

Quality management: a fixture or a vital process?

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- *We address the current status of quality management (QM) in companies in this paper.*
- *Interviews with senior executives of 19 companies spanning multiple industries and company sizes indicate that there are now at least five recurring themes related to QM's current role in companies:*
 - *Realized gains from QM keep it a fixture at most companies.*
 - *The aim of well-serving customers is appropriately integrated into quality efforts.*
 - *The realization that pursuit of QM solely for the sake of winning awards can have harmful consequences.*
 - *QM's emphasis on self-assessment and quality models is seen as valuable for providing focus and direction.*
 - *Gaps in integrating QM beyond operations exist in most companies.*
- *Our findings suggest that most businesses continue to have substantial opportunities for improvement in terms of more fully engaging QM throughout the firm. This makes it imperative that strategists engage and ultimately evolve companies so as to achieve their full potential. QM is not a fad of the century just past. Instead, it is a powerful means for companies to continue on a path to superior performance.*

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Introduction: quality management as a strategic imperative

Few today would advocate a business philosophy that accepts 'we're good enough.' The consequences of such a position are revealed by customer turnover, complaints, and stalled or declining satisfaction scores, among other metrics. Operationally, there are substantial costs due to producing goods and services not well aligned with customer needs, service and product failures, actions needed for recovery

and, when recovery fails, the cost of losing brand advocates, negative publicity, or legal actions. Upon reflection, the need for total quality is ever-present, far from a passing fad.

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QM has been touted as an important company mandate, promising dramatic operational and strategic improvements (Hackman

and Wageman, 1995). The necessity for firms to embrace QM system-wide seemed all the more evident when reports revealed substantive financial impacts associated with QM (Easton and Jarrell, 1998). But in recent years the strategic emphasis on QM seems to have faded, with QM relegated to operations-only status. Or, has QM evolved to the point where it is embedded throughout the firm and, thus, become as natural as breathing?

Specifically, this paper has two purposes. First, given that the 'heyday of quality' seems to have passed, we begin by revisiting QM at its roots and discuss why QM is a strategic-level priority. We then use interview data from senior executives at 19 companies and examine their perspectives on QM and how QM has been integrated into their companies. These interviews ultimately show that in the new century QM is generally neither considered out of fashion nor a fad gone by the wayside. Indeed, most companies involved in this research feel that stronger market positions are made possible by embracing QM. Second, we report the extent that QM is being embraced system-wide as opposed to remaining primarily in operations. Here, we give particular attention to the marketing function because both QM and marketing share a similar customer-centric nature (Bathie and Sarkar, 2002), with some calling QM and marketing 'natural bedfellows' (Fram, 1995). Indeed, the two are so entwined philosophically that when QM advocates espouse the voice of the customer as essential to total quality and we see applications such as Six Sigma being both value-driven and customer-focused (Reidenbach and Goeke, 2006), the natural connection to marketing becomes self-evident.

QM background

QM is both philosophy and technique, a set of principles and foundational approaches to business and a range of problem-solving tools and techniques. Quality has been defined as conformance to requirement (Crosby, 1986), fitness for use (Juran, 1970), and the needs of the consumer, present and future (Deming,

1986). QM has evolved to include tools, techniques, criteria, steps, and philosophies concerning how well-functioning organizations align strategic and operational concerns to attain world-class performance.

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The origin of quality can be traced back to the introduction of contract conditions and standards of work created by the military (c. 1916). True quality management appeared in 1931 with the publication of W.A. Shewarts' *Economic Control of Quality of Manufactured Product*. Deming, often characterized as the originator of QM, brought numerous gains to statistical processes but his greatest contribution was the development of 14 points, soon to become the basis of QM principles. Deming realized that statistical methods alone were not enough to achieve success and what was needed was a new guiding philosophy of management (Walton, 1986). In Deming's 14 points, a philosophy was provided challenging conventional business thought and practice. For example, short-term profits were no longer the focus. Rather it was the growth of jobs, breaking down barriers within organizations and, crucially, driving out fear and instilling an innovation-driven, improvement-seeking culture. This introduced an emphasis not only on improving the product or service or on the customer alone, but also in the way companies viewed and treated their employees.

Since then many other ground-breaking 'gurus' such as Feigenbaum and Juran have contributed elements to the quality movement that are now an integral part of QM. Meanwhile, zero defects (originated by Shingeo Shingo), and the development of quality circles

and cause and effect diagrams (originated by Kaoru Ishikawa), have enhanced QM applications. Drawing from numerous sources and disciplines, QM is now seen as a set of management principles, with its key elements including QM systems, QM techniques, tools, and teamwork, each valuable to any organization (Boaden, 1996).

QM has been used world-wide in various explicit or implicit forms and as such is recognized as an important element of management and business. QM is inherently integrative and strategic (Deming, 1986), with advocates suggesting that QM is an approach that should be at the heart of business decision-making (Bergstrom, 1995; Voss, 1994). It is the systems nature of QM that makes it so powerful, naturally accessible to all functions and integrative. Advocates argue that QM is a combination of management tools and techniques that all managers can and should be familiar with, such as communication, cost reduction, process improvement, leadership, and team building to name a few. The gathering of information is a particular focus of QM, since the understanding of the customer's needs, both internal and external, and the way in which the organization reacts to those needs is core to QM.

Once these thoughts are understood, it is only a small step for company leaders to realize that QM should be inherent (explicitly or implicitly) in corporate strategy and that it is a vital link to becoming world class. Feigenbaum went so far as to call quality a 'crucial hinge for business success or failure . . . and a significant factor in what has come to be called business strategic planning' (Feigenbaum, 1997). Stated strongly, by the 1990s it was evident that 'in today's competitive environment, quality is the key to an organization's success and survival' (Madu and Kuei, 1994).

When viewed as a strategic imperative, QM shifts from being simply quality control or quality assurance and enters a strategic quality phase with heightened commitment to quality at all levels in the organization. In fact, by the mid-1990s quality had become truly strategic in nature (McKechnie and Arnold, 1994;

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Morgan and Piercy, 1996; Ross, 1994), with some referring to it as the main focus for corporate decision-making (Spitzer, 1993) and a necessity for company survival (Hongern and Xianwei, 1996). Strategic QM (SQM) occurs once leaders develop a systematic approach for setting and meeting quality goals throughout the company. SQM is the apex of the broader system of managing quality (Juran, 1989). SQM has been called 'a comprehensive and strategic framework linking profitability, business objectives and competitiveness to quality efforts with the aim of harnessing human, material and information resources organization-wide in continuously improving products or services that will allow the delivery of customer satisfaction' (Tummala and Tang, 1996). Others go so far as to suggest that QM is a whole new approach to corporate management itself (Wilkinson and Witcher, 1993). By using QM as the catalyst for integration with corporate strategy, the result could be the creation of a strategic approach that is more sensitive to customer and competitive requirements and one that becomes the central focus of corporate decision-making (Cook and Dave, 1997).

It is widely accepted that for QM to be successfully implemented it is essential that senior management fully support it and are aware of its importance (Kanji and Asher, 1993). If lacking full support, employees can see QM as mere lip service by company leaders, with

ensuing damaging effects on employee attitudes, trust, and future projects. Even in cases where companies have a strong strategic intent to promote quality, companies need consistent persistent communication and policy infrastructure to realize the full potential of QM.

Business excellence through total quality

Major award models such as the European Quality Award (EFQM) and the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) are each based on seeking and expecting much more than product or service perfection. These awards consider a wide raft of management activities developed by each of the relevant award organizing bodies. When companies compete for QM awards they are evaluated across common criteria. These criteria include customer focus, leadership, continuous improvement, strategic quality planning, design quality, speed and prevention, people participation and partnership, fact-based management, and business results. Further, weightings are given to each criterion, providing a mechanism for reaching a summative score for the performance of each company competing for the award (leadership and business results receive greatest weightings).

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The principles underlying these models (EFQM, Baldrige, and Deming, among others)

have been developed and refined over the years, during which time methodologies have been built in terms of weightings across established criteria. The models are very similar in scoring procedures and the main differences are in the methods of evaluation (Ghobadian and Woo, 1996). These models have been used extensively throughout the world by leading companies and are seen to be successful for guiding company improvements (Hendricks and Singhal, 1999; Tai and Przasnyski, 1999). In fact, most companies using self-assessment tools realize higher sales, market share, and ROI (van der Wiele *et al.*, 2000), and Baldrige winners have beaten the S&P 500 by 4.4 to 1 (NIST Fact Sheet, 2001). Nearly two decades ago, the Baldrige Award was even being called the single most important catalyst for transforming American business, and the one single initiative that has done the most for reshaping management's thinking and behavior (Garvin, 1991). Additionally, by the late 1990s the EFQM term 'Business Excellence' gained substantial popularity due to the ability of the model to indicate the strategic, tactical, and operational imperatives facing companies.

The study

We interviewed senior-level executives and executives most responsible for quality at 19 companies (Business Owners, Vice Presidents, and Quality Managers). During the interviews, we explored whether and how QM has been integrated into their companies and whether the executives felt there were tangible gains from QM. The businesses spanned manufacturing, telecommunications, food and agriculture, banking and finance, and transportation, with companies ranging in size from 26 employees to over 8,000. The following themes emerged from the collective transcripts.

1. Gains from QM keep it a fixture at most companies

The gains sought and realized from having QM were numerous. Most revealing was the

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understanding that quality is seen as a necessity and the sooner it becomes ingrained throughout the company the better. While nearly all companies made comments as to the positive impacts associated with QM, executives at larger companies were especially prone to note the impact at strategic levels and the effect QM has on improving processes:

Quality Management has provided us with structure and goal setting. Before, we had a loose cannon approach, putting our finger in the air and asking which way the wind is blowing. (Manufacturing company; 1,000+ employees)

Quality Management has been taken on board as a structured approach to improvement. I think virtually all directors are now trained in it. So it's been given a fairly high profile in the organization. One of the key things quality has driven us towards is managing performance through processes. Our whole management process has been re-engineered. (Transportation company; 4,000+ employees)

Quality allowed thinking to be more structured. It helped us realize that you can improve quickly. We found that people want to improve — there is a desire to make things better but you must harness that desire. (Manufacturing company; 750+ employees)

There are a huge number of companies that aren't quality focused. The question is how many will be alive by the time they realize they should have done this. (Food and agriculture company; 400 employees)

As these quotes attest, these companies understand the need for the strategic use of quality. The value of integrating quality into a company's strategy is consistent with similar observations made over a decade ago (Green, 1993; Kanji *et al.*, 1992; Voss, 1994), a time when QM was viewed as central to corporate thinking, and thus a strategic issue (Aravindan *et al.*, 1996).

Overall, it seems that the strategic importance and role of QM has become an accepted position. When introduced strategically and infused throughout the company, a new way of doing business seems to emerge. As an executive at a manufacturing company (150 employees) suggested, *'I think quality management has brought new thinking to all aspects of the business.'*

2. Time and time again, serving customers well was a dominant theme integrated into the quality efforts virtually all of these companies undertake

I would look at our quality policy and ask, how can we improve our quality this next year? How can we really excel and give better service to our customers? Process policies — do we need to be reinvesting in various aspects of the process? (Food and agriculture company; 100 employees)

We're trying to develop supplier-to-partner and supplier-to-customer relationships throughout the organization, internally and externally. Business excellence is the term that we're probably going to look at overall and I think we're starting to instill it into people all the way from the executive offices to the floor where we are making the product. (Telecom company; 1,100+ employees)

The marketplace is demanding changes in operational methods that companies

have employed up to now. There's a whole range of things that consumers are asking for: visibility, improved packaging, and so on. Customers place demands on suppliers and there'll be a lot of changes driven through by our customers. The smart companies are moving quickly in response to customers. (Food and agriculture company; 400 employees)

QM may be a core strategic driver, but it does not replace the need for strategy

QM may be a core strategic driver, but it does not replace the need for strategy. Stated plainly, 'TQM . . . offers companies the opportunity to carry out improvements and focuses on getting closer to customers . . . Companies must still have the right strategies in place, the right products and services, the right commitment, and the right investment strategies in order to be successful' (Zairi *et al.*, 1994).

3. Pursuit of QM solely for the sake of winning awards can have harmful consequences

Executives at three companies provide a reminder that total quality is not about awards — it is about doing business better:

Pursuing Baldrige has given us awards, given us a trophy for the wall but it doesn't give you any more customers. Our credibility was there before the awards. (Manufacturing company; 35 employees)

When we looked at the companies that won the Baldrige Award, we saw that they often failed as companies very shortly afterwards. Baldrige was not necessarily a very good guide as to how well you run your business. In the end, we geared our

system improvements towards Baldrige — but we did not do it to win the award. (Manufacturing company; 1,000 employees)

We're still part of the quality effort and striving to capture awards such as the Baldrige. But at the end of the day what does it really mean? We found ourselves wasting time and resources making sure the paperwork was ready when we should have been working on products. That's why we decided to forget about the awards, but we have incorporated quality in our own way. (Banking and finance company; 500+ employees)

QM advocates recognize that QM is about systematic ongoing work involved in becoming a superior performer. In practice, many interviewees said that improvement is never-ending

These comments parallel concerns noted by Deming and Crosby. Deming was said to refer to the Baldrige guidelines as having an evil effect on American business (Stevens, 1994), while Crosby argued that Baldrige criteria had 'trivialized the quality crusade' (Simms *et al.*, 1992). As one former UK Quality Award-winner related, although winning can have a positive effect on staff morale, there is the danger of taking your 'eyes off the quality ball. The day after you win a quality award you have to go back to putting in the effort to be excellent' (Oldfield, 1999). Clearly, QM advocates recognize that QM is about systematic ongoing work involved in becoming a superior performer. In practice, many interviewees said that improvement is never-ending. Many companies do not allow QM models to constrict them in their search for improvement.

4. QM's emphasis on self-assessment and quality models is important to executives

Several managers described quality models as frameworks for a conceptual basis for guiding the organization and to provide processes for paths to business improvement. Some managers spoke about improvements in goal-setting, while others spoke of using quality models to pursue initiatives of a non-strategic nature more efficiently. The assessment and measurement emphasis of total quality was present across industries and companies. This sentiment was underscored by the following comments:

You can use Baldrige for benchmarking. We are hoping to develop an attitude where we allow people to pick and choose what they want to focus on for improvement. Maybe self-assessment tools are so popular because they give people the framework to identify areas for improvement. (Manufacturing company; 8,000+ employees)

The Baldrige Model gave us the methodology to address some issues rather than just have improvement idea(s) rattling round the mind of the Marketing Director (Food and agriculture company; 400 employees)

Several companies specifically noted that quality models provide an opportunity to benchmark:

We're trying to get better at really defining the things that we should be measuring. Traditionally, we've always gone for nice comfortable quality service indicators but when you look at it in the broader context it's how those are translated into customer perception and satisfaction that might be the really important thing. That's what brings people back ultimately, or not. (Transportation company; 4,000+ employees)

It's now the way we run our business. We perform self-assessments against the

Baldrige quality model (customized by the business), score ourselves, then set continuous improvement objectives to lift the whole business. It's becoming our culture. Our business review now looks like a Quality Model where we not only discuss key results but we actually ask, 'why aren't these things happening?' (Telecom company; 1,100+ employees)

We work very closely with the Model. We do self assessments twice a year and we are audited twice a year on the quality attributes and for each we get a rating from 1-7. We are aiming towards 7 but this requires getting everything right. It's based on fundamental things like customer satisfaction, what we are doing about it, market engagement, return on assets, employee satisfaction. For example, during the audit, the kind of question that comes up is 'You were assessed as a 4 last year. What differences have you enacted this year to get yourself towards 5?' (Manufacturing company; 40+ employees)

We use a self-assessment process based on the European quality model. We get a small team of people together on an annual basis and we sit down and use the criteria and list our strengths and our areas of improvement and score ourselves. (Manufacturing company; 200 employees)

In terms of benchmarking, the Model gives us a feel for what we are like compared to other companies. (Manufacturing company; 650 employees)

We didn't use the model as a strategic driver but as an example of what other good companies were using. We used bits and pieces of the model that suited us. (Food and agriculture company; 400+ employees)

A key point from many of the interviews is that QM models and accompanying assessment tools have their greatest impact in helping keep a focus on cause and effect relationships and whether gains are being made. This was clearly stated by an executive at a participating telecom company, who said

A key point from many of the interviews is that QM models and accompanying assessment tools have their greatest impact in helping keep a focus on cause and effect relationships and whether gains are being made

'The beauty is that you can start to make measurements (using the assessment tool) and you can see whether you're moving forward or not.' Thus, assessments provide an objective mechanism for highlighting needed changes while simultaneously providing the means for ongoing or periodic monitoring. Even so, care must be taken when using measurement tools, as the following comment suggests:

One of the decisions I'm trying to make is whether when you start self assessment in departments, managers are going to start creating scores. I have a feeling that the right way to approach it is not to have a score but to have an attitude of, 'let's get things moving and then let's worry about scoring.' (Telecom company; 1,100+ employees)

An executive at an industrial supply company suggested that QM is no longer part of their culture. Even so, the executive went on to say that it may simply be a matter of moving beyond QM: *'It might be that the learning we went through with QM is underpinned to everything we are doing today and it is just there, although we don't refer to it as QM. Total Quality is not a project any more but a program, an ongoing program.'* Numerous executives are acutely aware that quality is now a given.

5. Large gaps in integrating QM exist

Early on, QM's natural fit was in operations. Even in the 1990s many viewed QM's rele-

vance in terms of quality control and quality assurance. In most companies, continuous improvement did not permeate the strategic process; strategic performance was not measured, customer feedback was not used in the strategic process, and there was a lack of supporting infrastructure for a culture change toward total quality (Kaye and Dyason, 1995). Others found that QM was treated as a second- or third-level strategic focus (Wilcox, 1994), while some found that QM was used in strategic business units to meet some objectives, although it was not central to the overall strategy (Morgan and Piercy, 1996). Evidencing concern about QM's lack of integration, some have argued that QM needed to be changed from an activity a company invests in to an integrated philosophy which aids the strategic direction of the organization (Butz, 1995). The good news is that just one of the participating companies has a restricted view of QM's possibilities. At this small manufacturing firm (employing 40), the executive said *'I don't think there was anything in QM telling us how to reengineer finance, marketing, etc. So the reengineering was basically down to the manufacturing process or the manufacturing factories.'*

When executives realize that the central role of QM is in satisfying customers and that creating a system-wide workplace supporting processes for continuous improvement helps companies realize their potential, it is only a small leap to engage QM system-wide/cross-functionally. Strategic quality leads companies to seek functional excellence; it is viewing quality as an entire 'system of thought' (Calingo, 1996). Accepting this, it follows that fostering QM company-wide could be considered a natural evolution, with strong business performance the intended outcome. To this end, QM is embedded as an organization-wide commitment to satisfying customers by continually improving every business process involved in delivering goods and services (Churchill and Peter, 1994). This same sentiment was reflected in several interviews with a senior executive at a manufacturing company:

Fostering QM company-wide could be considered a natural evolution, with strong business performance the intended outcome

Continuous improvement is paramount in the success of any business. If you don't introduce change on an ongoing basis you do not pick up the new initiatives. You have to do that to remain competitive. At first, QM didn't concern marketing or finance or engineering. It was more a manufacturing thing. But as we moved forward and looked at our business strategy, we sought ways to gain a quantum leap and a business advantage. We came to realize it is by spreading QM through the organization, understanding that it is a tool for marketing, finance, HR and engineering. And it is all driven to satisfy the customer at the lowest possible costs, which is what QM is all about. (Manufacturing company; 4,000+ employees)

Even with the acknowledgment that QM is widely valued, of the 19 companies involved in this research, few saw any special connection between total quality efforts and marketing. When they did, it was in broader terms such as an ethos or as a marketing communications tool:

At the end of the day if you have not been subjected to the QM ethos then you may not have the right vision . . . QM achieved some goals for us by helping with inter-departmental communication and multi-discipline teams. (Manufacturing company, 850 employees)

The way we manage the delivery of (QM) is through our business processes. These processes are common across all the business units (and) the processes cascade

right down through all levels of the organization.

If your name becomes synonymous with quality, then that is a major marketing and bargaining tool. Almost every company either needs to have or would like to have a very quality conscious image.

We produced a video on our quality focus which described the type of organization we are in terms of technology, people, and culture. Our sales and marketing groups use the video to show suppliers and customers where we're coming from and how we treat quality and customer satisfaction.

There was a notable absence of discussion as to how various functional areas actually embrace QM

These observations indicate that senior executives often embrace QM, with the realization that QM is viewed by various publics (consumers in particular) as a brand differentiator. At the same time, there was a notable absence of discussion as to how various functional areas actually embrace QM. Once the conversation moved away from operations, there were generally few, if any, comments related to engaging QM in other areas. This was especially disconcerting when it came to the marketing function. Given over two decades of calls for integrating QM and marketing, we had expected a richer commentary by senior executives as to how QM has been integrated into marketing.

Thus, although QM is widely present in each of the 19 companies and the need to be a 'quality company' resonates well with senior executives, QM seems to remain primarily the focus of operations. This suggests that, in the new century, executives in leadership

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positions are not prioritizing QM system-wide. Departments (accounting, finance, marketing, among others) still may not be receiving the background, training, tools, and mindset offered by QM. There seems little doubt that the result may be underperforming brands as well as gaps in effectiveness and efficiency efforts.

Summary

Based on the above discussion it is evident that company leaders have varying levels of commitment to QM. For those choosing to make QM a somewhat peripheral commitment, there is nonetheless an understanding that borrowing from QM principles and practices is a useful, even essential, element in business success. Still others find themselves in a 'next generation' mindset. For these executives, QM is already ingrained in the company and the new focus underpinning the firm is strategic QM. In virtually all of our participating companies, QM is a familiar foundation. Of course, this foundation requires ongoing senior-level commitment, functional-level support, and training if companies expect to experience resultant stronger performance.

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Overall, we've found that most senior executives lack a system-wide QM commitment. This can be for any of several reasons, with the largest culprit being senior management

giving lip service to integration (Terziovski *et al.*, 1996), or making QM and similar initiatives mere rhetoric or fads (Dawson, 1998; Powell, 1995). Senior management support and the elimination of lip service has for years been the underpinning tenet for successfully integrating QM (Deming, 1986). Looking at just one critical function, marketing: quality strategy needs the marketing function to define expected performance levels for products and services, while customer satisfaction can only be accomplished by marketing being involved in process improvement efforts (Bathie and Sarkar, 2002). This clearly suggests that companies are leaving value on-the-table if critical functional areas are not purposefully engaged in ongoing quality improvement efforts.

In accepting these thoughts, strategists can realize many QM-driven performance implications across all functional areas, especially if supported by a quality model such as the Baldrige or EFQM models. These include a constantly improving customer and market focus and the ability to become more effective. Obvious gains would be greater consistency in such performance-critical activities as: (a) a continuous improvement mindset; (b) systematic approaches for understanding customers; (c) shifts from reacting to problems (corrective action) to preventive action and continuous improvement; (d) transfer of learning from past projects to present challenges; (d) process improvements across all aspects of strategy development and implementation; and (e) fact-based evaluation and learning, to name a few.

Fundamentally, QM provides the substantive promise evidenced by numerous writings in the late twentieth century and by continuing advocacies in the new century. Given that QM is a key to value creation, perhaps even essential for companies to avoid demise — made even more relevant in these difficult times — there can be no excuse for failing to embrace quality as a fundamental value and a strategic principle (Dew, 1998). This makes it imperative that strategists engage and ultimately evolve companies so as to achieve their full potential.

Biographical notes

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