An Investigation into the Challenges of Implementing the EFQM Excellence Model

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ABSTRACT

In recent times there has been an increasing trend, among organisations, towards the adoption of business excellence models (i.e. EFQM, Malcolm Baldrige, and Deming) as a strategic approach to drive improvements. This research takes a divergent-empirical perspective from the narrow view of current studies by investigating the challenges that organisations face when implementing the EFQM model. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a group of five EFQM experts that comprised quality management consultants and business managers. Primary data from participants was analysed using the qualitative content analysis approach, to collect, organise and extract key contents from the interview data. The results of the study suggest that, like with most TQM initiatives, the challenges that organisations face when implementing the EFQM model include factors such as: lack of viable leadership and top management support, lack of adequate planning, lack of skills, resources intensity, closed vertical communication, focus on short-term objectives (quick results), lack of employee commitment, and organisational structure, size and sector. The results of this empirical study can help managers and business excellence professionals understand the barriers and challenges that can impede the effective implementation of the EFQM model. It is only by understanding these challenges that best practises can be developed in order to mitigate them.

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality in today's global business environment has become a significant source of competitive advantage for organisations. Intense competition from abroad is resulting in a change in approach when it comes to doing business [1]. The mission and vision of business entities may differ, but the objective of providing customer satisfaction through superior quality remains absolute between all business entities. The concept of quality management has been a major source of profitability and competitive advantage [2]. This suggests that quality is an important concept that has a strong correlation with organisational performance.

In recent times, the significance of quality has been remarked through recognition and quality awards. This is also supported by Oakland [3], who suggests that organisations are placing emphasis on quality through business excellence models (BEMs), such as the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM), in order to measure their performance against world-class standards. In this context, BEMs are quality–management frameworks based on organisational performance criteria that originated as a result of the evolution of Total Quality Management (TQM) principles [4]. Wade [5] elaborates further by indicating that BEMs can be described as TQM, as they are both based on the same constructs. In particular, Watson [6] suggests that the EFQM excellence model finds its foundation in the concepts of TQM while Hendricks and Singhal [7] also argue that an award or recognition based on the EFQM criteria can serve as an effective way to measure the implementation of TQM in an organisation. Hendricks and Singhal's [7] argument is also supported by Santos-Vijande and Alvarez-Gonzalez [8], who advocate that the EFQM model should be used as a TQM benchmark. This suggests that TQM and BEMs such as the EFQM can be utilised interchangeably.

Several research lines can be indentified from the current literature in the field of EFQM. One of these lines pays attention to the benefit of the model. For instance, Hendricks and Singhal [7], Douglas and Judge [9], and

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Wilson and Collier [10] examined the EFQM model's impact on organisational performance in relation to stock and financial value increments, customer satisfaction, reduced employee turnover, and overall organisational growth. Other research lines related to the EFQM model have focused on performance management, its paradigm, and on leadership and management [11]. Joiner [12] suggests that current studies within the field of the EFQM model are focussed on two views, namely positive and negative. The former positively links the EFQM model with organisational performance [7, 13], whilst the latter does the same but in a negative manner [14, 15].

However, although this evidence suggests that the EFQM model has been the subject of extensive research, there is a shortage of research within this subject area that takes a critical view regarding its implementation. This argument is supported by Kim et al. [11] in their bid to identify trends and propose future works by conducting a comprehensive study on various EFQM research lines. In addition, Joiner [12] suggests that there is a desperate need for empirical studies about the EFQM model that take a contingency theory approach. Contingency theory approach here deals with the "no one best way approach" dictum [12]. An example of a contingency approach here may deal with factors affecting the implementation of TQM initiatives such as the EFQM model. Thus, the aim of this paper is to deviate from the current narrow approach seen in the EFQM literature by taking a divergent view, through an investigation into the challenges that organisations face when implementing the EFQM model.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON BUSINESS EXCELLENCE (BE) AND THE EFQM MODEL

The concept of managing for quality can be traced as far back as medieval times. Since then, it has evolved through several phases that have become part of the adaptation of this concept to the current needs of organisations and their markets. The evolution that the concept of quality management has gone through is illustrated by Figure 1.

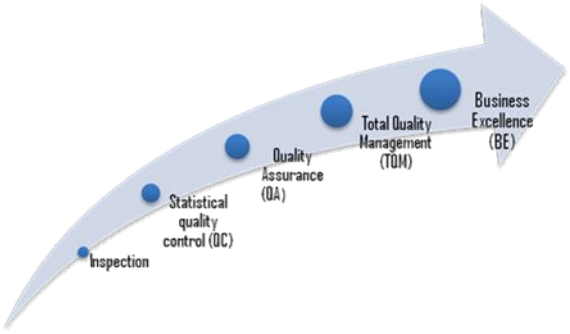

Figure 1. Evolution of quality (Dale et al. [16]).

The problems associated with the implementation and high failure rate of TQM [17] in the penultimate stage of the quality evolution illustrated in Figure 1 led to the proposal of the concept of Business Excellence (BE). Peters [18] suggested that quality was substituted with BE because the former was seen to be old fashioned. Adebanjo and Mann [19] define BE as "excellence in strategies, business practices and stakeholder-related performance results that have been validated by assessments using business excellence models that are proven". Since the introduction of the Deming Prize in 1951, a significant number of other awards have surfaced with the aim of improving the competitiveness of firms in various countries [3]. Mohammad et al. [20] suggest that BE models have been adopted in over 83 countries for Quality/BE awards. Of all BEM awards, the EFQM (Europe), Deming (Japan) and the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence (US) models can be considered the most widely used.

2.1. THE EFQM BUSINESS EXCELLENCE MODEL

In particular, the EFQM model has been of significant benefit to organisations that are passionate about improving their value proposition and growth [21]. This is because it helps businesses to identify and subsequently improve on gaps within their management systems. The EFQM is a non-prescriptive model that acts as a signpost for organisations that want to achieve excellence. The EFQM model comprises nine criteria and 32 sub-criteria, which are divided into two categories, namely enablers (5 criteria/24 sub-criteria) and results (4 criteria/8 sub-criteria), see Figure 2. The enablers can be described as what the organisation does while the results deal with what it achieves [22]. If an organisation wants to change the results it obtains, it then needs to change the way in which it is managed. This suggests that if an organisation is to achieve its espoused results, its leadership will have to drive its policy and strategy, people, partnerships & resources while improving the organisation's processes, products and/or services [23].

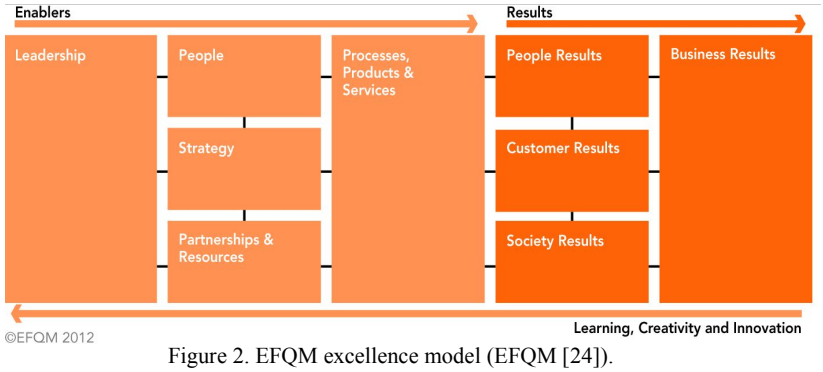

Figure 2. EFQM excellence model (EFQM [24]).

The EFQM model has been successfully employed by thousands of organisations around the world, especially in Europe, to help improve their management systems and performance [25]. This suggests that in these instances, the model has been effectively deployed within an organisation. However, even in successful cases, companies may have faced implementation barriers that may have posed a challenge for the organisation and the model's success. Since the EFQM model provides a complete framework that acts as a reference point for business entities that want to implement TQM [26, 27], it is possible to assume that the barriers faced during the implementation of TQM are the same, or very similar, to those found when the EFQM model is deployed. Based on the academic literature, Table 1 presents the most commonly faced barriers during the implementation of TQM. These have been taken as a reference in this research to investigate the challenges of implementing the EFQM business excellence model.

Table 1. TQM implementation challenges according to the literature.

Challenge	Reference
Poor plan for TQM implementation	[28, 29]
Leadership style of CEO or General Manager	[28]
Rigid organisational structure and hierarchy	[30]
Lack of leadership support and commitment	[29]
Limited resources to implement TQM	[30]
Emphasis on short term TQM goals	[31]
Resistance to change	[28, 29, 32]
Short-term TQM goals	[28, 29, 32]
Lack of employee commitment	[31]
Ineffective communication	[29]
Bureaucratic processes	[33]
Unclear vision and goals	[28]
Lack of empowerment	[30, 34]
Lack of departmental cooperation	[30]
Problems with organisational culture	[28]
Lack of appropriate skills to implement TQM	[28, 30]
Fear of reprisal by lower management from senior management	[34, 35]

3. Research Methodology

In Section 1 it was established that there is a shortage of empirical literature when it comes to the barriers that organisations face when implementing the EFQM model. For this reason, it was important to obtain an in depth expert opinion (i.e. qualitative) from consultants who had aided organisations implementing this BE model. To do this, the empirical data for this research was collected with the use of qualitative semi-structured interviews. Morgan [36] exerted that data collected from qualitative research is more objective and unbiased than quantitative data. Smith [37] also makes an argument in support of a qualitative research by suggesting that quantitative research can provide data that is misleading and has very little to do with human behaviour. Since Table 1 shows that the barriers to implementing TQM initiatives revolve around people, it is only logical to employ the use of a data collection method that is mainly suited for social analysis. In this context, semi-structured qualitative interviews allowed the achievement of a deeper understanding of the different variables that hinder the effective implementation of the EFQM model in organisations. In addition, this method offered interviewees the opportunity to freely express their opinions on what the challenges are when it comes to implementing the EFQM model, and in this way, capture verbal and non-verbal behaviours that are not normally captured with the use of other communication methods.

The interviewees consisted of a mixture of consultants and managers who had used the EFQM model in their organisations and/or consultancy projects. Table 2 presents information about the consultants and managers (i.e. respondents) who took part in this study. Due to confidentiality and for ethical reasons, the names of the participants are not disclosed. Participants are thus referred as Participant A, B, C, D and E.

Table 2. Participants information.

Participant	Position	Company	Experience
A	President	Business Excellence Consulting LLC (USA)	• 17 years • BE consultancy owner • Helps organisations implement the MBNQA in USA, and the EFQM in Europe • BE author • Assessor on the Northern Ireland Quality Award (EFQM) • Recipient of the ASQ Feigenbaum medal
B	Senior Partner	TQMI Ltd. (UK)	• 19 years of experience in helping organisations implement TQM • BE consultant and trainer
C	Director	Ashfield Consulting Ltd. (UK)	• 22 years • Visiting lecturer at the University of Warwick • Helps organisations within the UK's rail sector to carry out BE assessments in order to have their rail franchise license renewed
D	Head of Procurement and Commercial Development	London Probation Trust (UK)	• 15 years • He was instrumental in helping the public sector organisation gain the EFQM R4E badge
E	BE Specialist	Giad (GID) Industrial Group (Sudan)	• 5 years of experience • BE specialist • Entrusted with the responsibility of helping the GID to implement EFQM and was instrumental in helping GID gain the ISO 9000 certification

Based on the literature review and the TQM implementation challenges presented in Table 1, eight main issues that were identified as possible barriers for the effective implementation of the EFQM model were explored. These were: (1) Lack of viable leadership and top management commitment; (2) Poor plan for EFQM deployment; (3) Lack of appropriate skills to use the model; (4) Organisational structure, size and sector; (5) Lack of effective vertical communication; (6) Too resource intensive; (7) Emphasis on short-term objectives; (8) Lack of employee commitment.

In order to increase the reliability of the result obtained from the interviews, the questions were sent to the interviewees in advance; this gave them enough time to reflect on their experiences and respond effectively. Two of the five interviews were face-to-face and audio-recorded, whilst one was conducted on Skype (video chat), and two were conducted over the telephone. Debriefing sessions were also conducted immediately after each interview. The debriefing session allowed the clarification of themes from the interviews that were vague to the main researcher. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, some of the interviews were approximately 50 minutes long, and included content that was not relevant to the research topic. In order to organise and select relevant data, the main researcher had to listen to the recorded interviews repeatedly, in conjunction with the continuous review of the transcribed and interview notes.

Saunders et al. [38] suggest that when it comes to the analysis of qualitative research data, there is not a universalistic approach. The researchers were aware of computer aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVIVO; however, the authors decided to utilise the manual *content analysis* method. The employment in this study of a manual qualitative analysis method such as *content analysis* helped to facilitate learning and the data analysis process as this method takes into perspective the theoretical background of the research. In other words, a researcher can sift through data, extract relevant data and draw inferences from it. Webb [39] argues that a qualitative data analysis provides an aura of intimacy with the data derived from the semi-structured interviews. As a result, the researchers not only became better acquainted with the data than software would have offered but also had the opportunity to reflect on it, which allowed its clear interpretation. In order to analyse the collected data, the main researcher transcribed the audio recordings from the face-to-face interviews verbatim. During the transcription process, the main researcher numbered each paragraph in a legible way. In order to derive relevant information (i.e. coding) from the extensive data, the authors sifted through the

audio-recorded data, written notes from the face-to-face interviews, telephone and Skype chats. Coding in this context was a process whereby data was obtained, reduced and organised in order to allow for the ease of presentation and interpretation [40]. Derived relevant data was then evaluated against the eight pre-determined possible barriers faced during the implementation of the EFQM model.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. LACK OF VIABLE LEADERSHIP AND TOP MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

From the literature it was clear that one of the key barriers to the effective implementation of TQM initiatives within organisations is a lack of viable leadership and top management support [28, 29]. Participants' responses to the question on leadership and top management commitment suggest that they have had difficulties in helping organisations to implement the EFQM due to a lack of support from leaders and top managers. This is an indication that, like other TQM initiatives such as Six Sigma and Lean Six Sigma, a lack of viable leadership commitment to the implementation of the EFQM model will act as a barrier to its implementation. This also suggests that, in order to stand a chance of success, the implementation of the EFQM model has to be led from the top (CEO). This is because leadership is mainly about influence [3], and when it comes to the implementation of this BE model, it takes effective and influential leadership and top management to change the status quo within the organisation. All participants in this research placed viable leadership commitment as the most significant factor in implementing the EFQM. Kanji [41] supports the findings, by exerting that effective leadership is a pre-requisite in implementing business excellence into practice. In conclusion, the lack of viable leadership support, as with other TQM initiatives, can impede the effective implementation of the EFQM.

4.2. PLANNING FOR THE EFQM DEPLOYMENT

The literature review suggests that poor planning can be a major impediment to the effective implementation of TQM initiatives [28, 29]. Participants' responses in this research suggest that a lack of planning can act as a major impediment to the implementation of EFQM. All of the participants have had first-hand experiences with difficulties when implementing the EFQM due to inadequate planning. For instance, one of the participants in this study referred to an organisation that employed the use of the EFQM with inadequate preparation, planning and deployment. The resulting effect was that the organisation was only able to achieve significant improvements in 50 percent of its divisions, with the remaining 50 percent performing badly. This suggests that the lack of planning does not only impede the implementation of the EFQM, but it also impedes the benefits that the model offers, which should be the improvement of organisational performance and effectiveness. Dale et al. [16] suggest that planning for EFQM implementation starts with the CEO developing a clear vision and long-term strategy for the EFQM. This vision and long-term strategy is then cascaded throughout the organisation through policies, objectives and the right resources. This suggests that in order for organisations to reap the benefits of using the EFQM model, planning needs to be long-term and effective.

4.3. LACK OF APPROPRIATE SKILLS TO USE THE MODEL

Participants' responses suggest that the skills of the EFQM implementation project manager have an impact on its effective deployment. 'Appropriate skills' here refer to the deep understanding of the model and the capability to conduct a self-assessment in an organisation using the EFQM. The findings of this research support the literature reviewed, which suggests that one of the key factors as to why TQM initiatives fail is the lack of skills to implement it [28, 30]. In particular, one of the participants gave an example of a train operating company where an employee on the company's graduate scheme was given sole responsibility for collecting significant data for the organisation's EFQM award submission. The employee had no training or understanding of model, and thus the resulting effect was that the company's bid for the award failed. Therefore, empirical data from this study suggests that inadequate skills can act as a barrier to the implementation of the EFQM.

4.4. BARRIERS DUE TO ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE, SIZE AND SECTOR

Organisational structure and size can be seen to serve as a barrier to the effective implementation of TQM [30, 33]. 'Structure' here deals with the levels of hierarchy (i.e. flat or layer); 'size' refers to either a small or large firms; whilst 'sector' refers to either a private or public sector organisation. Empirical data from participants in this research contradict the statement of Ghobadian and Gallear [42], who suggest that TQM is more easily implemented in small organisations due to the organisational structure of small firms eases communication and decision-making. Findings in this study suggest that the EFQM model can be easy to implement in organisations of all sizes and structures. BE models like the EFQM provide a solution to the implementation problems posed by TQM. One participant suggests that the model is very effective in helping to align different functions and departments within an organisation, irrespectively of its size. However, two of the participants in this study showed concerns about the applicability of the model in public sector organisations. This supports the argument by Masters [43], where it was suggested that the bureaucratic and unstable nature of public sector organisations makes it complex to implement TQM initiatives. Due to austerity measures in the

UK, public sector organisations are under severe cost constraints, with the resulting effect that there are constant changes in policies. A participant referred to a case where support departments in public sector organisations had been outsourced to private sector organisations. The resulting effect was that on-going EFQM implementation programmes within those departments were discontinued. These findings suggest that the EFQM may be difficult to implement in public sector organisations.

4.5. LACK OF EFFECTIVE VERTICAL COMMUNICATION

Participants' responses in this study suggest that one of the challenges in implementing the EFQM is closed vertical communication. Vertical communication here deals with the flow of information and data up and down the hierarchy of an organisation [44]. Findings in this study support the literature, which suggests that lack of vertical communication is a major impediment to the effective implementation of TQM [28, 29]. A participant in this study gave an example, where subordinates had not disclosed the feedback of an EFQM assessment to their superiors due to the fear of reprisal. The resulting effect was that this organisation was not able to make the most of the improvement opportunities offered by the EFQM. Oakland [3] exerts that a lack of effective communication can lead to the creation of silos between departments, which can subsequently lead to sub-departmental optimisation. This was evident in the example given by one of the participants in this study, who relayed that an organisation was only able to achieve improvements in 50 percent of its organisation, with the other business units not experiencing any improvements.

4.6. TOO RESOURCE INTENSIVE

The findings in this study suggest that the EFQM is not a resource hungry activity. Participants suggest that an EFQM assessor's course is sufficient to conduct a self-assessment under the EFQM framework. One of the participants in this study professes to have helped organisations of different sizes implement the EFQM model with minimal resources, on numerous occasions. In one other participant's organisation, it took three people to implement the EFQM. The company in question is a public sector organisation, with numerous offices around London, and with over 3,000 employees. The findings of this study are supported by Medhurst and Richards [45], who suggest that the EFQM is not resource intensive to utilise. Although the implementation of the EFQM does not require significant resources to implement, except when an organisation wants to prepare a submission for the excellence award [45], the onus is on management to provide adequate training for the project teams that have the responsibility of using the EFQM within their organisation. One of the participants in this study faced difficulty in implementing the model because senior management was reluctant to provide adequate financial resources to implement the model.

4.7. EMPHASIS ON SHORT-TERM OBJECTIVES

Participants' responses in this study suggest that one of the barriers to the implementation of the EFQM model is the short-term objectives and results that management want to achieve. Deming [46] implies that management should deviate from its short-term focus on initiatives, and focus instead on long-term stability. In other words, the EFQM should not only be considered, for example, as a catapult to win a quality award/certification or as a 'flavour of the month' initiative; it should be perceived and approached as a long-term organisational development process. In this context, one of the participants in this study suggested that some organisations in the rail industry employ the use of the model just to meet compliance requirements, in order to get their rail franchise license renewed. A participant also mentioned of an organisation that won the EFQM R4E award, whilst its employees did not know what the RADAR logic (which is a key element of the EFQM model) stands for. These examples show the lack of long-term and embracement of the model into the organisations' culture and operations.

4.8. LACK OF EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT

Participants' responses support the literature by exerting that, like with most TQM initiatives, a lack of employee commitment will have a negative impact on the effective implementation of the EFQM model. Mersha [47] suggests that a lack of employee commitment is a subset of bad leadership, because employees become disengaged when they are not empowered. This is also supported by Kanji [41], who exerts that leadership must endeavour to involve the entirety of the organisation in continuous improvement activities. One of the participants in this research referred to an experience where the employees within the organisation developed a lacklustre attitude towards the implementation of the EFQM, because the CEO was not passionate about it, and this subsequently cascaded to the rest of the organisation creating an immense barrier that the organisation was unable to overcome, resulting in the failure of the EFQM implementation. In conclusion, the lack of commitment by any stakeholder would have a negative effect on the implementation of the EFQM.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research investigated the main challenges that organisation face during the implementation of the EFQM business excellence model. In particular, the results of the collected empirical data in this study suggest that the challenges in implementing TQM, as indicated by literature, are similar to the challenges in implementing the EFQM model. The main challenges identified in implementing the EFQM include lack of viable leadership commitment, poor planning, lack of skills due to inadequate training, lack of adequate resources, lack of vertical communication, short-term objectives for quick results, and lack of employee commitment. In this way, this research contributes to the BE body of knowledge by adding to the limited work regarding the implementation of the EFQM model. Since there is a lack of empirically sound research, this research can be used as a platform on which further research can be built. It is expected that the results of this empirical study can help managers and BE professionals understand the barriers and challenges that can impede the effective implementation of the EFQM. By understanding these, consultants and managers can develop best practices that can aid in the effective implementation of the EFQM model.

In terms of the research limitations, a case cannot be made by the authors about the generalisation of the findings of this study due to the small sample size of research participants. However, participants in this research have an average experience of over 16 years in helping various organisations implement the EFQM; therefore their significant experience could be considered to be anecdotal in representing the broad experiences of professional experts who utilise the this model. In addition, due to the lack of empirical sound research that identifies the challenges that organisations face when implementing the EFQM, the authors, in the bid to address the research problem, built some of the theoretical framework (i.e. identification of possible barriers) around the challenges of implementing TQM. Although different to the EFQM, the rationale behind it is that this model was built on TQM foundations. Finally, in terms of further research, it may include (1) the replication of this study with a larger data collection sample, (2) an investigation into the applicability of the EFQM to the UK public sector and how it can be affected due to economic austerity measures, and (3) its impact on innovation.

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