Quality of Work Life – A Strategic HR Tool for Organizational Development

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Abstract

Since the origin of the term in early 1970's, quality of work life has become a focus of growing concern in work organizations. It is used in the context of certain environmental and humanistic values which got neglected in the process of excessive concern for economic development and materialism during a major part of the twentieth century. Emergence of concern for QWL can be traced to the revival of interest in the large area of 'quality of life' in most of the countries of the world.

Historically, work has occupied an important place in the life of human beings. How people have thought and felt about the working experience has also been an age old concern for both workers and managers. The term quality of working life (QWL) was probably coined originally at the first international conference on QWL at Arden House in 1972 (Davis & Cherns, 1975). Mills (1978) probably coined the term quality of working life and suggested that it had moved permanently into the vocabulary of unions and management, even if a lot of the people using it were not exactly sure what territory it covered.

This paper is an attempt to reveal the importance of Quality of Work Life which has become a strategic human resources tool for organization development, a tool that facilitates smooth transition in a rapidly changing environment.

Introduction

Work is an integral part of our everyday life, as it is our livelihood or career or business. On an average we spend around twelve hours daily in the work place, that is one third of our entire life; it does not influence the overall quality of our life. It should yield job satisfaction, give peace of mind, a fulfillment of having done a task, as it is expected, without any flaw and having spent the time fruitfully, constructively and purposefully. Even if it is a small step towards our lifetime goal, at the end of the day it gives satisfaction and eagerness to look forward to the next day.

Quality of Work Life is not a specific technique; rather, it is more of a philosophy of the condition of work. Quality of Work Life means different things to different employees. QWL attempts to develop the individual while increasing productivity so that all society benefits.

Industrialisation and Quality of Work Life

The main problem relating to security and equity confronting workers these days arises from the development of the factory system in the industrialised countries. However, after 1950 in many of the industrialised countries problems relating to security and equity have been resolved with considerable protection by the law and due to powerful unions that offered excellent protection to the working people (Westley, 1979). The factory system theory misinterpreted labour as a commodity. However, with the development of concept of QWL, the notion of 'labour as commodity' has been challenged with the emphasis given to the humanisation of work and enhancement of workers' participation to make jobs more interesting, challenging and motivating (Bolweg, 1976).

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Evolution and Thrust in QWL

The term quality of work life (QWL) originated from the concept of social-technical system design in the 1970s. It represents perceptions and attitudes of the workforces that they are safe, relatively well satisfied and able to grow and develop as human beings and believed that it enhances their dignity through job satisfaction and humanising work, assigning meaningful jobs, job security, adequate pay and benefits, safe and healthy working conditions, opportunities to develop human capacity, social integration, freedom to self-expression, social relevance, increases individual productivity and finally achieve overall organisational effectiveness (Schular and Huber, 1993, Hian, Einstein and Walter, 1990, Feuer, 1989, Nachmias, 1988, Lawler III, 1982, Carlson, 1980, Guest, 1979, Hackman, 1977, Shuttle, 1977 and Walton, 1974). The main thrust of quality of work life comprises making work more interesting and challenging through redesigning of jobs and work organisation (Bolweg, 1976).

The performance outcomes of quality of work life initiatives are uniting management and organised labour, quality products, services, and relationships across functions and levels and between customers and producers (Weisbord, 1990). It helps to minimise cost, control quality, increase profits and satisfy employees' most important needs (Cascio, 1992, Suttle, 1977). On the contrary, the negative outcome affects directly on workers' physical and psychological problems, absenteeism, higher turnover, poor workers' relations, loss of human potentiality at work and low level of trust between employees and management (Gowdy, 1987, Burnstein, 1987).

Responsibility Factor in QWL

Both employers and employees now better appreciate the importance of the Quality of work life in an organization. Quality of worklife is important to organizational performance (Grayson, 1973). Quality of work life is an important factor that affects motivation at work (Ghosh, 1992). Quality of work life programmes has two objectives: to enhance the productivity and the satisfaction of employees (Gardon, 1984). Quality of work life is the quality of the content of relationship between employees and their total working environment with human dimensions added to the usual technical and economic ones.

Runcie (1980) remarked that should an employee have positive perception of the quality of worklife in the company, he would further probably strive to further improve the working tions, increase production and quality products. The experiences of a fair number of organizations indicate that a number of specific roles and structures and the support systems, must be in place and functioning effectively in order that the quality of work life programmes remain viable grow, involve, permeate the organizational culture and produce long term success and benefits. The cross nation experiences amply demonstrate that improvement in quality of work life has definite potential and scope in improving productivity (Ledford and Lawler, 1982) and overall organizational effectiveness (Buchanan and Boddy, 1982) as also reducing grievances, turnover and absenteeism (Goodman, 1980) and industrial accidents (Havolovic, 1991).

Even in the capitalist countries the government plays a guardian role in few cases particularly to protect interests of business and workforces (Drucker, 1993). In a recent study it is observed that the Japanese government has remained most vigilant in protecting working people by formulating and enforcing policies time-to-time to cope with changing socio-economic situation (Adhikari, 2005).

Key Components of QWL

Seen in the broadest and genuinely important sense, there are perhaps four key components of QWL (Stein, 1983),

a) **Control of Autonomy:** This is the capacity to affect one's own environment. Irrespective of details, some reasonable freedom of action on the job is inseparable from a high quality of work life.

b) **Recognition:** This means being known as an individual and being visible not only personally but as contributor.

c) **Belonging:** Closely related to recognition, belonging means being part of a social unit and having shared goals and values. Recognition satisfies the need to be distinguished and differentiated from others, and belonging fulfils the complementary need to be part of a group. Neither is sufficient by itself.

d) **Progress and Development:** These are some of the benefits employees derive from work. They include the internal rewards available from the organisation: challenge, exercise of competence, development of skill, and in general, a sense of accomplishment.

In addition to these components of QWL, there are two more that are sometimes forgotten. Without these, however, it is hard for people to believe that

any of the above is worth much. The first of these is decent working conditions, subject to the constraints of the particular setting, task, or technology. The second is dignity. People need to be treated with respect under all circumstances (Kanter, 1983).

Many people value a high quality of work life simply because they believe that people deserve it, that it is good in itself. Others see it as something that leads to other desirable things such as a motivation to work, greater productivity, and a more effective organisation. It is important to provide people with a high QWL whether it makes people more productive or not (Stein, 1983).

Changing Dimensions of QWL

Under the label QWL programme, organisations began experimenting with alternate work designs (eg. job enrichment, cross training and job rotation, autonomous work groups, project teams), alternate work schedules (eg. flexitime, compressed workweek, job sharing) and participative decision strategies (eg. joint labour-management committees, quality circle, problem solving team, work councils) (Bedeian & Zammunto, 1991). In recent years, the issue of designing job has gone beyond the determination of the most efficient way to perform tasks. The QWL has become an important design consideration, and the QWL concept is now widely used to refer to "A philosophy of management that enhances the dignity of all workers, introduces changes in the organization's culture like using TQM, and improving the physical and emotionally well-being of employees (eg. Providing opportunities for growth and development)" (Kopelman, 1985). In some organisations QWL programs are intended to increase employee trust, involvement, and problem solving so as to increase both worker satisfaction and organisation effectiveness (Invancevich and Matteson, 1990). Stein (1983) pointed out that QWL is a complex notion, and one on which there is little agreement.

In general, there are two different though not unrelated approaches to organisational change that affect QWL. One has as its objective a system in which the various components of QWL are present to a substantial and ever-increasing extent. For the reasons described above such an organisation would be flexible in its response to change, drawing on all its employees, more or less to their full capacity. The second approach is engage employees in problem solving, usually in a variety of team settings, of which small group activities (SGA) of the TQM are perhaps the most common example (Goodmeasure, Inc., 1982).

The first alternative is obviously more encompassing and includes the second, whereas the latter may not necessarily lead to the former, in the short run. The latter approach which sees QWL simply as a set of problem solving vehicles, is too narrow for two reasons. First, these vehicles only survive as long as they represent new means for people to gain access to opportunity and power and to be rewarded for it. The life cycle of such organizational innovations as the SGA, quality circle, job enrichment, or any other programmed is from one and one-half to three years or so in the absence of a systematic and broader organizational focus. Second reason is that it encourages problem solving in general and not simply in special situations designed for special purposes.

Much of what is done under the general heading of QWL is fine as far as it goes, but too often it does not go far enough. Nevertheless, seen as a critical step toward realization of the more comprehensive organizational objective, those problem-solving, group-oriented QWL vehicles are very appropriate. They offer substantive contributions in the short run (since they resolve issues) and examples of the sorts of things other could do all the time. When people speak of participation or involvement this is generally what they have in mind, although the details vary considerably.

QWL practices aim at extending growth, challenge, participation, responsibility, and control to all employees. What a company hopes to get in return is more committed and better used workforce that actively seeks to help the organization attain its performance goals. QWL should include attention to every aspect of an organization's procedures that has an impact on people's desire and their capacity to be productive (Kanter, 1983).

Trends in Quality of Work Life

QWL activities in different companies have taken many different forms. To attempt to sort out the hairline differences among the many terms is to wander aimlessly through the "semantic wilderness" (Mills, 1975) As Nurick (1985) suggests, we are left with broad but nameless field of inquiry. It is the premise of this study that the QWL cannot be defined with anything than the most general of terms, and therefore is quite meaningless when viewed as a unitary concept. It is better understood as interacting set of issues and processes directed at improving life at work. The

various meanings attached to the QWL concept seem to cluster within four distinct, yet related domains. In essence, QWL in the context of planned change involves:

- A philosophy with underlying values and assumptions.
- A set of structures and methods for organizational change.
- A set of human processes operating as a function of planned change; and
- A set of outcomes that can be monitored and assessed.

TQM and QWL

The relationship between TQM and QWL is of increasing significant today. QWL is a broad based expression designed to convey an importance of living and working conditions of the people. At the 4th Asean Confederation of Employers (ACE) conference held at Kuala Lumpur on 8th September, 1984, it was started that QWL is a new name for the older terms "general welfare, well-being and working environment of employees in their workplace" (Abdul Jalil Mohamad, 1984). ACE used the term QWL to refer to conditions that operate or prevail in the workplace which affect the health, safety, well-being and productivity of workers whether in the farm or in the factory. Though the term is commonly perceived in terms of physical elements of the workplace and involves protecting workers from the hazards of heat, dust, noise, vibration, chemicals, machines, radiation etc., it includes also conditions of work such as hours of work and organisation of work. Furthermore, it would also include the climate of relationship among the workers and between the workers and management. Nadler and Lawler (1983) emphasized the concern about the impact of work on people, organisational effectiveness and participative decision making as the hallmark of QWL. **(Refer Figure One)**

Conclusion

The study found that there is a high level of satisfaction among the employees regarding the Quality of Work life. The factors determining the satisfaction with the quality of work life in the organization were, "Adequate Income & Fair Compensation, - Safe & healthy working conditions", while the number of activities under the QWL banner is increasing, it remains unclear as to what is meant by the term "quality of work life". Consistently included in the listing of best U.S. companies to work for, are such expressions as "no-layoff philosophy", and "guaranteed fair treatment procedure" Federal Express scheme of handling employee grievances is used as a model by firms in many industries for better QWL for employees (Saylor, 1992).

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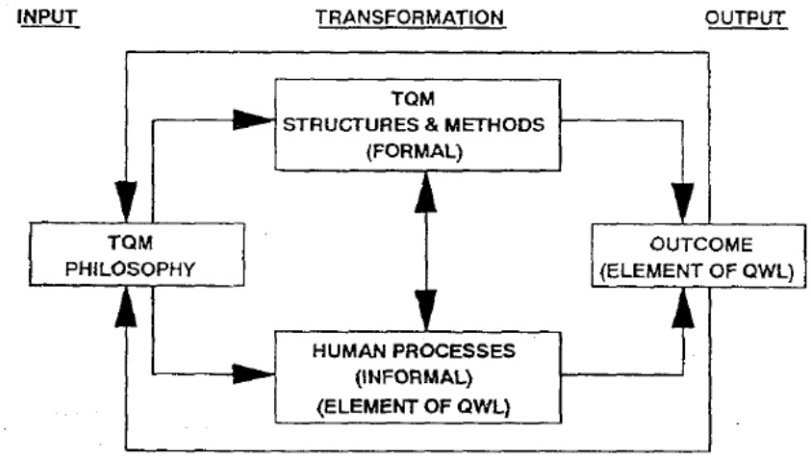

Figure I : QWL with TQM as a Change System