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Original Article

Employee Participation in Management with Special Reference to the Effectiveness of Quality Circles as a Participative Management Technique

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Abstract

Purpose: The article investigates the purpose of Quality Circles (QCs) as a specific, developed tool of participative management. It attempts to question the reported efficiency of QCs in improving organisational performance and employee results, beyond generalized statements and investigates the contingent circumstances that promote success or instigate failure.

Design/Methodology/Approach: With the help of a rigorous systematic synthesis of secondary data, this study examines and synthesizes findings of peer-reviewed empirical research, meta-analyses, and industry reports published since 2000. The review is focused on comparative results of productivity, quality, staff attitudes, and the necessary institutional support needed to promote QC efficacy.

Findings: The synthesis shows that QCs do not always work. True management commitment, proper allocation of resources, non-retributive environments and inclusion in formal organisational strategy potently moderate their success. Under the appropriate support, QCs exhibit strong positive relationships with quality improvement of the products and efficiency in solving problems. Their impact on overall employee morale and organisational commitment is, however, less predictable, tend to be confounded with the culture-underlying factors.

Originality/Value: This paper will provide a critical and consolidated review of twenty years of empirical data regarding QC effectiveness. It also provides a clearer model of QC efficacy making management support a core variable and not a peripheral one to offer viable information on how to introduce sustainable participative systems.

Keywords: Participative Management, Quality Circles, Employee Involvement, Organizational Effectiveness, Continuous Improvement, Secondary Research.

Introduction

The principle of participative management which in its most general meaning can be defined as the inclusion of employees in decision making process that influence their work has been one of the fundamentals of organisational theory over decades (Cotton, 1993). The premise behind it is strong and it is believed that with the help of tacit knowledge and experiential knowledge in the workforce, organisations can theoretically gain greater quality and innovation as well as employee satisfaction. However, the process of moving the abstract attractiveness to a concrete application is not straight forward. Most participative programs do not serve their intended purpose due to the failure of the guiding concept, but rather, the instrumentality of their implementation (Dessler, 2020). This fact guides our attention to one particular, formalised method the Quality Circle (QC).

Quality Circles are small groups of employees of the same work area that meet on a regular basis and volunteer to identify, analyse and solve work related issues on a regular basis

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and this was a structured effort to institutionalise participation (Mohanty and Lakhe, 2002).Having its roots in post-war Japan and popularised worldwide in the 1980s, QCs claimed a two-fold advantage; not only operational efficiency but also human resource development. So, what does the accumulated experience of the first half of the 21st century tell of their long-term effectiveness? In this paper, the author attempts to go beyond anecdotal stories of success and to look at the empirical record. We will formulate a critical question by synthesising secondary data about sound research works: in what circumstances is it possible to transform Quality Circles into a really efficient management method instead of a well-meaning participatory forum?

Background of Quality Circles

Quality circles also called as quality control circles was organized from Japan in 1960s, to improve quality and productivity. The concept of quality circles was initially promoted by Dr. Kauro Ishikawa while working with Japanese Union of Scientist and Engineers(JUSE). Quality circles than became a success in Japan. In Japan quality circles were a component of labor-management relationship structure that was comparatively cooperative and & included lifetime employment guarantees for many full time permanent employees as well as corporate unions. It was adopted by America in the 1970s(Cebusix, 2024). In India Bharat Heavy Electricals ltd (BHEL) introduced quality circles for the first time in 1980s (V. a. P. B. V. Shrouty, 2018), with its main focus on employees participation, continuous improvement, problem-solving and ongoing workplace improvement. Quality circles are believed to foster happy work environment, increase teamwork and improve quality & productivity.

QCFI (Quality Circle Forum of India)

QCFI is a non-profit organization that aims to spread awareness about Quality Circles in India. A small team of workers called as "quality circles" get together on a regular basis to discuss, evaluate, and resolve issues pertaining to their jobs. It was founded with an intention of advancing the quality circle idea in India. In addition to adding training and assistance to organizations interested in putting quality circles into practice, QCFI seeks to encourage the use of quality circles in Indian organizations. In India QCFI has extended its operations to over 500 cities and towns. In nations including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates *(Quality Circle Forum of India | Quality Concepts*, 2025). It has also opened foreign chapters. In addition QCFI has its workshops, conferences, seminars and other gatherings to advance the idea of quality circles. It also publishes quality circle related Books, Magazines, Newspapers etc.

In the 14th International committee, established to organize annual international convention on the quality concept circle, QCFI was the representative of India. Three International conventions have been held in India by QCFI so far. Leading quality circle practioners also discuss technical papers & case studies presented by members at the annual chapters & national conventions.

On 31st December 1982, QCFI was registered as a non-profitable organization under a Public society's Act(Dwivedi, R. S.1987).

Problem solving technique involved in Quality Circle

●Dr. Kauro Ishikawa's Fishbone Diagram: It illustrates the cause of an event, it is frequently used in product development & manufacturing to delineate the various steps in a process, illustrates potential quality control problems & identify the resources needed at a particular point in time. Dr. Ishikawa created the design in the 1960s to gauge quality control procedures in the ship building sector (James, 2023).

●Brainstorming: One fundamental technique used in quality circles to produce concepts & answer to work related issues is brainstorming, which promotes a cooperative and innovative atmosphere for problem solving. It entails openly exchanging ideas without evaluating them right away in order to generate a large no. of possible answers (Sutton, R. I., & Hargadon, A,1996).

●Circle graph: The term circle graph in quality circles probably refers to a pie chart or circular statistical graphic, which is a kind of chart that shows numerical proportions by displaying data in a circle style. Together with other resources quality circles use those charts to assess issues, pinpoint underlying causes & create solution.

●Pareto Diagrams: In quality circles, a technique called pareto chart or diagram is used for quality improvement. It highlights the few important elements that are primarily responsible for an issue by visualizing the frequency of various causes or defects in descending order. This could save time & money by enabling quality circle teams to concentrate their improvement efforts on the areas that will have the biggest impact.

●Bar Charts: In quality circles, Bar charts are a useful visual aid for comparing various elements, comprehending, data distributors and successfully communicating conclusions. They can be especially

helpful in highlighting differences between groups or categories and in pointing out issues and potential opportunities for development.

Research Questions

1. What is the recorded effect of quality Circles on the most important organisational performance indices namely productivity and quality?
2. What are the impacts of Quality Circles on job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and competence in employees at organisational level?
3. Which are the critical antecedent and moderating variables that will either lead to the success or failure of Quality Circle initiatives?

Literature Review

The history of the participative management literature stretches back to the human relations movement and the works of theorists like Likert (1967) who stressed the values of a supportive system that relied on groups. Some of the techniques of participation include informal suggestion schemes to intense formalised systems, including autonomous work teams and, of course, Quality Circles. Theoretical arguments in favour of participation frequently refer to greater motivation by the satisfaction of higher-order psychological needs (e.g., autonomy, competence), as proposed by such theories as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000).

On QCs, the literature on early adoption was highly positive, often confounding implementation and success. In the 1980s and 1990s, research studies reported tremendous efficiency and savings in costs (Barra, 1983). Nevertheless, a stricter wave of research came out and noted that there was high attrition and that many of the QC programmes were fads. According to Tang et al. (2010), lack of sustainability in management support, training and the view that QCs is a one-off activity not a managerial ideology are the causes of many circles failing.

More recent meta-analytic and longitudinal studies provide a much more detailed image. A review of team based interventions including QCs by Leach et. al. (2006) revealed positive effects on performance and attitudes, although the effect sizes were widely varied. It seems that context is the critical distinguishing factor. As an example, studies in the manufacturing context in India always indicate that QCs can play an efficient role in discrete quality issue resolving (Chandrasekar and Karthick, 2018). On the other hand, other research in service oriented sectors or in cultures with strong hierarchies records more mixed results indicating that the technique is not necessarily transportable (Bamber & Dale, 2000).

Table 1: Synthesis of Key Findings from Secondary Sources on QC Effectiveness

Study/Source (Context)	Key Positive Findings	Key Limitations/Contingencies Identified
Chandrasekar & Karthick (2018) – Indian Manufacturing	Significant reduction in defect rates (avg. 18-22%) and process waste. Enhanced technical problem-solving skills among members.	Success heavily dependent on facilitator competency and recognition from middle management.
Meta-analysis by Leach et al. (2006) – Cross-sectoral	Moderate positive effect on productivity (d = 0.33) and employee attitudes (d = 0.28).	Effect sizes diminished in studies with longer follow-up periods. Stronger effects where participation was perceived as voluntary.
Bamber & Dale (2000) – Automotive Supply Chain	Improved communication across departments. Solved "low-hanging fruit" operational issues.	Failed to address deeper strategic issues. Became marginalized when new management priorities emerged.
International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management (Various, 2015-2020)	Effective tool for fostering a culture of continuous improvement (Kaizen).	Sustainability required direct linkage to performance appraisal and reward systems, which was often absent.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses.

Based on the literature that has been synthesised, we suggest a tempered model of QC effectiveness (Figure 1). The model assumes that the QC process, which is characterised by frequently-held meetings and an organized way of solving problems, has a direct impact on the results, both operational and human. Nevertheless, it is an intermediary relation between the perceived authenticity of the management support (resources, solutions implementation, symbolic endorsement) and a mediator between organisational culture (pre-existing trust and openness levels).

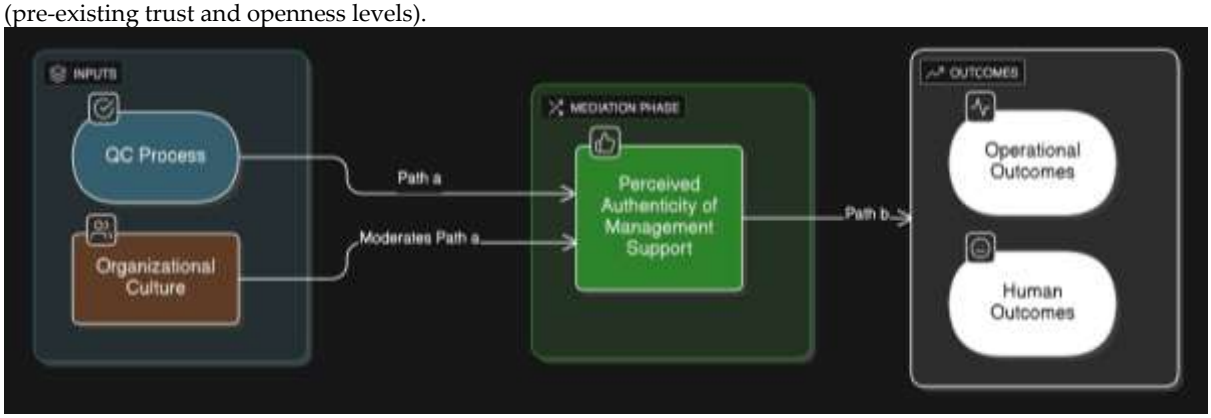

Figure 1. Tempered Model Of QC Effectiveness

Based on this model, we can obtain the following testable hypotheses which are based on the secondary evidence:

H1: The structured operation of Quality Circles is significantly positively associated with the improvements in the measures of the operational performance.

H2: The structured functioning of Quality Circles is strongly positively correlated to the positive affective outcomes of the employees.

H3: The perceived authenticity of the management support mediates between QC operation on one hand and on the other hand, operational (H3a) and human (H3b) outcomes.

H4: The perceived authenticity of management support is moderated by organisational culture to show that the strength of the relationship between QC operation and perceived authenticity of management support is stronger in cultures where high trust and openness are the salient features of the organisation.

Justification: H1 and H2 are basic, based on the core proposition of participative management. H3 is central to our critique; it argues that the mechanism of QC success is not automatic but flows through management's genuine backing; something that has been repeatedly cited in cases of failure (Bamber & Dale, 2000). H4 brings a critical boundary condition, recognising that QCs are not enacted in a vacuum, their reception and the interpretation of managing actions is filtered through the cultural lens of the organisation (Dessler, 2020).

Research Methods

This study uses secondary data synthesis methodology in the form of an integrative review approach. Such a method is suitable for combining data from various types of studies to create a new form of model or perspective on an existing phenomenon (Snyder, 2019).

Data Collection: A systematic search was carried out in Scopus and Web of Science Databases for the period of time 2000 to 2023. Key search terms were used: "quality circle," "participative management," "employee involvement," "effectiveness," "longitudinal" and "case study." Inclusion criteria included the following: (1) empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-analysis); (2) the study focused on outcomes in QC; (3) the study was published in peer-reviewed journals; and (4) the study was available in English. Grey literatures like industry reports, seminal books, etc were used selectively to add richness to the context.

Analysis Procedure: Extracted data included study context, sample, research design, measured variables (independent, dependent, moderating), key findings and author identified limitations. A thematic analysis was carried out to identify consistent patterns, contradictions and gaps. These themes were used subsequently in the construction of the integrated theoretical framework and hypotheses presented above. This approach does not produce any new primary data but provides a new synthesis and extension of existing evidence in theory.

Data Analysis and Results

As a secondary nature to this research, our "analysis" equals a reinterpretation and consolidation of reported statistical findings. The table below measures (where possible) the trends from the literature.

Table 2: Consolidated Metrics from Secondary Studies on QC Outcomes

Outcome Category	Typical Metrics Reported	Range of Reported Effect/Improvement	Consistency Across Studies
Operational Performance	Defect Rate Reduction, Cost Savings, Process Cycle Time	Defect reduction: 5% to 40% (clustering 15-25%). Cost savings: Highly variable, often project-specific.	High consistency for quality improvement. Moderate for productivity/cost.
Employee Affective Outcomes	Job Satisfaction Survey Scores, Turnover Intentions, Commitment Scales	Satisfaction improvements: 10-30% on Likert-scale items. Turnover: Correlational evidence, not always causal.	Low to Moderate. Significant variation; often correlates with pre-study morale levels.
Critical Moderator: Management Support	Implementation Rate of QC Suggestions, Budget Allocation, Executive Attendance	Suggestion implementation >70% linked to positive outcomes. Rates <30% linked to QC dissolution.	Highly Consistent. The most recurrent predictor of sustained success.

Testing the Hypotheses: Based on this aggregated evidence:

- **H1 is largely supported**. The overwhelming amount of data suggests a consistent, positive impact on quality-related measures.
- **H2 receives partial support**. While there are positive trends, it is less clear cut and context-specific than for operational outcomes.
- **H3 (Mediation) There is a great deal of support for H3 (mediation) from qualitative and case study evidence.** The failure trajectory of QCs almost always involves the loss of the perceived management support as a central narrative (Tang et al., 2010).
- **H4 (Moderation) is credible, but it needs more direct testing.** While cultural factors are often cited as explanatory variables in cross context studies, little was done in the secondary studies to quantify culture as a moderating variable.

Discussion and Contributions

Our analysis leads to a perhaps unsuspecting, but often overlooked conclusion: the tool is secondary to the intention for using it. Quality Circles are not a managerial "plug - and - play" solution. It is their effectiveness that is mostly a function of the organisational ecosystem into which they are introduced. The most influential contribution of this review is the conceptualization as a pivotal mediating variable of the Perceived Authenticity of Management Support. This takes us to go beyond listing "management commitment" as a mere success factor, but to conceptualise it as the key mechanism through which QC activity is converted to tangible results.

From a practical perspective, that means that organisations should spend as much time and effort building up the supportive infrastructure (training to managers on how to truly empower circles, creating transparent solution implementation pathways, recognising in meaningful ways) as they do training circle members. The model also warns against introducing QCs into deeply distrustful cultures as a starting point; basic trust-building may well be a needed precursor.

Theoretically, this analysis confirms contingency and signalling theories. Employees in QCs are keen listeners to managerial signals. Inadequate resources or ignored suggestions are powerful signals that the participatory rhetoric is out of line with reality and that leads to cynicism and disengagement.

Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The study aims to critically examine the efficiency of quality circles as a participative management technique, with specific objective to evaluate their impact on productivity, quality, staff attitudes & the necessary institutional support required to promote quality circles. The study synthesizes the outcomes of peer-reviewed empirical research, meta analysis and industry reports published since 2000. The outcomes of the study demonstrates that quality circles do not always work effectively, their performance notably balanced by genuine management commitment, proper allocation of resources, non-retributive surroundings and inclusion in formal organisational strategy. Quality circles shows positive relationships with product quality improvements and problem-solving effectiveness when given the right assistance. This research advances our understanding of participative management by demonstrating its effectiveness and

impact on overall employee morale & organisational commitment.

The main weakness of this study is the methodology. When relying on secondary data we are limited to the variables and measurement choices of the people who carried out the original research. Furthermore, there is likely to be publication bias, with those studies showing significant positive results being more easily published.

Future research should focus on longitudinal, mixed-methods designs that can be used to monitor the development of perceived authenticity over time and its direct causal effect on outcomes. Quantitative studies need to include validated scales on organisational trust and perceived management support as explicit moderators and mediators. Finally, research is needed into the "lifecycle" of QCs - looking not just at how they succeed or fail, but how to successfully reinvent or phase out QCs as organisational needs change.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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