

Towards a quality management competence framework? -exploring practices and competencies in quality management.

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Abstract

Purpose – The core of Quality management (QM) is still to make for the fulfilment of customer requirements in organisations. The content and concept of QM has been a recurring theme in research on QM and though the conceptual framework and general content of QM might still have relevance, the practices and activities in order to best serve the needs of contemporary organisations seems to change over time. In fact, an increasing number of studies address a perceived shift within QM which might not only have impact on the practices and activities within QM but might perhaps also go as far as affecting the conceptual underpinnings of QM. For example, strategic influence and strategic facilitation has been described as becoming increasingly more important which can be described as an emerging novelty of QM.

Considering this backdrop, it is somewhat surprising that relatively few empirical studies have focused on what QM professionals *actually do* within the realm of their professional practice. Even fewer studies focus on what *it actually takes* to do QM-work, i.e. the core competencies of QM. This is even more surprising since the most predominant way to organise the function of QM seems to be to create a professionalized and structured wing of the organisation: “the quality department”, i.e. there are often defined professionals in larger organisations dedicated to organised QM work thus representing incumbent and very real QM competencies.

The point of departure for this paper is recognize the existence of actual QM competencies and address a perceived need to explore and understand these competencies needed for QM professionals in order to perform professional QM activities and practices. This need becomes even more articulated considering the changing roles, needs and requirements of QM and QM professionals. In paraphrasing the proverbial Cheshire Cat we can hardly know what it takes to be a QM professional tomorrow if we don't really know what it takes to be a QM professional today.

The purpose of this paper is to extend the conceptual understanding of QM by introducing a competence and practice theory based terminology for describing QM work in contemporary organisations and create a conceptual competence framework for QM practice. In order to address this purpose, the study revolves around the following research questions: What characterizes contemporary QM work and how can it be described in terms of professional practice? What are the essential competencies and competence areas needed in order to perform the professional practices of QM?

Design/methodology/approach –This paper is based on a cross-case study design incorporating four Swedish large size organizations in which where QM professionals ($n= 34$) were targeted, selected and interviewed in the early spring of 2017. Following a qualitative analysis using Nvivo software, the QM activities were extracted and identified from the interview data. These activities were then aggregated and thematised according to pre-set criteria for professional practice. By analysing and establishing contextual similarities, both commonalities and deviances could be described which, in turn, produced patterns or “archetypes” of QM competencies needed to perform professional practices within different levels and orientations of QM work.

The sampling of interviewees was based on a need to cover the whole spectrum of QM practice. The basic requirement was that interviews had defined tasks and designated time for QM work. In order to categorize and organize a representative sample, the following generic four-level categorization was done:

- Level 1: individuals on a strategic level with strategic managerial responsibilities for QM.
- Level 2: individuals on an operational level with managerial responsibilities for QM
- Level 3: individuals on an operational level without managerial responsibilities for QM but with a general perspective on QM
- Level 4: as level 3 but responsibilities within a confined operational area or function.

Findings – This study identifies and discusses a number of key similarities shared across different organisations but also significant deviances which stresses the need for contextual understanding. Depending on organisational position and the QM orientation, four different generic QM roles are identified: centralised & strategic, centralised & operational, decentralised & strategic and decentralised & operational. The paper also provides empirically derived examples of the above roles. This approach in categorising generic roles addresses the challenge of the “production dilemma” within QM, i.e. the balance between exploitation and exploration practices within QM.

Derived from the practices identified and described in the paper, four basic quality management competence dimensions are identified and described: the social capability dimension, the experience in practice dimension, the methods and process capability dimension and the development capability dimension. Sub categories defining the four dimensions are also empirically extracted and described. A competence framework is constructed featuring levels of QM competence depending on the generic role categorization. New and emerging competencies are discussed in relation to the proposed competence framework. Both practical and theoretical implications are discussed.

Research limitations/implications – The selection and sampling within the study may have certain repercussions as to the results; the sample is limited to large size Swedish organizations and the organizations are heterogeneous (including public sector organizations as well as industrial firms).

Practical implications – Setting competence standards for QM is important in order for organisations to design business excellence aligned QM functions truly fit for purpose. In creating and launching a standardised way and terminology in defining QM competencies, the communication and flow of information within the organisation on issues of designing and planning QM is facilitated. This provides an ease for both practitioners and management levels to manage, plan and staff the needed target levels of QM competence, on both strategic and operational levels within organisations.

Originality/value – This paper extends current research on QM with a two-fold contribution. First, it aims to provide a practically useful tool for QM practitioners and management on any organisational level to support aligned and expedient organisation of QM as a function. Second, it aims to expand the theoretical understanding of QM by infusing practice theory and competence theory. It also forms a vantage point for further research on particular QM competencies that are anticipated as possibly important for future organisational needs.

Keywords: quality management, professional, competencies, activities, practice