THE ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF QUALITY MANAGERS IN BRITAIN AND AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts the career experiences and development needs of 334 British quality managers compared with Australian quality managers based on two Australian surveys. The quality managers in both countries brought wide functional experience to their roles, with many coming in particular from production and operations and general management. In their current roles major sources of job satisfaction for managers in both countries were improving efficiency and problem solving, whereas aspects of employee relations was a source of least satisfaction. Both groups of quality managers utilised a very limited range of quality tools, the most popular being brainstorming, control charts and Pareto analysis, with virtually no mention of more sophisticated tools like Six sigma, which is in stark contrast to American managers. Also British and Australian managers showed little awareness in terms of their development needs for a broader background in quality, which could disadvantage their companies in global markets.

Introduction

Global competitiveness can drive companies to recognise the need for more integrative management systems based on TQM (Mangelsdorf 1999) but how ready are those responsible for quality to face this challenge? Recent American studies of quality professionals suggest that they and their companies are aware of the importance of continuing professional development to remain competitive (Hennessy 2005).

This paper reports on studies of quality managers which are part of an international research programme into the careers of technical managers, in particular in Britain and Australia (Burcher et al 2002, 2004, Stewart & Waddell, 2003, Waddell & Mallen 2001). The British quality managers’ study examines the experiences, satisfactions, aspirations and development needs of 334 British quality managers who responded to a postal survey in 2005. The respondents are members of the Institute of Quality Assurance or members of a business improvement network, together with some other known contacts. The majority of the quality managers are men, with only 46 women in the whole sample. The age range of the sample varies from 26-70 years old with 49 the average age for the group. Fifty seven percent of the managers currently work in manufacturing with the rest in service industries. Their companies vary in size with SMEs (small and medium sized enterprises) well represented. The headquarters of these companies are predominantly in the UK (62%) with the rest mainly in the USA, Canada or continental Europe.

The results of the British study are compared with those based on two Australian surveys, one of 290 quality managers which examined their background and career histories, current position, sources of job satisfaction and perceptions of the future and a second study of 235 Australian quality managers looking at their background, training and development needs.

Background and Career History

Respondents in the British study and the first Australian study were very similar in terms of those without post-school formal qualification and those with technician, undergraduate and postgraduate qualification but the managers in the second Australian study were rather less well qualified. The quality managers in both countries brought wide functional experience to
their roles, with many coming in particular from production and operations and general management, prior to entering the quality field.

**Perceptions of current roles**

Major sources of job satisfaction for managers in both countries are improving efficiency and problem solving, whereas aspects of employee relations are a source of least satisfaction for both groups of managers. British managers are also particularly frustrated by hours of work and physical working conditions but for the Australians, documentation and bureaucracy are the least favoured aspects of their work. When the British quality managers were asked to compare their situation with that of other managers in their organisation, whereas work load, work variety and autonomy were considered to be above average compared with others, they rated advancement opportunities and income as somewhat less favourable. The Australian quality managers were given a more limited range of work attributes to rate and they considered work variety, work importance and work load to be above average compared with others, whereas they rated income and status as less favourable.

**Using quality tools and techniques**

Within their job as British quality managers, 49% have responsibilities for providing a wide variety of employees’ training needs but only 42% run employee surveys to ascertain these needs. In the case of the Australian quality managers 40% ran employee surveys but 64% are responsible for employee training needs, which raises the question even more of how effective they are in these roles if they do not conduct employee surveys to ascertain these needs. Also in both countries employee training covered diverse programmes with only 7% in the case of the British quality managers and 25% in the case of the Australian managers being specifically related to quality procedures, which suggests that quality per se within training has only limited priority. 39% of the British quality managers and 33% of the Australian managers also undertook customer surveys.

Turning to the quality tools that the managers themselves used, they were somewhat limited in range with brainstorming, control charts/SPC and Pareto analysis comprising the most widely used tools in both countries. These findings suggest that the vast majority of the managers surveyed in both countries are not using, and indeed may not be aware of, the range of quality tools and techniques available today. It is particularly surprising in the case of the later British study that virtually no mention is made of more sophisticated tools for instance Six Sigma, which is in stark contrast to a study reported on American managers (Hennessy 2005).

**Needs for personal development**

Whether or not the British quality managers had experienced higher education, a high proportion appreciate the opportunities for continuing professional development with 76% having attended external courses and 38% taking internal courses. The most widely attended external courses were in the areas of ISO9000 and management and internal courses were most frequently management and health and safety programmes. In the case of the Australian quality managers, 82% had attended some type of training programme, with general management the most widely studied area (35%) followed by quality practices and principles (30%). Managers in both countries then appear to have undergone development opportunities in a range of management related areas but the emphasis specifically on quality
issues has been limited, which may account for the narrow perspectives taken by them on the use of tools and techniques.

They were also asked what courses they would like to take for their present job and any future jobs. For their present jobs the British quality managers wanted to study business and management followed by languages, whereas for their future jobs languages followed by business and management were favoured in that order. With the Australian managers they sought general management courses for their short term needs, with a higher degree or general management development for their long term needs. Perhaps it is surprising, given their limited background in quality, that so few of the quality managers in both countries were seeking personal development in the area of quality tools and techniques. Even amongst the graduates in both countries, very few had degrees specialising in quality management.

Conclusions

The studies indicate that quality managers in both countries have varied educational backgrounds and bring diverse experiences outside the field of quality to their work. However, they appear to be relying on these factors, together with on the job experience within a quality department to enable them to perform effectively as specialist managers, rather than recognising and seeking knowledge of the wider range of techniques available for their current specialism. This raises the issue of whether organisations are offering sufficiently wide development opportunities for their quality managers, to enable them to remain current with quality thinking and the need for this to be integrated into wider management systems to enhance competitiveness. As respondents indicated that in over 70% of cases their British organisations and 67% of the Australian organisations have undergone major change in the last two years, it may be that such periods of turmoil have not been conducive to offering training to ensure that their quality managers are at the leading edge of their profession. Certainly in the case of the British managers, such oversights at top management level may be reflected in the opinion of over 50% of the quality managers that there is inadequate knowledge of quality issues at board level.

Tellingly too, when quality managers were asked how they saw their future in their organisation, the biggest proportion of the British managers (25%), and of the Australian managers (32%) indicated “no change.”. Generally the findings in both countries suggest that there is a worrying proportion of quality managers working in an un-dynamic career situation but for some, at least, this does not seem to be a source of major dissatisfaction. Indeed other findings indicate that the majority of the quality managers studied are well satisfied with many aspects of their job and view it favourably in relation to the situation of other managers in their organisation.

References


