RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

WRKLFQUAL: A Tool for Measuring Quality of Work Life

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has recognised the association between Quality of Work Life (QWL) of the service providers and the quality of service offered. Studies have also found QWL to be an important factor influencing organisational commitment and turnover intentions, which has led to assumptions an employee attaches great importance to their work and work life and joins an organisation with certain expectations. But employee expectations are not static and understanding their perception of HR policies is crucial to understanding QWL. Despite these assumptions, the literature is devoid of any systematic study to define and measure the expected QWL for service sector employees. Thus, the present study discusses a methodology for identifying the expected dimensions of QWL, and subsequently, proposes an instrument for measuring QWL, operationally named WRKLFQUAL, based on the gap analysis tool. The rationale for subscribing to this theoretical framework is justified in this article. The implications of the study and directions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Work as a 'source of livelihood' has branched out from this meaning and advanced over to 'cover and create' diverse meaning in an individual's lived experience in the workplace as well as in life, encouraging creativity and self expression (Morrison 1993), apart from being a source of satisfaction (Luthans 1998). Conversely, research on work and stress suggests that the workplace can be a major source of stress and ill health (Duxbury & Higgins 2001).

According to Lawler (2005), society has entered a new era in the relationship between organisations and their employees. In this new era, people are the primary source for a company's competitive advantage and organisational prosperity and survival depends on how employees are treated. Furthermore, it is critical that companies treat people in ways that make them feel committed, if not loyal, members. As such, employees expect their job to provide a certain amount of stability and loyalty from the organisation (Conlon 2003, McDonald & Hite 2005). Nevertheless, employees have certain expectations when they join an organisation (Woods 1993) and when they are not fulfilled job satisfaction is likely to decline and turnover is a likely consequence.

In the earlier studies it was observed that management theorists have the importance of coordinating the organisation-human relationship to enhance productivity and develop human capital (Maslow 1954, Argyris 1957, Herzberg 1968). From this perspective there has stemmed the notion of organisational responsibility and specifically of management, to ensure that employees who commit themselves fully to achieving the organisation's objectives should also experience a high Quality of Work Life (Kotzé 2005). Besides, an employee who feels a great deal of work related well being and little job distress is apt to have a good Quality of Work Life (QWL), and vice versa (Riggio 1990). Indeed, QWL is a process by which an organisation responds to employee needs by developing mechanisms to allow members to share fully in making decisions that design their lives at work (Robbins 1998). Subsequently, organisations cognisant of issues surrounding the concept of QWL appear to be more effective at retaining their employees and achieving their goals (Louis & Smith 1990).

As service industries are becoming increasingly important to the economies of developed nations (Dabholkar,

Thorpe & Rentz 1996), managers of service organisation affirm that their employees are the most valuable asset (Tzafrir & Gur 2007). This contention is particularly relevant for the service sector, which is largely dependent on the encounter between employees and customers (Testa & Ehrhart 2005). In spite of this acknowledged connection not much attention has been paid to the conditions of the work environment that forms the basis for service oriented employees (Edvardsson & Gustavsson 2003), and in fact according to Von de Looi and Bender (1995), low QWL may affect the quality of services and organisational commitment. Moreover, QWL programmes can lead to greater self esteem and improved job satisfaction (Suttle 1977) and satisfied employees are more likely to work harder and provide better services (Yoon & Suh 2003). Yet, despite such importance of QWL for the employees in the service sector, there is hardly any research, which elucidates the employees' expectations of the QWL elements. More importantly, a tool for measuring the phenomenon of QWL in a service context is virtually non existent. Consequently, this study propounds a theoretical framework for defining and measuring the expected QWL for the service sector employees. Against this background a literature review on the importance of work and the work life for the employees, their expectations, and prior views on the QWL construct was undertaken.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work Environment and Human Resourcefulness

It has been long recognised that the environment provided by the organisation has an important influence on the psychological health of its employees, and, therefore, the health of the organisation itself (Argyris 1957, McGregor 1960). The resourcefulness of the employees in an organisation depends largely on the environment at the workplace, and it has been suggested that due attention be paid in providing a satisfying and a high quality work environment for the employees commensurate with other associated work factors (Mumford 2006). Also, the importance of the workplace as providing a sense of community for workers has been highlighted in a number of studies (Deyo 1980, Fine 1986, Hochschild 1997). Furthermore, the community is now centred around the workplace rather than the home (Pocock 2003).

Research indicates that a climate for employee well being serves as a foundation for a climate for service (Schneider & Bowen 1985). Therefore, if employees perceive an organisation as offering a good work environment in return for their contribution to an organisation, then it is likely that employees will report higher levels of performance and job involvement. Employee satisfaction facilitates superior performance and also greater attraction and retention of the best employees, thereby enhancing the ability of the organisation to deliver higher quality services (Berry 1981). Hence, this study would be more appropriate for the 'service sector employees', where 'quality' in the work life of an employee reflects spontaneously in mental and physical well being and is duly transferred as 'quality' in the service towards customers. Realisation has dawned among researchers and practitioners that customers are not just external, but that the organisation has internal customers as well, that is, their employees (Berry, Hensel & Burke 1976).

The importance of 'work' and the life associated to the 'work place' for an employee is gaining significance. Hence, organisations and employees have to find ways to respond to the new realities in the workplace. This notion signals a need for further research in the area of QWL.

Employee Expectations

Researchers have found that an individual's QWL is influenced by his or her work experience and future career expectations (Hodson 1985, Chatman 1989). Expectation is a belief about the probabilities associated with a future state of affairs (Geers, Weiland, Kosbab, Landry & Helfer 2005), and the anticipation of what will happen (Webster's 1995). Often employees start jobs with expectations based on their life experiences, career aspirations, and personal characteristics (Woods 1993). Research has found variation between relevant work expectations and the actual experienced states of these performed states to be an important factor influencing employee turnover (Pearson 1995). In addition, work relevant expectation has been linked to satisfaction by expectation-confirmation theory (Oliver 1980). Moreover, studies have confirmed that satisfied employees are more likely to be highly motivated, have a good morale at work, and given the opportunity can work more effectively and efficiently (Eskildsen & Dahlgaard 2000), and in teams are more productive (Heskett, Sasser & Schlesinger 1997). Hence, employers are challenged to provide benefits and services for their employees, so as to better satisfy them in the quest to provide an effective and efficient service to the customers (Grönroos 1990).

There is a long lineage, in the relevant literature, to demonstrate more favourable outcomes are realised when employee expectation are understood, communicated, and consistently measured (Knight, Crutsinger & Kim 2006). For example, at Capitol plastics in Bowling Green, Ohio, workers on one production line suggested the provision of floor mats as a means to reduce the discomfort of standing on a cement floor all day, and when management implemented this idea the QWL of the employees was raised (MacDuffie & Helper 1997). A similar

stance is taken by many human relations theorists who have proposed that understanding employees is fundamental for achieving good service and customer satisfaction (Meudell & Gadd 1994, Borchgrevink & Susskind 1999). But according to Delamotte and Takezawa (1984), workers' expectations and work related problem awareness are not static, which can result in a shift of focus on QWL valuation. And when the actual experiences differ from initial expectations, employees experience unmet expectations (Porter & Steers 1973), also referred to as 'occupational reality shock' (Dean, Ferris & Konstans 1988). The impact of met or unmet expectations on turnover or turnover intentions has been investigated in various studies (Sorensen & Sorensen 1974, Major, Kozlowski, Chao & Gardner 1995, Pearson 1995) to reveal dysfunctional work outcomes are linked with gaps between experienced and preferred expectations. Consequently, given the relativity of met and unmet employee expectations on employee satisfaction and turnover, the study presented here explores the feasibility of ascertaining a procedure that can be adopted to understand the extent of employee expectations as a means to determine the dimensions of QWL.

Internal Customers and QWL

Understanding the concept of quality is elusive. Indeed, there are a plethora of definitions as many authors have attempted to delineate the fundamental differences between products and services (Nankervis, Pearson & Chatterjee 2007). According to Berry (1981), employees are the internal customers and their jobs are considered as internal products. Complementing this stand Kotler (2000), and Berry and Parasuraman (1992) further reiterate that internal marketing is more important than conventional external marketing, wherein internal marketing embraces the philosophy of treating employees as internal customers and setting strategies to shape job products to fit human needs. And situations where employees are considered internal customers and are engaged in contingent organisational practices the internal marketing initiatives have led to excellent service and successful external marketing (Greene, Walls & Schrest 1994). Thus, the advocation that satisfied employees provide a higher level of external service quality, which can lead to increased customer satisfaction (Johnson 1996, Griffith 2001). Hence, inducting quality into the work lives of employees is an enviable challenge and inevitable for any organisation. This is particularly vital for the service sector employees, as was suggested by Hodson and Roscigno (2004) that organisational success and worker well being must be complementary.

In spite of the various studies projecting the contribution of QWL there is still a lack of both a universally accepted definition and a clear cut understanding of the QWL concept and what it entails (Krueger, et al. 2002). The intangibility, variability, and perishability of the service process together with the volatility of customer expectations are some of the prominent dimensions that inhibit the delineation of the phenomenon of QWL. Interestingly, managers, commentators and social scientists have either avoided the task or have been unable to develop a contemporary service QWL criteria during the past three decades since the illumination of the enigma by Seashore (1975) who advanced a conceptualisation of QWL should consider the ongoing changes of workers' aspirations as a result of their interactions with the wider socio cultural environment during their life courses. Further advice was given by Davis (1983), who has defined QWL as 'the quality of the relationship between employees and the total working environment, with human dimensions added to the usual technical and economic considerations'. Across time definitions of QWL have changed focus and have been used at different times to refer to different variables (Nadler & Lawler 1983) and may also mean different things to different people in different roles (Sashkin & Burke 1987). It is observed that the method of defining QWL is varied, encompassing several different perspectives (Loscocco & Roschelle 1991) with a result QWL has been defined as the workplace strategies, operations and environment that promote and maintain employee satisfaction aimed at improving working conditions for employees and organisational effectiveness (Lau & Bruce 1998). Clearly, a variety of job and organisational factors can contribute to QWL (Carayon & Smith 2000), and individual characteristics and circumstances can have an impact on the QWL experiences of the employees (Hannif, Burgess & Connell 2008).

Diversity across the workforce influences workplace relationships (Ho 2007). And while it is recognised different people have different perspectives the various frameworks and theories that provide a point of departure (to explain these exchange relationships) the paradigms do not convincingly express what makes for a high quality of working life (Davis & Cherns 1975). As QWL is a construct that is multifaceted and context based (Guest 1979), the various definitions of, and approaches to QWL indicate that there are differences in the meanings given to its concepts and practices (Kotzé 2005). The diversity in the definition of QWL generates widespread disagreement about its measurement and interpretation (Kotzé 2005, Nankervis, et al. 2007). Inferences from these positions are suggestive of a need to develop a technique to define the 'QWL construct' in the present context and also to formulate a measuring tool. Further, a review of the literature on QWL and service industry divulges that there is hardly any recorded study about the employees' expectations of the QWL and its measurement, inciting a need to fill this gap.

The purpose of the present study is to contour a theoretical framework that propounds a methodology for generating expected dimensions of the QWL construct and develop an instrument for measuring QWL. These two issues are simultaneously discussed. To justify the methodology suggested in this study, there is a need to comprehend allied methods and tools, before spearheading towards a convincing rationale for the proposed theoretical framework.

Methodology for Identifying the Expected Dimensions of QWL

Quality needs to be understood from a customer's point of view, because the quality of a particular product or service is what the customer perceives it to be (Slack, Camber & Johnston 2004). And it is overwhelmingly evident from the service quality literature that quality is defined by the consumers (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry 1985 1988). In practice, the philosophy of internal marketing advocates managing the organisation's human resources based on a marketing perspective (George & Grönroos 1991). On the one hand, viewing the employees as internal customers, viewing jobs as internal products and endeavouring to offer internal products that satisfy the needs and wants of their internal customers is presumed to a successful HRM strategy because of the heightened opportunity for personal contacts (Berry & Parasuraman 1991). On the other hand, it is observed that the employer's reports on the effectiveness of the HRM policies and practices are not from their experience of the actual human resource (HR) practices (Guest 2001). Complementing this notion is the finding of the study by Geare, Edgar, and Deng (2006), indicating that employee ratings of HRM functions differed significantly from the ratings of their HR managers. Indeed, it can be justified that since the actual consumers of the HR policies are the employees, they should be sanctioned some voice in research into HRM (Edgar & Geare 2005).

In the context of this study, for understanding the employees' expectation of QWL and identifying the attributes relating to QWL dimensions forming the QWL construct, appropriate research methodology needs to be adopted. It is observed that when there is an attempt to find the meaning of or to understand the experience of a given situation to a group of individuals (Kendra & Taplin 2004) then qualitative methodologies would be appropriate (Strauss & Corbin 1998, Symon & Cassell 1998) for collecting data and generating theory that is grounded in the data using Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Strauss & Corbin 1998). Thus, qualitative data collection techniques like interview, focus group discussion, open ended questionnaire may be appropriately used to elicit data from the employees regarding their expectation of the QWL attributes.

Analysis of qualitative data can be favourably undertaken by content analysis. Content analysis is a research methodology that recognises the importance of language in human cognition (Sapir 1944, Whorf 1956). This methodology assumes that a group of words reveal underlying themes, and that co-occurrences of keywords can be interpreted as reflecting to the association between underlying concepts (Huff 1990, Weber 1990). For these reasons, the content analysis method can be best used for deriving the dimensions and related attributes within each dimension. The end result of this process would be a logically compelling analysis that identifies the key constructs (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Thus, the qualitative data collection phase followed by appropriate content analysis would help in identifying the emerging themes. Appropriate dimensions of the QWL construct can be formulated by adopting this procedure, in a way, similar to that initiated by Parasuraman, et al. (1985), where they carried out exploratory focus group interviews to formulate the dimensions of service quality.

Model for Measuring QWL

To develop a tool for measuring QWL a deliberation on previous gap analysis tools are countered, which benefits the framework of the study. The basis of service quality is a perceived judgment arising from an evaluative process where customers compare their expectations as a standard of reference against which performance can be judged (Grönroos 1984). Parasuraman, et al. (1985) refined this concept to create the gap analysis model for the external customers. In their study, after identifying the dimensions of service quality, the SERVQUAL tool was employed for assessing the quality of service. SERVQUAL is a 22 item instrument for assessing perceived service quality by measuring the gap between customers' expectations and perceptions of service (Parasuraman, et al. 1988). This instrument asks customers to respond to each of the listed statements based on each dimension twice, once regarding quality specification (their expectation) and once about their perceived service (the actual experience). Each item in this instrument is ranked on a seven point Likert scale ('strongly disagree', to 'strongly agree').

The results of the gaps between expectations and experienced perceptions ranged from minus six to six. This range of scores represents the gap between the highest expectation and the lowest perception of a service element. The scale purportedly assessed the quality of service by measuring the gaps (P-E), or difference scores, between customer perceptions of actual service performance (P) and customer expectations (E) of how the service would be offered across five critical service dimensions. Gap analysis defines service quality in terms of the gap between what the service should provide and the customer's perception of what the service actually provides (Boulding, Kalra, Staelina & Zeithaml 1993). A key assumption is, that the smaller the gap, the higher the quality of service. The met unmet expectations gap provides underpinning for the SERVQUAL instrument to interpret service quality.

The SERVQUAL scale has been used in a plethora of service environments (e.g., Grönroos 1990, Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry 1990, Babakus & Mangold 1992). There is supporting evidence on the utility of gap analysis. For example, Brown and Schwartz (1989) employed a gap analysis tool to locate the discrepancies between provider and client evaluation of service, in the field of medicine. Pitt, Watson, and Kavan (1995) adapted the SERVQUAL

instrument and extended it to the information service function. Another useful employment of an adapted version of SERVQUAL in a service environment was demonstrated by Pearson and Armstrong (1995) when they evaluated the quality of service provided by the central personnel department of an university to several schools of the institution. Later, Soutar and McNeil (1996) used SERVQUAL to assess service quality using student expectations and perceptions of the services they received from universities. And more recently, Frost and Kumar (2000) utilised gap analysis to explore the internal service quality gaps that existed for frontline employees working for an international airline. Overall, the gap analysis employed in the SERVQUAL model has proven to be valid and reliable for measuring service quality (Wisniewski 2001). Thus, taking a cue from the SERVQUAL tool, and by appropriately extending and modifying them to suit a situation involving 'work life' as a product offered by the organisation to their internal customers, their employees, a befitting model operationally named 'WRKLFQUAL' (work life quality or quality of work life) is conceptualised and presented as Figure 1.

Figure 1 WRKLFQUAL : A 'Quality of Work Life' model
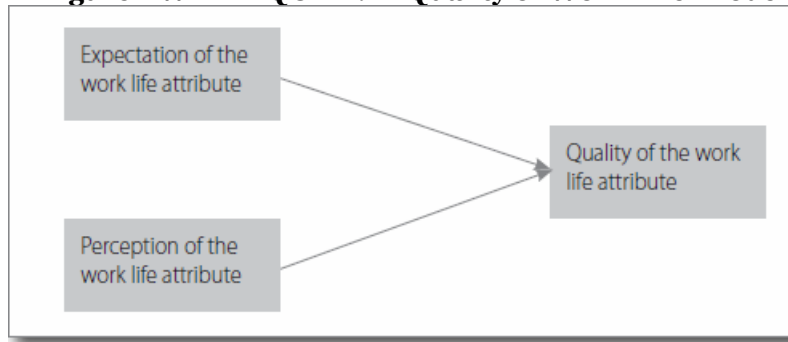
The WRKLFQUAL model (shown as Figure 1) draws attention to the difference between the expectation and perception on various QWL dimensions. The instrument for assessing the expectation and perception scores would carry statements pertaining to the attributes of the dimensions previously identified by the qualitative content analysis. Respondents are required to indicate their level of expectation of each attribute of the QWL dimension represented by a statement. The scale for this ranges from one (very low expectation) to five (very high expectation). The other section of the questionnaire would examine the respondent's perceptions of the QWL attribute experienced in the work place on a scale ranging from one (highly dissatisfied) to five (highly satisfied). The quality of a particular work life dimension (QD_i), depends on the total difference between the perception (P_{ij}) and expectation (E_{ij}) scores pertaining to the attributes corresponding to that particular dimension, as described in equation [1].

$$QD_i = \sum_{j=1}^{a(i)} (P_{ij} - E_{ij}) \qquad [1]$$

where j = 1, 2, ..., a(i), or, in other words, j represents the number of attributes for a particular dimension and i represents the number of dimension that may vary from 1 to m. On the one hand, for a particular dimension, if the expectation is higher than the perception, then the employee may be less satisfied with that QWL attribute (QD_i is negative). On the other hand, if the expectation with respect to certain QWL attribute is lower than the perception, then the employee would be more satisfied with the QWL feature (QD_i is positive). In the case of expectation and perception being equal, then the employee would be in a state of ambivalence in terms of the level of satisfaction (QD_i = 0). Furthermore, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry (1985, 1988, 1991) claimed that perceived service quality was the customer's global evaluation of the overall excellence or superiority of the service. Thus, the total QWL experienced by an employee can be measured as the statement shown as equation [2].

$$QWL = \sum_{i=1}^{m} (QD_i) \qquad [2]$$

The overall quality in the 'work life' can be attributed to the total score computed using WRKLFQUAL as represented in equation [2], for all the dimensions of QWL that was identified previously. This score demonstrates the overall gap between what the subject expects, and what the object stimuli offer is the origin of experienced satisfaction (Locke 1976, 1984).

DISCUSSION

Even though the term QWL has been widely used the conceptualisation of the phenomenon is still unclear. Additionally, the propensity of QWL to maintain a committed workforce that will be capable of delivering service

quality necessitates a deeper understanding of the QWL construct. Thus, the purpose of this paper was to elicit a theoretical framework, that would systematically assist in defining and measuring the QWL construct. The references to research literature on employee expectations, QWL, service quality measurement and the concept of 'employees as internal customers' aided the conceptualisation of this theoretical framework, operationally named WRKLFQUAL.

The WRKLFQUAL model is based on the SERVQUAL model, a valid and reliable tool used for measuring service quality. The SERVQUAL tool is modified to measure the work life quality in the present study. This theoretical exploratory conception outlines a framework for identifying employees' expectations and experiences of QWL. Studies have reiterated that employee expectations are relational constructs, and that it is crucial to measure employees' perceptions of HR practices (Wright, Gardner & Moynihan 2003). Consequently, the WRKLFQUAL model exemplifies the critical gap that may exist between the expectations and experienced perceptions of QWL among the employees. Furthermore, the theoretical framework proposed in this presentation would be appropriately applicable and crucial for a service organisation. It is acknowledged that a negative appraisal of the work environment may manifest itself in negative employee effects (Hoffman & Ingram 1992), which may be reflected in a lack of effort to serve customers (Testa 2001). Thus, the gap identified using WRKLFQUAL would give a clue regarding employees satisfaction/dissatisfaction with respect to the elements of the work environment.

CONCLUSION

In concurrence with the ascertained importance of an employee's role in the service exchange process, managers and researchers in the service industry have realised the significance of providing a good work life for their employees. However, work life standards need to be constituted and articulated in a way that is expected by the individuals enduring the workplace experience. Thus, the theoretical model developed in this manuscript would provide potentially useful means to: (a) identify and define the QWL construct, and (b) measure QWL. This work provides a foundational guide to utilise an individuals' expectations and experienced perceptions of work life attributes to comprehend the QWL concerning the employees.

The advance notions have both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective the presented material contributes to the QWL literature by providing a framework for defining the QWL construct. The empirical application of the WRKLFQUAL model has potential for practical implications for the human resource management (HRM) and human resource development (HRD) departments. For instance, findings from a field study based on the WRKLFQUAL tool are likely to provide empirical foundation for evaluating employees' satisfaction/dissatisfaction with various work life elements in an organisation. These findings would assist the HR practitioners in systematically assessing and improving the various work life elements offered by the organisation for their employees. In turn, such initiatives could lead to improved employee satisfaction and better service quality. Arguably, the pursuit of this line of research would greatly enhance the conceptualisation of the QWL construct relating to various service conditions.

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