



# Teamworking and service quality: the limits of employee involvement

Teamworking  
and service  
quality

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**Keywords** *Teamwork, Total quality management, Empowerment, Management control*

**Abstract** *This article reports employee attitudes towards quality management (QM) at two organisations in the private services sector. It examines the nature and extent of employee involvement in QM through teamworking, describes the methods which managements use to encourage teamworking, and assesses the levels of responsibility and autonomy that teams have. Actual levels of discretion and responsibility afforded to teams are found to be low, and yet employees consistently report feeling a strong “sense of teamwork”. Managers are using various mechanisms to increasingly control or limit the extent of employee “empowerment”. At the same time, however, there is strong employee support for teams, and employees feel that teamworking allows them to have more input into problem-solving and decision-making. This article argues that what has occurred in each case is a “re-organisation of control”, such that there has been a general increase in the level of employee involvement, but within increasingly defined and measurable limits.*

## Introduction

This paper is concerned with examining levels of employee involvement in service quality at two organisations. The first, New Bank, is a major financial services institution, employing around 40,000 people across a network of retail banking branches and business centres throughout Britain. In the late 1980s, with competition developing rapidly within the financial services market, the company perceived the need to compete more on quality and to improve the level of customer service. Although not formally committed to the banner headline of “total quality management” (TQM), the company’s stated corporate “vision” is to become “first choice” for customers and staff, and in so doing the quality of customer service is recognised as of paramount importance. The second organisation, Hotel Co, is one of the leading hotel groups in Britain, with 15 hotels situated throughout the UK. Staff numbers range from around 130 in the full-service hotels to around 30 in the smaller limited-facility establishments. In the early 1980s the company began to realise that it could only gain competitive advantage through its service standards surpassing those of other hotels. After launching its first “Customer Care” programme in 1984, the company subsequently took two years planning and developing a thoroughgoing TQM programme, largely under the personal guidance of the managing director.

The origins of the quality management (QM) strategies at these two organisations place them squarely within what has recently been classified by Wilkinson *et al.* (1998, p. 26) as the “third phase” in the development of TQM in

the UK. The four phases they describe are: “Japanisation” and quality circles; company wide quality; catering for the customer; and the spread of quality initiatives into the public sector. The third phase is said to have begun in the mid-1980s with the growing concern with customer service in the services sector – including retailing, financial services and the hospitality industry – as competition intensified. At both New Bank and Hotel Co the main driving force behind the introduction of QM was indeed the need to gain competitive advantage in a market place where the products on offer are fundamentally the same. More generally, while it is not identical in each case, within both financial services and the hotel and catering industry the employee/customer interaction is typically regarded as an important source of profitability, and managements are thus increasingly dependent on staff to provide what Fuller and Smith (1991) term “quality service work”.

The particular aspect of front-line employees’ work that this paper focuses on is teamworking. The links between QM programmes and teamworking are well established. Indeed, Dean and Bowen’s (1994) review of the literature suggests that teamworking is one of the three key principles of TQM (the others are “customer focus” and “continuous improvement”). Teamworking is seen as one of the central means of involving employees in continuous improvement activities, and thus in raising levels of customer satisfaction.

A useful way of conceptualising the role of teamworking in quality strategies is to begin by considering how it relates to “employee empowerment”. In normative accounts of empowerment certain key elements are likely to be present, such as a sense of personal efficacy and worth, a sense of individual power, and the freedom to use that power in the achievement of valued goals (Conger and Kanungo, 1988; Foy, 1994; Sparrowe, 1994). Peters and Waterman (1982) put an emphasis on treating people as adults, avoiding a rigid chain of command and encouraging employees to use their initiative. Lyth and Johnston (1996) list eight overlapping but different definitions of empowerment, in which terms such as delegation, responsibility and control figure prominently. However, as Collinson and Edwards (1998) argue, although empowerment is frequently used as a short-hand for discretion, autonomy and responsibility, more precision is desirable, and it is more fruitful to see empowerment as a “constrained process”, and as essentially referring to “the use of employees’ abilities within goals defined by management”. It is this emphasis on the constrained nature of employee involvement which is developed here, illustrating also the observation by Wilkinson (1998) that empowerment tends to be strongly managerially-led and to reflect business considerations such as quality and productivity.

The ways in which teamworking reflects this particular conceptualisation of empowerment can be clarified by sketching an analytical framework which locates empowerment within the context of other initiatives with which it shares many assumptions and roots, such as “employee involvement”, “employee participation” and “industrial democracy”. A number of typologies are relevant here. Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) identified a continuum of

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employee involvement in managerial decisions moving through three broad management styles – directive, consultative and participant. Strauss (1979) refers to three different participation models, distinguished by the depth of workers' influence over management – consultative participation, co-management and workers' self-management. More recently, Marchington *et al.* (1992) have used employee participation as an umbrella term covering all forms of employee influence: employee involvement is used as a term to describe managerially inspired initiatives aimed at winning employee commitment, and industrial democracy as those practices whose aim is to increase the rights of employees to participate in management decisions. These schema have been taken forward by Lashley (1997, p. 33) in order to illustrate the variety of managerial intentions for empowerment and the different forms that it may take. The four “managerial meanings” and some of their associated initiatives are: “empowerment through participation” (e.g. autonomous work groups, job enrichment); “empowerment through involvement” (e.g. quality circles, team briefings); “empowerment through commitment” (e.g. employee share ownership, profit-sharing); “empowerment through delayering” (e.g. job redesign, job enrichment). In focusing on task-based and problem-solving teams, this paper is thus primarily concerned with the first two of these categories, and in particular with “empowerment through involvement”. Lashley (1997, pp. 56-7) defines this as follows:

Empowerment through involvement aims to engage employees . . . without sharing decision-making. The forms of empowerment are largely concerned with developing a sense of “ownership” in employees so that those directly concerned with customer service will provide the appropriate service to customers and will look for ways of improving customer service through the benefit of their own experience . . . [They are] largely concerned with task level issues, and limited to an agenda of items which is restricted to work organization, productivity and quality improvement, and problem-solving customer satisfaction issues. They allow employees limited power, because in all cases managers make the final decisions. Employees have opportunities to make suggestions and identify issues for improvement, but decisions remain the domain of managers.

The literature discussing the implications of teamworking for employees can be broadly split into four points along a continuum: from the rather “messianic” tone of – for example – Wickens (1987), through the “optimistic” view (e.g. Hill, 1991) to the more balanced “contingency” accounts (e.g. Wilkinson *et al.*, 1992), and finally on to the more “critical” labour process accounts (e.g. Delbridge and Turnbull, 1992). These positions are not expanded on in any detail here (for a more thorough review see Rees, 1997). Rather, the paper takes such debates largely as read, and concentrates on the presentation of case study data[1]. However, since the theoretical position of the paper has a degree of overlap with the “critical” perspective, it is necessary to elaborate on this briefly.

The central argument of this perspective is that the greater employee autonomy and discretion implied by teamworking is invariably accompanied by an intensification of work and increased surveillance (cf. McArdle *et al.*, 1995; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Webb, 1996). Parker and Slaughter (1993) have suggested that teams as constituted under QM systems are a far cry from

the “semi-autonomous work groups” of the 1960s and 1970s, which were designed to enhance worker control and job satisfaction. Rather, they see teamworking as part of an overall management package which they term “management by stress”, whereby teamworking both facilitates labour intensification and acts as a self-policing device through peer surveillance and control. Similarly, Delbridge and Turnbull (1992) describe task-based teamworking as a form of “management through compliance”, whereby organising workers into teams and making these teams accountable for their own performance allows managements to impose a “customer ethos” on the workforce, and harness the peer pressure of fellow team members to ensure compliance to organisational objectives.

While finding some evidence to support these points, this paper rejects the argument that QM leads to straight intensification. At the same time, it avoids the conclusion that QM has the potential to lead to wholly positive outcomes for employees. Rather, it is drawn towards an intermediate position which emphasises the role of teamworking in “re-organising control”. This entails an attempt to conceptualise one of the central contradictions within QM; as Legge (1995, p. 223) has pointed out, it:

seem[s] to argue for delegation and centralisation simultaneously. On the one hand, it [is] suggested that employees are empowered in order to take responsibility at operational level for quality and continuity of production ... On the other hand, it [is] suggested that management have a pre-eminent role in the devising of systematic standardised systems for achieving quality that limit spontaneous initiative on the shopfloor.

What follows is an illustration of these twin dimensions of QM through a consideration of the operation of teamworking at New Bank and Hotel Co.

The analysis is split into two sections. The first section examines employee involvement in task-based teamworking (i.e. the nature of the organisation of work into teams). In terms of the hard/soft model of QM developed by Wilkinson *et al.* (1992), this form of teamworking can be considered as one of the “hard” elements of QM, since it stems from the nature of the organisation of production; teams arise because jobs are designed and organised on the basis of functional flexibility, and management may encourage their development by arranging tasks and work routines in certain ways. Much importance is assigned to task-based teamworking in the QM literature (cf. Coyle-Shapiro, 1995; Dale and Cooper, 1992; Waldman, 1994), and it is generally considered to be a key factor in securing employee flexibility and generating organisational commitment. As for the claims made for empowerment through task-based teamworking, Appelbaum and Batt (1994, p. 135) argue in their review of new forms of work organisation in the USA that “the American team-based model leads to a real redistribution of power and authority in the workplace”.

The second section of the paper considers employee involvement in policy development groups. These are problem-solving teams as opposed to task-based teams, and can be considered as one of the “soft” elements of QM, in the sense that they are set up by management for the explicit purpose of involving employees in decision-making, in an attempt to make greater use of their latent

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potential and encourage their commitment to managerial objectives. Problem-solving teams thus do not stem from the organisation of production; indeed, they have no necessary relationship with the nature of work tasks at all, but are instead voluntary groups initiated by management. The main form that problem-solving teams take is quality circles, and these too are considered central to the achievement of employee commitment within QM organisations (see also Dale and Boaden, 1994; Gallie and White, 1993). Referring to both of these forms of teamworking, Lashley (1997, p. 41) argues that:

Experience of group working can provide a source of satisfaction to participating employees. Being able to have some influence over decisions, even though restricted to tasks, is seen by some employees as an improvement on more traditional command and control structures. Similarly, group membership and developing relationships between the work group can also be satisfying through the feelings of mutuality and support for individuals.

### **Task-based teamworking**

#### *New Bank*

At New Bank, it is difficult to identify discernible task-based teams. There appear to be parallel, and to some extent contradictory, trends occurring. On the one hand there is the promotion of the idea of the branch as a “team”. As a regional quality service co-ordinator explained:

In terms of the service improvement programme that the bank is now driving through . . . [there will be] further teamwork activity, but far more focused around business objectives, where people will actually have improvement objectives to go for, tailored to their own branch needs.

On the other hand, there is an increasing degree of demarcation between the different sections within branches, which tends to increase interaction between employees within sections at the expense of branch-wide co-operation:

The introduction of sectionalisation has . . . helped team spirit within the individual sections, but if I need a cashier to support the cashiers team at 3.30 p.m. because we're busy, we have to call relief from another team, and that's where the team spirit has gone at the moment. (Branch Manager)

This variety in the nature of task-based teamworking at New Bank is reflected in the perceptions of employees themselves. Two-thirds said that they usually worked in a team, but defined this in a variety of different ways. A total of 69 per cent said that the other members of their team would “always” help if there were problems with a job. The largest category (50 per cent) described the sense of teamwork in their group as “fairly strong”, with fewer (29 per cent) opting to describe it as “very strong”. Around half said that this sense of teamwork had increased during the past three years.

Concerning the degree of responsibility which teams have for organising work, a large proportion (69 per cent) reported that this responsibility had increased. At the same time, however, a far smaller proportion (26 per cent) described the team as having responsibility for the allocation of work between individual employees.

As regards perceptions of the relative levels of influence of themselves, their supervisors and their work group, employees at New Bank ascribed a large degree of influence to themselves. A large majority (73 per cent) described themselves as having a “great deal” of influence over the pace at which they work, when they can have a break (65 per cent), and deciding how they are to carry out tasks (70 per cent). As for teams themselves, their influence remains low, and it is only over the issue of the allocation of work between team members where more than half said that their team had either a “fair amount” or a “great deal” of influence.

Significant numbers of employees at New Bank reported that they had acquired new skills and responsibilities through teamworking. The skills acquired were generally said to be those of communication and “people skills”, mirroring the heavy emphasis on man-management and leadership as areas in which responsibilities were felt to have increased.

Employees were then asked about the effect they felt working in teams had had on a variety of issues, and about how they would feel if the bank abandoned its general quality improvement programme. On the first issue, few merited the specific issue of teamworking with having had a particularly positive effect on most issues. For instance, a considerable number said that teamworking had either had “no effect” or had led to a decrease in the variety of tasks in their job (54 per cent), their level of responsibility (39 per cent) and their level of job satisfaction (41 per cent). Most also appeared less committed to the bank’s overall “vision”, with 56 per cent saying they either would not mind or would positively prefer it if it were to be abandoned. Among the other 44 per cent who said they would be a “bit sorry” or “very sorry” if this happened, a sense of teamworking and team spirit figured very low down on the list of what they said they would miss.

It is, then, not easy to identify the extent of task-based teamworking at New Bank. Indeed, managers themselves have different conceptions of the boundaries of task-based groups, some defining them on a branch-wide basis and others referring to a growing sense of teamworking within sections. As regards the definitions of employees, the data reveal that some two-thirds consider themselves as working in a team, which they define in a variety of ways. Other employees were said to be supportive, and a fairly strong sense of teamwork was reported. Working in teams was also said by many to have led to the adoption of new skills and responsibilities, although the general level of commitment to teamworking among employees at New Bank is low.

#### *Hotel Co*

Hotel Co operates task-based teamworking within defined work areas. For example, in one of the full-service hotels studied there is now full functional flexibility within two key areas. One is “food and beverages”; where previously there were rigid demarcations between the bar, the restaurant and room service, all of the employees in these areas can now inter-change and work in any area. The other area is “reception”; where previously this was divided

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between switchboard, night audit and reception, now all employees inter-link with one another. The personnel and training manager from this hotel extols the virtues of functional flexibility in organisational terms, and also believes it has had a direct effect on the quality of customer service:

There is certainly the flexibility there . . . so if there's a staff shortage or a sudden busy period then they can help one another out . . . And this was very much to give flexibility from a rota point of view, and to be able to give the customer the kind of service they wanted at the time they wanted it . . . The majority [of jobs] have got people contact, and if they've got the people skills then we can transfer them.

Generally speaking it is in the larger hotels that this functional flexibility within departments is to be found. In the smaller hotels there is greater flexibility between as well as within specific work areas. As one of the assistant general managers from a limited-facility establishment explained:

[A full-service] hotel . . . is very departmentalised, . . . [whereas] here someone might work in a restaurant, then work on the desk, then they might clean rooms, then work on reservations. So people work in other people's areas. The idea . . . is flexibility, so that everyone can work in at least two departments . . . One of the good things about TQM here is that I've never heard anybody say "That's not my job". Everyone seems willing to do anything.

Teams are thus generally defined in terms of each functional area in the hotel. All those working in "food and beverages" are one team, whether they be in the restaurant or kitchens. All those in "front of house" are another team, regardless of which particular job they usually do. As a front desk manager explained:

When I started here three years ago a receptionist could do a receptionist's job, a telephonist could do a telephonist's job, a cashier could do a cashier's job, and someone on night audit could be a night auditor. But they are all multi-functional now, and they don't have particular roles . . . As far as we are concerned in front office, we are one team.

The majority of employees at Hotel Co (69 per cent) did indeed recognise themselves as working in teams. The largest category of employees – 50 per cent, the same figure as at New Bank – described the sense of teamwork in their group as "fairly strong". Most (57 per cent) said that it had increased in the last three years, and the majority (60 per cent) said that other team members were always willing to help out if there were problems. As regards the responsibility of teams for organising and allocating work, the responses of employees at Hotel Co are very similar to those at New Bank. That is, while a majority (in this case 61 per cent) said that the responsibility of the team for organising work had increased, a far smaller proportion (32 per cent) said that the team had responsibility for allocating work between individual employees.

Concerning the relative levels of influence of themselves, their supervisors and their work group, again a majority at Hotel Co ascribed a "great deal" of influence to themselves over three particular issues: namely, the pace at which they work (60 per cent), how they do the task at hand (70 per cent), and when they can have a break (58 per cent). Supervisors are deemed to have the most influence over deciding when employees start and finish their work (81 per cent

said they had a “fair amount” or a “great deal” of influence), the allocation of work between team members (78 per cent), and also how tasks are carried out (78 per cent). Once again, the work group was ascribed relatively little influence over these issues.

The extent to which employees at Hotel Co said they have been required to develop new skills and responsibilities as a result of working in teams is also similar to New Bank: that is, a majority said they have done this, but rather more said they have developed new skills (in this case 81 per cent) than new responsibilities (58 per cent). As for the nature of these, the emphasis was again on communication and “people skills”, and corresponding responsibility for man-management and leadership.

To sum up, task-based teamworking exists at Hotel Co insofar as employees rotate between jobs within distinct functional areas. In the smaller hotels, there tends also to be functional flexibility between these areas. Managers consider this to be a more efficient way of organising work, and believe that it contributes to improvements in the quality of customer service. The data have shown that, in line with employees at New Bank, most employees at Hotel Co consider themselves to be working in a team. A fairly strong sense of teamwork is reported by a majority of employees, and a supportive atmosphere is said to exist when problems arise. Most employees also say that they have adopted new skills and responsibilities as a result of working in teams.

### **Problem-solving teamworking**

#### *New Bank*

The QM strategy at New Bank began with an emphasis on the “softer” elements, with the aim of instilling in employees the importance of customer satisfaction, and encouraging them to put forward ideas about ways of improving the quality of service provision. Within this framework, quality circles were seen as the best means of improving communications and winning the active commitment of employees to service quality.

These quality circles were called “quality service action teams” (QSATs). Branches were instructed to set up teams which would meet on a regular weekly basis, follow a structure for identifying problems, and then come up with a solution which would be presented to management for acceptance or rejection. However, after operating with QSATs for some two years, senior management began to identify fundamental problems, which led to a change in the nature of problem-solving teamworking at the bank. The conclusion was drawn that, due to insufficient management direction, QSATs tended to be looking too hard to find problems, managers considered many of the issues they raised to be relatively insignificant, and QSAT members themselves were becoming de-motivated as fewer of their ideas were taken up.

As a consequence of these problems, QSATs were re-vamped, with more emphasis on management involvement, and with a stronger link to broader



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management objectives. These newer problem-solving groups were called “quality improvement teams” (QITs). A branch manager described the process of change as follows:

We had “quality service action teams” in branches . . . but unfortunately it died a bit of a death, because branches who went into it quite enthusiastically ran out of ideas, and I’m also not so sure that the customer perceived our quality as being any better . . . Now we tend to use QITs more than anything . . . QSATs are about saying “Can we find any problems”? . . . [whereas] QITs are reactive. So, say I get three complaints on standing orders, and it’s a common complaint, we get a QIT together and say “Right, let’s try and knock this on the head”.

The aim now, is to only operate problem-solving teams which focus on particular issues, especially those which have implications for the “bottom line”. *Ad hoc* groups are formed by managers, and centred on particular business issues. As a regional quality service co-ordinator explained:

We will use the teamwork concept, but teams will be formed to attack particular areas, *ad hoc* teams, not just the same team that meets every Wednesday. We don’t want a team to be faffing around for three or four months without really generating any constructive way forward . . . It needs to be focused around business objectives . . . Before it was a team looking for a problem rather than a problem being there and a team being formed to solve it, which is really much more focused.

New Bank is keen that problem-solving teams stick to specific identifiable objectives, and that managers intervene to ensure that this is the case:

The bank has found you will get better value if the teamwork concept is managerially focused and centred on particular business issues. The results are then much better, and management need to stay close to know what is going on (quality service co-ordinator).

Formal problem-solving teams are not the only means for “bottom-up” employee involvement at New Bank. Other *ad hoc* meetings are frequently held, particularly on a departmental basis, and the weekly communication meetings also provide an opportunity for suggestions to be put forward.

The vast majority of employees (91 per cent) reported that problem-solving meetings were held. However, when asked to describe these meetings, only 29 per cent referred to quality circle-type groups (QSATs or QITs), while a markedly larger proportion (44 per cent) referred to another more regular form of meeting, namely weekly communication meetings. However, the largest proportion (40 per cent) said that problem-solving meetings are held “once every few weeks” (with only 24 per cent saying “once a week”). This suggests that the majority were indeed following the instruction on the questionnaire to think only of quality circle-type groups when answering this particular set of questions.

A large proportion of employees at New Bank (62 per cent) said that they either “always” or “often” attended problem-solving meetings, and by far the largest proportion (68 per cent) said they did so in order to “know what is going on”. Most reported that they feel under far more pressure to attend problem-solving meetings from supervisors (66 per cent reporting either a “fair amount”

or a “great deal” of pressure), and from more senior management (73 per cent), than they do from either their own work group (45 per cent) or other employees (45 per cent).

Around two-thirds of employees at New Bank said they believe management to give either a “reasonable amount” or a “great deal” of serious consideration to the ideas put to them by problem-solving teams, and they were virtually unanimous in describing these teams as generally a “good thing”. The largest proportions said that the groups allowed them an opportunity to be involved in discussing problems (55 per cent), and a chance to put their own views forward (26 per cent).

So, problem-solving teamworking at New Bank was a central aspect of the initial QM strategy and has since then been subject to something of a re-generation. There was a move by senior management to re-focus quality circles so that they would be more managerially led and consider issues more closely identified with business objectives. The data show a generally high level of awareness of quality circles among employees, although many equate involvement in problem-solving on a group basis more readily with weekly communication meetings. Pressure to attend problem-solving groups was said to be greatest from supervisors and more senior managers. Some commented that this pressure can cause problems as other countervailing pressures often take precedence. In the words of one employee:

They [quality circles] are good in theory as there is always room for improvement. In practice our jobs are so busy that we do not have any spare time in the day, and we do not have enough staff to serve and answer phones while others are in a meeting.

Despite these pressures, employees at New Bank generally consider quality circle-type groups to be positive, to the extent that they allow them an opportunity to put their views forward and be kept abreast of new developments.

### *Hotel Co*

The trajectory which problem-solving teamworking has followed at Hotel Co is very similar to that at New Bank. The QM strategy began with the same emphasis on the importance of customer service and on encouraging employees to seek ways to improve it. Initially the best means to achieve this was considered to be through a comprehensive quality circle policy. This was the defining feature of the TQM programme at Hotel Co for some two to three years.

Since that time, however, the efficacy of free-standing, regular, “bottom-up” problem-solving teams has been increasingly challenged at the company. As a result, although quality circles still operate in many hotels, there is an increasing tendency for groups to be more *ad hoc* and for managers to be more involved in their operation. This transition is summed up by one of the general managers as follows:

Quality circles were introduced with the idea that they would meet, decide what they wanted to work on, and then solve problems within their own work area. There was nothing dictated by management. It all had to be driven from the bottom, and that did cause some problems. The situation now is that at this hotel there are no groups of people who meet on a regular

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basis and find problems and try to solve them. The only time there will be people working on something is if I get that going. Quality circles . . . [were] difficult because it wasn't driven by management, and so you couldn't give it any direction.

Some managers at Hotel Co are highly critical of the "textbook formula" for quality circles, which dictates that employees are left free to identify problems themselves and come up with their own suggestions for solutions to them. Their criticisms reflect many of the points made by managers at New Bank. The views of this assistant general manager sum up these feelings in fairly stark terms:

I can't stand quality circles. Basically I've got no patience with them. The whole point of quality circles is that everyone has got a chance and everyone can air their views, but then someone puts forward a totally ridiculous view and you feel like saying "Don't be so stupid", but you can't do that, you've got to say "Mmmm, yes, that's interesting", I mean, what a waste of time! And the process takes so long. Some groups take months and months to come up with a solution, and you think "I could have told you that in the first place". We [management] usually know what the problem is, and we know what the solution is too, so let's just get on with it . . . With quality circles . . . you're just going *round* in circles, and getting nowhere.

Again echoing views expressed at New Bank, most managers at Hotel Co believe that problem-solving teams operate more effectively if they are initiated as and when required by management, rather than meeting on a regular basis regardless of whether a particular problem has been identified. This approach is also seen as more likely to generate the co-operation of employees. As a general manager explained:

If I'd said "Look, I need an action team to look at something", they would have said "Oh, bloody hell, here he goes again, he wants more people to do more work in their own time". But if I say "We've got this problem we need to sort out, can a couple of you help me with it over a cup of coffee?", there won't be a problem.

The nature of the organisation of work within the hotels also means that some managers find it difficult to release their staff to attend quality circle meetings on a regular basis. As such, the more *ad hoc* approach to problem-solving teamworking is preferred:

It's more important that I can get customers into the hotel and get them out effectively, and I can't just close the desk. Whereas every other department in the hotel can effectively say "OK, we're not here for an hour", we can't just say "Sorry, we're all in a quality circle, check yourselves in and we'll see you later!" (front desk manager).

Again in line with New Bank, Hotel Co also has other means available for the "bottom-up" involvement of employees in problem-solving activity, with regular departmental meetings being primary among these.

Every employee at Hotel Co reported that problem-solving meetings did take place. When asked to describe these meetings, the responses were again similar to those from employees at New Bank. Although a slightly higher proportion (37 per cent) referred directly to quality circles, there was still an even larger proportion who thought first of another form of meeting (in this case, 39 per cent referred to departmental meetings). The great majority of employees at Hotel Co (93 per cent) said that problem-solving groups met on a regular basis.

When asked how often this was, the responses split reasonably evenly between those saying "once a week" (36 per cent), those saying "once every few weeks" (24 per cent), and those saying "once a month" (29 per cent).

Employees at Hotel Co have a high rate of attendance at problem-solving meetings, with 71 per cent saying that they "always" attend. As for the reasons for this, the bulk said that they attended in order to "know what is going on" and to be involved in discussing and solving problems. When asked if they felt under pressure to attend these meetings, many said that they felt under no pressure at all. Of those who did report feeling under pressure, the answers are less clear cut than at New Bank, but they do show a similar pattern; that is, higher proportions report pressure from senior managers (20 per cent saying this amounts to a "great deal" of pressure) and from supervisors (17 per cent) than they do from either their own work group or other employees.

As for the degree of consideration which employees at Hotel Co believe managers give to the ideas which are generated by problem-solving teams, the responses are almost identical to those at New Bank, with 71 per cent replying either a "reasonable amount" or a "great deal". They are also similarly emphatic in describing these groups as generally a "good thing". Once again, it is the opportunity to be involved in discussing and solving problems that is most highly valued.

To sum up, quality circles have been a permanent and central feature of the QM strategy at Hotel Co. Latterly they have been subject to the same kinds of changes as have occurred at New Bank, whereby they have become more managerially led and more likely to occur only when management identifies particular problems. Managers believe they need to be more involved if the teams are to be effective and if the willing co-operation of employees is to be elicited. The data show a high level of awareness of quality circles among employees at Hotel Co, and a large proportion report that they always attend them. What pressure there is to attend is again perceived as coming mainly from more senior managers. Employees generally see quality circles in a positive light, and believe that management does give genuine consideration to the ideas which they put forward.

### **Employee empowerment through teamworking: opportunities and constraints**

This paper has described the extent to which employee involvement in teamworking is part of the QM strategy at two organisations in the private services sector, and a range of data have been presented on employee attitudes towards teams. Two different forms of teamworking have been identified, and both companies have been found to use each one to varying degrees.

The first form of teamworking discussed was task-based teamworking, which refers to the way in which work tasks are organised around teams of employees. The primary advantage for management commonly associated with this form of teamworking is that it allows for increased flexibility in the allocation and carrying out of work routines. It is at the same time generally

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considered to help generate a greater sense of involvement and commitment on the part of employees. Managers at both organisations did indeed identify these as the main benefits.

As a general rule, it is likely to be less easy to identify clearly defined task-based teamworking at service sector organisations. By contrast, at manufacturing companies the nature of the lay-out of the production line will tend to determine work routines to a large degree, and if task-based teamworking exists it is likely to be more clearly structured. This assumption, however, is not entirely borne out here. At least in the case of Hotel Co there is a good deal of functional flexibility between different employees within the same work areas. Moreover, it is striking that even where formally prescribed teams do not exist (as at New Bank), a large proportion of employees nevertheless describe themselves as working “in a team”, and the vast majority report feeling a “sense of teamwork” within their work area.

A useful way of looking in more depth behind this rather bland conclusion is to consider the data in terms of a series of steps or “hurdles” which must be overcome if the organisation can be said to operate with full or “real” task-based teamworking. Large numbers of employees may say that they work in a team, but what does the data tell us about the actual levels of responsibility and autonomy that these “teams” have? Can they be classified as autonomous or semi-autonomous work groups, or does decision-making authority still reside at a higher level, while the term “teamworking” is loosely used to describe any kind of mutual assistance or problem-sharing between employees in the same general work area? Consideration of the findings in this manner will allow for a more nuanced conclusion as to the true extent of employee involvement in teamworking at each organisation.

The data have shown over two-thirds of employees at each company describing themselves as working in a team. An obvious starting point in critically assessing the extent of autonomy that these teams have is to consider the nature of the allocation of work between team members. One would expect that if teams had any real degree of discretion they would themselves be responsible for determining the way tasks are distributed between each team member. However, we have seen that at New Bank a substantial majority of employees say that work is allocated to each individual within the team by a supervisor or more senior manager. At Hotel Co a slightly higher proportion (around one-third) say that work tasks are assigned to the team for allocation between team members. This is hardly evidence of autonomous work groups with discretion to decide who does what within the team, but rather suggests that authority to determine the allocation of tasks resides almost permanently at a higher level.

A second “test” of the extent of team authority is provided by the responses to the question about the relative levels of influence which work teams, supervisors and employees have over a variety of issues. Although the answers appear complex, some clear trends emerge. Most striking is the extent to which employees feel that they as individuals have the most influence over certain issues. Employees consistently say that they themselves have the greatest

influence over issues such as the pace of work, how work tasks are carried out, and when breaks can be taken. Supervisors tend to be assigned primary responsibility for certain other issues, such as the setting of output targets, the allocation of work between team members, the rotation of team members between jobs, and when work is started and finished. On none of these issues is “the work group” consistently said to have the highest level of influence. Once again, the picture emerging is one of teams in name only. Although large numbers of employees say that they work in a team, the lack of real authority and autonomy in these teams is underlined by the evidence provided by employees themselves, who consistently report that decisions are either made above the level of the team, or else by themselves as individuals without reference to the view of the group as a whole.

Evidence that the teamworking reported is of a weak rather than a strong character is also apparent from the definitions of teamworking which employees themselves provide. Hotel Co has a more advanced form of task-based teamworking, and it is indeed here that the largest proportions of employees describe themselves as working “in a team”. However, over two-thirds of employees at New Bank similarly say that they work “in a team”. The data show the largest proportion here defining this team in very general terms as simply “people working together to achieve aims”. So, it appears that even where functional or task-based flexibility is not a recognised management policy or has not been found to be a central feature of the organisation of work routines, employees will tend nevertheless to apply the term “teamworking” to other more general forms of day-to-day co-operation between themselves and their work colleagues.

This is an important point insofar as it illustrates the importance of probing employees’ own views on what constitutes “teamworking”, as opposed to relying on the application of a pre-conceived definition. “Informal’ definitions of teamworking remain important, and yet they are only likely to be picked up through qualitative investigation, as opposed to relying on surveys of managerial respondents. As Geary (1996, pp. 7-8) has noted:

the presence of teamworking as reported by management tells us little of how work organisation may have or may not have changed. There may have been considerable informal teamworking in place and its formal introduction by management may have had a negligible effect. Alternatively, while management may have moved to introduce teamworking, this may not have been accompanied by an increase in employees’ discretion or autonomy.

Turning now to consider problem-solving teamworking, the rationale behind its introduction again reflects a desire to generate greater commitment to management objectives through involving employees further in the identification and solving of problems. However, rather than being linked to the organisation of production and work tasks, these teams are set up for the explicit purpose of eliciting ideas from employees. The most frequently used form of problem-solving team in the QM organisation is the quality circle, and both case study companies have used these in one guise or another as a more or less central aspect of their QM strategy.

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In a similar way to task-based teams, employees have also demonstrated a high level of awareness of problem-solving groups where they have been well established. Quality circles have been a central feature of the QM strategy at Hotel Co. A large proportion of employees always attend circle meetings, and the vast majority consider them in a positive light in terms of the opportunity they provide for discussing problems and being kept informed of developments. At New Bank, by contrast, quality circle-type groups are less firmly established, and employees consequently show a lower level of awareness of them. Under one-third of employees at New Bank referred to quality circle-type groups when asked to describe the nature of problem-solving teamworking at their place of work, with the largest proportion mentioning weekly communication meetings. And although the vast majority said they considered problem-solving groups to be a “good thing”, they also made more negative or critical comments about this form of teamworking on their questionnaire returns.

These differences in levels of employee awareness and enthusiasm for problem-solving teamworking may be largely explicable in terms of the varying degrees of management commitment to it between the two organisations. At Hotel Co management has, in general, remained committed to the continuation of quality circle-type groups since they were first introduced as a key component of QM. In contrast, the trajectory which problem-solving teamworking has followed at New Bank has been far more uneven. Quality circles were initially seen as a fundamental part of the QM strategy, but they subsequently declined in significance, as management began increasingly to question the rationale behind their operation. As a consequence, quality circles have been re-launched (and re-named) to reflect the new management thinking behind them.

This “new thinking” essentially entails the use of quality circle-type groups on a more *ad hoc* basis, so that rather than meeting regularly, they are convened only as and when managers identify particular problems that they deem to require investigation. At New Bank problem-solving teams have been explicitly re-formulated to reflect this objective. It is also, however, a discernible trend at Hotel Co, where quality circles have more recently been increasingly managerially led and thus more likely to occur only when managers believe they are necessary. Moreover, managers at both organisations are attempting to use information gathered from “customer feedback” questionnaires and so-called “mystery shopper” reports as a way of deciding which aspects of service quality require addressing through problem-solving teams.

So, one of the key findings of this analysis of teamworking is that managers are seeking to increasingly control or limit the extent of employee empowerment. With problem-solving teamworking, the trend is towards greater management intervention to ensure that teams meet only when necessary and that they address themselves to pre-defined “business objectives”. While at first glance this may appear a perfectly sensible approach,

it can tend to undermine the principles on which quality circles are commonly thought to be based. If problem-solving teams are led too much by management, and if managers are the only ones who define what constitutes a “problem”, then far from feeling “empowered”, the members of the team are more likely to feel they are merely following management dictate. As regards task-based teamworking, we have seen clearly that what discretion and autonomy teams do have is limited to a fairly narrow range of job-specific tasks, while responsibility for key decisions – concerning such issues as the allocation of work and the nature of production or sales targets – is located at a higher supervisory or managerial level. In these circumstances, the conclusion that employees have undergone a process of “empowerment” must again be considered inappropriate.

Having said all this, if employees are not empowered, then neither are they wholly disenchanted. What has also come through strongly here is the high degree of employee support for teamworking, insofar as it allows employees to make a contribution towards solving problems and generates significant co-operation and “team spirit”. What has occurred is a general increase in the level of employee involvement, but within increasingly defined and measurable limits.

### **Conclusion: teamworking and the re-organisation of control**

At both New Bank and Hotel Co teamworking is associated with a mix of costs and benefits for employees. This mix, moreover, takes different forms in the different organisational settings, due to the particular configuration of contingent factors at work in each case. A separate paper (Rees, 1999) seeks to isolate the determinants of these different outcomes.

The current paper is more concerned to explain what is fundamentally common across the two organisations; namely, the fact that teamworking, and QM more generally, tends to have both positive and negative implications for employees. The positive aspects are stressed in what might be called the “optimistic model” of QM, which sees quality programmes as leading to enhanced employee commitment and greater job satisfaction through widening autonomy and discretion. In contrast, the “exploitation model” of QM stresses the negative aspects, arguing that empowerment is merely a rhetorical smokescreen to hide a reality of harder work and increasing stress.

These divergent perspectives on QM were briefly alluded to earlier in the paper, and it is clear that evidence can be marshalled here to support both accounts. However, the implication of this analysis is that it would be misleading to privilege one interpretation over the other. Rather, arguably the most fruitful way to conceptualise the implications of teamworking for employees is in terms of a re-organisation of control. On the one hand management at both New Bank and Hotel Co wishes to increasingly control or limit the extent of employee involvement through teamworking (task-based teams are limited in their scope of influence, while problem-solving teams are more managerially led and *ad hoc*). At the same time, however, employees do



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value the increasing involvement that such team-based methods provide them with. Management, thus, appears to have conceded some genuine autonomy to task-based and problem-solving teams, at the same time as consolidating their own control. In other words, what is ceded to employees tends only to be a limited form of detailed control, while general control remains firmly in the hands of management.

This “re-organisation of control” argument has something in common with the critical labour process tradition outlined previously, insofar as the nature of production and the organisation of work tasks are considered to be crucial factors in determining the boundaries of employee autonomy and discretion. However, it stops short of concluding that the implications of QM for employees tend invariably to be negative. Rather, teamworking is seen here as constituting “empowerment through involvement”. As Collinson and Edwards (1998, pp. 4-6) note, this form of empowerment represents:

... not the absence of control but an effort to generate disciplined autonomy within a clearly understood set of expectations and priorities ... [It is] a managerially-led delegation of some decision-making ... a disciplined endeavour to release some powers within a monitored and controlled structure.

The principles behind this approach draw on the set of theoretical tools advanced by Edwards (1986, pp. 79-80), most notably the distinction between “general control” and “detailed control”. In Edwards’ terms:

Maximising *detailed* control is not necessarily the employer’s aim; *detailed* control, however, remains important ... Underlying ... the many schemes that have been introduced to increase workers’ participation in the enterprise ... is the wish to persuade workers to use their creativity to overcome problems in the production process ... The aim is to improve general control while reducing the employer’s detailed control.

A similar point has been made more recently by a number of researchers in relation to employee empowerment initiatives. Robbins (1983, p. 67) argues that empowerment “has the effect of increasing management control while creating the impression of reducing it”. Wilkinson (1998, p. 516) suggests that “empowerment may not in practice dilute overall management control”. And Lashley (1997, p. 36) concludes that:

The empowered and committed employee ... appears to offer managements the promise of control *and* commitment ... Rather than control and commitment being two ends of a continuum, empowerment represents a shift in the locus of control from externally imposed directive control to internally imposed self-control ... empowerment means greater control of employees because of ... [this] shift of the locus of control.

This paper has discussed the quality management strategies at two organisations. The nature and operation of central aspects of these strategies, namely task-based and problem-solving teams, is best understood in precisely these terms. In each case, teamworking represents a form of “empowerment through involvement”, but a constrained and limited form of involvement, which allows for greater detailed control for employees at the point of

production or service delivery at the same time as providing management with increasing general control.

#### Note

1. Some of the qualitative management interview data from "New Bank" and "Hotel Co" have already been published elsewhere (Rees, 1995). This paper relies more heavily on quantitative questionnaire data. Detailed structured questionnaires were administered to a representative sample of 50 employees at each organisation. The paper summarises responses to a particular sub-set of questions on teamworking practices. The original frequency tables and characteristics of respondents can be found in Rees (1996).

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