

EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT PRACTICES FOR DECISION-MAKING ON PRODUCTION QUALITY ISSUES

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Manufacturing companies are increasingly involved in developing quality improvement strategies. One such strategy is empowering employees to address quality issues. While the literature on empowerment is abundant, empirical work on its contribution to company performance has yielded conflicting results, which poses a challenge for organizations wishing to implement empowerment programs (Wall, Wood, & Leach, 2005). Various findings reported by researchers include inappropriate management of the power given to subordinates, lack of supervision, and limited achievement of results (Turkmenoglu, 2019). If an employee is not given the freedom to make decisions about how and what to do when they notice discrepancies in quality requirements, doubts their abilities, or is unsure of the right decision, this is not a good situation in the organization.

The aim of research

To determine, how prepared the manufacturing company is to empower employees to make decisions on quality issues.

The methods of the research.

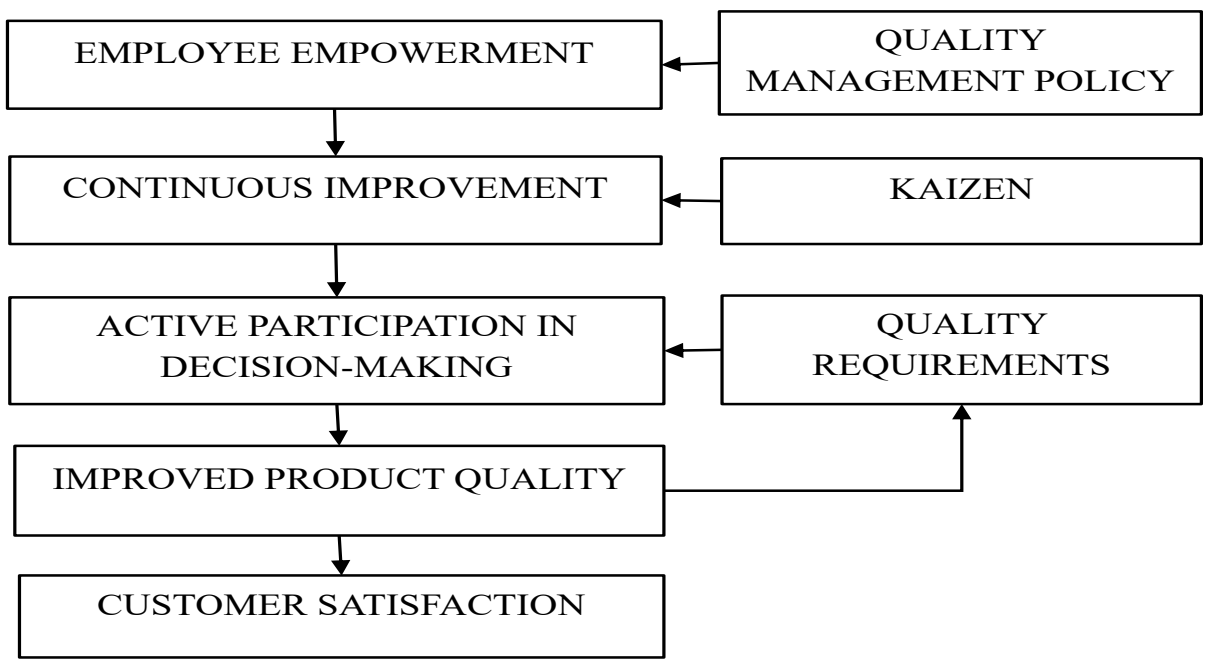
The direct interview method was used to conduct qualitative. The study involved 32 informants Operational level managers (Shift managers, Direct managers, Team leaders). The questionnaire had 6 semi-structured groups of questions according to Figure 1. The questionnaire used a descriptive scale: Low, Medium, High. Low: Employees are rarely consulted; decisions are made only by managers. Medium: Employees are sometimes involved, mostly reactively. High: Employees are actively involved in making decisions and implementing initiatives related to quality. The qualitative study was conducted in a manufacturing company in the Klaipėda region in September-October 2024.

Theoretical background

Employee empowerment is a strategic choice that aims to improve product quality by improving process efficiency and employee engagement. Empowerment in an organizational setting is usually synonymous with decision-making freedom, full responsibility for one's actions, and a work environment without boundaries (Meyerson & Dewettinck, 2012).

It is of utmost importance that employees have sufficient authority to perform their jobs well and maximize their knowledge and skills. Empowered employees effectively use their talents to improve service quality and positively contribute to individual performance (Basha & Reddy, 2014) and have freedom in the work environment (Beuren, Santos & Bernd, 2020). If empowered employees are actively involved in the organization, they can influence the organization's performance (Goksoy, 2017) and thereby help the organization gain a competitive advantage (Jordan, Miglič, Todorović, Marič, 2017). The power to make decisions requires little control and influence from the side of managers and management (Rana and Singh, 2016). Empowering employees for production quality results in better products, cost savings, operational efficiency, and a stronger competitive advantage.

The model presented by the authors provides information on how to initiate employee empowerment in an organization to achieve the highest quality results and business success.



1 Fig. Employee empowerment model for decision-making on quality issues.

Basha, H.S.A., & Reddy, B.K. (2014). Employee empowerment practices in Indian banking sector. International Journal of 22 Business Research, 1(2), 22-33.

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Research results

The presented results of the qualitative study answer the question of how a manufacturing company prepared to empower employees to make decisions on quality issues.

No.	CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	SUMMARY OF RESULTS
1.	EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT	Quality Management Policy	Medium: Decisions are centralized; employees are unaware of the extent of their decision-making rights.
		Organizational Culture	High: OK does not discourage employees from actively engaging in quality decisions.
		Clear Authority and Boundaries	Low: Lack of clear delegation of authority.
2.	ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN DECISION- MAKING	Continuous Training	High: Employees are continuously trained to identify quality problems.
		Knowledge and Skills	Medium: Employees do not use their knowledge and skills in real-world decision-making due to lack of opportunity, confidence, or permission.
		Improvement Programs	Low: Development programs are not designed for decision-making, data interpretation, or problem-solving, specifically for quality management.
3.	QUALITY REQUIREMENTS IMPROVED PRODUCT QUALITY	Role Clarity	Low: Employees are unsure of the limits of their responsibility, authority, or involvement in decision-making.
		Management Support	Medium: Operational managers do not fully trust employees' decisions.
		Communication Channels	Medium: Quality expectations and feedback cycles are not very clear or irregular.
4.	EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT	Access to Information	Medium: Employees react to, rather than prevent, quality problems. Lack of real-time information.
		Resources and Tools	Medium: Partial access to resources and quality tools.
		Escalation Procedures	High: Employees understand and follow procedures.
5.	CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT	Increased Productivity and Efficiency	Medium: Quality has improved, but only in specific processes or product lines, not across the organization. Process inefficiencies still persist.
		Employee Feedback	Medium: Employee empowerment is not yet fully mature because employee feedback is episodic.
		Inspection/Test Results	Medium: Data from inspections is collected but not regularly reviewed or used for improvements.
6.	ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN DECISION- MAKING	Customer Complaints/Feedback	Medium: Feedback does not always lead to effective changes to products or processes. Process inefficiencies persist.
		Increased/Decreased Purchases	Medium: Product changes may not be visible or compelling enough to influence purchasing behavior.
		Return Rate	Low: This return rate indicates customer satisfaction with the quality of the product.

The results of the study revealed that "Escalation Procedures" are rated as high on a descriptive scale in the context of empowering employees to make quality decisions. This means that the organization has clearly defined quality requirements and procedures. The company's employees are constantly trained in identifying quality problems. Employees know well when, how and to whom to report problems that go beyond their control.

Other information revealed shortcomings according to the descriptive scale – low. This is a lack of clear delegation of authority to employees, so employees are not sure about the limits of their responsibility, authority or participation in decision-making. Also, improvement programs are not aimed at decision-making, data interpretation or problem solving - specifically quality management. These shortcomings need to be corrected in order to properly empower employees to address quality issues. It is necessary to train employees to interpret quality data and provide teams with access to key quality non-conformity analysis tools and production planning data.

MAIN RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The employees of a manufacturing company who are directly involved in the production processes have the best understanding of potential defects and areas for improvement. Quality problems in manufacturing companies can lead to waste that must be recycled and warranty claims are required, which certainly increases costs. Empowering employees can help detect quality defects in products early and correct them, thereby reducing waste and improving cost efficiency.

The qualitative study (32 informants) revealed the shortcomings of employee empowerment in addressing quality issues. Managers talk about empowerment, but give little explanation of how or when employees can participate. Decision-making structures are top-down, and bottom-up feedback is limited. Employees have some relevant knowledge and skills needed to perform quality-related tasks, but these are not consistently sufficient or strategically developed to fully support empowerment. Employees are skilled in operations, but not in areas that promote empowerment in decision-making systems, customer-centric quality thinking, or continuous improvement tools. The scope or guidelines for employees' roles in quality decisions are poorly defined. Advanced tools (e.g., statistical quality control software, real-time data dashboards) are lacking or used ineffectively. Manual processes still dominate, and automation or digital monitoring systems that could support empowered decisions are underutilized or outdated. While customer feedback is received, it is not systematically or effectively used to improve the product or process. Customer insights need to be leveraged to guide preventative improvements, not just reactive fixes.

Most importantly, employees feel more motivated and accountable when they are trusted to make quality-related decisions. Employee empowerment initiates a chain reaction that leads to superior quality outcomes and business success.