

Fostering Better QWL: New Mantra For Corporate Success


HRM
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ABSTRACT

From practical point of view, the overriding organizational concern would certainly be continuous improvements in employee productivity, and thereby leading to higher profitability. But, such improvements in productivity can't be achieved overnight without focusing on employees' job satisfaction, job involvement and organizational commitment – the three primary work related attitudes, ultimately taking care of their productivity. But, for ensuring higher levels of these work attitudes, the organizations need to emphasize on the qualitative aspects of work life of their employees. Realizing this, more and more organizations are showing interest in fostering better Quality of Work Life (QWL) of employees who are ultimately taking care of the glooming bottom line. This may be because of expected linkage between employees perceiving a better QWL and feeling satisfied and displaying greater work motivation. Consequently, their job involvement would also be higher. The present Conceptual Paper, analyzing the plethora of available literature with a practical orientation, highlights this new mantra of achieving corporate success by fostering better QWL for the employees. It explains the need, relevance, significance and the resultant multitude benefits of fostering better QWL for employees of any organization.

1.0 INTRODUCTION:

It is well known that to ensure an organization's continued survival, growth and prosperity, every organization needs to have competent, committed and motivated people at all levels; as this people dimension can only be a long term competitive advantage for any organization. The same was signaled way back by Caudron (1994) also when he pointed out that the only thing that will maintain today's source of competitive advantage is high quality personnel instead of merely capital, technology or long-lived products. On the same line, acknowledging the ever increasing importance of the people dimension in today's organizations; Abdeen (2002) noted that the employees, in reality are the soft assets of an organization and they are certainly the hidden value of a company. Thus, the employees, being the basic pillars of any organization, must be treated as assets, and not as liabilities; they must be seen as investment, and not as expenditure; they must be acknowledged as the revenue/profit centre, and not as the cost/loss centre. Thus, it is rightly said that an organization is always known by the people it keeps; and the quality of an organization can never exceed the quality of the minds that make it.

From the organization's practical point of view, the overriding prime focus of attention would certainly be the continuous improvements in employee productivity, and thereby leading to higher profitability. But, such improvements in productivity of the employees can't be achieved overnight without focusing on their job satisfaction, job involvement and organizational commitment – the three primary work related attitudes, ultimately taking care of their productivity. And, for achieving higher levels of these three work attitudes, the organization needs to make the employees feel that they really care for them. The employees should be provided with all the things that they expect to have; and not the things that the organizational authorities feel they ought to have or what they can afford. So, the organizations must emphasize on the qualitative aspects of the work life of their employees. Further, one must understand the fact that in the globalized era, given the amount of time and energy people expend at their workplaces, it is important to ensure that they feel satisfied about their work life. Thus, if organizations are concerned about gaining a long-term competitive advantage through this people dimension, it seems inevitable that they take care of their employees; that too in right spirit, and not only in words or on paper.

So, if an organization focuses too much on enhancing productivity, ignoring/sidelining the quality of employees' working life, it will not achieve the desired aims/objectives. Levering (1988) also argued the same that the profit of successful organization is not to be achieved at the expense of its employees. Realizing this, since times immemorial, organizations have been focusing on how people feel, perceive and what they think about their working life; and it has always remained a major concern area.

Hence, in this cut-to-throat competitive era, with increased concern for economic well being of the organization, more and more organizations are showing concern about ensuring better Quality of Work Life of these real assets who are ultimately taking care of the bottom line. This may be because of expected linkage between employees perceiving better QWL and feeling satisfied and displaying greater work motivation. Consequently, their job involvement would also be higher.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF QWL:

It was only after the pioneering and path breaking findings of the famous "Hawthorne Experiment" during 1927-32 that organizations across the globe started realizing the importance of people in ensuring continued survival, stability and sustainable growth. The behavioural approach to management of people and paternalistic approach on the part of higher-ups were certainly the welcome signs. Everywhere, a new air was blowing, spreading the fresh fragrance of treating people as the basic building blocks and ideally the mind, body and soul of any sort of organization (Mayo, 1960). So, employees at the work place started gaining due recognition; but this new approach remained marginal. So, a lot of things were required to be accomplished to match two diverse ends – one is to humanize the work place and the other is to improve productivity, and consequently profitability. The notion of Quality of Work Life, popularly abbreviated as QWL, seems to be standing at the confluence of these two separate streams of thought, i.e., ensuring humanization of the work place without compromising productivity and profitability. QWL seems to be a balancing approach – trying to gain a balance between the needs of the employees and the needs of the organization. In a way, the goals of improved quality and greater employee involvement are mutually dependent; and the same has been the mainstay of the QWL movement (Rubinstein, 1980). While many other approaches to resolving productivity crisis are uni-dimensional in nature; QWL seems to be taking care of both – the employees' interest as well as the organizational interest (Martell & Tyson, 1983).

2.1 Meaning of Quality of Work Life (QWL):

Historically, the actual term 'quality of work(ing) life (QWL)' seems to have been coined in early 1970s. The term gained international status and wide scale recognition when the United Auto Workers and General Motors used it as the umbrella concept for the work reforms they would jointly sponsor (Beer et al., 1985). Since then, the term has become buzz word across corporate corridors and a matter of high concern in work organizations.

Cherns (1975) referred to QWL as a contemporary expression of something which was referred to as "humanization of the workplace", "workplace democracy", "work restructuring" or "job redesign".

Barbash (1976) treats QWL as a set of factors which can be

termed as the New Organizational Ethic.

Taylor (1977) defined the term 'quality of working life' as "the phenomenal experience of people at work". Guest (1979) referred to QWL as the measure of the quality of human experiences in the organization. Similarly, Walton (1980) opined that the term 'QWL' referred specifically to changes that enhanced human experience at work or, stated negatively, decreased the social and psychological costs incurred in producing goods and services.

As per the definition given by Davis (1983), Quality of Work Life is the quality of relationship between employees and the total working environment, with human dimensions added to the usual technical and economic considerations.

At the same time, Rao (2010) rightly suggested that QWL is a goal, as well as a process. So, organizations must understand that ensuring better QWL to employees is not a one-shot affair; it's a never ending ongoing process that demands continuous whole hearted efforts and support of the top beyond 'lip service'.

In general, QWL can be understood as a generic term for a range of techniques and processes that are designed to give employees greater discretion and control over their work. The basic idea behind any QWL initiative is that greater participation and involvement in decision making by employees will lead to improvements in satisfaction, motivation and commitment, which, in turn, might lead to positive improvements in productivity.

3.0 SIGNIFICANCE OF QWL:

It has been recognized since long that the work environment provided by the organization has a profound influence on the job attitudes of industrial employees (Ganguli, 1955), psychological health of its employees, and consequently the health of the organization itself; as life at work place is an integral part of total life space of an individual (Lawler III, Nadler & Cammann, 1980). Mumford (2006) also reported that the resourcefulness of the employees depends largely on the QWL experienced at the workplace. Moreover, the issue of QWL is getting increasing attention in the recent times not only due to increasing demands of today's business environment, but also of the family structure, which ultimately made it popular across all professions and fields (Akder, 2006).

In the present era also, the importance of work and the life associated with the workplace for an employee is certainly becoming increasingly significant; and hence organizations have to find ways to respond to the new realities of the workplace, that is, showing genuine concern for providing better QWL to its employees. The ever increasing popularity and concern for ensuring better QWL perhaps has been due to the realization that human resource is the most important asset which must be nurtured and developed (Saklani, 2010).

From a business perspective, QWL is important since there is evidence demonstrating that the nature of the work environment is related to satisfaction of employees and work related behaviours. Lambert (1991) also noted that job characteristics have a definite impact on the job satisfaction, job involvement, and intrinsic motivation of workers. While evaluating the bottom-line benefits, Hoque & Rahman, (1999) highlighted that QWL is important for ensuring better job performance, job satisfaction, labour turnover, labour-management relations and such other factors which play an important role in determining the overall well-being of an organization.

Besides better human resource outcomes, the organizational efforts to provide better QWL seem to also benefit business performance. While comparing the companies that were identified as the "best companies to work for" to the Standard and Poor's 100 companies, it was found that companies providing high QWL enjoy exceptional growth and profitability. By using samples from Standard & Poor's 500 companies, Lau (2000) found that QWL companies have a higher growth rate as measured by the five-year trends of sale growth and asset growth. Even in

the recent study of 475 managers of manufacturing industry, LooSee & Rose (2007) found that QWL is a good predictor of job performance and the predictive validity is significantly high. Considering all these, management always viewed QWL programmes as a way of reducing costs and improving productivity.

Further, improvement in QWL is a certain source of numerous gains not only for the employees, but also for the organization and the society at large. In this regard, White (1983) puts that QWL and its relationship to other aspects of life is important to individuals, to the organizations in which they work, and to society as a whole. Thus, in addition to the concerned employees, the society as a whole might gain from QWL, as certain social problems like unrest in society, mental and health problems, drug and alcohol abuse and inequitable distribution of national income can be effectively combated with better QWL (Hackman & Suttle, 1977).

The outcomes of improved QWL may vary ranging from improvement in working relationships (Keidel, 1982), improvement in organizational performance and product quality (Macy, 1982), improvement in employee commitment (Walton, 1980), improvement in work design (Goodman, 1982), improvement in organizational effectiveness (Sorensen & Hed, 1983), to serving as a foundation for a climate for providing better services to customers (Schneider & Bowen, 1985). Based on over 3 dozen separate surveys, QWL applications show a very strong record of intended outcomes like planned change in organizations (Sun, 1988).

High level of QWL has also been reported to be associated with high level of job satisfaction on many aspects of working life, commitment and performance (Wilcock & Wright, 1991). On the same line, QWL is also found to be positively affecting employees' work responses in terms of organizational identification, job satisfaction, job effort, job performance, intention to quit, organizational turnover, and personal alienation (Efraty & Sirgy, 1990).

Even organizations showing more concern regarding ensuring better QWL for their employees are found to be more effective in retaining their employees and achieving their goals (Hayes, et al., 2006). This may be due the fact that better QWL in terms of better job characteristics and work environments positively relate to organizational commitment, which in turn reduces the intention of turnover. Similar sort of findings were reported in the study of Huang, Lawler & Lei (2007), wherein QWL dimensions were found significantly and positively related to career commitment and affective commitment.

It is also found to be associated with reducing grievances, turnover, absenteeism, and industrial accidents (Guest, 1979; Macy, 1982). Ronchi & Wilkens (1977) also reported 16 percent reduction in absenteeism after QWL intervention, while Goodman (1982) reported that absenteeism, turnover and tardiness are strongly and positively affected in most QWL projects. Straw & Hecksher (1984) supports this finding with the fact that the base absentee rate declined in the post-QWL period.

Extensive review of the health and well-being literature confirms that people who experience higher levels of QWL are more likely to be experiencing higher levels of health and well-being (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Researches in the domains of industrial/organizational psychology also indicate that QWL is an important predictor of life satisfaction (Rice, Near & Hunt, 1980) and health and psychological well-being of employees (Martel & Dupuis, 2006). Improvements in QWL might lead to more positive feelings towards one's self (greater self esteem), towards one's job (improved job satisfaction and involvement), and towards the organization (stronger commitment to the organization's goals) (Saklani, 2003).

So, several researches on QWL invariably establish the fact that QWL is a significant determinant of various enviable organizational outcomes. Recently, Kaushik & Tonk (2008) reported that the benefits of enhanced QWL can be summarized as follows:

- Positive feelings towards one's job (improved job satisfaction and job involvement);
- Positive feelings towards oneself (improved self esteem);
- Positive feelings towards the organization (stronger commitment to the organization);
- Improved physical and psychological health;
- Greater growth and development of the individual as a person and as a productive member of the organization;
- Decreased absenteeism, turnover, and accidents; and
- Higher quality and quantity of output of goods and services.

Considering all these, the significance of fostering better QWL can be easily understood and perhaps realizing this only, QWL

has become a 'buzz' word across the corporate corridors.

4.0 CONCLUSION:

All said and done, we can conclude that there are no two opinions about the fact that employees perceiving better QWL are more likely to serve as the 'real backbones' for their employing organization; and help the organization to transcend new heights of success. With the growing concern for economic well-being of organizations in this ever competitive business landscape, we will see more and more corporate houses using this modern mantra of achieving corporate success, i.e., fostering better QWL for their employees.

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