Focus on human resources as a mediating factor between ISO 9001 certification and continuous quality improvement

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Abstract: The worldwide trend of ISO 9001 certification throughout the last decades has instigated a rigorous debate on whether and under which circumstances real quality results are attained by certified companies. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how focus on human resources (HR), especially in a service environment, affects quality management system (QMS) implementation through ISO 9001 certification, towards the goal of attaining continuous quality improvement. The research was undertaken in the form of multiple case studies at five service-oriented ISO 9001 certified companies pertaining to different business sectors. The results obtained suggest that when a company exhibits limited focus on people, alongside a downgraded view of the HR department in the organisational structure, all quality initiatives are likely to serve as an end-point towards certification. As such, the companies bearing these features cannot reap the benefits that a successful QMS implementation could potentially offer in the long run. On the other hand, a broad focus on people, combined with a strategic orientation of the HR department, is expected to drive the companies at issue towards real quality. As such, ISO 9001 certification can be an actual driver of continuous quality improvement.

Keywords: focus on human resources; ISO 9001 certification; quality management system implementation; continuous quality improvement.


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1 Introduction

There is no doubt in that ISO 9001 certification is part of current practices supposedly undertaken in pursuit of quality. A considerable number of companies choose the certification road, for a number of reasons, ranging from pure marketing and customer satisfying ones (extrinsic motivation), to real commitment to quality (intrinsic motivation). However, as Knowles (2011) points out, the central tendency of many of these companies is to drift back to business as usual until the next audit is due, failing to reap the full benefits of quality management system (QMS) certification, which would otherwise be an excellent tool towards continuous quality improvement. Beyond the obvious and well documented impact of motivation for certification, on the implementation and benefits of ISO 9001, we put the human factor under scrutiny, since human resources (HR) contribution to the QMS certification process and mostly to its aftermath seems to be of utter importance.

Indeed, HR strategic orientation is argued to yield significant benefits of a QMS implementation for those companies that recognise how important the position of the HR department in the organisational structure can be (Kufidu and Vouzas, 1998). In fact, when aligned to strategic objectives, and not confined only to its hard aspects, HR can contribute to the sound implementation of a QMS (Holmes and McElwee, 1995; Verreault and Hyland, 2005; Cannings and Hills, 2012). Considering solely the hard aspects of HR is hence rightly regarded as a hindrance towards real quality features. On the contrary, soft aspects are projected as the centrepiece of a company, helping it capitalise on HR, what’s more on a service-oriented environment. A vast number of quality gurus, experts, academics, and researchers, all stressed how focus on human resources can contribute to the sound implementation of a QMS in such a way that continuous quality improvement is attained. Furthermore, actively involving people in the work environment and instilling in them the very vision and mission of the company, is likely to make them feel a part of whatever effort is made on a company level, and not
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confine them to an individual basis of simply performing their tasks (Evans and Lindsay, 2008).

It is thus straightforward why one should further investigate how focus on human resources, especially in a service environment, affects QMS implementation through ISO 9001 certification, towards the goal of attaining continuous quality improvement. This question constitutes the primary objective of the present study. Qualitative research question traditionally calls for a qualitative strategy. In this respect, a multiple-case study herein served as a means of refining the emerging theory. The strategy deployed in this study included on-site and telephone interviews supplemented by desk research in a means to triangulate the data enhancing the validity and accuracy of the results.

In short, the remainder of this paper’s structure is as follows. In Section 2, the theoretical background related to the subject at issue is depicted, presenting the conceptual boundaries within which this study deploys. In Section 3, issues of methodology, strategy and techniques used in the study are addressed. Section 4 includes the findings, i.e. a thorough outline of each case, in a within-case approach. Section 5 presents a discussion of the cross-case analysis, wherein discrepancies and similarities are presented. Section 6 provides a conclusion of the study as well as its main limitations, supplemented with suggestions for further research on the matter.

2 Literature review

Evans and Lindsay (2008) aptly mention the inability to duplicate the human factor of a company, which gives insight as to why people are at the fore of any quality initiative. From early on, the leitmotif of quality was ‘focus on people’ and the first quality gurus stressed the importance of human factor in the quest towards quality (Deming, 1982; Juran and Godfrey, 1999; Crosby, 1979). Initially it appeared more of a superficial and vague approach, rather than an accumulation of specific guidelines on how to address the human factor (Wilkinson et al., 1996).

The advent of total quality management (TQM) as a framework marked a more articulate approach to the human factor; a series of studies (Tari et al., 2007; Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Schonberger, 1994; Belohlav, 1993; Briggs and Keogh, 1999; Hill and Wilkinson, 1995) highlighted the contribution of sound HR practices’ implementation to TQM. In fact, many went even further, to identify the disregard of human resources as the main cause of TQM failure (Yang, 2006; Lammermeyr, 1991; Wilkinson, 1992; Oakland and Oakland, 1998; Palo and Padhi, 2005; Morrison and Rahim, 1993; Hoogervorst et al., 2005). Wilkinson recurrently (Wilkinson, 1992; Wilkinson et al., 1993, 1996) stressed TQM’s segregation in a soft part and a hard part, with human resources pertaining to the soft/management part of the equation. He also pointed out that focus on the hard aspects of quality alone hinders the successful outcome of TQM as a framework.

Barring the linkage between the human resources and TQM, there is an undeniable relation of the former with a more service-orientated consideration (Bowen and Greiner, 1986); indeed, a set of factors stemming from the changing micro and macro-environment in business to date, imposed a pressure towards the majority of companies to focus on and develop the human aspect of their organisations (Senyucel, 2009). It seems that the underlying forces – total quality initiatives on one hand, and service-oriented mentality on the other hand, inextricably linked with each other as
well – simultaneously imposed a shift of mentality concerning the hitherto neglected, peripheral department of HR; from the pure administrative, record keeping, maintenance, transactional nature of the erstwhile personnel department, the latter had to engage to a more quality focused, holistic, systemic, transformational approach to address the new given demands for TQM (Colter and O’Connor, 2012).

Besides, the very nature of human resources alludes to TQM, if implemented through a quality rationale (i.e. being interdisciplinary and interdependent with other departments), and not merely auxiliary, solely performing administrative, short-term oriented tasks. This need is further enhanced considering the change even in name only, from ‘personnel’ to ‘human resources’ department. Despite a number of sceptical voices arguing that it is merely a fancy name and an attempt to make it sound more interesting (Senyucel, 2009), it is indicative of the attempt to indeed revamp, but at the same time promote and consolidate its position in a company, stemming from different aims and help align it to company’s strategic initiatives towards quality.

ISO 9001 initiative has also dealt with the human factor of a company, acknowledging thus its contribution to quality, but has limited the references to human resource department only to the administrative aspects of quality efforts (Hassan, 2010); throughout ISO 9001 requirements there is a focus on training, infrastructure and work environment (Evans and Lindsay, 2008) whereas inadvertently downplays the remaining functions that a human resource department traditionally undertakes, namely planning, staffing, motivating, compensating, and what’s more, the functions that could actually contribute to any quality initiative, such as aligning corporate objectives to human resource activities, attributing thus a more strategic role to HR department. Therefore, it is evident that ISO 9001 certification alone does not lead organisations to extensively focus on human resources, though that could be the key to continuous quality improvement.

3 Research methodology

The previously mentioned – both extant theory and primary research objective – are conceptualised in Figure 1. As shown in this conceptual model, this study investigates ‘focus on human resources’ as a mediator between ISO 9001 certification and continuous quality improvement. ‘Focus on human resources’ is manifested here in two dimensions:

1. focus on people, as results from the actual implementation of three critical HR practices (i.e. teamwork; training; and communication)
2. orientation of the HR department.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study, due to the exploratory, open-ended nature of the subject at issue. Albeit the restrictions stemming from its attributes considered as more vague, an empirical qualitative research is indisputably far more liberating when approaching a complex issue, such as the mediating role of human resources in quality improvement. Yin’s (2003) overview on case studies provides an excellent basis for the present paper’s research strategy. The most common allegation of this approach lies on its restricting nature in terms of ability to generalise the findings. Yin (2003) suggests that this downside is offset by using multiple case studies analysis.
In line with this idea, Eisenhardt (1989) also projects the importance of multiple case studies.

**Figure 1** The basic conceptual model (see online version for colours)

The selection process in multiple-case studies’ strategy traditionally pertains to non-probability, i.e. non-random sampling (Saunders et al., 2007). Within a wide range of non-probability sampling techniques, the purposive sampling projects itself as the most appropriate for this study. This technique seeks information-rich cases which can be studied in depth (Patton, 1990). In this direction, five medium and large-sized, service-oriented companies were selected. Namely, a call centre, a training institute, an IT/software company, a bank and a private school. Their common base is that they are all ISO 9001 certified and operate in the European market.

The salient research technique decided for this study was to conduct interviews with a senior officer whether in charge of human resources, quality department, or of upper-level management. A consequent desk research exploring the online presence of each company was conducted as a means to triangulate the data acquired through the interviews, ensuring thus the validity of the present research (Patton, 1990; Stake, 2003; Yin, 2003). The interviews were conducted through on-site visits (four companies) and a telephone interview (one company – for location reasons). Their duration ranged from two to up to three hours, and they were all based on a semi-structured form, allowing new issues to emerge for exploration (Saunders et al., 2007). Confidentiality issues were also mentioned priorly to each discussion. All five interviews were audio-recorded and were all subsequently transcribed for further data analysis. Evidently, analysing the data encompassed both a within-case and cross-case analysis approach. Both these inextricably linked approaches in a multiple-case study strategy, each serving a different scope, are thoroughly presented in the following sections.

### 4 Within-case analysis

This section presents the initial step of the analysis, i.e. the gradual within-case analysis. The five case studies are presented in turn as follows: the call centre, the training institute, the IT/software company, the bank and the private school.

#### 4.1 Case study 1: the call centre

The first company belongs to the travel industry sector, mainly operating as a call centre with an active presence all around Europe. It is a medium-sized company, operating for less than ten years, and certified for the last four years.
At a first glance, everything concerning the company’s procedures presumably runs smoothly. The certification initiated the establishment of documentation procedures, needed in any company en route to growth. Before that, the structure was completely flat, and decisions were taken upon unofficial meetings in random places.

Their first steps towards the implementation of a QMS were about to avail their growth as a company; numerous studies have proved that medium-sized companies recently certified are susceptible to benefit more from a QMS implementation, exactly due to the priorly existing less formal procedures and hence the in-between gap in terms of performance before and after certification (Gotzamani and Tsiotras, 2001; Huarng, 1998). As such, the company at issue fits the profile, being both medium-sized and with a QMS at a nascent stage.

Thus it is obvious how beneficial certification has been for the company. And despite the red tape instigated from then on, it is considered as a highly facilitating and necessary step towards growth, given that the company was increasingly expanding. In this respect, the inference that quality certification contributes to the actual QMS implementation in terms of documentation and processes is legitimate.

However, a serious troubling lies, as one would expect, on the soft part of the HR. The processes are merely seen as a tool to enhance quality, which might or might not be used correctly, setting thus the praise (or the blame, for that matter) on people. Undeniably, and based on the extant literature previously mentioned, the human factor is considered the bearer of quality, hence the cornerstone of any company and especially a service-oriented one. Nevertheless, the involvement of people in the company is surprisingly at low levels; even concerning the aftermath of quality initiatives, their results and any suggestions are conveyed at a higher organisational level and afterwards they are only communicated to employees potentially involved in the error detected or its improvement process. Through this perspective, the holistic mentality and systems thinking, which constitute a requisite for continuous quality improvement, seem discontinued.

In counterbalance, there is indeed an effort for further employees’ involvement, namely by feedbacks through yearly conducted surveys, but these are basic, in structure and implementation. The HR department, having acknowledged the need for more quality, made the strategic decision to enrich, in the near future, some of their metrics with more quality-oriented features, which is a promising yet indicative of the current situation project. However, to date, KPIs have been measured mainly in terms of quantity, as opposed to quality. It is a common pitfall that many companies encounter, since managing by objectives may well work in performance (numbers), but not uncommonly to the detriment of quality (Knowles, 2011; Evans and Lindsay, 2008). It is noteworthy that there is an intention to shift to management by fact, a key element of TQM, but has not been implemented yet.

The structure of a company traditionally poses as another indicator of quality-oriented mentality (Evans and Lindsay, 2008). In this perspective, the company at issue possesses the key elements suggestive of quality potentials, in terms of organisational structure. The HR department belongs to the upper-level management, insinuating that its function is potentially aligned to strategic objectives set at a higher level of the organisational chart. As such, one would expect the basis of any company’s culture, the vision and mission statement, to be fully communicated in a top-down manner; in practice though, this is a token which is not particularly embraced. A desk research, realised retrospectively, indeed proved the alarming reality in this context.
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Overall, their QMS might provide in the future those appropriate insights as to what must be done, so that real quality features, which are unintentionally allayed, can be attained. For the time being though, this company is indicative of the assertion that certification may well be a good first step only to help the structure and processes of a company; nevertheless, it calls for an ardent focus on people to really attain continuous quality improvement. Before this can be realised, all there is to it, is a reassuring but deceptive and somewhat dangerous short-term resting place for those with a real concern for quality (Holmes and McElwee, 1995).

4.2 Case study 2: the training institute

The same rationale concerning certifications and quality perceptions applies for the second company to be examined. It is a medium-sized company, active in the European market with several branches in three countries, operating as an educational/training institute.

HR department has a peripheral role, undertaking mostly administrative tasks, standard procedures for operational personnel and with individualised approach for about 1/10 of headcount, hence deploying a very limited interaction with the employees. On top of that, the very position of the HR department in the company sounds the first alarm bells, since its functions are integrated and it reports to the CFO. The latter choice further implies what a marginal, secondary role the HR department possesses, and is indicative of the typical albeit dangerous tendency to consider people as resources, bound to comply with financial objectives, rather than to be used as a driver for a company’s success, something feasible when reporting to CEO (Miller, 2013). The full extent of HR department’s marginalisation is additionally depicted in that it has very limited functions when it comes to quality initiatives implementation, which is nevertheless normal considering also its position, as previously outlined. In this context, its alignment to strategic objectives, in other words a fundamental requisite for quality improvement as aptly argued by Vouzas (2004, 2007) and Kufidu and Vouzas (1998), is virtually discontinued.

An additional aspect supporting this disconnect of certification from additional quality initiatives is the fact that they are mostly implemented by product management whereas HR department’s role is limited to the pure administrative aspects of quality. What’s more, any quality improvements suggested, are all addressed on branch level, and individual results are communicated actively back to them. Through this perspective, the holistic approach – suggestive of TQM features – which would otherwise be evident, is not fully embraced despite the encouraging methods used for its communication per se.

Undeniably, the company applies both objective and subjective product quality, through measurement of students’ grades improvement and through feedbacks from customers respectively, both being a promising aspect in terms of quality initiatives. One should not get carried away though by the presence of feedbacks alone, to infer that TQM is pursued, first and foremost because they are the norm (it is standard procedure for medium and large-sized companies), and then because their application alone does not guarantee their de facto sound implementation afterwards. Specifically for the subjective product quality technique undertaken, the company uses the NPS metric which has received rigorous criticism on the potentially distorted results it might provide due to disclosure of the real identity of the recipient, amongst others. Holmes and McElwee’s
(1995) distrust of the KPI’s fad as an a priori driver of quality, is applicable in the company at issue.

As far as employees’ feedback is concerned, it is limited to typical procedures, and apart from a yearly performance review, no further interaction or people involvement was explicitly demonstrated. As previously stated, the TQM mentality traditionally encompasses focus on people, which is herein limited to basics.

The company considers that certifications are an effective quality indicator, but that going the extra mile in terms of quality is somehow irrelevant of certifications. And despite the underlying fragment of truth of this very statement, as has been recurrently argued by a number of experts, it is also discouraging, considering Lee and Palmer (1999) who stress the damage that failing to understand the bigger picture of TQM and certifications’ interrelation can cause to any company.

When quality initiatives as part of a certification are perceived and implemented merely as a marketing tool, as is evident in the company at issue, it is fair to doubt whether and how quality features can be attained. This doubt is further supported, when one considers the structure and organisational position of HR department and the overall mentality which is therein instilled. As such, this company seems to go about in quality with the misconception that certification encompasses enough quality features to at least commercialise quality.

4.3 Case study 3: the IT/software company

The third case to be examined is an IT/software company actively operating in the European market. It is currently a large company, as a result of a number of mergers and acquisitions, which nevertheless have their share of implications in quality terms, as depicted later in this section.

First it should be noted that the HR department had a very limited weight in the company especially in the past years, undertaking mostly administrative tasks. A shift in mentality is observed, in that HR department is currently more involved in issues besides the purely administrative ones, and that it can provide invaluable intelligence thus, contributing to more strategic initiatives. This shift is argued to have occurred throughout several corporate changes, the most alarming one though being the downgrading of the HR department below the CFO. This is somehow contradicting in terms. And it is so, since the strategic decision to assign the HR department to the CFO, is indicative of a limited focus on it; HR in turn, is perceived through an administrative perspective rather than as a partner which could contribute to all initiatives towards quality improvement of the company.

It is probably the first implication that has been caused by the repetitive mergers and the subsequent corporate changes. This implication is closely interrelated to the overall mentality instilled in the upper-level management. Consecutive changes even in the vision of the company, presumably supposed to picture its long-term orientation are a source of instability which is indirectly related to quality. The perpetual changing of direction seems to have a big, negative impact on HR department and how it is viewed by the upper-level management.

Besides, HR department is somehow detached from the entire certification process, since its contribution when it comes to quality is not particularly encouraged. The certifications are run separately, mainly from the quality department, and no significant interaction between these two departments was observed, apart from the standard
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interaction in the context of being certified, namely some suggestions from quality to HR
department on how to improve their own processes. Thus, the HR department has zero
contribution to quality initiatives. KPIs and standard metrics, e.g. turnover rate, seem to
be all there is to it from their part, when it comes to quality initiatives. After all, the
company’s view on those is that they can reflect quality features at a satisfactory level.
Simultaneously, being complacent – as the company is – about them indicates a limited
awareness of how TQM and certifications can interact to the profit of the company (Lee
and Palmer, 1999).

Another implication of the constant changing culture as described earlier, besides its
impact on the limited focus of the upper-level management on the HR, is how employees
interact in such a turbulent environment. It seems that they do not embrace these changes,
and HR department has difficulties in addressing the challenges triggered by them. The
reason of difficulties encountered in embracing the changes is twofold; firstly, it is
exactly due to this uncertainty that the employees seem completely detached from a
process to engage to any vision, as they think it will soon change again. And then it is the
nature of the business itself that implies a disconnection to long-term orientation and to
the focus on soft skills. In a software environment where programming gurus being
placed at management positions can yield high rates in terms of business performance,
their strong technical skills offset the soft skills that they may lack, those soft skills that
are even deemed a frill. In this respect, no real commitment to quality initiatives is
detected from the people of the organisation, since they do not understand what the
organisation is doing and why, and will not become committed to assisting it (Mihiotis,
2005).

What is more troubling though on this part is the fact that HR department has indeed
detected this detachment of employees but seems unable and even reluctant to further
address it; the assertion that they have the information on their portal site and they cannot
convince employees to care more, is suggestive of the limited efforts of HR department
to motivate their employees. A further downside of the specific nature of the software
business on one hand, and of consecutive mergers on the other, is that team work is
negatively affected. Different company cultures before the mergers and the subsequent
diversified environment (as the company has a broad range of software products and
services, pertaining to different divisions) are an impediment to team work, which could
otherwise enhance a TQM mentality; in this respect, the homogenisation of the erstwhile
different teams is hindered, to the detriment of quality.

Based on those, it is already safe to argue that focus on people is limited in the
company at issue. To these facts though comes to add a general sense of top-bottom
communication throughout the company. The HR director may well be involved in all
departments but no interaction is detected, and whichever information obtained is
provided by units’ managers and not the employees themselves. The big intervals
between these sets of communication with departments is even more troubling as there is
no frequent addressing of issues when informed on a yearly basis, except for the sine qua
non immediate reaction on occasion.

Feedbacks are the way to communicate with the upper-level management, and despite
a high initial response rate, no suggestions are particularly made nor are the employees
really involved in their outcome, as already mentioned. It seems that the holistic
mentality that could potentially instigate further quality efforts is not especially embraced
and as such the company cannot reap the full benefits of the certification.
4.4 Case study 4: the bank

The fourth company to be examined serves as a great case supporting the notion that under certain circumstances continuous quality improvement is feasible. This company pertains to the banking sector, with an active presence in the European market. It is a large company, active for several decades, and with a very big and structured HR department, numbering over 100 employees.

Various distinct activities within the HR department are treated as such, and are assigned to different sub-departments, namely compensation and benefits, recruitment, training and development amongst others. It goes without saying that processes are very specific, according to context. For example, when it comes to recruitment process, there are some skills required like self-motivation, communicative and cooperative skills paired with entrepreneurial thinking, which should be common to all employees, regardless of the position to be filled, and on top of that there are the specific technical skills required for each position. All these are outlined in a detailed manner such that even the screening and interviewing of all applicants are performed based on very specific questions carefully designed to test the aforementioned soft skills along with the technical requisites. Consecutively, the applicants are ranked based on their performance throughout the previous procedures, and the selection is conducted solely and repeatedly from this database. As such, the underlying principles are very structured and objective, and everything is as it should be.

Another encouraging element is people involvement. The initial, most evident approach for that is twofold; firstly, there is a platform where processes of the company, regulations behind it and each department’s information, are all thoroughly written and easily accessible by each employee. Secondly, this is further complemented by a help desk for employees. They are encouraged to address any question, complaint, suggestion or request to this particular help desk, which after all has a very high rate of performance concerning the solution to the issues arriving there through mails or telephone calls; whether on-the-spot, or by channelling the remaining issues to the respective department capable to address them, this mixture of active and passive communication methods poses as an efficient tool facilitating both employees and management.

On the whole, pooling problems and suggestions in the same place, namely the help desk, helps detect recognisable patterns in terms of frequency, as in through statistical techniques, further investigate on them and then address them to the HR specialist of the respective department. Doing this on a monthly basis is indicative of the quality oriented mentality of strategic decisions. Through this echelon, a monthly review does not leave much space for excessive accumulation of problems and issues to be addressed, whether these involve detection of problems at a particular department or simple suggestions for improvement of an already effective process.

Focusing on the soft part of HR department is also evident when considering that the results of quality audits as well as those of internal surveys are broadly communicated amongst all employees; there are individual departmental meetings covering all issues and rankings, so that each employee can get the information on both the individual and the general results. Besides, such an approach directly relates to the idea of employee involvement wherein employees can better understand the entire process from start to finish (Evans and Lindsay, 2008). Workshops are the next step following each meeting, wherein any emerging needs for improvement are addressed.
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As far as the organisational structure is concerned, it is indicative of the weight that HR department possesses therein. Albeit the primarily consulting nature of the department, it is nevertheless in full alignment with the upper-level management. Strategic objectives and HR objectives should be in line with each other in terms of long-term orientation. This is a need fully understood by the HR department which translates any specific HR request in one that will be embraced from upper-level management, in order to approach quality to the fullest. Undisputedly, vision and mission being the cornerstones of any company should be in alignment firstly with each other, then with any individual departmental short-term objectives, and last but not least be communicated to all employees in a most explicit way; the bank at issue indeed meets these criteria, a rationale suggestive of quality.

Despite the fact that detailed processes, induced partially by complex organisational structure, both entail a maze amount of bureaucracy, the HR department recognises the need for a thorough approach of procedures in such that quality is widely and not individually reached. In a short-term perspective, a delay in a process can be a sign of lack of quality, but the long-term effects hiding behind this delay can be highly beneficial in a broader sense ensuing TQM.

What’s more, the HR department understands what an impact customer-focused mentality can have on the smooth operation of the company. The basis for that is indeed being set in a company-wide manner through workshops, initiated by an affiliate consulting group, wherein matters of change of culture and philosophy are being addressed. TQM mentality is thus highly embraced; this can be further illustrated by the recurrent efforts to overcome all obstacles, undoubtedly raised in ventures of this calibre, and recognising that such actions are important in essence. Understanding any such weaknesses is critical and needs a big amount of effort, but they should eventually walk the talk, if they want to be on the road to sound quality. Be it customer or employee satisfaction surveys, the workshops, the collaboration with consulting groups, the help desk, all suggestive of focus on employees, as well as the very organisational structure, all are indicative of a QMS implementation in a way to achieve continuous quality improvement.

4.5 Case study 5: the private school

A similar rationale applies in the fifth case examined; it is a private school operating in Greece, amongst the oldest and largest ones in the territory. It has been accredited with a number of awards and certifications for several years.

The school has a structured HR department numbering only a handful of employees, but with specific, separate activities; it is a result of a very conscious strategic decision from upper management to create specific, common, repeated procedures for each activity undertaken. This need raised as the school grew even bigger, and especially considering the diversity of personnel – from pure administrative to educational, any school employs people from a wide range of background and aiming to fulfil an even bigger one of activities. As such, the HR department had to address this diversity with due diligence.

On top of that and for similar reasons, payroll is also a part of the HR department, something facilitating, at least, the administrative aspects of the department. The latter is perceived as an impediment in terms of quality, since the need for a more strategic HR department is required in order to help with the quality efforts. Apart from the obviously
negative aspect of this trait, it has an alternative reading though; traditionally, it is of utter importance to understand what’s needed in order to be able to implement it at a future point, instead of being rest assured that everything runs smoothly and hence failing to detect what could further improve an organisation. And besides that, it seems that the admittedly more administrative focus is counterbalanced, if not overtaken, by a set of other features, as discussed hereafter.

In fact, HR department has always been very high in the school’s organisational structure, indicative of the scope that the upper management has concerning HR, namely that of being in full alignment with its strategic objectives. Such an organisational structure is facilitating this intention. A further positive aspect of the organisational structure is a very specific vision and mission statement, actively communicated and embraced by employees, an inference made from both recurrent feedbacks and the general school culture shared throughout its human resources.

And then, there is the contribution of the HR department to quality efforts, as is evident from the meetings organised by the quality department wherein all activities and matters that could potentially be value-added, or in turn, non-value-added in terms of quality are reviewed, and then respectively addressed. These meetings are realised with the full cooperation of the HR department amongst others; hence one can easily perceive how facilitating such an interaction can be for all quality initiatives; even more so, when these meetings take place on a weekly basis which is a highly frequent timeframe for reviews, deterring the accumulation of issues to be addressed. In this respect, the quality-oriented mentality of the school is apparent.

People involvement is clearly evident in the actual operation of the school. First, quality audits’ process is highly participative, in the sense that it is not a detached process run solely from quality department, but involves a great number of people from many departments – with HR department therein possessing a pivotal role – interacting in order to implement them. Besides the echelon of quality audits, there are indeed several other issues as well as means to interact with the employees. All such issues can be addressed during the annual conference of the organisation. Therein are discussed all results from monitoring activities and metrics, as well as the objectives of the organisation, and general strategic issues. This is a more formal way of communicating all information to employees, which only complements the daily used intranet, wherein they can have access on anything concerning the school processes.

Most of all though, it seems that team working, a key element of TQM, being the school’s basic pattern, as well as a general open-door culture, with a climate encouraging interaction is highly suggestive of the focus on people in the organisation. In this respect, there are many opportunities from the employees’ perspective to both be informed and be heard from upper management, as the channels towards the upper levels are made very direct. The weekly meetings in quest for quality, is also indicative of the focus on people as they involve many employees in a cross-departmental manner. As such, the organisation has well embraced the key principles to attain continuous quality improvement and is not rest assured of quality as a mere result of a certification.

5 Cross-case analysis

This section presents a cross-case analysis that addresses the cases in a more comprehensive way, in order to detect similarities or discrepancies amongst them.
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Table 1 depicts in short the main similarities and discrepancies and classifies them according to their projected features. Note though that it is not the individual points which can, or cannot, lead to real quality improvements, but how all the points are interacting. In the following sub-sections, it is interesting to compare them through this rationale in two dimensions that constitute ‘focus on human resources’ factor in this study:

1 focus on people
2 orientation of the HR department.

It should be stated that no particular pattern was identified throughout the study to insinuate that any similarities or discrepancies were caused as a result of a specific sector; after all, two of the companies pertaining broadly to the same sector, that of education, have provided contrasting results for predicted reasons.

5.1 Focus on people

For the companies at issue, people involvement is limited, in the call centre, the training institute and the IT/software, whereas a more comprehensive relative approach is evident for the cases of the bank and the school examined. In terms of the basic aspects, as one would traditionally expect in medium and large-sized companies, all share more or less the same features, e.g. in terms of recruitment processes. They all use feedbacks from employees which are positive feature in quality terms, but cannot be indicative of quality if implemented alone. Beyond these, the picture is vastly different on other elements which may suggest people involvement. Firstly, the call centre, the IT/software and the training institute, all have a top-bottom communication process for their employees, the two first using the intranet and portal site respectively, and the latter through the branch managers, in order to pass any information on them. No reverse communication was explicitly inferred or stated throughout the interviews, nor was it deducted from desk research. Team work or any special training efforts did not emerge either, with the exception of the IT/software where training is cherished, as a result though of ISO 9001 requirements, where training is encouraged. For the specific case of the IT/software, team work is explicitly allayed out of reasons as explained in its within-case analysis. All these are indicative of the limited focus on people of these companies.

For the case of the bank and the school, employees have as much information as possible, through intranet, focus groups, help desk and team working. All these facilitate a more interactive approach. For the school, it is a highly participative process, unlikely to succeed without people’s true commitment. As for the results, both companies’ decision to comprehensively inform all employees is suggestive of what Evans and Lindsay (2008) argue concerning people involvement in such a way to make employees understand the entire process from start to finish. Being able to involve the employees by making them a part of the company and promote a participative instead of competitive environment is likely to instigate them to assist the company in every effort towards continuous quality improvement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Call centre</th>
<th>Training institute</th>
<th>IT/software</th>
<th>Bank</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><strong>Focus on people</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Teamwork</strong></td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Very limited</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neither inferred nor stated</td>
<td>Neither inferred nor stated</td>
<td>Hinder due to the diversified nature and the consecutive changes (mergers)</td>
<td>Groups; cooperation with consulting group for further improvement</td>
<td>Teamwork is a pivotal practice from early on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Training</strong></td>
<td>Standard procedures</td>
<td>Neither inferred nor stated</td>
<td>Focus on training not only on the technical part of the organisation</td>
<td>Training has a specific learning plan preposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Top-bottom; intranet</td>
<td>Top-bottom; meetings</td>
<td>Top-bottom; portal site</td>
<td>Interactive; Intranet, meetings, groups, help desk, workshops, teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><strong>HR department</strong></td>
<td>Primary role</td>
<td>Very limited role</td>
<td>Limited role</td>
<td>Pivotal role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>HR focus</strong></td>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>Administrative</td>
<td>Administrative and strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>HR position in organisational structure</strong></td>
<td>Aligned to upper-level</td>
<td>Secondary; reports to CFO</td>
<td>Secondary; reports to CFO</td>
<td>Aligned to upper-level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>Improvements</strong></td>
<td>Fragmentary</td>
<td>Fragmentary; occasional</td>
<td>continuous</td>
<td>continuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Frequency</strong></td>
<td>Yearly reviews</td>
<td>Yearly reviews; immediate on hard violations</td>
<td>Yearly reviews; immediate on hard violations</td>
<td>Monthly reviews of help desk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Results</strong></td>
<td>Communicated; addressed on individual level</td>
<td>Communicated; addressed on individual level</td>
<td>Communicated; addressed on individual level</td>
<td>Communicated in a comprehensive manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Metrics/tools</strong></td>
<td>Quality-oriented KPIs, feedbacks, turnover rate within six months</td>
<td>Objective product quality (grades measurement); subjective (NPS metric; feedback)</td>
<td>Quality-oriented KPIs, feedbacks, turnover rate, reports on resignations</td>
<td>Quality-oriented KPIs, feedbacks, performance audits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2 Orientation of the HR department

Considering the specific cases examined in the present study in terms of HR position in their organisational structure, the call centre, the bank and the school have chosen to assign their HR departments in the upper-level management. As for the training institute and the IT/software, the HR possesses a de facto degraded role reporting to the CFO with whichever implications that this encompasses, for the particular reasons analysed in their within-case analysis.

Being aligned to strategic objectives, traditionally set at a higher management level, is only one side of the coin, obviously. HR individual focus should exhibit strategic orientation alongside with the administrative aspects of its functions, which are detached from quality improvement potentials, according to a number of experts. For the case of the training institute and the IT/software, HR fails to be aligned to upper management and at the same time being purely administrative. For the call centre though, it seems that HR department’s sound position in the organisational structure is somehow offset by its focus being solely administrative rather than strategic. As for the case of the bank, both its position and its focus are strategically orientated. The school’s case is again more complex, being administratively focused, despite its position in the organisational structure. This can be partially attributed to the small number of employees in the department, while its negative effect coherently to the literature review, can be and actually is mitigated. As argued in its within-case analysis, it is indeed counterbalanced by a number of other features that insinuate the company’s intention, at the least, to convey to HR more strategic functions and actively involve it with quality initiatives like the cross-departmental groups for quality issues review on a weekly basis.

6 Conclusions

Real quality results and the specifics of their prerequisites under ISO 9001 implementation have been rigorously scrutinised during the last decades. This study gave insights into the specifics of QMS implementation by exploring the cases of five service-oriented companies pertaining to different business sectors. The empirical research conducted attempted to outline and indeed supported the assertion that extensive focus on people and strategic orientation of the HR department can make the difference in terms of quality.

Specifically, it is argued that when a company exhibits limited focus on people, alongside a downgraded view of the HR department in the organisational structure, all quality initiatives are likely to serve as an end-point towards certification. As such, the companies bearing these features cannot reap the benefits that a successful QMS implementation could potentially offer in the long run. On the other hand, a broad focus on people, combined with a strategic orientation of the HR department, is expected to drive the companies at issue towards real quality. As such, ISO 9001 certification can be an actual driver of continuous quality improvement. Therefore, in order to reap the full benefits of a sound QMS implementation, HR soft parts are required to be at the forefront of the organisation’s processes and their long term objectives to be fully aligned to strategic ones.
It goes without saying that several limitations apply throughout the present study. On a theoretical basis it is a complex issue, in terms of the very subjective nature of quality, and what’s more when approached from the human element perspective, enhancing this subjectivity. Then on a methodological basis, time and potentials to examine in-depth (as this would require a number of private data) being a limiting factor, the cases are approached in a less comprehensive manner with obvious implications, nevertheless providing an excellent chance to verify any patterns across cases, be it similarities or discrepancies. Last, the data per se induce some challenges; the main data collection’s techniques can contain sources of bias, since interpreting the contextual concepts can be attributed to either the person interviewed or the researcher, amongst others, whilst these boundaries are extremely foggy.

A further research could undertake interviews of employees from quality and HR departments, as well as others working for the companies at issue, in order to strengthen the results of the present study. On top of that, this is likely to help overcome the theoretical limitation as mentioned before, wrought by the subjective nature of quality in service-oriented companies. The exploration of more cases pertaining to the sectors examined is also suggested since it could showcase further insights on what has already emerged through the present study.

References
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