

QUALITY PRACTICES AND
CUSTOMER/SUPPLIER
MANAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIAN
SERVICE ORGANISATIONS:
UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

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Abstract

This paper reports on a cross-sectional study in which the extent of implementation of quality management practices with customers and suppliers, and the links between specific practices and performance outcomes are considered. The sample for the study (N=141) is drawn from small to medium sized Australian service organisations. Key findings are that quality management practices are not widely implemented with customers and suppliers, and that organisations perceive only a moderate effect from such implementation on performance outcomes. When the relationship between specific quality practices with customers and suppliers, and performance outcomes are explored by regression analysis, the most significant predictor of improved systems, improved responsiveness, increased quality of service, and improved competitive advantage is the involvement of suppliers in system change and improvement. Other significant factors include the use of customer satisfaction surveys, and the existence of strategic alliances. These findings give a clear message to about the potential of quality practices to managers in service organisations who are seeking more value from their customer/supplier interface.

Keywords: Quality, suppliers, customers, performance, services

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INTRODUCTION

A number of authors note the lack of a coherent theory of quality, and the confusing variety of different perspectives, techniques and conceptions of the meaning of quality (Dean and Bowen 1994; Foley et al 1997; Silvestro 1998). However, there is no doubt that customer orientation is one of the foundation stones of contemporary Quality Management (QM) practices. In his comprehensive review of the manufacturing TQM and service quality literatures, Silvestro (1998) notes that all TQM gurus are unified in their emphasis on customer focus, and that manufacturing and service quality literatures share a customer based perspective on quality management. This perspective includes external and internal customers, and suppliers. Differences between services and manufacturing are also noted and, in particular, the scope for further development of the services literature on the management of suppliers, external customers and internal networks of customers.

A variety of strategies for gaining more value from customers and suppliers have been developed, documented and tested. These include: single sourcing, balanced sourcing, strategic alliances, integration and partnerships, the development of supplier competencies, involvement in continuous improvement, and requirements for quality certification (Laseter 1998; Monczka et al 1997; Murray and Kotabe 1999; Narasimhan 1997; Spekman et al 1998). Many of the elements of these strategies overlap significantly with Quality Management practices and seek similar performance outcomes such as high quality, improved relationships, customer satisfaction and competitive advantage. For example, Narasimhan (1997) argues that TQM and strategic supply management are 'highly conjunctive' in that the same organizational objectives motivate the use of both approaches and, in particular, "leading-edge firms are successfully employing TQM principles in implementing strategic supply management practices" (p43).

Acknowledging the importance of customers and suppliers to QM, and the possible links to better performance outcomes, the aims of the study reported in this paper were:

- to explore the extent of implementation of quality management practices with customers and suppliers in Australian service organisations, and
- to identify possible links between specific practices and business performance outcomes.

The paper commences with a brief review of the relevant literature and a description of the methodology used in the study. The results are then reported and discussed, with particular reference to the implications for practising managers.

BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Strategic Importance of Customers and Suppliers

One of the major reasons for pursuing applications of QM with customers and suppliers, is the strategic importance of customers and suppliers in the current business environment. There has been a movement away from a narrow perspective and adversarial approach to the supply chain, to a view that focuses on processes, rather than functions, and that incorporates a variety of strategies in an endeavour to gain maximum value from relationships (Laseter 1998; Spekman et al 1998). In discussing 'balanced sourcing', as researched and documented by Booz.Allen & Hamilton, Laseter notes that it requires a broad, organisation-wide perspective and is indicated by fully leveraging supplier capabilities, and driving improvement at both customers and suppliers. In turn, these approaches require certain organizational

capabilities and include the creation of sourcing strategies, and building and sustaining relationships. The end result is assumed to be a competitive advantage that delivers superior returns.

Trends to strategic alliances, partnerships, networks, collaboration and contracting, in both manufacturing and services (Burnes and New 1997; Duff 1994), suggest that organisations would benefit by exploring the QM approaches that lead to desirable outcomes in such contexts (Bienstock et al 1997; Milligan et al 1998; Rura-Polley and Clegg 1998; Spekman et al 1998). For example, Spekman et al (1998) argue that a firm's success is tied, in part, to the strength of its weakest supply chain partner as, in value-added networks, competitive advantage depends on integrating the cooperating companies who are competing with other firms along the entire supply chain. They suggest that typical characteristics of the 'former', traditional view of supply chain management include multiple partners, partner evaluations based on purchase price, arms-length negotiations, and many suppliers with formal short-term contracts. These characteristics are in basic conflict with the approaches espoused by quality gurus and practitioners. This view is reinforced by authors on business-to-business relationships who emphasise the strategic role that relationships can play, and the need for the firm to operate and compete at all levels of the new competitive paradigm (Ford et al 1998; Wilson 1995). Hence, when quality in customer/supplier management is considered, two major areas arise. Firstly, managing relationships with customers and suppliers and, secondly, managing quality in terms of the role of customers and suppliers. These areas are briefly considered in turn.

Managing Relationships with Customers and Suppliers

Relationships in business markets are increasingly important in many companies' operating strategies, and have become an integral part of operating strategies over the past 10 years (Wilson 1995). The early work is evident in the literature from the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) school and the on-going research into business-to-business relationships (Ford et al 1998). The IMP approach emphasises interdependence between two active parties and is concerned with the management of buyer-seller relationships rather than exchanges (Dwyer et al 1987; Ford 1980). The issue is how to maintain productive, cooperative relationships with suppliers while simultaneously ensuring competitive pricing and high quality of services, regardless of the specific context (Embleton and Wright 1998; Laseter 1998).

Most of the work in industrial marketing is in manufacturing, especially with respect to the automobile industry, and its applicability in services does not seem to have been explored, despite remarkable increases in purchasing of business services (Fitzsimmons et al 1998). The nature of many services means that service delivery is highly variable, complex and often seeking long-term outcomes, which renders quality measurement difficult and subjective (Parasuraman et al 1985). Hence, to secure quality in certain service environments, for example, domiciliary care, there is a need to develop long-term, high-trust relationships with suppliers of services (Hardy and Wistow 1998). Further, suppliers of the service need to understand the service outcome requirements (as well as service delivery) and can, presumably, enhance the quality of both delivery and outcomes, as a result of being involved in system change and improvement.

Empirical evidence from manufacturing suggests that consciousness of relationship building is accompanying the trends to alliances and collaborative structures. For example, Monczka et al (1997, p113) report the results of a survey in which manufacturing companies were asked to indicate the extent to which they had used various practices in their cases of 'most successful' and 'least successful' supplier integration into new product/process/service development. Of the 21 practices listed, 17 represent sharing, or joint agreements or activities in some form. This provides a compelling case for involvement of suppliers in a wide variety of planning and control activities, related to their contribution to product or service delivery and quality. Laseter (1998) reports on a *Strategy & Business* survey of a diverse group of large corporations where respondents ranked building and sustaining supplier relationships as the most critical of the six Balanced Sourcing capabilities. He points out, though, that almost all indicated that they had not fully developed this capability (1998, p89-90). This finding suggests that the importance of relationships is acknowledged but that the pathway to establishing and maintaining them may not be clear.

Managing Quality

TQM, JIT and other quality initiatives are built on a philosophy of continuous improvement and incremental progress towards both greater organisational efficiency and customer satisfaction and some authors report remarkable increases in productivity, quality and responsiveness as a result of the application of JIT principles, such as waste elimination, in services (Duclos et al 1995; Inman and Mehra 1991; Lee 1990; Wasco et al 1991). However, while effective supply management has long been recognized as a competitive weapon in the Japanese manufacturing industry (Narasimhan 1997, p44), and JIT emphasises supplier management, there appears to be little evidence of studies that specifically explore supplier management in service organisations. It is possible that the language does not readily translate to the service situation, and hence the integration of literatures is not occurring (Inman and Mehra 1991; Silvestro 1998).

In the quality literature, managers have long acknowledged the importance of getting close to their key customers. Now that this logic has extended upstream as well, it is important to leverage the skills, expertise and capabilities of the firms who comprise the key suppliers (Spekman et al 1998). However, as in the survey reported above (Laseter 1998), Spekman et al's (1998) findings indicate that businesses have not yet fully operationalized the concept of supply chain management, possibly due to the finding that buyers and sellers do not share the same values and beliefs about the advantages of supply chain management. Hence, Spekman et al allege, it is not surprising that supply chain practices are difficult to implement. They suggest that a level of consensus about goals is necessary, and a shared perspective of the merits of close ties. In order to achieve the operationalization, it is therefore possible that the application of QM principles will provide an operational pathway to closer collaboration, just as TQM is considered by many to be the appropriate antecedent of successful business process reengineering (Nissen 1996).

As indicated earlier in this paper, Narasimhan (1997) identifies and examines the link between TQM and strategic supply chain management. He claims that TQM principles and methods are subsumed in managing all aspects of the supply chain and from the opposite perspective, the strategic intent of the supply chain is to achieve TQM objectives of high quality and customer satisfaction, flexibility, cycle time reduction, innovation and improvements in productivity. In summary, Narasimhan states that strategic management aims "to link together supply chain entities to create a 'virtual enterprise' with common, mutually beneficial, system-wide TQM objectives" (1997, p47). In our study, we take the perspective of the firm and consider the linkages between QM with customers and suppliers, and the possible links to performance outcomes.

Another approach to quality practices with suppliers is to consider the management of contractors in services. With the trend to using specialised business providers, in contracting and outsourcing, there are some commentaries and studies related to managing service quality. Referring to contract management, Domberger and Hall (1991) and the Industry Commission of Australia (1996) suggest several key approaches that will facilitate high levels of quality. Firstly, pre-qualification requirements, most commonly in the form of certification or QA processes, must be met so that purchasers have a level of confidence in suppliers' abilities to deliver high quality. Secondly, attention to specifications and performance monitoring is emphasised. This attention includes the use of contracts and may include inspections, other forms of supplier measurement, and customer satisfaction surveys. All of these activities fall within the scope of QM. Finally, the approach that organisations adopt with respect to single and multiple sourcing reflects whether services are embracing the trend to longer-term contracts and supply base rationalization that is evident in manufacturing (Lyons et al 1990). Hence, a number of key elements emerge that indicate the extent of adoption of QM practices in customer/supplier management. These elements are incorporated as items in the study described below.

As discussed above, we expect that the implementation of QM practices should result in better understanding and progress towards common goals, and better relationships with customers and suppliers. However, the ultimate purpose of implementation of changed practice is to achieve better quality of service and to gain competitive advantage in the marketplace. As Laseter (1998, p15) states "Tapping the broader expertise of a company's extended enterprise by leveraging supplier innovation can increase the applied

brainpower exponentially. Companies that do it well have an opportunity to build a sustainable competitive advantage." With reference to manufacturing, Monczka et al (1997, p97) state "In managing organizational quality, it has become widely recognized that effective integration of suppliers into the product value/supply chain will be a key factor in achieving the improvements necessary to remain competitive." Consequently, the final part of our study explores the association between key variables representing quality management practices and performance outcomes, and endeavours to highlight the most likely predictors of improved performance.

THE STUDY

Research Questions

Based on the literature, the following research questions were formulated for investigation in this study:

1. To what extent are quality practices applied to customer/supplier management in Australian service organisations?
2. What relationships exist between specific quality practices in customer/supplier management and performance outcomes?

Research Hypothesis

The application of quality practices in customer/supplier management has a positive and significant effect on performance outcomes (competitive advantage, increased quality and responsiveness of service, improved relationships).

The Sample

A survey was mailed to a large random sample of service organisation managers, using the member companies of the Australian Institute of Management. The sample consisted of 550 companies and 141 useable returns were received, yielding a response rate of 26%. The sample represented a diverse range of services including wholesale trade (18%), public administration (13%), financial services (11%), health and community services (8%), business services (6%), construction and engineering services (6%), education (4%), transportation (4%), and membership organisations (4%). The number of employees ranged from 5 to 32,000, with 71% of organisations employing less than 200 employees. The reported sales/revenue turnover ranged from \$0.5 million to \$3.6 billion, with the most frequent return of around \$10 million per annum.

The Instrument

The survey instrument was developed based on key quality management practices from the literature, and with reference to earlier surveys of Australian manufacturing organisations conducted by Ernst and Young, and the Quality Management Research Unit, Monash University (Ernst and Young 1996). All responses about quality management practices and performance outcomes utilised an appropriate Likert scale from 1 to 5, for example, extent of involvement of customers in ... 1 (none) to 5 (very large). Data was also collected on the responding organisations, their attitude towards quality management, and the nature and extent of their use of QM practices. This paper reports specifically on findings related to QM implementation with customers/suppliers and performance outcomes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Extent to which QM Practices are Applied to Customers/Suppliers

The first research question focuses on the extent of adoption of QM approaches in customer and supplier management in service organisations. To explore this, the responses to the extent of involvement of customers in key activities, and the extent of utilisation of QM practices with suppliers were sought. The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1 Customer involvement in various activities

Activity	Mean	SD
Customer surveys to measure satisfaction level	3.40	1.31
Strategic alliances with the service provider	2.85	1.23
Design and development of products/services	2.77	1.24
Testing of products/services	2.72	1.21
Continuous improvement of systems and procedures	2.62	1.18

Note: Scores based on a Likert scale from 1 (no involvement) to 5 (very large involvement)

Table 2 QM practices utilised in relation to suppliers

QM Practice	Mean	SD	Mean*
Suppliers are measured on performance, e.g. delivery time, product/service quality	3.40	1.23	3.59
Inspection of goods and services	3.35	1.30	3.95
Supplier agreement contracts	3.24	1.21	3.11
Multiple sourcing is used	2.96	1.09	3.14
Suppliers are involved in a strategic alliance	2.54	1.21	na
Suppliers are involved in system change and improvement	2.25	1.12	2.24
Single sourcing is used	2.19	1.00	1.93
Suppliers must have certification	1.93	1.09	3.33

Note 1: Scores based on a Likert scale from 1 (no utilisation) to 5 (very large utilisation)

Note 2: * QM practices utilised in relation to suppliers in manufacturing organisations (Ernst and Young 1996)

The data in Table 1 indicates that service organisations tend not to involve their customers in QM activities, with the only activity scoring above the mid-point being the use of customer surveys. Similarly, QM practices do not appear to have been adopted significantly with respect to supplier management, with the highest scores being mid-range and more than half the items scoring below the mid-point. In both tables, the high standard deviation values indicate the broad range of responses and the absence of a consistent approach. In summary, these tables suggest that Australian service organisations are not highly attuned to strategy that involves their suppliers and customers.

The final column in Table 2 presents the data obtained from a 1996 survey of Australian manufacturing organisations that used an almost identical scale to the one in our survey. The scores follow a similar order, with the main exception being the requirement for a pre-qualification in the form of certification, which is not evident in services. It is interesting that neither service nor manufacturing organisations involve their suppliers in system change and improvement to an appreciable degree. The special significance of this result is developed later in this paper.

The Relationship between QM Practices and Performance

It is reasonable to assume that, when organisations adopt QM techniques, they are seeking specific outcomes, generally relating to higher levels of performance. When respondents were asked to assess the impact of QM practices on a variety of performance outcomes, on a scale of 1 (none) to 5 (very large), the largest (but moderate) effects were demonstrated for improved systems, improved quality of service, improved customer relationships, and improved responses to customer needs (all in range 3.5-3.7). Other outcomes hovered about 3 on the scale with improved supplier relationships just below the mid-point (2.8). While this may not be surprising for our sample (where there is limited evidence of adoption of QM techniques with customers and suppliers), it suggests that the potential of QM as a strategic tool with customers and suppliers has not been identified nor capitalised upon by our service organisations.

Given that the opportunity for managers to make gains in these areas are espoused in the manufacturing literature, we were interested in pursuing the relationships, if any, that do exist between specific QM practices with customers/suppliers and performance outcomes. Initially, Pearson correlation coefficients were obtained for key performance outcomes, and the items measuring QM implementation in customer/supplier management. The results are shown in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 Correlation coefficients between performance outcomes and customer involvement in various activities

Customer involvement in ..	Performance outcomes				
	Improved systems	Increased service quality	Improved response to customer needs	Improved competitive advantage	Improved customer relationships
Design and development	.209*		.195*		.331**
Testing products/services		.181*	.232**	.341**	.246**
Customer satisfaction surveys		.262**	.262**		.258**
Continuous improvement	.239**	.233**	.290**	.294**	.393**
Strategic alliances	.236**	.263**	.307**	.356**	.289**

Where effects were not significant at the .05 level, values have been excluded

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level

Table 4 Correlation coefficients between performance outcomes and utilisation of QM practices with suppliers

QM practice with suppliers	Performance outcomes				
	Improved systems	Increased service quality	Improved response to customer needs	Improved competitive advantage	Improved supplier relationships
Inspection					
Contracts			.192*		.270**
Performance measurement	.209*	.270**	.221*	.201*	.363**
Certification					.268**
Multiple sourcing					.212*
Single sourcing					.198*
Involvement in improvement	.353**	.372**	.436**	.356**	.535**
Strategic alliances		.219*	.231*	.299**	.428**

Where effects were not significant at the .05 level, values have been excluded

Correlation is significant at the .05 level

** Correlation is significant at the .01 level

The striking results from Tables 3 and 4 are the significant correlations for all items with improved customer relationships, and all items (except inspection) for improved supplier relationships. As an aside, it is likely that the nature of many services renders 'inspection' inapplicable and an example of where QM terminology does not readily translate from manufacturing to service environments. Other striking results from Tables 3 and 4 include, firstly, the apparent importance of involving customers and suppliers in change and improvement activities. Such involvement correlates significantly, at the 99% confidence level, with all the performance outcomes that we considered and reinforces the importance of collaboration as outlined in manufacturing literature. Secondly, the use of strategic alliances as a means of enhancing performance appears to have significant effects however, we draw this conclusion cautiously as the term 'customer' is open to a variety of interpretations when the supply chain is being considered. Finally, from the findings, we are unable to draw any conclusions about the effects of single or multiple sourcing, contracts and pre-qualification requirements such as certification.

Having established that significant correlations exist for a number of the variables, the next question concerns their relative contribution to the various outcomes. To gain insights into this, a series of regression analyses were performed, using the outcomes as dependent variables and the items with a significant correlation to them as independent variables. The results are shown in Table 5.

The results in Table 5 support the hypothesis of this study, that is, 'The application of quality practices in customer/supplier management has a positive and significant effect on performance outcomes'. In particular, the best predictor of improved systems, increased quality of service, improved response to customer needs and improved competitive advantage, is 'the involvement of suppliers in system change and improvement'. This dramatic result presents a very compelling case to support previous assumptions and evidence in the literature about the value of strategic supply chain management (Laseter 1998; Narasimhan 1997; Spekman et al 1998). In our study, supplier involvement in system change and development has remarkable importance.

Intuitively, we would expect improved relationships as a result of involving suppliers and customers in improvement activities. This is confirmed by the last two regression analyses and, though the results shown make be interpreted as artefacts, it is interesting that other variables that demonstrated a significant association, such as customer involvement in design and development, are not more prominent. Finally, consistent with the effects of supplier involvement discussed above, the role of strategic alliances emerges as a significant predictor for both competitive advantage (customer alliances) and supplier relationships (supplier alliances). This also supports contemporary practice, and the assumptions about likely performance outcomes. In summary, our findings are consistent with previous studies in service organisations (Terziovski and Dean 1998, Voss 1996) and they provide a very clear message to managers about the contribution that quality practices with customers and suppliers can make to performance outcomes.

Table 5 Results of regression analysis to determine the best predictors of performance outcomes

Outcome (dependent variable)	Adj R ²	Independent variables demonstrating a relationship	St beta coeff
Improved systems	.134	• Suppliers are involved in system change and improvement	.315**
Increased quality of service	.163	• Suppliers are involved in system change and improvement • Customer surveys used to measure satisfaction level	.341** .198*
Improved response to customer needs	.190	• Suppliers are involved in system change and improvement	.383**
Improved competitive advantage	.203	• Suppliers are involved in system change and improvement • Customers in strategic alliances with the service provider	.239** .234*
Improved supplier relationships	.317	• Suppliers are involved in system change and improvement • Suppliers are involved in a strategic alliance	.389** .214*
Improved customer relationships	.181	• Customers involved in continuous improvement of systems and procedures	.246*

* sig T < .05, ** sig T < .01

Managerial Implications

QM acknowledges the importance of both customers and suppliers, and implementation of QM practices with customer/supplier groups has the potential to make a significant contribution to organizational results. In particular, customer involvement in:

- strategic alliances;
- testing of products/services, and
- continuous improvement of systems and procedures

shows a positive association to each of improved competitive advantage, responsiveness and increased service quality. The use of

- customer surveys to measure satisfaction level

does not appear to be associated with competitive advantage, but is positively associated with both improved service quality and responsiveness to customer needs, and is therefore likely to have a long term effect.

In terms of QM practices with suppliers,

- involvement of suppliers in system change and improvement;
- measurement of suppliers on performance; and
- involvement of suppliers in strategic alliances

all demonstrate a positive association to each of improved competitive advantage, responsiveness and increased service quality, as well. The effects for other QM practices (such as single sourcing, contracts, certification) are not conclusive.

When quality practices are compared, the critical factor that emerges as a predictor of desirable outcomes is *the involvement of suppliers in system change and improvement*. This is a very useful, and seemingly achievable, starting point. While there is considerable discussion about strategic supply chain management in the manufacturing literature, generally couched in terms of integration and value-added activities, it offers very little in the way of implementation information (Monczka et al 1997, p97). Further, Murray and Kotabe (1999) note that service firms now seem to be sourcing their activities globally (in much the same way as manufacturing firms have sourced components and finished goods for 30 years) but that very little is known about the nature of service sourcing strategy. We suggest that linking QM to strategic supply chain concepts may be a profitable way forward.

CONCLUSION

This paper is based on a cross-sectional study that focuses on identifying critical customer/supplier quality practices, which have a significant impact on business performance outcomes in service organisations.

Key findings are that the extent of adoption of QM in relation to customers and suppliers is relatively low with the main areas being the use of customer surveys, and performance measurement of suppliers. The quality practice, 'supplier involvement in system change and development', emerges convincingly as the most critical factor in terms of customer/supplier management and performance outcomes in service organisations. This factor is also the best predictor of supplier relationships. Similarly and, as expected, customer involvement in continuous improvement contributes significantly to customer relationships. Other factors that make a contribution include the existence of strategic alliances, and the use of customer surveys. These results reinforce the need for customer/supplier partnerships to be pursued because of their potential to have a positive impact on the bottom line.

As the use and importance of suppliers in services is growing, service organisations need to focus more on the practices that will have most impact on results. This study highlights specific areas for attention.

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- 9/00 Warwick Frost "Ecotourism and Rainforests" (February, pp.13).
- 10/00 Glenice J. Wood & Margaret Lindorff "Sex Differences in Managers' Explanations for Career Progress: A Test of Social Role Theory" (February, pp.15).
- 11/00 Yi-Ting Yu & Alison Dean "Including Emotions in Customer Satisfaction Measurement: a new Perspective on Loyalty" (March, pp.11).
- 12/00 Dianne Waddell & David Mallen "The Future for Quality Managers" (March, pp.13).
- 13/00 Di Waddell & Deb Stewart "Training and Management Development of Quality Managers" (March, pp.12).
- 14/00 Geraldine Khachan & Cornelis Reiman "Australia's Relationship with the Middle East – A Trade Perspective" (March, pp.16).
- 15/00 Lim Hong Hai, Ali Haidar & Len Pullin "Managerial Values of Penang Island Municipal Council Officers: A Preliminary Report" (March, pp.11).
- 16/00 Alison M. Dean & Dr. Milé Terziovski "Quality Practices and Customer/Supplier Management in Australian Service Organisations: Untapped Potential" (March, pp.12).