
Editorial

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1 Introduction

The development and gradual introduction of new forms of production management based on the application of Japanese practices such as just in time manufacturing systems, total quality management systems, new product development through the use of simultaneous engineering techniques, and new forms of orienting and managing supplier relationships (through comprehensive supply chain management), have led to a change in paradigm, or, at the very least, to a substantial shift in the way of understanding, designing, introducing and sustaining the manufacturing or operations strategy of business organisations.

In the area of production and operations management, 'lean production system' (also known as Global Production System (GPS) and Toyota Production System (TPS)) (Krafcik, 1988; Womack, Jones and Roos, 1990; Womack and Jones, 2003) is the name given to one particular new philosophy or orientation for the design, operation and control of the production subsystem. This model was initially developed in Japan on the basis of studies carried out in automotive companies, and after over two decades of development there, finally arrived in the west in the eighties, first in USA and then in Western Europe.

The essence of this new paradigm, or orientation, for business operations contrasts directly with the traditional conception, more widely accepted, which holds that companies cannot achieve favourable results in more than one at a time of the characteristic objectives of the manufacturing function: the conventional objectives of

cost or efficiency, flexibility, quality and reduced lead times (Skinner, 1974; Wheelwright, 1981).

However, from the experience of Japanese manufacturers, and also of some western producers that have successfully introduced lean production procedures, it has been observed that some companies tend to achieve, simultaneously, not only acceptable results, but in many cases better results than those of their competitors, in all manufacturing objectives (Ferdows and de Meyer, 1990; Clark, 1996). These results are achieved precisely thanks to the use of certain policies that fall within the new lean production paradigm.

In these companies the model of incompatibilities between production strategies and objectives and the manufacturing policies to implement them does not seem to apply. They are known in the literature under the name of world-class manufacturers (Schonberger, 1986; Gunn, 1987). However, there does not yet seem to be enough evidence to demonstrate the 'superiority or not' of this position and the controversy continues.

Indeed, at the root of the controversy also lies the incompatibility between traditional comparative advantages (cost v differentiation) and the no less important question of what form competition will take in the future, when all of the most important global manufacturers will, in fact, be world class manufacturers.

2 What about services?

But what about services? How service operations can benefit of those advances? Is it possible to translate the basic principles and practices of the lean production system to the service industry? Those are the underlying questions that motivated this issue.

Service operations concentrate today in more than the two-third parts of economic activity in developed countries, but due to its peculiarities and special features, the management of services is still a quasi-unexplored territory, from where researches try to escape in their studies, and the majority of specialists in industrial competitiveness swear (Pannirselvam *et al.*, 1999).

Fortunately this situation has now been changing in the last few years. See for example the origin of this journal, the recent publications of some special issues inside generalist ones (Rust and Chase, 1999; Roth and Menor, 2003); or the recognition of services as a challenging area of study in some other disciplines (Karmakar, 1996). In this special issue of the *International Journal of Services Technology and Management*, we try to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of some main problems related with the transposition to the service environment of the ideas and principles related with the lean production paradigm. This job is not simple at all, but necessary if we assume the implementation of the new paradigm is inevitable in order to achieve the higher levels of quality and efficiency in service operations that our developed western societies demand.

Through this special issue we can find nine original research papers which pretend to show to the reader some of these intriguing possibilities. This set of contributions can be classified in two main categories:

- With a more exploratory purpose, and more related with the translation of what we can understand as principles of the lean production system, we have the works by Pär Ahlström, 'Lean Service Operations: Translating Lean Production Principles to Service Operations'; Uday M. Apte and Chon-Huat Goh, 'Applying Lean Manufacturing Principles to Information Intensive Services'; Angel Martinez and Manuela Perez, 'The use of Lean Indicators for Operations Management in Service Companies'; and the one by Alfonso Durán, 'Lean Potential of Network Enabled Remote Service Outsourcing: spatio-temporal decoupling and resource flexibility'.
- With a more practical vision and directly related with the application of some of the main techniques related to lean thinking into services operations, we can find the works of Lluís Cuatrecasas, 'A Lean Management Implementation Method in Service Operations'; B.P. Lingaraj and Joseph N. Khamalah 'Total Quality Management in small well established Service Businesses'; Joanne Sulek 'Statistical Quality Control in Services', and Albert Corominas, Amaia Lusa and Rafael Pastor 'Characteristics and Classification of the Annualised Working Hours Planning Problems'.

Last but not least, the work by Diego J. Cuello de Oro, Luis M. Delgado and Marta Fossas, 'Analysis of the Relational Capital between Logistic Partners', serves as a final contribution in order to demonstrate us that the competitive advantage, of a lean orientation in this case of the logistic activities, could be achieved in both parts of the supply channel: in the supplier and the customer as well. An experience will probably encourage the logistics services providers to enhance their relational capital with their partners, both in industrial or in the services sector.

The challenge is no doubt exciting, and we had only begun to walk the way, but I particularly think that it is a good start. Now the turn is for the reader.

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