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Emerald Article: Quality management and HRM in the service industry: some case study evidence

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Introduction: quality management and HRM in the service sector

In any discussion of quality management one is faced with the initial problem of defining what one means by the term. A useful starting point is the distinction between the "hard" and "soft" aspects of a QM programme as interdependent elements (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1991, 1992). The hard aspects refer to generally quantifiable production techniques, such as total quality control, just-in-time production and task-based teamworking. The soft or more qualitative aspects of a QM programme consist of:

- the use of HRM-style policies to generate commitment to quality;
- the dissemination of a management ideology that reinforces the maxims of cultural change, continuous improvement and customer satisfaction.

The quality improvement initiatives of different organizations will have distinctly different emphases. Some organizations will base their quality improvement programme primarily on soft QM techniques with only limited use of more quantitative methods. For others, quality assurance and production standards will be of greater importance than achieving any kind of cultural change. Thus Webb (1995, p. 124) concludes from her own case study research that such strategies can be compared to a code of conduct:

> In fact, TQM had different manifestations, dependent on the purposes of its proponents.

A key variable here is sector. The origins of QM lie within the production and operations field, and manufacturing firms will tend to place an emphasis on the hard and quantifiable production aspects. In contrast, it is assumed that organizations in the service sector, who by definition have a greater degree of staff/customer interaction, will tend to concentrate on the more qualitative and softer aspects of customer care and cultural change.

However, through the following analysis of managerial attitudes towards various aspects of "soft QM" within New Bank and Hotel Co., it is clear that in each case there is an increasing search for more quantifiable measurement of outcomes. Moreover, while greater employee discretion, autonomy and "empowerment" are in each case considered to be the main beneficial effects of the QM programme, they can also be seen to go hand-in-hand with closer monitoring and tighter management control.

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Origins of QM in the two case study companies

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. In the late 1980s, with competition developing rapidly within the financial services market, New Bank 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, the company's stated corporate mission is to become "first choice" for customers and staff, and in so doing the quality of customer service is recognized as of paramount importance.

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 hotels. In the early 1980s the company began to realize 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, in the late 1980s the company took two years planning and developing a thoroughgoing TQM programme, largely under the personal guidance of the managing director.

It is clear that in each company the main driving force behind the introduction of QM was the need to gain competitive advantage in a marketplace where the products on offer are fundamentally the same. In the words of a branch manager from New Bank:

> There's been a complete change around, which has been brought about by competitive pressures, because there's a market out there and a lot of financial service institutions all vying for the same business, and we've got to distance ourselves from our competitors, and in my view the only way of doing that is by offering a quality service to the customer.

Within the hotel and catering industry employee/customer interaction is similarly regarded as an important source of profitability, and there is also developing a greater dependence on staff to provide what Fuller and Smith (1991) term "quality service work":

> In terms of the product there's only so much you can do: en suite bathrooms, double beds, direct dial phones, tea and coffee, TVs, swimming pools, jacuzzis. There really isn't a lot else you can do to the product apart from very little things, so the only thing that will give you an edge is the quality of service, and that brings you to TQM (general manager, Hotel Co.).

In both organizations, pressures to improve the quality of service are also perceived as coming directly from customers:

> There are also customer pressures as well, people do expect more, and customers are more prepared to tell me that they don't like this or they don't like that, whereas before … the bank manager was the king and if he told you to do something you'd do it, and now there's not this aura around the bank manager that there used to be (branch manager, New Bank).

> People want a lot more for a lot less now. Before in hotels you could charge people the earth and they would pay it. Now we have to offer good quality at a competitive price … people bargain when they come here … and they won't pay for things that aren't up to standard now, and you can't do anything (assistant general manager, Hotel Co.).

Employee involvement in QM: management-led groups and empowerment

Both New Bank and Hotel Co. began their QM programmes with an enthusiastic commitment to quality circles as the best means of improving communications and winning the active commitment of employees to quality improvements. It is now fairly well established that quality circles are often introduced as a parallel or dualistic structure which co-exists outside of the existing organizational hierarchy, and as such are doomed to fail in the face of middle management recalcitrance and inadequate reward systems (Hill, 1991). And indeed, it is just such problems which have led both companies to move progressively away from highly prescriptive and regular "bottom up" quality circles towards more *ad hoc* and management-led groups.

In New Bank, for instance, branches were instructed to set up quality circles 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. The bank quickly found, however, that without management direction circles tended to be looking too hard to find problems, managers considered many of the issues they raised to be relatively insignificant, and circle members became demotivated as fewer of their ideas were taken up:

> We had quality service action teams [quality circles] in branches, and there was a tremendous launch of this quality programme in a big marquee, 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 [management-led groups] more than anything … QSATs are about saying "can we find any problems?" … 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" (branch manager).

The aim now, then, is to operate only groups which focus on particular issues, especially those which have implications for the "bottom line". *Ad hoc* groups will be formed by managers and centred on particular business issues.

A similar transition in Hotel Co. 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 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.

Although these formal mechanisms for employee involvement appear to have become subject to tighter management control, within both organizations management argues that employees now enjoy far greater autonomy and discretion over their work as a result of what is generically referred to as "empowerment". A more "open" management style is said to have encouraged employees to feel more able to express their views and to take greater personal responsibility for problem solving. In Hotel Co., for instance:

> Whatever level you look at, employees are more involved in decisions, and that's very positive and a good foundation to build on (general manager).

> There has been a lot of discussion over the last three years about empowerment and people making their own decisions, and I know that this is the one thing that *is* actually happening ...They do solve their own problems (quality support manager, head office).

And similarly in New Bank:

> I don't think we've been a good organization historically for involving staff. I've worked for managers in the past where if they tell you to jump through the hoop then you jump through the hoop and you didn't ask why. Nowadays people are more inclined to approach their seniors and challenge things and ask things, which has got to be good (manager, lending centre).

> Managers used to be a lot more aloof than they are now. When I joined the bank some 15 years ago as a grade 1 the thought of talking to the manager was quite frightening really, whereas now people join the bank at different grades and will speak their minds a lot more (assistant manager, services unit).

However, it will be argued here that despite these benefits of "empowerment" in terms of greater employee involvement, in both organizations there have been concurrent trends which have tended to have the effect of limiting employee discretion and autonomy.

Management attitudes towards QM

Since this article draws exclusively from interviews with managers, it is interesting to examine not only how they consider a greater commitment to QM on the part of other employees may be generated, but also their views on how QM has affected their own positions.

It is now fairly well documented that QM programmes are often introduced with a high degree of senior management commitment, followed by initiatives for generating commitment on the part of lower grade employees, but that the involvement of employees at middle management level is not adequately addressed.

This was certainly the case at Hotel Co. The original commitment to TQM came from the head office. Training was introduced at supervisory level and at the more junior operative level, but department level managers were effectively missed out. As one general manager describes it:

> After quality circles were introduced there was a layer of management left floundering as to where they fitted in, because it was introduced at operative level and for general managers … and there were all these managers in the units wondering what was happening to their jobs and their role. It was taking away some of the things they'd always done and always been responsible for.

Evidence suggests (Poole and Mansfield, 1992, p. 212) that although the greater involvement of employees is certainly favoured by managers,

> there remains a preference for schemes which are integrative and which do not directly challenge the managerial controlling function.

In Hotel Co., some of the managers at department level clearly felt threatened by the "empowerment" of those in more junior positions:

> Guys in the middle…really felt left out and threatened, and it was seen as almost a disease to have the word "manager" in your title because you would be seen as this incompetent fool next to the staff who are wonderful and can do no wrong (resident manager).

Six years after the original launch of the TQM programme, the company has now taken more steps to allay the fears and insecurities of department level managers:

> We did realize we'd made a mistake and we did try to take a few steps back and do something about training for middle managers, and I think this is being pushed a lot more by managers at GM level themselves (quality support manager, head office).

It would appear that this greater focus on department level managers is having the desired effect. Most that I spoke to said they were now completely comfortable with their role in the TQM programme, and did not feel their positions were under threat. The view of this front desk manager is typical:

> At middle management level we all thought at first "hang on, what's going on here, are we not needed anymore?" But actually, when you step back and think about it, it gives you the opportunity to become a better manager by taking away the time wasting stuff, and you are freed up to do far more things and to look at where your department is going and look at the areas that need development, as opposed to just getting tied up with stuff that really isn't relevant.

In New Bank, the QM programme has been operating against the background of large scale job losses, which have affected managerial grades as much as any others. In the financial services sector more generally, many managers feel threatened by the pace of change (Cressey and Scott, 1992). At New Bank, rapid technological advances and tighter market conditions are at present coexisting somewhat uneasily with the traditional, conservative environment in which many managers began their careers. Coupled with this, the flattening of organizational hierarchies and the attempts to "empower" clerical grade employees to take greater responsibility has meant that the old corporate culture of caution, deference and loyalty is rapidly breaking up. Many of the managers who are trying to swim with the tide of change will be found in the company's new business centres. The situation is summed up as follows by a manager from a newly established regional lending centre:

> If a manager has been 30 or 40 years in the bank and it's been indoctrinated into him that whatever people above you say you do, and that you tell those below you what to do, then it must be very difficult to turn that on its head and tell staff that any ideas they have are welcome and they will try them out. I have a lot of sympathy with those who've given the bank 30 or 40 years loyal service and just can't make that change. Historically the bank has tended to paddle along with them, but I think now there is more and more a desire that they be removed from the system, by whatever means the bank chooses.

Appraisal and reward: the motivation problem

In addition to the implementation of various employee involvement techniques, both case study companies have also undergone a "delayering" exercise and a flattening of organizational hierarchies. This has had the effect of severely reducing promotional opportunities, which in turn has impacted significantly to reduce employee motivation. Job losses, particularly in New Bank, have exacerbated feelings of unease and insecurity. At the same time, both companies have been operating under increasingly tight financial circumstances, which has reduced the scope for pay increases and contributed similarly to the undermining of staff morale. One of the general managers in Hotel Co. describes it thus:

> TQM…was launched amid a great deal of publicity and senior management commitment, and loads of money being thrown at it, with big gala dinners to celebrate circle of the year and all that. And then we hit the recession…I was an accounts manager at the time, and all of a sudden you just grabbed hold of the purse strings and pulled them right in. A lot of the ideas they [employees] were coming up with were good ideas that just needed a little bit of funding, but we put the lid on everything, which obviously demotivated people…There was no pay increase in 1990, which was the first time that had ever happened…This is not an unusual thing now but at the time it was a huge culture shock…We were talking about pay banding and about profit sharing at first, all part of the TQM programme. And now we're talking about no pay rise, times are tough, people have a job so let's get on with it.

Managers in both companies expressed particular concern about the apparent lack of opportunities for career advancement among employees:

> In this hotel there is a very flat structure, so even if you're a very good receptionist you will stay as a receptionist …The fact that they've got rid of assistant manager level – apart from in the small hotels like this one – means that it's very difficult for people to get anywhere, because they'd be jumping from say a restaurant supervisor to a manager, and that just doesn't happen (assistant general manager, Hotel Co.).

> They haven't made it clear to the staff how their careers will actually progress and how they will fit in with the new system, it's always under review…There is no longer any defined career path…There's no real incentive for people anymore, apart from their traditional loyalty…but in a lot of cases the loyalty is wearing pretty thin (assistant manager, customer services, New Bank).

The problems for management in attempting to generate, or in these two cases re-generate, employee commitment to QM through the use of HRM-style appraisal and payment strategies are now fairly well established. There is an implicit contradiction between collectivism and individualism in management attempts to develop a collective identity around teamwork at the same time as discriminating between individual employees' contributions through performance-related pay (Legge, 1989), and employees themselves will recognize a payment strategy which pulls in different directions.

Even where PRP is not used, performance appraisals may be perceived as arbitrary and subjective, and therefore not realize management's intention that they inform employees' attitudes and values in the direction of quality and flexibility. As for the use of job evaluation as a basis for a more simplified grading structure, this too can lead to a great deal of disquiet over the manner in which jobs are measured and evaluated. So, in this particular area:

> the HRM dimension to management's compensation strategies – appraisal, performance-related pay and job evaluation – [may itself be]…the locus for much of employees' dissatisfaction and not the level of compensation *per se* (Geary, 1992, p. 50).

There is variation in the extent to which the two case study companies have attempted to address the "motivation problem" through appraisal and reward. In Hotel Co., there is a salary for each job, and pay is not related to appraisals at all. According to the quality support manager at the company's head office:

> The whole idea of recognition is something that we're looking at at the moment, and we're in the process of developing an appraisal system that is linked to the total quality programme, but I don't know any more about it than that.

Some of the managers in the hotels clearly feel there needs to be a greater sense of urgency over the issue. One general manager told me:

> We have to find some better ways of getting more cash into people's back pockets, because I don't think this constant "everyone's happy, everyone's motivated, everyone's empowered" can carry on forever unless it turns into something of real positive benefit to them, which has to be financial. People will become more and more cynical, and unless we do something fairly soon we will lose it … If TQM has all these benefits for the company, then we need to give some of those back and share them with employees.

New Bank appears to have taken the issue somewhat further. The company has recently introduced a new appraisal system which involves the manager of each unit getting together with each member of staff and discussing what are the key competences of the job, and then deciding on areas which both feel the member of staff can develop over the subsequent 12 months. Previously the bank used a system of annual reports, where a manager scored each member of staff on a scale of 1-6 under a number or different areas. Under the new system – called "valuing individual performance" – reviews will be conducted two or three times a year and the final appraisal at the end of the year, and performance will determine the level of pay rise awarded the following April.

At the time of writing it is too early to tell whether this new system is likely to have the desired effect of improving customer service through the rejuvenation of employee motivation, something which has for a variety of reasons been subjected to a severe bruising during recent years. Many of the managers I spoke to were optimistic, but others remain to be convinced:

> There's nothing put in place properly or advised to the staff properly about what the new system will actually permit them to do, how they can expect to progress and how they can expect to be rewarded for good performance (assistant manager, customer services).

Greater flexibility or new rigidities?

With a QM strategy, then, there is often a tendency for employee "empowerment" to be interlinked with the search for greater flexibility through the flattening of the organizational hierarchy and the breaking down of demarcations. Despite the consequent tendency for promotion opportunities to be reduced, many managers see clear benefits for lower-grade employees in this process. In Hotel Co., for instance:

> TQM has…made a difference to our staffing structures in that we've been able to do away with levels of management through empowering people and giving more responsibility to operative level (general manager).

> Hotels are very traditional, and there are a number of invisible walls through which no man – let alone waiter or chef – shall pass, and TQM has really helped to break down those barriers. There are traditional barriers between the restaurant and kitchens, between front of house and food and beverage, and this whole issue of knowing more about each others' jobs and treating one another like customers has really helped us to become far more effective, and there is now much more flexibility among personnel (resident manager).

> 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 somone on night audit could be a night auditor. But they are all multifunctional now, and they don't have particular roles…As far as we are concerned in front office we are one team (front desk manager).

In New Bank, however, although de-layering and the flattening of the grading structure have been evident trends in recent years, the drive to improve customer service appears to have led not to functional flexibility between different areas, but rather to even more rigid demarcations. As one branch manager describes it:

> This branch is now split into a number of sections…A year ago…if you had a cashier missing you'd drag someone from another department to help them out. We're very sectionalized now. We've got a cashiers' department, a customer services section, a processing unit, a services unit, a lending section, and a technical services unit. The introduction of sectionalization has worked against team spirit overall.

This sectionalization is tied in with two concurrent policies of the bank which are a central part of its QM programme: first, the segmentation of the customer base; and second, the standardization of procedures.

The segmentation of the customer base is intended to provide a more specialist service for both corporate and high net worth personal customers, whose affairs are now dealt with not by their branch manager but by corporate account executives and personal account executives at the newly established regional business centres. The standardization of branch procedures has resulted from two sources. First, the organization and methods department of the bank established exactly how long it takes to carry out simple branch procedures, and this information is used by section heads when allocating work. And second, computer technology has allowed the simplification of various branch functions, such as the standardization of lending through "credit scoring". The effect of all this on branch banking jobs is summed up by one manager as follows:

> You take out corporate lending and give it to an expert in that field, you take out high net worth personal customers and let them be dealt with by a specialist, and what is left for the branch network to deal with is the mass market, most of which you are not really too bothered with…They just want a very basic service, and so the bank has standardized all the procedures to deal with this mass market…Standardization of procedures involves complete de-skilling.

Real empowerment or tighter control?

There is a debate within the QM literature, much of it focused on manufacturing industry, about the extent to which such initiatives provide management with a means of exerting greater control through the monitoring and surveillance of their employees. Indeed,

> there is a considerable degree of ambiguity about TQM in practice – while the language is about increased involvement, there is also a strong emphasis on reinforcing management control (Wilkinson, 1994, p. 281).

It is not only in the context of a manufacturing production line that a potential for surveillance of employees exists. Similar practices can occur in a service organization, but they will take different forms, often based on monitoring by customers themselves. In financial services, as evidenced by New Bank, so-called "mystery shoppers" are increasingly used as a technique for monitoring the level of customer service being provided. And in the hotel and catering industry various techniques are used for rewarding or disciplining staff on the basis of customer feedback (Fuller and Smith, 1991). A good example from Hotel Co. is provided by a housekeeping manager:

> In my department we are self-checking…When they've cleaned a room they log in from the bedroom to tell reception that the room is clean, by the telephone, there is a certain number that they log in and that registers…Years ago if there was a complaint it would go to the housekeeper, the housekeeper would send it to the assistant, the assistant would take it to the supervisor and so on, whereas now it goes straight back to the maid who cleaned it.

Furthermore, we have seen how in New Bank the drive for better customer service has led not to a greater degree of flexibility for staff but rather to more sectionalization, and to more rigid and routinized job procedures. Employees are hardly "empowered" by this process, quite the opposite in fact:

> The work flows are controlled by section heads ... so work flow is still very rigidly managed. It's like being on an assembly line. Everything is timed. These O&M people come in, and they ask us how long it takes to put a standing order on, and if we say 45 seconds or whatever then that is the time for that particular job. And so then you can actually say to somebody "there's ten standing orders, that should take you ten minutes", or whatever it is…That's the way we're going, towards an assembly line (branch manager).

In Hotel Co., although employee empowerment would appear to be more genuine, here too there is closer monitoring and tighter management control:

> If you spoke to the staff here they would say the pressures are really very very high now ... because they are being measured all the time, they are under close scrutiny ... We watch them more closely and we are able to give them some sort of idea of whether they are meeting the targets ... and that does put pressure on them (personnel and training manager).

And even if employees enjoy greater discretion as regards decision making, the "right to manage" is never far away. To quote one resident manager:

> TQM has meant that the hotel is actually a great deal easier to run 90 per cent of the time, although there is always that 10 per cent of the time when people question you and you have to say "no, I just want you to go and do it".

All of this raises the question of how real flexibility and empowerment are under QM programmes, and of whether such terms are not merely a rhetorical smokescreen for the assertion of more traditional forms of control. Certainly there is a growing body of literature that tends to view QM initiatives as a sophisticated form of work intensification (Delbridge and Turnbull, 1992; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992).

In marked contrast is the prescriptive approach to QM, best exemplified in the work of the so-called management "gurus" (Crosby, 1984; Deming, 1986; Ishikawa, 1985; Juran, 1988); and in Britain by Oakland (1989). Here QM programmes are seen as unquestionably progressive in their implications for employees, insofar as they allow for job enlargement, functional flexibility and enhanced responsibility for quality control at the point of production or service delivery.

Detailed case study evidence, mostly drawn from manufacturing, suggests that neither of these two extreme positions is wholly accurate. Rather, QM tends to give greater autonomy to those at the lower end of the organizational hierarchy, *at the same time* as providing for tighter management control (Bratton, 1991; Dawson and Webb, 1989; Webb, 1995; Wilkinson *et al.*, 1992).

This view would seem to be applicable to the operation of QM in the service sector too, at least insofar as the two case studies described here are concerned. Managers in both Hotel Co. and New Bank are generally keen to stress how QM has allowed employees to express their views more openly and take greater personal responsibility for their work. At the same time they acknowledge the clear trends towards the closer monitoring and tighter control of that work. As this research progresses, it will be interesting to see whether and to what extent the attitudes of employees in each company reflect this complex picture.

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