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**Communication Enhancement: A Process
Dividend for the Organisation and the HRM
Department?**

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COMMUNICATION ENHANCEMENT: A PROCESS DIVIDEND FOR THE ORGANISATION AND THE HRM DEPARTMENT?

ABSTRACT

Quality has become a key issue for organisations seeking competitive advantage and coping with ever changing market demands. Evidence suggests that the human resource implications of such initiatives are frequently underestimated and neglected (Powell, 1995). The present study surveyed 133 Irish organisations implementing Quality Initiatives (QIs), focusing particularly on the impact of these initiatives on internal communication processes and the role played by the human resource (HR) function in these changes. Results indicate the overall success of the QIs in enhancing internal communication processes, but highlight two issues: the surprising absence of HR function involvement in the deliverance of these communication enhancements and the perception by most respondents that while the stated tangible QI objectives have been achieved, there is still some distance to be travelled to fulfil employee expectations on the more intangible communication based needs. The implications of these findings are discussed in terms of the changing face of the HR function and the long term success of QIs.

INTRODUCTION

One of the problems faced by the personnel practitioner is that of defining precisely the boundaries of his or her job (see Legge, 1978). Even if these boundaries can be defined, there is always the additional difficulty of defending the territory from other managers as people management is, after all, within the remit of every manager. In recent years, personnel managers have had to work even harder at this boundary definition and defence task; human resource management (HRM), with all its promises of board room participation and strategic focus, is nevertheless seen as the function of general rather than human resource managers (e.g. Guest, 1987; Fowler, 1987). Yet, while many personnel managers still concentrate on the old reliables of recruitment, training and employee relations as the means of defining their positions, the major changes taking place within organisations suggest that there are opportunities for involvement in a larger number of areas.

This article describes the communications strategies adopted by Irish organisations implementing quality programmes and considers the role played by the HR function in the and construction and implementation of these strategies. Communications as a discrete personnel task appears to be confined to the traditional textbooks (Torrington and Hall, 1995; Armstrong, 1991) and is not considered a key issue in the more recent publications (e.g. Storey, 1995; Legge, 1995a). Yet, communications is certainly a 'soft' issue and thus is in line with the facilitative role commanded by the traditional personnel function as well as the 'human' focus proffered by HRM. The article argues that the human resource function needs to be actively involved in the construction, delivery and receipt of communications processes within the organisation. The need for such involvement is not simply because exclusion will relegate the HR department to the sidelines, but because there needs to reside somewhere within an organisation an understanding of the purpose, nature and outcomes of communications processes.

QUALITY AND HUMAN RESOURCES: THE LITERATURE EVIDENCE

As management philosophies and approaches have evolved over time, from the Classical/Tayloristic paradigm early in this century, to a post-Hawthorne Studies human relations orientation, the interest and focus on employee involvement in organisational processes has shifted accordingly. The shift from the classical management philosophy to the human relations approach was characterised by a refocusing on the role of the employee from one who is hired to work and not to think, to a view which

accepts that employees seek relational acknowledgement and a sense of self-esteem from their work. In recent decades the evolution of the modern HRM philosophy has been guided by the perception that employees are most satisfied and productive when they have some input and control over the work they do in the workplace (Heath & Bryant, 1992). This is certainly true of the 'soft' variant approach of HRM (see, Marchington, 1995) which espouses active employee involvement in task and organisation-related decisions and functions. Such an approach is characterised in practice by a quality driven philosophy where the focus is on effective organisational communications, consultative decision-making, teamwork and employee development programmes (Guest, 1987; Andriessen, 1991, Legge, 1995b).

This description of the evolution and practices of the 'soft' variant approach to HRM is at very least syntactically analogous to the aspirations of the Quality movement of recent decades. The seminal writings of the accepted quality gurus (see, Deming, 1986; Juran, 1988) are infused with references of shifting from traditional hierarchical vertical layers to a more horizontal and cross-functional team based problem-solving approach (Fry-Bover, 1994). In effect the quality movement and 'soft' HRM appear to share both a common language and common goals, characterised by a fidelity to the optimisation of employee participation and potential, while maximising internal and external customer satisfaction (Garvin, 1988; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992; Tenner & DeToro, 1992; Wood and Peccei, 1995). The process, while apparently novel, reflects the Immaturity-Maturity Continuum described by Chris Argyris (1962), when he reflected that it was incumbent upon management to foster the development of mature and active relations with employees and in turn to give them more control over their work.

The Centrality of Communications Dynamics to Organisational Effectiveness

Communication dynamics in organisations are necessarily multifaceted and intricate, reflecting the complex norms, values, climate and goals of the organisation and the environments in which it functions (see, Mintzberg, 1973; Putnam, 1982; Heath & Bryant, 1992). Spenser (1994) in her review of organisational models, reminds us that organisations are firstly, social arrangements and by definition organisational culture is constructed by the organisation's members. Thus, the life blood of an organisation is the relationships which develop and exist, for and between, an organisation's constituent membership. Dachler (1989) adds that these relationships are essentially 'communication processes which include a *content level* as well as a *relationship level*,

the latter informing how the content level is to be understood within the *context of the relationship* (p. 51).

In the accepted age of the 'knowledge or information worker', information exchange and communication clarity are essential in the co-ordination of effort and control of organisational processes (Andriessen, 1991). Indeed some researchers have reported that the bedrock of the effective implementation of any QI within an organisation involves the redefinition of traditional boundaries and importantly the redefinition of the communication channels that exist within an organisation (Bak, 1992).

Morris, Meister and Hunt (1994), in a study of why QIs fail, indicated that many initiatives, no matter what the stated goal, should not be undertaken unless an objective internal communication audit is first conducted. Given such positive advocacy for the inclusion of communications analysis in the adopting of any QI, it is more than surprising to find that the stated objectives of many organisations involved in such initiatives rarely include any defined communication based outcome goals. Despite the intuitive logic of perceiving an analysis and development of the internal communication process as central to any QI, research has indicated that these 'softer' issues are in reality often neglected, thus consigning many quality efforts to frustration (see, Sandelands, 1994). It appears that many organisations involved in QIs may be neglecting the importance of the 'process dividend' associated with the inclusion of baseline communications review and support methods. These sentiments are supported by Raynor (1992) who suggests that the search for quality involves an entire 'system of thought', not just a simple review or revision of production/service methods. Unfortunately, too often employees are expected to develop the new orientations and perceptions of reality depicted by the QI, despite the fact that the objectives and redesign techniques being utilised are stated primarily in productivity based language. Such an approach does not take cognisance of the fact that essential to an organisations functioning is the realisation that internal communication is an complex interpretative process by which employees co-ordinate efforts by taking roles and establishing norms for work processes (see, Daft and Weick, 1984).

Measurement of Organisational Communication Dynamics

In functional terms, researchers in the area of communications in organisations have specifically investigated the processes of upward, downward and sideways communication and communication maturity in organisations when evaluating on site

relational behaviour (see, Marchington, 1995; Brewster et al., 1994; Hurley, 1990). In the applied setting, it is the appraisal of the existence of, and level of, relational maturity between employees and management (and indeed employees and employees) which indicates the level of true employee empowerment and collaboration in an organisation. Sims (1994) links such thinking to the HR function, saying that it is the responsibility of HR personnel to ensure that the communication processes to facilitate such relational maturity are fully functioning. Effectively the perception is that the HR function is primarily a conduit for open and integrative communications within an organisation.

THE RESEARCH

The study aimed to evaluate the impact of QIs on the communication dynamics of participating organisations, assessing whether there have been perceived positive increments and importantly whether these reached the levels of improvement expected by employees. Accordingly, upward, downward, and sideways communication quality was assessed as was the level of collaborative communication and problem-solving behaviour. Also evaluated was the influence of the existing HR practices in the facilitation of such processes as the evidence suggests that the HR role is essential to the development and sustaining of such communication quality change (Sims, 1994).

Methodology

The survey is the third part of a longitudinal study of the impact of QI introduction on management practices in Irish firms. The first phase of the study focused on customer service implications (Sinnott, 1994), and the second, a study of specific internal communication transformations of organisations undergoing changes due to QI implementation, is currently under completion. The third phase aims at examining the human resource implications of QIs (Monks, Buckley and Sinnott, 1996) and this section specifically focuses on the integration of communication process shifts on employee perceptions of the success of the QIs.

Survey Questionnaire

The instrument used to collect the information was a two part questionnaire. Part one contained five sections focusing on organisational details, the nature of the personnel/human resource function within the organisation, the quality programmes utilised and the impact of the QI on the HR function. The fifth section was the communication dynamics questionnaire. This is a 16 item Likert style questionnaire (1

to 7), which aimed to track respondents perceptions of the impact of the QI introduced in their organisation on specific communication processes. In developing the questionnaire, the quality literature was reviewed to identify relevant items and several elements were taken from other commonly utilised relevant test batteries (e.g. Likert, 1967; House and Rizzo, 1972; Buckley, 1993). The questionnaire contained items which ascertained the existence of and levels of upward, downward and sideward communication and the quality of collaborative interaction.

The questionnaire asked those responsible for human resource matters within the organisations to assess their organisation's position on each item before QI introduction, their perception of the situation at the present time and finally how they would like to see these communication issues progress in the future. Thus each item required three responses: past situation, present status and future expectation. Respondents were also given space to comment freely on how they perceived the QI influence on employee motivation and satisfaction.

Procedure

In May 1995, the questionnaire was administered to the 249 listed Irish *Q Mark* companies. The *Q Mark* is an Irish quality audit and accreditation scheme originally based on ISO 9000 but also embracing a service quality mark formulated on ISO 9004 and the Malcolm Baldrige Award criteria. Questionnaires were returned by 133 companies, reflecting a 54% response rate.

THE IMPACT OF QIS ON COMMUNICATIONS

Aims of the Quality Programme

The stated aims of respondent organisations involvement in QI are outlined in Table 1. Many of these aims were global in nature but were in line with standard quality specifications. However it is worth noting that the objectives were predominately product/service (i.e. outcome related) with only about half of the organisations considering wider cultural changes as critical objectives which may be pivotal to the sustaining nature of quality change (i.e. process related).

Table 1: Aims of the Quality Programme

Aims	%
To improve quality of service	92
To improve competitive advantage	76
To stay in line/ahead of competitors	72
To increase employee involvement	63
To reduce costs	60
To improve productivity	56
To streamline work practices	46
To support organisational/culture change	45
N = 133	

The quality programmes were perceived as 'successful' in achieving these objectives in 60 per cent of companies, as 'very successful' in 37 per cent and as 'unsuccessful' in 3 per cent of companies. When asked to record the changes in employee involvement resulting from the QI (Table 2), there was clear evidence that the initiatives did influence substantial improvement in communications and more consultative processes.

Table 2: Change in Employee Involvement Resulting From QI

Changes	%
Improved Communications	81
More emphasis on teamworking	70
Improved Reporting System	61
Focus on Participation & Involvement	58
Improved management systems	51
Change of Organisational Culture	50
Devolution of Responsibility	46
Cross Functional Teams	41
Flatter Hierarchy	27
Creation of Semi-Autonomous work Groups	23
Performance Based reward System	19
Fewer Control Systems	15
N = 133	

When asked about the methods employed in their QI to improve communications and involvement a variety of techniques were recorded (see Table 3).

Table 3: Communications And Involvement Methods

Measure	%
Teambriefing	74
Teamworking	73
Communication Programmes	68
Quality Teams	55
Suggestion Schemes	53
Special Newsletter	38
Attitude Survey	34

N = 115

COMMUNICATIONS DYNAMICS

Upward Communication

As indicated in Table 2 above, 81 per cent of responding organisations cited improved communications as a significant positive result of the QI. This general finding is supported at a more particular level, with results indicating that upward communication has improved significantly since QI introduction. This is evidenced by comparison of the means of the three items which monitor the efficiency and openness of employee communication and contributions (Table 4).

Table 4: Mean changes in Upward Communication since QI introduction

Item	Mean before QI	Mean at present	Sig level
Upward communication is efficient	4.7	3.9	t= -8.2 <i>p</i> <.001
Employees feel a freedom to communicate on perceived work problems	3.6	2.7	t=-9.6 <i>p</i> <.001
Employees feel a freedom to communicate work improvement which may enhance efficiency	3.8	2.7	t=-10.8 <i>p</i> <.001

Such statistically significant shifts in upward communication means indicate that the team-based approaches applied in the QI have allowed employees to increase their involvement and communicative input dramatically over that period.

Downward Communication

The efficiency of top-down communication was assessed by two specific items which investigate both the dominance of downward communication and openness of management to share information. The shifts in mean scores again indicate considerable change in downward communication quality (Table 5).

Table 5: Mean changes in Downward Communication since QI introduction

Item	Mean before QI	Mean at present	sig. level
The directional flow of information in the organisation is predominately downward	3.0	3.6	t=4.3 <i>p</i> <.001
Superiors are willing to share information openly with subordinates	3.9	2.9	t=-8.6 <i>p</i> <.001

Both items appraising downward communication quality reveal statistically significant shifts from the pre-QI phase to the present. It is noticeable that the item stating 'the directional flow of information in the organisation is predominantly downward' was on average answered as 'True' prior to QI introduction. While there is a significant shift since QI introduction, it is of note that the mean response at present is still negative for this item, indicating that the downward flow of information is still a dominant feature of these organisations.

Sideways Communication

The evaluation of the quality of communication among employees was treated by three items in the questionnaire. These items assess the quality of teamwork and inter-employee communication and whether competition between individuals/groups exists or hinders this (Table 6).

Table 6: Mean changes in Sideways Communication since QI introduction

Item	Mean before QI	Mean at present	Sig. Level
Communication between colleagues at similar level is in a healthy state	3.5	2.9	t= - 6.9 p<.001
Competition between individuals and groups hinders sideways communication	3.7	4.0	t= 4.0 p<.001
Very little co-operative teamwork exists in my organisation	4.6	5.3	t= 6.8 p<.001

The results again indicate that significant positive steps in the quality of employee-employee communication have resulted from the introduction of QIs in the organisations surveyed. The very positive mean scores for the ‘co-operative teamwork’ item indicate the success of movement from individual based work to a group participation orientation under the quality programmes introduced.

Management Collaboration and Empathic Communication Climate

Several items in the questionnaire aimed at assessing any shifts in the empathic/collaborative climate within the organisations surveyed. These items focused primarily on supportive and facilitative management/superior behaviour frequently associated with a move to flatter hierarchical structure and team based processes (Table 7).

Table 7: Mean changes in Collaborative and Empathic Communication since QI introduction

Item	Mean before QI	Mean at present	Sig. Level
Management know and talk with employees individually	3.0	2.3	t=-6.9 p<.001
Management encourage employees	3.4	2.6	t=-7.9 p<.001
Management are available for employees to come speak with them	2.9	2.3	t=-7.8 p<.001

Again there is a clear statistical indication that QIs have significantly enhanced the employee-management relationship, indicating a move toward a more open supportive and empathic relationship than existed before QI introduction.

Respondent's Desires for the Future

The final aspect of the questionnaire elicited respondents' desires/expectations of trends in the future, again focusing on the issues of upward, downward, sideways and collaborative-empathic communication. For the sake of brevity, Table 8 contains the mean scores for the three directional communication processes, comparing means as they were reported at present with those that respondents would like to see in the future in their organisations.

Table 8: Mean Scores of Directional Communication Items at Present and Desired in the Future

Item	Mean at present	Hope for the future	Sig. Level
Upward Communication is efficient	3.9	2.0	t=14.5 p<.001
Employees feel free to communicate on perceived work problems	2.7	1.7	t=10.6 p<.001
Employees feel free to communicate on work improvements/initiatives to increase efficiency	2.7	1.6	t=11.5 p<.001
The directional flow of information in the organisation is predominantly downward	3.6	4.6	t=-6.4 p<.001
Superiors share information openly with subordinates	2.9	1.8	t=8.6 p<.001
Communication between individuals at similar levels is in a healthy state	2.9	1.7	t=11.9 p<.001
Very Little co-operative teamwork exists in my organisation	5.3	6.0	t=-5.6 p<.001
Competition between individuals and groups hinders sideways communication	4.0	5.2	t=-8.4 p<.001

The change in mean scores again indicate that respondents perceive significant shifts in communication dynamics from the present situation (which is generally defined as having achieved quality) to where they would like to be in the future. Generally speaking, there was a perceived need/desire for further significant improvements in all areas of upward, downward and sideways communication.

Allied to these desired improvements in directional communications dynamics, similar trends were reported in terms of the future of the collaborative-empathic climate as measured by the final three items in the questionnaire (Table 9). The trend again indicates that respondents perceived that significant improvements in organisational supportive-empathic climate should accrue in the future.

In conclusion, the results of the present study indicate that the introduction of structured QIs in the 133 responding organisations have resulted in significant positive shifts in the quality of internal communication dynamics. In particular, the improvements have been identified in directional communication processes, indicating a move to more participative-interactive work practices.

Table 9: Mean scores of Collaborative-Empathic Climate at Present and Desired in Future

Item	Mean at present	Hope for the future	Sig. Level
Management know and talk with employees individually	2.3	1.5	t=9.1 $p < .001$
Management encourage employees	2.6	1.5	t=11.2 $p < .001$
Management are available for employees to come and speak with them	2.3	1.5	t=9.0 $p < .001$

This conclusion was also reinforced by the significant shifts recorded in what has been identified as collaborative-empathic climate that has developed in the organisations since QI introduction. However, of particular interest to the present study were the respondents' reflections of the future of communication processes within their organisations. There was clear evidence that while the introduction of quality programmes have improved communication processes, there is an expectation/desire that these will improve substantially in the future. Thus the quality process, in terms of communication dynamics, still has some distance to travel to fulfil employee expectations and desires for QIs.

Involvement of the HR Department in Communications Initiatives

The survey also explored the extent to which the HR department was involved in these communications initiatives. Only 52 of the organisations had structured personnel departments and the results for these companies are shown in table 10.

Table 10: Involvement of HR Department in Communications

	No. of HR departments 'Very involved'	N
Teambriefing	26	43
Suggestion Schemes	15	26
Communication Programmes	30	47
Teamworking	22	42
Quality Teams	12	34
Newsletters	11	23
Attitude Survey	20	28

N =52

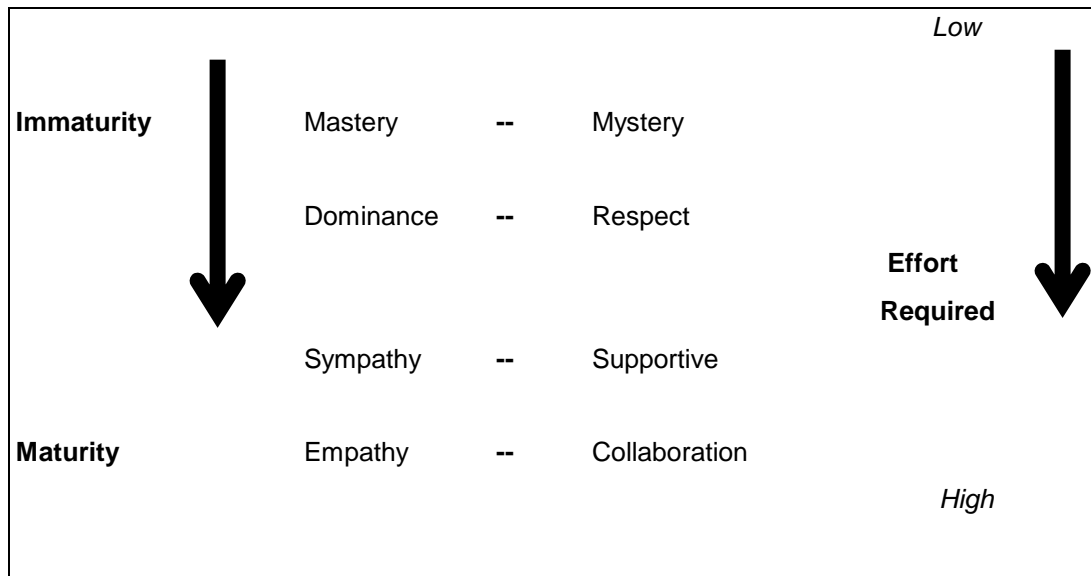
Two interesting issues emerge from the findings highlighted in table 10. First, although the majority of organisations with HR structured personnel departments indicated that communication programmes were in place, the more easily identifiable types of these programmes - teambriefing, suggestion schemes, newsletters and attitude surveys - did not figure prominently. Second, where these structured communications processes did take place, in many cases the HR department was either not involved or involved to only a minor extent. Thus, only about half the HR departments surveyed were 'very involved' in processes such as teambriefing, newsletters, or communications programmes. Where attitude surveys were conducted, the HR department was likely to be involved to a greater extent. It appears that despite the research evidence indicating the integral link between the HRM function and improved organisational communications and employee involvement, many organisations did not see the function as central to the provision of these enhancement techniques.

DISCUSSION

This article gives some thought provoking insights on how the introduction of QIs have impacted on the quality of communication process in Irish organisations. Of particular interest is the universal perception that the QI initiatives have had a significant positive influence on internal communication processes. In general, upward, downward and sideways communications have improved significantly and a more positive collaborative-empathic climate has been achieved. These improvements appear to have resulted from the introduction of practices such as teamworking, communication programmes, quality teams, teambriefings and so forth. The functional results, which include flatter hierarchies along with improved participation and involvement, appear to

have assisted the progress to more supportive and harmonious internal relations. Such a growth in communication quality is analogous to the evolution in relational maturity characterised in writings in the field of developmental and psychotherapeutic psychology (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Communication - Relationship Evolution



Here the most basic (immature) relationship is characterised by Mastery-Mystery communications. Translated in terms of classical management philosophy, management have the power, the information and are ultimately dominant. Employees must take the word of management as incontrovertible fact. Frequently in this relationship few of the employees needs are met and he/she is typically frustrated. Level two is characterised by the less harsh Role Dominant - Respect relationship, where management gain compliance through respect from their years of experience or position. This is still very much a 'We - They' relationship. The next step, characterised by Sympathy-Supportive, describes a movement forward towards a more supportive and interactive relationship, but is still top-down in orientation and somewhat patronising. The final step on the road to the ultimate mature relationship is the Empathy-Collaboration step, which is fully integrative and participative in nature, with management and employee sharing goals, problems and decisions in an open equitable relationship. The organisations studied were at different stages of this relationship, and many appeared to be striving towards the final maturity stage.

In this context, the present study clearly indicates that while QI have moved organisational communication processes toward this mature stage, employees still perceive that the climate can be substantially improved. More significant is the fact that respondents indicated that they 'expected' such improvements in the future. Herein in lays the possible stumbling block for the participating organisations. If, as the results indicated, only 50 per cent of the firms with functioning HR departments involved the department in communication enhancement techniques (communication programme, teambriefings etc.,) then this highlights a serious incongruity between the literature on best practice and reality. To paraphrase Guzzo and Noonan (1994), if HR practices are seen as the primary conduit of communication within an organisation, then it makes little sense to exclude the function from the communication enhancement techniques essential to the development and sustenance of a quality environment.

Why it is that so many organisations do not see fit to have the HR function fully involved in QI enhancement of communication processes within organisations? In practice much of the HR energy in involvement in QIs has focused clearly on the traditional tangibles such as recruitment, selection, appraisal and training, perhaps to the neglect of focusing more closely on the more intangible aspects of the role, such as communication assessment, monitoring and development with the organisation. For example, Storey's (1992) research showed that communications programmes within organisations experiencing change were handled either by the public relations department or by external consultants and that the 'internal promoters' were key line managers, not personnel (p. 185). In some ways, the HR function may have 'forgotten' its roots. Thus, in traditional personnel departments, the HR function was responsible for ensuring effective communications processes: bargaining with unions, organising the Christmas party and issuing the staff newsletter were tasks in which the personnel department had expertise and authority. Shifts in organisational dynamics, with rapid change and moves towards HRM, have introduced a different set of expectations and responsibilities for the personnel department and for line management. The personnel department in its traditional role at least spanned the gulf between management and employees and in so doing retained control over the communications processes; with a HRM mantle this role is not as clear cut and communications responsibilities may have been abrogated to line management as a result.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has considered the changes in communications processes in organisations involved in quality initiatives. The findings have to be interpreted with caution: respondents were in management roles and as a consequence may have a much rosier view of these changes than those at the receiving end. The perception that much still needs to be done to improve communications raises the issue of where responsibility lies within the organisations for managing this process. In at least some of the organisations studied, this did not appear to lie with the HR department.

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