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Understanding Total Quality Management in Context: Qualitative Research on Managers' Awareness of TQM Aspects in the Greek Service Industry

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Abstract

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Keywords

Managers, Total Quality Management, Soft and Hard Side of TQM, Greek Service Organizations, and In Depth Interviews

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Understanding Total Quality Management in Context: Qualitative Research on Managers' Awareness of TQM Aspects in the Greek Service Industry

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This study addresses managers' awareness and familiarity with Total Quality Management (TQM). Eighteen (18) semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with managers working in a variety of service organizations in Greece. The major argument of the study is that although the acronym TQM and some of its concepts and practices are known by a range of public and private sector managers, actual awareness of its "soft" side is often superficial, and managers have a relatively poor understanding of it. TQM is neither resisted nor directly absorbed by them, but they tend to see it from the technical point of view, being aware only of the importance of its "hard" aspects. Key Words: Managers, Total Quality Management, Soft and Hard Side of TQM, Greek Service Organizations, and In Depth Interviews

Introduction

Oakland (1989) argues that "TQM needs to gain ground rapidly and become a way of life in many organizations" (p. 15). However, Total Quality Management (TQM) cannot become a way of life in organizations immediately. Time is needed in order to integrate the appropriate quality principles and techniques into the culture of the organization (Goetsch & Davis, 1994). Time, however, is not the only resource that TQM requires. Human resources are equally important for TQM success. Therefore, it could be said that people's awareness of quality is central to TQM's purpose. For Crosby (1984), quality awareness is not just promoting quality within an organization, but it is also spreading information around. He also points out that quality awareness extends to the way in which managers act and talk about quality. Thus, quality awareness begins from management and spreads throughout the entire organization. Nevertheless, research evidence (Morgan & Murgatroyd, 1997) has shown that quality awareness is sometimes limited. Moreover, quality messages can be interpreted differently by managers working in different national business contexts. How can TQM become "a way of life" within an organization when managers are not really aware of it? Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the extent to which managers in a specific national context are aware of the TQM approach.

This article presents the results of a qualitative study that was carried out in the Greek service industry. It draws on eighteen (18) interviews that were conducted with managers working in the specific industry. The purpose for using qualitative techniques was to dig beneath the quantitative data of the study, examining the meaning that respondents gave to the concepts of TQM, and their views of its links with wider individual and organizational processes. Also, the qualitative research gives more evidence towards Greek managers' understanding of the "soft" side of TQM. The significance of this side of TQM to the Greek service industry is associated with two main reasons. Firstly, the majority of Greek service organizations concentrate in adopting "hard" management practices and systems towards their willingness to improve quality (Vouzas, 1997, 2004). A prime example is the wide adoption of ISO 9000 systems. Moreover, this is linked to the second reason of the significance of the "soft" aspect of TQM, which is the critique that TQM is accepted by many authors and management thinkers. This critique is very well-represented by a group of literature that is called the *Contingency* approach to TQM (Psychogios, 2005). This approach sees TQM from a more pragmatic point of view rather than arguing that TQM is either an ideal management model with universal application (Goetsch & Davis, 1994; Oakland, 1989) or a new and sophisticated method for work intensification/exploitation (Braverman, 1974; Delbridge, Turnbull, & Wilkinson, 1992; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992). The contingency approach suggests that TQM's implementation and its impact depend on the ability of organizations to adopt and apply its "soft" concepts and ideas (Psychogios). In other words, this approach does not see TQM negatively or positively, rather its view depends on several individual, organizational, and national contexts.

In this respect, the major argument of the article is that although the acronym of TQM and some of its concepts and practices are known by our interviewees, actual awareness of its "soft" side is often superficial and people have a relatively poor understanding of it. Managers tend to see TQM from a technical point of view, being aware only of the importance of its "hard" aspects.

This paper is organized in six sections. The first section of this paper examines the meaning of TQM. The second and the third sections analyze the "soft" and "hard" sides of TQM in more depth. The fourth part summarizes the literature on managers' awareness towards TQM approach. The next section describes the methodology used in the present study. The fifth section analytically presents and discusses the findings, whilst the final section comes up with major conclusions concerning the application of TQM in the Greek service industry.

The Meaning of TQM

A baseline technical definition of what TQM is all about has been given by the American Federal Office of Management Budget Circular (cited in Milakovich, 1990, p. 209), "TQM is a total organizational approach for meeting customer needs and expectations that involves all managers and employees in using quantitative methods to improve continuously the organisation's processes, products and services."

In addition, the American Federal Office of Management (cited in Morgan & Murgatroyd, 1997) defines TQM as,

...a total organizational approach for meeting customer needs and expectations that involves all managers and employees in using quantitative methods to improve continuously the organization's processes, products, and services. (p. 7)

According to the latter definition TQM is not merely a technical system. In fact, TQM is associated with the organisation itself, which is also a social system. Pike and Barnes (1996) argue that organizations are not only technical systems, but also human systems. In addition, Oakland (1993) states that TQM is an attempt to improve the whole organisation's competitiveness, effectiveness, and structure. For Dale (1999),

TQM is the mutual co-operation of everyone in an organisation and associated business processes to produce products and services, which meet and, hopefully, exceed the needs and expectations of customers. TQM is both a philosophy and a set of management guiding principles for managing an organisation. (p. 9)

From the above definitions, we can identify two important aspects that comprise TQM: management tools and techniques as well as management concepts and principles. The techniques refer to what has been referred to as the "hard" aspects of TQM, while the principles refer to the "soft" side.

The "Hard" Side of TQM

Deming (1986) has stated that "in God we trust - all others must use data." This statement emphasizes the importance of management techniques, tools, and systems that compose the "hard" side of TQM. Using the definition given by Goetsch and Davis (1994) management tools are means of "collecting and displaying information in ways to help the human brain grasp thoughts and ideas that, when applied to physical processes, cause the processes to yield better results" (p. 382). The quality management literature provides a wide range of quality management tools, techniques, and systems. Some of them are quite simple, while others are more complex. Table 1 shows the "hard" aspects of TQM most commonly found in Quality Management Literature.

Table 1

“Hard” TQM Practices Identified in Quality Management Literature

TQM Techniques, tools and systems
Statistical Process Control
ISO 9000 series
Pareto Analysis
Matrix Diagram
Histograms
Tree Decision Diagram
Critical Path Analysis
Fishbone or Ishakawa Diagram

The first TQM tool is the *Statistical Process Control* (SPC). SPC is a statistical method through which managers can control the production or the service delivery process, in order to make shifts attempting to improve it (Goetsch & Davis, 1994). As Dale and Oakland (1991) argue the basic objective of SPC is to reduce variation, which is inherent in many processes. SPC is one of the most well-known management methods.

The second technical aspect of TQM is the *ISO 9000 Series*. The International Standards Organization (ISO) 9000 is perhaps the most popular quality improvement system. It is an international set of documents widely known as standards written by a worldwide organization known as the ISO/Technical Committee 176 (Lamprecht, 1992). This set of standards ensures that a company has a specific quality improvement policy, which makes it more competitive in the market. This aspect of competitiveness is one that makes ISO 9000 very popular among Greek firms (Tsiotras & Gotzamani, 1996; Vouzas, 1997).

Another significant TQM tool is *Pareto Analysis*. It is a tool through which the management team can eliminate problems that occur in the operation processes (Bicheno, 1998). According to Dale (1999), “it is an extremely useful tool for considering a large volume of data in a manageable form...” (p. 296). A fourth technique is the *Matrix Diagram*. This is a tool that allows managers to identify, analyze, and rate the relationship between two or more variables, and in this way to encourage them to think in terms of relationships, their strengths, and any patterns (Besterfield, Besterfield-Michna, Besterfield, & Besterfield-Sacre, 1999).

Histograms are also useful TQM tools. Histograms graphically demonstrate the relative number of occurrences of a wide range of events (Bicheno, 1998). The most important causes are shown on the diagram and correcting actions take place. The Tree diagram, which is also known as systematic diagram method (Dale, 1999), is a tool through which someone can arrange targets, problems, or customer’s needs in a specific order (Bicheno).

The seventh technique is *critical path analysis* (CPA). This tool is associated with managing projects. It is related to TQM because project management is critical to the implementation of quality programs within an organization (Bicheno, 1998). CPA seeks to establish, through the use of a network of arrows or nodes, a logical order of activities in terms of time and importance for the completion of a project (Bicheno).

The final technique is one of the classic TQM tools called *fishbone* or *Ishakawa diagram*. The fishbone diagram is used to identify causes of a problem without using statistical methods (Bicheno, 1998; Goetsch & Davis, 1994). According to Goetsch and Davis, the fishbone diagram serves as an excellent reminder for the things that have to be done.

The “Soft” Side of TQM

The investigation of the “soft” side of TQM resulted in the identification of nine (9) key principles most commonly found in quality management literature (Table 2). The first of these principles is that TQM, in contrast to previous quality management initiatives, involves everyone in an organization. It is widely accepted that the increase of employees’ participation in the overall quality strategy brings an increased flow of information and knowledge, and contributes in the "distribution of intelligence" to the bottom of the organization for resolving problems (Powell, 1995). As Morgan and Murgatroyd (1997) note, the “total” element of TQM implies that every organizational member is involved in quality improvement processes. In addition, Oakland (1989) points out that “... [TQM] is essentially a way of organizing and involving the whole organization; every department, every activity, every single person at every level” (p. 14).

Table 2

“Soft” TQM Concepts Identified in Quality Management Literature

TQM Concepts
Total Employee Involvement
Continuous Improvement
Continuous Training
Teamwork
Empowerment
Top-management Commitment and Support
Democratic Management Style
Customer/Citizen Satisfaction
Culture Change

The second principle is associated with *continuous improvement*. According to TQM theory the best way to improve organizational output is to continually improve performance (Dale, 1996; Goetsch & Davis, 1994; Ho & Fung 1994). Quality improvement is not a task that has an end, as it is not static. The emphasis is on seeking improvement opportunities, not just holding the status quo. The focus is on planning, prevention, and anticipation (Dale, 1996). According to Oakland (1989), in order “to maintain a wave of interest in quality, it is necessary to develop generations of managers who...are dedicated to the pursuit of never-ending improvement in meeting external and internal customers needs” (p. 296). In addition, Juran (1988) notes that quality improvement requires the establishment of a quality council, which is the driver, to ensure that improvement is continuous and never-ending. Quality improvement can be achieved if an organization develops a management philosophy of continuous

improvement, and provides the necessary supporting organizational practices (Juran, 1993). Quality experts like Deming, Juran, Scholtes, and Crosby state that organizations must approach quality improvement from a long-term perspective: They also warn us that achieving some quality improvement can breed complacency (cited in Longenecker & Scazzero, 1996).

A third principle of TQM is related to the concept of *teamwork* (Conti & Kleiner, 1997; Hill, 1991; Lawler, 1994; Waldman, 1994; Wilkinson, Marchington, Goodman, & Ackers, 1992). Within the context of TQM, teamwork is an important outcome and a condition for continuous improvement (Coyle-Shapiro, 1997). Teams are generally viewed as more powerful and effective work entities than individuals. Teams, according to Lawler should be catholic, including employees from all the hierarchical levels, layers, and from all the departments of the enterprise. Scholtes (1992) argues that teams are needed for all organizations in order to make them work more flexibly and to develop mutual trust among members. In traditional management approaches each department needs to take care of its own problems. In a TQM context the whole organization needs to care about quality improvement and not just in a departmentalized way. In this respect, organizations need cross-functional work groups that will deal with inter-departmental management problems.

Empowering the employee is another important principle of TQM. According to Besterfield et al. (1999),

Empowerment is an environment in which people have the ability, the confidence, and the commitment to take the responsibility and ownership to improve the process and initiate the necessary steps to satisfy customer requirements within well-defined boundaries in order to achieve organizational values and goals. (p. 77)

Wilkinson (1998) argues that TQM offers ways in which empowerment of employees can support an organization's efforts not only in quality improvement, but in empowerment as well. Its approach places the responsibility for an organization's processes in the hands of those who know these processes best, and helps them to participate directly in the organization's mission or purpose. In particular, the plan-do-study-act cycle lies at the heart of the improvement process and represents the key to employee empowerment in that process.

According to Cleary (1996) while employers seek the commitment and empowerment of their employees, increased control over the work process is a cornerstone of TQM. Under TQM, continuous improvement is undertaken by those involved in a process and this introduces elements of bottom-up issue identification and problem solving. As a result, TQM may empower employees by delegating functions that were previously the preserve of more senior organizational members and as a result institutionalize participation on a permanent basis (Hill, 1991; Vouzas, 2004). Teams within organizations help employees become involved in issues that were previously top-management's responsibility (Morgan & Murgatroyd, 1997). Gatchalian (1997) argues that empowered employees know how to better incorporate their skills in day-to-day work tasks, and thus, they can exercise better judgment and a sense of responsibility.

The fifth basic concept of TQM is *continuous training*. Oakland (1989) believes that training is the single most significant component in trying to improve quality. He points out that “quality training must be continuous to meet not only changes in technology, but also changes involving the environment in which an organization operates, its structure, and perhaps most important of all the people who work there” (p. 263). According to Dale (1999), continuous training contributes to the establishment of “a common language throughout the business” (p. 11). A study by Mathews et al. (2001) found that “top managers and shop-floor workers receive more training in the areas of “soft” quality tools, quality awareness and customer focus than in statistical approaches. Middle managers and quality specialists receive most quality-related training”. Furthermore, effective TQM implementation calls for a training policy, which will be part of the overall quality strategy and aims at improving the necessary skills for continuous quality improvement (Brown, 1994; Marchington, Dale, & Wilkinson, 1993; Patel, 1993; Walley & Kowalski, 1992). According to Motwani, Frahm, & Kathawala (1994), the future of training on issues related to quality should emphasise better training evaluation processes. Organizations spend a lot of money on training and, thus, need to check whether training is meeting strategic goals. He also supports the view that training can be evaluated by specific indicators like customer satisfaction, market share, and employee performance.

The sixth element is *customer satisfaction*. In a total quality context customer satisfaction is the driving force for an organization to improve its performance (Moore, Hopkins, & Hopkins, 1998; Zairi, 2000). Juran (1993) argues that there are two different kinds of customers: the external (clients, government regulatory bodies, the public) that defines the quality of the service delivered and the internal (employees, different departments) that defines the quality of the processes associated with the delivering of services. Both external and internal customers have needs. A contemporary approach to quality such as TQM stresses the importance of satisfying those needs (Centre for the Evaluation of Public Policy and Practice, 1992). According to Rampersad (2001) “to realize customer satisfaction, everyone within the organization should consider continuous improvement as something normal” and urge organizations to make an inventory of customers’ data, customers’ complaints, and benchmarking in order to improve the customer orientation. Lagrosen (2001) states that although customer focus is revered, methods for developing a deeper understanding of the customers’ situation are not sufficiently integrated into TQM.

The above principles of TQM require top management commitment and support. Dale (1999) argues that top managers “have to take charge personally, lead the process, provide direction, exercise forceful leadership, including dealing with those employees who block improvement and maintain the impetus” (p. 10). In addition, Torrington and Hall (1998) argue “senior managers need to define the quality objectives of the organization to provide direction and clarity and to communicate these continually within the organization” (p. 300). According to Ahire and O’Shaughnessy (1998), companies with high top management commitment have the ability to produce high quality products, in contrast with firms with low top management support.

Beyond management’s commitment and support to TQM, an open and democratic/participative management style is identified. The importance of management style in TQM has been pointed out by Crosby (1979). Later authors argue in favor of a

more democratic management style. For example, Morgan and Murgatroyd (1997) note that the fundamental difference between TQM and other management approaches “is that it is more democratic” (p. 15). Additionally, Goetsch and Davis (1994) claim that the most appropriate style of management within a TQM context is the participative one, which “...involves soliciting input from empowered employees” (p. 224).

Finally, a supportive *organizational culture* is the common denominator of all the “soft” aspects of TQM (Atkinson, 1990; Coulson-Thomas, 1992; Grant, Shani, & Krishnan, 1994; Sousa-Poza, Nystrom, & Wiebe, 2001; Van Donk & Sanders, 1993). In other words, quality culture binds together all of aforementioned TQM concepts. As Hill (1991) points out it nurtures high-trust social relationships, and it develops a shared sense of membership as well as a belief that continuous improvement is for the good of everyone within the organisation. Similarly, Corbett and Rastrick (2000) argue that organizational culture affects and alters employees’ actions and perceptions of all aspects of their work in order to include quality. In addition, Sinclair and Collins (1994) support the view that culture acts as a force for cohesion in organizations and therefore can support or inhibit the process of change towards TQM application.

In conclusion we can argue that in exploring the concept of TQM we can identify two major components: the “what” and the “how” of TQM (Goetsch & Davis, 1994). As the component of “what” diverges in almost every single study and textbook, the “how” component distinguishes TQM from other quality management approaches and includes basic principles that are generally accepted. These principles and concepts comprise the “soft” side of the TQM approach (see Table 2). Nevertheless, as Wilkinson, Redman, & Snape (1993) argue, the TQM gurus focused on the “hard” side of TQM by emphasizing the importance of statistics and operations in the quality assurance process within organisations. In this respect, TQM is a whole management theory that includes both “hard” and “soft” aspects. The question that rises, however, is whether managers are equally aware of both sides of it.

Managers’ Awareness Towards TQM

Although, the above distinctive elements of the “soft” and “hard” side of TQM are well documented, little has been said about how one can assess managers’ awareness and understand them. The extant literature consists of a few qualitative studies that have examined managers’ attitudes towards TQM (Brennan, 1991; Hill, 1991, 1995; Tsiotras & Gotzamani, 1996). For example, Taylor (1995) found that awareness of ISO 9000 was very high among executives in his study in Northern Ireland. Almost nine out of ten executives (88%) had heard of the quality systems standard ISO 9000, whereas an earlier study revealed only 32% awareness. He also mentioned that activities related to quality were frequently misunderstood, and often quality was equated with the checking activity of quality control or interpreted in the context of product grade or excellence.

Particular interest on the awareness and perceptions of managers on TQM is related to middle management level (Dopson, Risk, & Stewart, 1992; Institute of Personnel Management, 1993; Vouzas, 1997; Wilkinson et al., 1993). Ishikawa (1985) considers middle managers to be the key people in quality management and the key players in breaking the status quo. He calls this layer of management “traffic policemen”.

He believes that middle managers are at the crossroads: They have to obtain crucial information and acquire the ability to make judgements based on a broad perspective.

Research has shown that even though middle managers want to participate in the early stages of TQM, top management has no trust in them (Vouzas, 1997). Wilkinson et al. (1993) argue that lack of commitment from middle management has been the case in nine out of ten organizations they studied. The study also suggested that the effect of TQM on middle managers was substantial; made their jobs more demanding; and emphasized team work, people management skills, and technical knowledge. Another study by Marchington et al. (1993) suggests that middle managers are concerned with a loss of authority or increased workload associated with TQM. Collard (1989), on the other hand, found that in order for middle managers to be role models in a TQM environment they need to upgrade their communication and presentation skills, skills for working with groups, and group leadership skills. Furthermore, middle managers' beliefs and attitudes regarding the quality approach to organizational change seemed to be more related to organizational context rather than the type of organization or the role of the middle manager (Collard, 1989; Hill, 1991, 1995; Ishikawa, 1985).

The majority of the latter studies were based on the assessment of managers' awareness towards a specific principle or practice of TQM like ISO 9000, teamwork, training, etc... However, this often resulted in missing the whole picture of TQM. Moreover, different individual perspectives make the measurement of the awareness of the two sides even more difficult. The variety of perspectives is derived from many factors such as age, educational background, and the level of managerial experience. The above factors are related to the human side of the organizations. On the other hand, there are factors closely related to the organization itself that alter the perspective of TQM, such as the size, years of existence, and the specific domain that they operate.

In conclusion, as the "hard" side of TQM includes a wide range of techniques, systems, and tools. The "soft" side is sometimes the missing link that makes the implementation of TQM paradigm less successful. In this respect, this paper seeks to analyze TQM in a national context in order to investigate in more depth its underlying assumptions of the "hard" and "soft" sides in contemporary Greek organizational life.

Research Methodology

Creswell (2003) argues that for an exploratory study the use of a qualitative approach is considered appropriate (Christy & Wood, 1999; Goodman, 1999). In addition, as Gilmore and Carson (1996) point out qualitative research methods are well suited for the nature of service industry. According to Creswell exploratory qualitative study means "that not much has been written about the topic or the population being studied, and the researcher seeks to listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas" (Creswell, p. 30). This is the case of the present study. More specifically, the aim of this qualitative study was to investigate four particular areas of TQM application in services industry: managers' awareness of the TQM, managers' understanding of the "hard" side of TQM, managers' understanding of the "soft" side of TQM, and the differences of public and private managers on TQM aspects. These issues cannot easily be explored through a survey or questionnaire.

For the purpose of this study, in depth interviews with managers were used as a data collection tool. This method reduces the “distance” between interviewer and interviewee (Johns & Lee-Ross, 1998). Palmerino (1999) points out that this method should be considered more often by researchers, since it provides more qualitative information, more depth, more representation, more efficiency, and more value. In addition, this type of interviewing reflected the exploratory nature of the study by exploring awareness of specific aspects of TQM as well as giving explanations why things happened. The “free” and open discussion with the interviewees on these issues resulted in two things. First, each interviewee had the opportunity to express his/her opinion in any way he/she wished. Second, this discussion provided researchers a better understanding of the subjects’ attitudes towards several issues.

For the in depth interviews, a simple semi-structured questionnaire was developed on the basis of the literature. The interview’s instrument covered the following general topics: personal information, managers’ role in the organizations, meaning of quality, approach to quality, TQM issues, and finally, general issues associated with management style, power, trust, communication, etc... Moreover, it needs to be pointed out that during the interview two lists, including the identified “soft” and “hard” TQM items from the quality management literature, were being demonstrated to interviewees, requiring their comments in order to identify their awareness and familiarity with both sides of TQM.

The sample of this study was purposeful and selected from a larger field study, which was a survey among 400 managers working in the Greek service industry. The sample of 400 managers was randomly drawn from the directories of the Greek Management Association (mainly private sector managers) as well as the Greek Administrative Chamber (mainly public sector managers), which are the most important management associations of the country. The target was to cover a wide range of different managers, working in various organizations in both sectors of employment.

A valid and reliable range of responses for the qualitative study was obtained by following two specific criteria in selecting interviewees. The first criterion refers to the managers themselves and it is related to their (1) age, (2) educational background, (3) the level of experience of each respondent represented by their years of work in the particular position, and (4) the functions that they employ (HR, operations, administration, accounting/auditing, engineering, etc). The second criterion was related to managers’ organizations and includes (1) the size of the organization (number of employees), (2) years of existence, (3) the domain that they operate (public-private), and (4) evidence (policies and procedures) towards quality improvement efforts.

Eighteen (18) managers working in a variety of private and public service organizations were interviewed. If we observe the profile of interview participants (see Appendix A) we can conclude that their demographic characteristics vary across age-groups, educational backgrounds, years of experience, and work specializations. This indicates a representative range of responses according to the criteria that have been set for the selection of the larger field study.

The in depth interviews took place in the period between March and April 2004. The researchers contacted the managers via telephone to schedule appointments (day and time) for the interview session. In addition, researchers explained the purpose of the research (Seidman, 1998). All interviews took place at the interviewees’ work places. Each interview lasted about 70 minutes. Throughout the discussions a professional tape

recorder was used, after the approval of the respondents, in order to avoid any ethical concerns and dilemmas (Malhotra & Peterson, 2001). The researchers also took hand written notes during the sessions. After all the interviews were completed, the discussions were transcribed, the data obtained from the interviews with the managers were coded, and then forwarded to the respective respondents for review and approval.

For the purpose of data analysis, open-ended answers were subjected to content analysis and close ended choice answers were straightforwardly tabulated (Priporas, Gatsoris, & Zacharis, 2005). Content analysis is “a thorough research technique which allows replicable and valid inferences from data to their context” (Krippendorff, 1980, p21). The first step in content analysis is to formulate a research question. In this study the main research question was, “Are managers in services enterprises aware of the TQM concepts?” In analyzing the data from the interviews the researchers followed the procedure given below.

1. Listening to the taped discussions and examining the hand written notes;
2. Delineating units of general meaning;
3. Delineating units of meaning relevant to the TQM principles;
4. Clustering units of relevant meaning again, according to the TQM practices; and
5. Determining themes from clusters of meaning, and identifying general and unique themes from the interviews.

Findings

A Four-Fold Framework of Analysis

In order to present and analyze the findings that emerged from the collected qualitative data, a four-fold analytical framework was used. This framework consists of four main areas of analytical interest. The first area is related to the level of managers' awareness with TQM and its significance in the modernization of organizational operations. The second area is related to the importance and use of the “hard” side of TQM that includes techniques, tools, and systems. On the other hand, the third area of interest is associated with the opposite TQM side; the “soft” one, which includes ideas, concepts, and human resource practices. Finally, the fourth area is related to the comparative interest among public and private sector managers, regarding their awareness and familiarity with TQM paradigm.

Managers' awareness of TQM in service organizations

All of our interviewees seemed to accept the fact that the Greek economy, in general, and management system, in particular, needs to be modernized. According to their responses, the modernization movement was mainly caused by the great demands of full EU membership as well as by increased international market competition. These two developments led companies and public bodies to give greater emphasis to quality improvement efforts. Therefore, the modernization process stressed the importance of quick and direct results of quality management for organizational effectiveness. The

interviewees supported the view that this caused the adoption of practical methods, which mainly focus on improved outcomes. A prime example of these kinds of methods is TQM. As our evidence indicates, the majority of our respondents understood quality improvement from the “scientific” or “expert” point of view. They relate quality improvement efforts primarily to the classical notion of organizational effectiveness, and to specific performance standards like ISO 9000. As they indicated, this is due to the accuracy of these quality improvement systems as well as their quick and, generally, effective implementation that led to an increased demand for such international awards. “... I believe that international performance standards are the most important guide to improving things. We need something specific in order to understand what to improve and in what way” (Quality assistant manager – Insurance services). “...Last year we were awarded with an ISO 9000. We were operating in increasingly competitive market and I think this award indicates how important is total quality to us” (Technical equipment manager – Health diagnostic center).

The last statement also indicates that the concept of total quality seems to be most favoured among the Greek service managers that participated in the research. Two reasons have been suggested by them. The first is associated with the fact that TQM has entered the organizational agenda in Greek service industry, becoming a fashionable management concept. This seems to be the message from several interviewees.

...Of course we know about it [TQM]. Actually, a lot of training programmes refer to it. Once, they [refers to the people in the upper management level] have called an expert on TQM to give a lecture on its advantages for banking services. Although, quality improvement is not my specialised area, I found it very interesting. (IT manager – Banking services)

...Two weeks ago I participated in a conference, which was called ‘TQM in The Public Sector’. I think this is strong evidence towards the fact that TQM is here [in public organizations] as well. (Special scientific advisor – Government department)

The second reason is related to the issue of the educational background of many people who graduated from *Anglo-Saxon* (UK or US) universities. This is associated with the fact that the total quality idea has been transferred mainly from these countries to Greece.

... I personally have an MBA degree from Southampton Business School and I have specialised in quality assurance. Actually, my dissertation was about TQM in financial services. Therefore, I believe that many of us [managers] know very much about it. (Quality manager – High technology services)

Moreover, the above interviewee indicates another important issue. It seems that in managers' minds the total quality idea is closely related to a technocratic procedure with specific guidelines, steps, and tools rather than to a more sophisticated management philosophy that also includes "soft" principles. Moreover, it is characteristic that almost all of our interviewees defined TQM by using either well-known phrases, such as "just in time", "right first time", or associating it with international standards. This is illustrated by the statements of our interviewees, who defined total quality improvement as, "...A process of following specific rules and procedures in delivering the right service the right time" (Assistant quality manager – Insurance services). "...An improvement of service delivery through improvement of specific procedures such as speed of service as well as through the reduction of the cost of services" (Product manager – Banking and financial services). "... [TQM means] to set targets, to analyze the cost-benefit of operations, to set performance evaluation measures and to evaluate the results all the time every time" (Audit coordinator – Tax service).

Managers' understanding of the "hard" side of TQM

In previous sections we have seen that the TQM paradigm has been categorised into two major sides: the "hard" and the "soft" one. The majority of our respondents agree with a group of the nine "soft" TQM principles. On the other hand, most of them are familiar with the majority of "hard" TQM practices. However, the qualitative evidence also questions the actual understanding and awareness of the "soft" side of TQM among the managers of our sample. It is a fact that TQM became a fashion in private firms as well as in public services. Thus, it is reasonable that many of our interviewees in our sample know what concepts and principles TQM theory includes. Nevertheless, the critical point is whether these concepts are really understood and applied by them.

...This firm promotes total quality improvement through specific techniques and methods applied by specialists that they work here. I do not think that the whole organisation needs to change [its culture] in order to improve some things that we know that they need improvement.
(Operations manager – Telecommunication services)

This statement illustrates not only managers' positive attitudes towards the "hard" side of TQM, but also the fact that in their minds "soft" TQM does not matter very much. TQM techniques and tools are seen of having great importance in people's minds. The analysis of their responses offers several arguments towards this conclusion.

The first argument is associated with the views of our interview participants, who see the quality message of achieving customers' requirements through the use of specific methods and tools as the core of the TQM initiative. Moreover, almost all of our interviewees argue in favour of an approach that is associated with technical aspects of management. Only HR managers seem to have a more open view recognising the importance of human capital in the TQM approach. For them TQM involves people and it is something more than a simple technique. "... [TQM means] to take advantage of all human resources within an organisation and to involve them in goal achievement" (HR

manager – Telecommunication services). "... [TQM] can be considered as a philosophy or new management logic rather than a technique. It is a new management sphere of organizational performance, which has a strong human-oriented side" (HR manager – Insurance services).

The second argument is related to the fact that, as mentioned above, TQM was brought to Greece by people that have been educated mainly in Anglo-Saxon countries. In other words, educational background plays a dominant role in whether managers are familiar with, and use, TQM techniques and tools. However, it does not seem to be important to whether managers are aware of "soft" TQM concepts. This finding supports the view that postgraduates can easily understand and apply "hard" TQM practices. On the other hand, their educational background does not seem to help them understand and apply "soft" TQM principles.

...Since I began to work in this department [the Quality department of the company] I have realised that someone is more likely to be employed by this Firm if you are a postgraduate degree holder and moreover if you have taken your degree from abroad. I think the combination of both makes someone a very strong candidate employee in every single enterprise. (Assistant quality manager – Insurance services)

A third argument in support of the importance of the "hard" side of TQM in managers' minds is associated with the favourable concept of "specialist" (in contrast to "generalist") among our participants. According to them, management techniques, tools, and systems are mainly related to the expert knowledge of people. This seems to be confirmed by almost all of the interviewees who commented on the list of techniques and systems which were shown to them. "...Go to the Quality department. Over there you can find a lot of experts to explain to you how these things are working here" (IT manager – Private hospital). "...I am not an expert on quality improvement. I think that you need to speak with someone who knows about these things" (Administrator – Government department).

...My job mainly is to recruit and select new employees. These techniques have nothing to do with my job here. I believe that most of them relate to the work of a specialist, who has studied the "hardcore" of management science. I think that the best you can do is to find a person like this to comment on whether we use such techniques. Go to the Quality department. (HR manager – Telecommunication services)

Furthermore, the quality "experts" interviewed, give a great degree of consideration to the "hard" aspects of TQM and a lower degree to the "soft" principles like employee empowerment and cultural change. It is characteristic that from their point of view, the latter is included in the knowledge field of a human resource "specialist"! Although they agree that the TQM paradigm includes a variety of "soft" concepts, they do not recognize these concepts as part of their day-to-day responsibility. "...I am here to contribute mainly to quality assurance rather than to motivate people do their jobs" (Assistant quality manager – Insurance services).

...I am familiar with the majority of quality improvement techniques. Actually, I have an MSc in Quality Control. However, I strongly believe that in changing the culture of the Firm we need the help of “specialists” like those working in Human Resource Department. (Operations manager – Telecommunication services)

Furthermore, another argument in favour of the importance of the “hard” side of TQM is related to the fact that according to our respondents this side is mainly significant for organizational performance and processes. Two points support this view. First, the majority of our interviewees, when asked to comment on the relation between “soft” concepts of TQM and organizational aspects (performance and process), turned the conversation to the “hard” side of TQM, arguing that management techniques are the most significant elements in improving major organizational processes and outcomes. Actually, two different reactions have been observed associated with managers’ attitudes towards the “hard” and the “soft” side of TQM and organizational outcomes. More specifically, some interviewees seem to confuse “hard” and “soft” aspects of TQM, emphasizing for example the practice of empowerment as a “technique” or a “procedure” that can be applied or implemented following specific steps. “...How can you empower employees in such an environment [he/she refers to the public organizational culture]? We do not have the ‘practical means’ of doing so” (Audit coordinator – Tax service).

...Private companies have the resources to implement empowerment programmes. Public management is rather different. I know very few public service departments where the employees are really looking forward to do better job. In public administration there is a lack of motivation. (Patient transaction manager-Public hospital)

Managers’ understanding of the “soft” side of TQM

The above evidence indicates that Greek managers understand the application of TQM mainly from its “hard” side. Their awareness of the importance of the “soft” side is vague. Although, they recognize that “soft” TQM concepts are essential to many organizational aspects, they still emphasize the importance of techniques and systems in achieving organizational quality outcomes. Such an emphasis can be mainly found in their statements about training, which is seen as a good method of improving the technical skills of people, and consequently promoting organizational trust and employees’ involvement, while improving organizational performance.

...In recent years various training programmes have been offered to civil servants in order to improve their skills and individual performance. I think that these programmes are the best – and maybe the only – policies towards TQM that the Government initiated. I need to admit though that sometimes [the training programmes] have great results, especially those concerning the use of a new software system or various management tools,

on the general performance of the organisation. (Special scientific advisor – Government department)

...Top-management would be much more reliable to me and to the majority of my colleagues when trying to introduce a new policy, if it offered specialised training courses in order firstly to convince us of its advantages and secondly to demonstrate to us practical ways of implementing it. (Assistant quality manager – Insurance services)

In addition, they view teamwork as a good work practice through which team-members can share their experiences, and consequently learn about new methods and techniques. According to several interviewees, learning through teamwork can promote organizational communication and motivate people to participate in teams.

...I remember that last year we needed to teach employees the ‘know-how’ of a new software management tool. We have decided to separate them in teams mixing those who knew more about it with those who knew less. Although we still have some little problems with some people, the majority of them learned to use the tool effectively. I observed this method contribute to the development of a good communication network [electronic mail], which many times help them deal with some particular problems. (HR manager – Telecommunication services)

In other words, there are some managers who seem to recognize the advantages of the awareness of “soft” TQM concepts, but these are seen as complementing “hard” management techniques and systems that are central to improving organizational processes and outcomes. This perception leads us to the second point of our argument in favour of the importance of the “hard” side of TQM on organizational aspects. “Soft” TQM concepts are presented as ideal aspects of an ideal management paradigm. Therefore, someone who would respond negatively to them can hardly be found. Also, the people who have the most positive views about these “soft” TQM concepts also tend to have positive views about organizational processes and outcomes. These people are more favourable in seeing a linkage between “soft” TQM concepts and organizational outcomes. Nevertheless, according to them, TQM techniques will be those that will affect, positively or negatively, organizational aspects.

Private versus public sector managers’ awareness of TQM aspects

A further confirmation of the greater importance of the “hard” side of TQM can be given if we consider separately the situation in public and private services. First, the majority of both public and private sector managers agree with the “soft” aspects of TQM. A further analysis of the qualitative data though can show us to what extent managers’ are really aware of the “soft” side of TQM. The qualitative data suggest that public as well as private sector managers doubt the application of the “soft” TQM ideas in their organizations. Both of them had the same negative responses when we asked them to evaluate the importance of these aspects for their organizations.

...Changing the culture of a group of people or of an organisation is not always an easy job. Therefore, I strongly believe that if we would like to improve our operations quickly as well as effectively, we need to forget about culture and concentrate upon more realistic targets. (Audit manager – Banking services)

...All these principles are very good in theory. They more likely fit in an ideal organisation. But public organizations are not ideal in management terms. We have much more serious problems that we need to deal with than, for example, to try to convince all the personnel to be involved in decision-making process. I believe that more practical methods would have much better application and result. (Budget control administrator – Social security agency)

Although the fact that awareness and use of TQM techniques and tools are lower in the public sector, according to many of our interview participants, it is reasonable insofar as the use of most management practices was, and in some cases is still, very limited in public services. In contrast, according to participants from the private industry, many companies have incorporated TQM or similar practices for many years in their operations. However, it seems that during the last years similar practices have entered public organizations, despite the fact that public managers are not so familiar with them. Here is the comment of a public manager when she was shown a list of techniques and asked her to confirm whether she and her colleagues know and/or use these tools.

...Although I am not so much familiar with many of these [she refers to the list of TQM techniques] and we have never used them here, I do admit that it would be good for our practices to know at least the most important of them. Let's hope that the next generation of employees will be much more familiar with these. (Administrator – Local government)

One last point concerns the way that private and public managers see the effectiveness of TQM in the Greek service industry. Private sector participants see the implementation of the TQM paradigm in a more positive way than public sector ones. Moreover, they see TQM as having some potential to reduce bureaucratic formalities, to enhance employees' involvement in decision-making process, and to promote personal career development. In contrast, public managers that have participated in interviews have a more pessimistic view about TQM implications. This is related, according to our interviewees, to the existence of a widely held pessimism within the public organizational culture.

...According to my experience, it is not easy to change the situation in public services. If they [he refers to the whole work force of public services] do not want to adopt and apply new practices in their jobs, then it is very difficult to convince them doing so. As an old politician used to say *if someone wants to change the situation in public administration he*

needs first to 'change' all the civil servants: Dismiss them all and then come to discuss new revolutionary work practices. (Special scientific advisor – Government department)

Discussion and Conclusions

The above findings indicate that the concept of total quality seems to be most favoured among the Greek service managers that participated in the research. There are two reasons that explain this favoured attitude of Greek managers. The first is that TQM has entered the organizational agenda in Greek service industry and become a fashionable management concept. Also, the educational background seems to be the second reason. The majority of managers that are in favour of TQM are postgraduate degree holders and they have been graduated mainly from Anglo-Saxon universities. Those that have been educated (MSc/MA/MBA and/or PhD) in foreign countries seem to be much more familiar with “hard” aspects of TQM than those have been educated in Greek universities. Most of these people have good educational background (mainly at the postgraduate level) and sometimes working experience taken in countries like UK and US. When they returned to Greece they try to apply what they learned and experienced abroad (Papalexandris, 1992; Papalexandris & Nikandrou, 2000). Most of the time, these individuals operate as “change agents,” bringing a lot of management practices and concepts to Greek organizational environments. This results in much more emphasis on the technical side of management than on the “soft” one. In other words, we can argue that postgraduates can easily understand and apply TQM practices. In contrast, this educational level does not seem to positively contribute to the understanding and application of “soft” TQM principles. The most plausible explanation is associated with the fact that “soft” management concepts can more easily be accepted by everyone without any particular educational background, but its actual application is more difficult as far as it requires mutual understanding from many people.

This argument seems to be further supported by our findings and especially by our respondents' view of TQM as a scientific and systematic procedure. Moreover, the qualitative evidence also questions the actual understanding and awareness of the “soft” side of TQM among the managers of our sample. The evidence suggests that Greek managers are far from being fully aware of “soft” TQM principles, and, consequently, apply them in their day-to-day work. In Greek private and public organizations the acronym of TQM is not very much related, in their minds, to “soft” management aspects (like cultural change, empowerment, and involvement), but more with “hard” management techniques and practices.

Furthermore, the importance of the “hard” side of TQM in managers' minds is associated with the favourable concept of “specialist” (in contrast to “generalist”). The work culture in Greece promotes the concept of “specialist” (Bourantas, Anagnostelis, Mantes, & Kefalas, 1990; Papalexandris, 1992; Papalexandris & Nikandrou, 2000). Management techniques, tools, and systems are mainly related to the expert knowledge of people. In their minds, the notion of expert is associated with someone who knows and applies “hard” management practices rather than “soft” and human related concepts. The quality improvement effort is seen as a job of experts, who mainly work in the relevant business departments or units. Moreover, the people working in these departments seem

to acknowledge themselves as “experts” or “specialists” in quality improvement policies. Therefore, the concept of “specialist” seems to be well established within the Greek management culture. The majority of managers try to be “specialists” in the things that they are dealing with, and usually they have studied, rather than “generalists” dealing with a wide range of responsibilities in their day-to-day work.

Moreover, the evidence does not suggest only that in managers’ minds “soft” TQM principles are not of much importance, but that “hard” TQM is seen as being critical for both sectors of employment. However, it seems that TQM concepts and techniques have been much more well-introduced in private industry rather than in public one. An explanation is related to a strong belief shared among civil servants that public bureaucratic pathologies cannot be easily overcome. In other words, within public services there is a well-established culture that inhibits any substantial attempt to restructure and reform the public management system (Makridimitris & Michalopoulos, 2000; Michalopoulos, 2002; Michalopoulos & Psychogios, 2003). Nevertheless, the last decade saw many policies aimed at towards public administration reform (Department of Internal Affairs, Public Administration and Decentralisation, 1998; Makridimitris, 2001; Michalopoulos, 2001, 2002; Michalopoulos & Psychogios, 2003; National Bank of Greece, 1998). One of them is the introduction of management techniques taken mainly from the private domain. Also, it is a fact that many civil servants have realised the need for the introduction of “hard” management practices within public organizations (Michalopoulos & Psychogios).

The overall conclusion of this study is that despite managers’ awareness of “soft” TQM concepts and ideas, their level of understanding and knowledge towards these concepts is superficial. Without any doubt TQM has become a substantial issue on the Greek managerial agenda. Nevertheless, Greek managers have to undertake many steps towards the TQM approach before it could be said to be a core organizing principle. Moreover, there is evidence that TQM has affected Greek managers’ perceptions on several aspects of their day-to-day work. However, this effect came mainly from their familiarity with “hard” management practices rather than from their awareness of “soft” notions. This fact suggests that managers hold a realistic view of TQM. According to their view, although the “soft” side of TQM is something “good” and useful in their minds, it has little to do with organizational reality. The one that really matters is the “hard” side.

From our analysis, we can argue that TQM, as a whole new management philosophy with a set of concepts and tools, has started to enter the consciousness of managers in Greek service organizations. We can also argue that there is no particular opposition on the adoption of TQM. Most of the people seem to accept it and tend to see it as part of particular policies attempting to modernize the Greek management system. Nevertheless, the TQM paradigm has not cut very deep into service organizations in general and managers in particular. It has not yet become a driving force. Managers see TQM from a more pragmatic view insofar as, firstly, they focus on the importance of the “hard” side of it and, secondly, they hold a sceptical approach to the actual implications and effectiveness of several “soft” ideas like empowerment and involvement.

Bearing that in mind, we can suggest a variety of scenarios concerning the application of TQM in the Greek business context. A pessimistic scenario would be the rejection of TQM. In the past there have been many examples of rejection of practices

adopting from other business systems (Makridimitris & Michalopoulos, 2000). The special features of the Greek business culture might prove to be an obstacle to the implementation of TQM, owing to system's distinctness from Anglo-Saxon ones. This scenario can be further supported if we consider the research evidence of Vernon and Rees (2001). According to their study several special characteristics of national political economies continue to count even when globalization presses strongly to undermine them. In other words, special features of the nature of the Greek system may strongly resist the adoption of TQM. On the other hand, an optimistic scenario would suggest that the pressure of globalization of the economy and international competition could lead to the dominance of the modernization agenda. This would mean a continuous adoption of modern management approaches such as TQM that have been applied in other business systems. It would also mean a pressure on the system to implement approaches that are still relatively novel.

The study's view however, suggests that a contingency scenario is more likely to occur. According to this scenario, TQM has some potential for successful implementation in Greek organizations as far as it can be adapted to the Greek management culture. This scenario is even stronger if we consider the fact that "quality mania" has found considerable support from many ministers as a new method of improvement in the Greek civil service. Similarly there are many voices among senior managers and business owners that are keen on TQM.

With respect to similar studies, the present one has expanded the academic dialogue on the application of TQM in other than Anglo-Saxon business systems, from which it emerged and developed. However, there are some limitations of this study that should be addressed. Firstly, the particular sample of managers was selected from the service sector. An additional sample with managers from manufacturing or other sectors would give a more clear view of the TQM awareness in the Greek business system. Secondly, although the number of participants was valid for the purposes of this study, a wider number of participants would strengthen the current findings.

Additional qualitative research should be developed in other business environments, attempting to investigate the implementation of TQM. In other words, what is now needed is to develop the analysis of the changing human side of organizations. Whether specific management approaches can contribute to system change needs to be seen. Advancing Wilkinson and Willmott's (1995) thoughts whether TQM can really promote concepts like employee empowerment and involvement in different national contexts "...must remain an open question" (p. 17). For example, have specific features of the Greek management culture, such as the authoritarian style, been affected by such approaches? TQM may have begun to encourage these changes.

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Appendix A

Profile of Interview Participants

Public Sector					
Job Title	Organization	Gender	Age Group	Education*	Experience**
Special Scientific Advisor	Government Department	Male	30-39	PhD in Administrative Science (Greece)	8 years
Administrator	Government Department	Female	40-39	MSc in Public Policy and Public Finance (Greece)	12 years
Administrator	Local Government	Female	30-39	BA in Politics (Greece)	9 years
Audit Coordinator	Tax Service	Female	30-49	BSc in Economics (Greece)	11 years
HR Manager	Public Enterprise	Male	50-59	BSc in Economics (Greece)	13 years
Budget Control Administrator	Social Security Agency	Male	40-49	BSc in Economics (Greece)	9 years
Patient Transaction Manager	NHS Hospital	Female	50-59	BA in Law (Greece)	10 years
Product Manager	Public Bank	Male	20-29	BSc in Accounting (Greece)	7 years
Private Sector					
Job Title	Organization	Gender	Age	Education*	Experience**
Quality Manager	High Technology Services	Male	20-29	MSc in Quality Assurance (UK)	5 years
Operations Manager	Telecommunications	Male	20-29	MBA (US)	6 years

	Services				
Assistant Quality Manager	Insurance Services	Female	30-39	BSc in Economics (Greece)	7 years
HR Manager	Telecommunication Services	Male	50-59	MBA (Greece)	12 years
HR Manager	Insurance Services	Male	20-29	MA in HRM (UK)	5 years
IT Manager	Banking Services	Female	40-49	MSc in Business Studies (UK)	8 years
IT Manager	Private Hospital	Female	30-39	BSc in Business Administration (Greece)	6 years
Audit Manager	Banking Services	Male	30-39	MSc in Accounting (UK)	7 years
Product Manager	Banking and Financial Services	Male	50-59	BSc in Economics (Greece)	11 years
Technical Equipment Manager	Health Diagnostic Center	Male	40-49	BSc in Mechanical Engineering (Greece)	9 years

* It is the higher education level

** Experience in the present position

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