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The Role of National Culture in Total Quality Management

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of national culture in adopting total quality management (TQM) in developing countries, using the ICT organisations in Jordan as the basis of the study. employing a methodology of semistructured interviews, the data was collected from General and TQM managers. The ten largest organisations, based on the number of employees, were used as the basis of the study. The results indicated that the national culture characteristics have a negative impact on adopting and supporting TQM implementation. This paper introduces a key dimension (Wasta) hasn't been studied in the TQM literature and focuses on its impact on TQM implementation.

Keywords: *TQM, National Culture, MIS, Developing Countries, Wasta.*

Introduction

Developing countries as a group, compared with the industrialised countries, have unique environmental conditions which should be taken into account in designing appropriate management strategies, including the introduction of effective quality management methods (Mersha 1997). Management approaches that are seen as essentially western in origin are viewed with some suspicion in many Middle Eastern and Islamic countries; this represents a barrier to their acceptance (Al- Zamany et al., 2000). Cultural influence not only comes from organisation culture but also from national culture. It is argued that a review of the quality awards and critical success factors for total quality management (TQM) has revealed that culture influences the understanding of core TQM concepts in a country and it also

has an effect on the operationalisation of TQM (Kumar, 2006). The organisational literature confirms that environmental factors, especially socio-cultural factors, have a major influence on business practice and on organisational performance (e.g. Oliff, Arpan and DuBois, 1989; Prasad and Tata, 2003). TQM also tends to be influenced by the internal cultures of organisations, which in turn reflect national cultures but may also exhibit their own distinct characteristics (Alsughayir and Zairi, 2008).

The study has been undertaken in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector in Jordan, which is one of the newly developing and industrialising countries. The purpose of this article is to examine the role of national culture to implementation and success of TQM within that context.

Literature Review

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Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede, 1991, p5). James (1996) mentioned that culture has several definitions, but gave an emphasis on the definition of culture as a set of similar behaviours and ideas that set one group apart from another. Hofstede indicated that organizational culture comes from national cultures, that cultures manifest themselves, from external to deep, in leaders, values and symbols (Hofstede, 1980). Furthermore the differences in national cultures are reflected in how organisations are structured and managed (Chen, 2001; Hofstede, 1991). Oakland (2003) defined the culture of an organisation as the attitude and beliefs that pass through the organisation about how business should be conducted and how employees should act and be treated. TQM is a description of the culture, attitude and organisation of a company that aims to

provide its customers with products and services that satisfy their needs. The culture requires quality in all aspects of the organisation's operations, with things being right the first time, and defects and waste eradicated from operations (Guangming et al., 2000). Organisations need to develop a perfect implementation approach, which is accepted by the culture. They indicate that culture plays a core role in the success or failure of TQM implementation. Therefore, it is important to develop TQM programmes that are accepted culturally. TQM programmes are more likely to succeed if the prevailing organisational culture is compatible with the values and essential assumptions suggested by the TQM discipline (Kujala and Lillrank, 2004).

Najmi and Kehoe (2000) pointed out that organisation members may refuse to go along with any new changes, but this problem can be solved by generating a quality culture in the organisation. Tsang and Antony (2001) indicated that organisations have to generate a culture where all the organisation members should participate in quality awareness programmes and quality improvement projects relevant to their own place of work. Williams et al. (1993) stated that culture influences what the managerial group attends to, how it explains the information and the responses it makes to change in the external environment. Culture is a significant contributor to strategic analysis and the development of strategy. As culture influences what organisation members attend to and how they explain this information and react then it is a significant determinant of the success of strategic implementation culture. Organisational culture is considered as an antecedent of TQM practice (Prajogo and McDermott, 2005). Understanding it is essential for successful TQM implementation and has a significant effect on applying TQM (Rad, 2006). Tsang and Antony (2001) asserted that organisations must generate a

culture where all the organisation's members should participate in the quality awareness programme and quality improvement projects, especially those relevant to their workplace.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of national culture in the implementation and potential operational success of TQM. In order to achieve this aim a qualitative research approach was undertaken.

Structured interviews were conducted. It is worth noting that many Arab researchers have recommended the use of face-to-face semistructured interviews technique as a means of data collection (Al-Bahusseini, 2000; Al-Rashed, 1996). They concluded that this technique is very successful in Arab companies, where managers prefer to talk rather than to complete a questionnaire.

The researcher chose the ten largest ICT companies in Jordan, based on the number of

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employees, to conduct the semi-structured interviews. These ten companies have TQM departments, which means they are able to provide detailed information about TQM issues in their companies.

The researcher conducted informal interviews with three managers in order to pilot the interviews' questions. Based on these pilots the researcher justified some questions in accordance to the recommendations made by the interviewees. From which the final set of interview questions were developed and used. From the target 10 companies, the general manager and TQM manager from each company were contacted. From the total of 20 target managers, 16 agreed to be interviewed. The time and places of the interview were chosen by the interviewees themselves which gave the advantage of flexibility of choosing the best time and place. However, most of the interviews were held in the managers' offices for their convenience. The researcher sent emails to each interviewee before the time of

interview to confirm the appointment. The researcher provided the interviewees a cover letter to explain the aims of the interview and provide them with the questions for the interview, and in addition to seek their cooperation. The managers were interviewed individually, and each interview took about half an hour. The questions included were open-ended. However, the interviewees talked in general and, actually, they provided more important related issues. All interviews were conducted in Arabic. In conducting the semi-structured interviews, the researcher took notes in addition to recording the whole interview in tape record in order to remember all the details. However, each interviewee was explicitly asked whether or not the interview could be tape-recorded. Eleven interviewees allowed the researcher to tape-record the interviews the other five did not.

The researcher assured utmost confidentiality of the provided data. The data obtained from the interviews was processed and analysed using a number of steps using thematic analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The interview findings indicated that 87.5% of the interview participants identified that organisational culture is considered as the major impediment to TQM implementation within their companies. One of the TQM managers stated that:

“The core barriers within the organization is culture.”

Another manager stated that:

“Although we apply TQM strategies, our employees still have negative perspectives about the needs of the TQM strategies in the companies.”

In other words, some employees prefer to keep the old way of working rather than the new one because they considered any changes including adopting new culture need more effort and time. So, they believe that current culture is more comfortable and less confusing.

New dimensions regarding organisational culture as an impediment to TQM in Jordanian ICT companies were introduced by the managers who took part in the interview process. These new dimensions are nepotism and “Wasta”.

Nepotism, as a term, is much related to the term collectivism that was mentioned by Hofstede (2001). Webster’s International Dictionary defines nepotism as *“favouritism shown to nephew and other relative, as by giving them positions because of their relationship rather than their merit”*.

Webster’s International Dictionary, 1976, p1510). Ford and McLaughlin (1986) mention that nepotism has a negative impact on an employee’s behaviour, family relationships get mixed up with business decisions’ people cannot be sure if they have been hired, promoted or given a rise on the basis of their actual performance or kinship.

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Hofstede’s fifth dimension indicates that Arabic business culture is always characterised by high collectivism and femininity (Hofstede, 1997, 2001). The current situation in Jordanian companies is reflected in the words of a TQM manager *“The problem with us that we are living in tribe and kinship relation. That effect negatively in our business process and relationship”*.

“Wasta” is the term used in the Jordanian context to reflect the role of the personal and family relationship in developing the business process. “Wasta” usually holds a negative meaning because people usually use it when an illegal or unusual process is to be developed. Hutchings and Weir (2006, p278) defined Wasta as *“intrinsic to the operation of many valuable social processes, central to the transmission of knowledge and the creation of opportunity”*.

Moreover, Sawalha (2002) stress that the role of “Wasta” in the business sector is developing the business process based on

personal gains; which commonly stand for favouritism, cronyism, and dishonesty in general. Also, he stated that the Arab World is based on strong family connections secured in Wasta networks.

Furthermore, some studies in Arab management signify that organisations in Arab countries nowadays face many organisational and managerial problems, starting from their bureaucratic design and existing power culture (Sabri, 2007).

The participants highly valued the role of the educational institutions in providing the companies with well educated staff; the interviewees believe in the value of education and that a more educated staff will contribute to the implementation of TQM to wider sectors. Additionally, the interviewees believe that the cultural issues of focusing on price more than the quality of products and services has a negative role in the implementation of TQM in Jordan. According to 62.5% of the interviewees, the local community does not demand a continuous development of service quality, because they give more attention to the price. The researchers' reflect that in a country where income is low, taxation is high and there are high rates of unemployment and poverty then people think about spending less regardless of the quality (Central Bank of Jordan, 2006). One of the interviewees stated that *"poor people buy things twice because they think about low price rather than quality"*.

Hofstede (2001) identified five dimensions in the national culture: power distance index (PDI), uncertainty avoidance index (UAI), individualism (IDV), masculinity (MAS) and long-term orientation (LTO). The interviews have reflected Hofstede's five dimensions.

The participants emphasised the effect of the families' relationships in the organisation's culture and hence recorded high collectivism. This matches Hofstede finding in (1997) which characterized the Arab business culture by the high power distance, high uncertainty

and collectivism and reflects the current situation in Jordan. Furthermore, many authors (such as Ali and Sabri 2001) stated that Arab management practices are a combination of four main characteristics: hierarchical authority, rules and policy, delegation of personality and power of individuals. While the others consider the need to change to a culture that fits the TQM implementation they emphasised more the difficulties that they might face such as the organisation structure and the financial barriers.

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Conclusion

Based on survey and synthesis of culture and TQM literature, this paper has presented the results of a study of the role of culture in developing countries, the adoption of inappropriate organisational culture to support TQM implementation in ICT companies in Jordan. There are two particular dimensions related to the national culture that have emerged from the study: “Wasta” and nepotism. The result indicated that these two dimensions related to the organisation culture coming from national culture. These dimensions are considered to have negative impact on the implementation of TQM in Jordanian ICT companies. Also, bureaucracy has emerged as a third negative aspect of national culture affecting organisation culture. The critical findings in relation to the national culture that have emerged from the interviews are that the educational institutions in Jordan provide the ICT companies with well educated and qualified staff able to provide effective TQM implementation and the customers’ culture still focuses on product price more than product quality. From this perspective it may be concluded that the customer culture plays a negative role in applying TQM in Jordanian ICT companies. The findings of this research lead to a number of potential suggestions and recommendations

in order to improve TQM activities in Jordanian ICT companies. Managers need to consider all the suggested critical points presented in the previous sections in addition to the following implications these companies should develop a strategy for implementing TQM by paying more attention to the identification, analysis and adoption of an appropriate organisational culture that suits the TQM implementation, in particular the issue of “wasta”, which is known but not always acknowledged as an issue to be managed.

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