study (Collinson *et al.* 1998: iii), six conditions were identified as promoting the successful implementation of QM: (i) job security; (ii) precise relationships with customers; (iii) careful appraisal and realistic expectations; (iv) training linked to quality or teamwork; (v) short-term pressures kept in check; and (vi) employee representation. While all of these conditions are pertinent to some degree in each of the cases considered here, there is not the space to discuss them all in detail; rather, the objective is merely to illustrate the importance of organisational contingencies, and it is sufficient to highlight three of these six factors in order to do this.

First, training. Where management give serious attention to training as a key aspect of QM, this tends to be reflected in widespread employee commitment. However, an emphasis on training does not guarantee employee commitment, as is well illustrated by Auto Components, where relatively high levels of employee support for QM appear to have little to do with training. Despite their clear recognition of the amount of training having increased markedly since QM was introduced (Table 7), only 8 per cent of employees from the new factory chose to describe the training they receive as 'more than adequate', by far the lowest proportion to do so from across the four companies; over half described training as either 'barely adequate' or 'not at all adequate' (Table 8). The main criticism was that production requirements too often meant that training got sidelined, as reflected in many of the comments made on the questionnaire returns, such as: 'Getting parts out the door is seen as more important than training, and this gets in the way of commitment to training'; 'It's all production here, and they don't want you to switch the machines off and take time out for training, which is a false economy in the end.' In saying that there will be an emphasis on training, management may have raised the expectations of those in the new factory, such that when those expectations are not met, resentment sets in. Despite this, we have already seen that employee

commitment to QM is generally strongest at this company. This suggests, firstly, that training is an important but not a determining influence upon employee commitment, and, secondly, that the factors influencing employee acceptance of QM work in combination, so that in this case employee dissatisfaction with training is not sufficient to detract from the generally positive attitudes towards other aspects of management strategy.

At Office Tech training is more limited to basic on-the-job issues, and reflects the need to maintain consistency in product quality. It is notable that employees appear to be far more satisfied; one-third described the training as 'more than adequate', and most of the others as 'adequate but nothing more' (Table 8). This is not to say that they were not critical (many questioned the competence and commitment of the trainers themselves), but in general they know what the training is for and they see it being delivered as described.

Training at New Bank aims to equip employees with the skills considered necessary to improve customer service and find sales opportunities. Branches have regular training days, and longer courses are held at a national training centre. A significant proportion of employees were critical of the training for being too idealistic and a 'management fad', and many actually reported that their 'real' training had decreased. Some said that training was 'not frequent enough' or was 'too basic and idealistic', as reflected in the following comments: 'A certain idealism pervades outside training courses, which does not reflect the actuality of branch

Table 7
Levels of training

	AC (N)	AC (O)	OT	NB	HC
increased	76	45.5	49	41	63
little or no change	20	54.5	38.5	25	29
decreased	4	—	13	34	8
	(25)	(22)	(39)	(44)	(38)

Table 8
Adequacy of training

	AC (N)	AC (O)	OT	NB	HC
more than adequate	8	26	33	25.5	65
adequate but nothing more	40	68	59	55	28
barely adequate	44	5	5	17	4
not at all adequate	8	—	3	2	2
	(25)	(19)	(39)	(47)	(46)

life'; 'Unfortunately, monitoring of the benefits of training is non-existent, and staff have little time to practise what they have learned due to every-day working pressures.' Furthermore, although 41 per cent said that their level of training had increased under QM, an almost equally large proportion (34 per cent) reported that it had in fact decreased, by some considerable margin the largest proportion of employees to do so from across the four companies (Table 7).

Training appears to be most clearly connected to QM at Hotel Co. There is a lengthy induction programme for all new staff, followed by regular training days in all hotels. It would appear that Hotel Co delivers on its training promises far more than Auto Components, and the attitudes of employees towards training are the most positive from across the four companies; as many as 65 per cent declared training to be 'more than adequate' (just about twice as many as the next highest proportion to do so, at Office Tech) (Table 8).

The clear inference from this data is that employees prefer straightforward targeted training (as at Hotel Co and, to a lesser extent, Office Tech), rather than training which is either felt to be too idealistic and have little or no relevance to the

Table 9

Perceived levels of job security

	AC (N)	AC (O)	OT	NB	HC
very high	32	36	45	4	28
high	52	48	39.5	21	47
moderate	16	16	16	57	23
low	—	—	—	8.5	2
very low	—	—	—	8.5	—
	(25)	(25)	(38)	(47)	(47)

Table 10

Correlations with perceived job security

	Correlation	Probability	
Degree of loyalty to company	.4130	.000	(181)
Extent to which in favour of changes when first introduced	.2657	.000	(178)
Extent to which in favour of changes now	.2598	.013	(91)
Adequacy of training	.2048	.007	(173)
Satisfaction with appraisal	.2001	.021	(132)
Level of influence over quality	.1932	.009	(180)
Importance of quality improvement	.1668	.025	(181)

Note: Pearson's parametric correlation test was applied. As the "probability" column indicates, all correlations are significant at the 5 per cent level.

reality of everyday work (as at New Bank), or is sidelined when production needs take over (as at Auto Components).

A second key conditional factor in terms of employee commitment to QM is perceptions of job security. The study of employee involvement by Marchington *et al.* (1994) showed clearly that employee views of participation schemes were strongly dependent on feelings of job security, and it is reasonable to expect that job insecurity would similarly undermine acceptance of quality programmes. This is indeed the case. Perceived levels of job security are by far the lowest among employees at New Bank (with 74 per cent choosing to describe their level of job security as either 'moderate', 'low' or 'very low') (Table 9), and we have already seen much evidence of the low level of employee commitment to QM. In contrast, levels of perceived job security are much higher at Auto Components and Hotel Co, the two organisations who overall appear to be the most successful in generating the enthusiasm and commitment of employees to quality objectives.

Further statistical analyses probed this connection further. Employee responses to a number of questions which may be taken as indicators of commitment to management strategy were correlated with perceived levels of job security (Table 10). Taking the four organisations together there is, for instance, a positive correlation between perceived job security and employees' opinion of the importance of quality, as well as their perceived level of influence over quality. In other words, the higher job security is considered to be, the more likely employees are to report a high level of influence over quality. Other correlations are somewhat stronger. The higher job security is perceived to be, the more satisfied employees say they are with appraisal and with training provision, the more likely they are to have supported the QM strategy when it was first introduced, and the more likely they are to say they are supportive of further changes now. Most notably, those employees who perceive their job security to be high are far more likely to feel loyalty towards the organisation than those who do not. And when responses to a set of questions on job satisfaction were cross-tabulated with perceived levels of job security, a clear pattern emerged (Table 11). Those who consider their job security to be 'very high' or 'high' are far more likely to report feeling 'more satisfied' with their jobs, whilst in contrast a majority of those who consider themselves to have only a 'moderate', 'low' or 'very low' level of job security say they are now 'less satisfied'.

A third contingent factor worthy of note in this section is the nature of employee representation. In the six, named, unionised companies examined by Edwards *et al.* (1998), the existence of strong co-operative relationships with trade unions appeared to foster employee commitment to QM:

Acceptance of QM ... was greatest at the Halifax where the union had the closest relationship with management, weaker in such cases as Severn Trent and Lewisham where the union was being marginalized, and weakest at Philips, where managerial antipathy to unions was most intense. (p. 470)

The four cases considered here illustrate the same pattern. Most notable is Auto Components, a unionised company with a strong union identity on the shop-floor, where management have chosen not to challenge the role of the union but rather to 'use' the union as another dimension to its communication strategy. Management are aware that the full-time union convenor, who is widely respected on the shop floor, is sympathetic to the direction of change, and have taken advantage of his potential as a communications link with employees, helping to smooth the introduction of new practices.

Whilst Auto Components may be 'using' the union, the strategy at the other unionised company, New Bank, is best described as one of 'non-engagement'. Despite many employees expressing a wish for the unions to voice their concerns about QM more strongly, the unions appear weak and divided, with little influence at the workplace level. For management, by-passing the unions may be an easy option where the unions are already weak, but it would appear that this policy may contribute to making employee support for QM more difficult to attain, especially where no alternative mechanisms for the airing of employee grievances are put in place. In contrast, although Hotel Co is a non-union company, employees nevertheless feel that alternative channels have been made available which allow for constructive criticism of the QM process, and their support for management-led initiatives may as a consequence be more readily forthcoming.

These observations do not imply that a trade union is a necessary condition for employee acceptance of quality. Rather, they suggest that where workers have strong

Table 11
Job security and job satisfaction

	<i>AC</i> (<i>N</i>)	<i>AC</i> (<i>O</i>)	<i>NB</i>	<i>HC</i>
<i>Change in level of job satisfaction</i>				
more satisfied	79	60	36	58.5
little or no change	17	32	16	34
less satisfied	4	8	48	7
	(24)	(25)	(44)	(41)
<i>Cross-tabulation of job satisfaction with perceived job security</i>				
	Job Satisfaction			
	more	no change	less	
Job Security	very high	21	7	1
	high	38	12	3
	moderate	13	14	15
	low	5		
	very low	1	3	

(133)

union traditions it does seem that working with and not against the union helps to generate the trust necessary for quality principles to take root. This supports McCabe's argument that 'TQM cannot simply be dismissed as a trojan horse of non or anti-unionism' (1999: 666). Rather, taken with the data on job security, the strong implication here is that it is secure and organised workers who are the most likely to have positive perceptions of QM.

Conclusion

In terms of the 'empowerment vs. intensification' debate this paper has, following Knights and McCabe (1998) and Rosenthal *et al.* (1997), sought to take a 'middle position'. It has also attempted to go further than recent commentators by exploring the reasons why the balance between management control and employee commitment will *vary* in different organisational circumstances.

Of central importance is the discourse of quality, that is, the nature of the 'culture of quality' and the way this is communicated by management. At the same time, whilst managements may have a degree of flexibility here, they operate in specific organisational contexts, and elements of this context can condition the breadth of strategic choice to a considerable extent. Both the cultural and historical context of organisations, as well as the pace of change, can alter the balance of effects of QM. Other contextual issues have also been discussed, in particular training provision, perceptions of job security, and representative structures.

This emphasis on the 'context-dependent' nature of QM undermines the implicit assumption within much of the prescriptive literature that a 'quality blueprint' can be introduced into any organisation and impact positively upon employee commitment. This is best illustrated by the case of New Bank, which has introduced a whole plethora of new initiatives in the name of customer satisfaction, quality improvement and cultural change, and yet has signally failed to enhance employee commitment.

The analysis has not privileged either the discursive or the material aspects, but has indicated that both need to be addressed to gain a fuller understanding of the implications of QM for employees. Post-structuralist writers may counter that 'material relations' cannot be split off from discourse in this way, since they are discursively defined and a matter of contestation and debate. Whilst acknowledging this point, this dualism is used here as a heuristic device, since it allows the separation of various factors within the complexity of QM initiatives, and facilitates a clearer view of their relative influence on employees' subjective attitudes. As Newton (1998) argues, materialist writers may well need to provide more convincing accounts of how material contingencies work through subjective individuals, in other words how structure is constituted through agency. However, the best way to capture this is not through abandoning the structure/agency and

material/discursive distinctions altogether, but rather through detailed case study work which is premised upon their interrelationship, and which does not give undue credence to either aspect. This paper has sought to adopt just such an approach, and to avoid the tendency in many post-structuralist accounts to over-emphasise the pervasiveness of management discourses; as Rosenthal *et al.* (1997) point out, such accounts

are long on the content of ideological or discursive messages and on theories of identity. They are short, however, on the substantiation that managerial ideologies or discourses do indeed work in the ways that they allege. Little evidence has been presented for the view that corporations have substantial effects on the attitudes, beliefs or identities of their employees. (pp. 485–6)

The cases presented here suggest a more balanced conclusion, namely that management discourses of quality *do* have effects, but that these effects are mediated by contextual and material factors. Since they are inter-dependent, the precise delineation between discursive and material processes remains hard to grasp. However, what is clear is that in none of these cases were management able to exercise a 'discursive closure' that precluded employee resistance to, and negotiation with, quality management initiatives.

The paper has combined the discursive/material distinction with an emphasis on the 'context-dependent' nature of QM, as a means of understanding worker responses to organisational change. In each of the four organisations studied, these responses were complex, and influenced by a specific mixture of identity relations, corporate strategies and organisational context.

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Chris Rees
 School of Human Resource Management
 Kingston University
 Kingston Hill
 Kingston upon Thames
 Surrey
 KT2 7LB
 email: c.rees@kingston.ac.uk