Quality of Work Life: A Review of Literature

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The Quality of Work Life (QWL) is a multi-faceted concept, having multi-dimensional constructs brought about by the variation of interest of the researchers and/or its users. The issue of QWL has become critical due to the increasing demands of today's business environment and of the family structure. This gave rise to an increased interest in QWL not only in business but also for many professions and fields. Determining QWL always involves the interplay between and among the worker, job content, and job context. Furthermore, the determination of the extent of QWL in an organization is a perceptual undertaking. As such, QWL is greatly influenced by the personal characteristics of those who determine it. Measuring the extent by which QWL in an organization is usually done through the level of satisfaction employees experience using a given set of variables that are appropriate and useful in their situation.

Keywords: productivity, quality of work life, scientific management, work satisfaction

Around the world, companies find themselves on a competitive treadmill as they cope with a weak economy and look for ways to meet expectations. Some company leaders address this economic environment by taking a straight business approach to compete by creating new markets and revenue streams, trimming costs or delivering new products to customers while other company leaders choose to take a more holistic approach, melding the business view with a work/life view by finding ways to help employees work more effectively, tuning the workplace so employees have more flexibility in deciding where and how they want to work, and providing access to services and tools that allow employees to take care of their personal-life needs while minimizing the anxiety that sometimes accompanies these activities (Childs, 2003). Childs (2003) argues that the latter approach is gaining attention because such a work/life view appears to work for the business as can be gleaned from the global surveys made in IBM in 2001 conducted in 20 languages and 48 countries which showed that quality of work life (QWL) programs have a strong correlation with productivity.

Moreover, the issue of QWL has become critical in the last two decades not only due to the increasing demands of today's business environment but also of the family structure. This gave rise to an increased interest in QWL not only in business but also for many professions and fields (Akdere, 2006).

Although the expression *quality of work life* (QWL) was not used in the late 19th century, certain isolated efforts had already been made to improve conditions for workers (Martel & Dupuis, 2006). For example, Peter Drucker (as cited in

Chalofsky, 2007) asserted that Frederick Taylor (father of scientific management), among all his contemporaries, truly deserved the title humanist because he believed in matching the person's abilities to complexities of the job, he encouraged worker suggestions, he believed in appropriate training for a job, he felt that management was to blame for worker restriction of output rather than worker inferiority, and he believed in giving people feedback to help them change. However, this mechanical or quantitative approach that scientific management assured gave way to the frustration of workers which led to the human relations movement and later socio-technical movement which is the basis for today's quality of work life (Padala & Suryanarayana, 2010).

It would be several decades before the social sciences and humanities showed real interest in the work and, more specifically, in the relationship between workers' attitudes and behaviors, on the one hand, and the company's productivity, on the other. This is outlined in the results of the Hawthorne study by Elton Mayo in 1933 on the influence of environmental factors on plant workers' performance which tempered the Taylorian performance rules that apply then (Martel & Dupuis, 2006).

However, this new approach remained marginal. It was only towards the end of the 1950s that the concept of QWL was slowly taking root in the specific context of working conditions in the industrialized countries. Although most organizations persisted in using an old-style Taylorian model in managing their companies, the result was that jobs became more humanized (Martel & Dupuis, 2006).

It was in this context that the first major research into work organization took place, initially in Europe. On the other side of the Atlantic, pressure was becoming stronger to follow the trend initiated in Europe. And it was not until the late 1960s that Irving Bluestone, who was then employed by General Motors, used the expression *quality of work life* for the first time. The first QWL program in the United States allowed workers to play an active role in decisions concerning their working conditions. Its goal was essentially to evaluate employee satisfaction in order to develop a series of programs to increase worker productivity (Martel & Dupuis, 2006). Martel and Dupuis (2006) added that this event represents the starting point to define and monitor the common denominator that would enable researchers, employers, unions, and employees to reconcile the goals and aspirations of all parties involved in the working world.

Given the background on where QWL started, it is no wonder that researches on QWL are commonly directed at workers in male-dominated, manual, and manufacturing sector. It is not clear then whether it also applies to health care, where there is a higher proportion of female staff; work is professional, semi-professional, or clerical; and organizations that provide services rather than producing goods (Lewis, Brazil, Krueger, Lohfeld, & Tjam, 2001). In addition, quality of work life as a way of democratizing and humanizing the workplace has been investigated and applied mainly in different parts of the Western industrialized world including Europe, Canada, U.S.A., Japan, and Australia (Wyatt & Wah, 2001).

For example, it was in 1970 when U.S. Congress enacted the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) creating an opportunity for federal-state partnerships to promote safety and health in the workplace. However, it is noteworthy to consider a news release made by the U.S. Department of Labor in September 2010 showing that only 21 U.S. states and Puerto Rico have complete programs on Occupational Safety and Health covering both the private sector and state and local governments, with only four states and the U.S. Virgin Islands have programs limited in coverage to public sector employees. Despite the relatively limited area of OSHA's coverage, it appears that the US government shows seriousness in the enforcement of its workplace safety laws and ensuring the safety and health of American workers as evidenced by the increase in its 2011 budget for such purpose by $14 million (Neuman, 2010).

With the exception mainly of Japan, Asia has emphasized QWL to a far lesser degree than North America and Europe. Thus, not only are there probably fewer organizations operating QWL programs, but there are also fewer published QWL research papers in the Southeast Asia region (Wyatt & Wah, 2001). There are still some who believe that the practice of quality of work life is a U.S. phenomenon and that it is the U.S.-based corporations that push such issues overseas (Childs, 2003) including the Southeast Asia region. In the Philippines, the government passed Executive Order 307 on November 4, 1987 "Establishing the Occupational Safety and Health Center in the Employees' Compensation Commission" as an attached agency of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) covering a wide range of issues on workers' health and safety needs in the workplace.

With the widespread, and still increasing, interest in QWL, there are issues that have to be clarified which this paper will attempt to tackle such as the issue on how QWL should be viewed, that is, what are the dimensions involved in QWL, and how QWL should be determined or measured.

DIMENSIONS OF QWL

QWL has been well recognized as a multi-dimensional construct. So far, the key concepts of workplace conditions and environments include, among others: family-work balance (Huang, Lawler, & Lei, 2007); skills level, autonomy, and challenge (Lewis et al., 2001); job security and job stress (Saklani, 2004); management and supervisory style, satisfactory physical surroundings, job safety, satisfactory working hours, and meaningful tasks (Ivancevich, 2001); nature of job, and stimulating opportunities and co-workers (Wyatt & Wah, 2001).

On the other hand, the key concepts of employee welfare and well-being include autonomy in decision making (Lewis et al., 2001). In addition, Gnanayudam and Dharmasiri (2007)

include the worker's sense of belongingness to a group, a sense of becoming oneself, and a sense of being worthy and respectable.

With an attempt to simplify the dimensions of QWL, Cardiff University's QWL survey (2008) identified psychosocial factors as contributing to QWL – job and career satisfaction, general well-being, stress at work, control at work, home-work interface, working conditions. However parsimonious the dimensions may become, the basic consideration will still have to be: What would be the dimensions appropriate and useful to the organization?

Padala and Suryanarayana (2010) have proposed that the QWL dimensions be broadly divided into: Classical dimensions and Contemporary dimensions. Classical dimensions include physical working conditions, employees' welfare, employee assistance, job factors, and financial factors. Whereas contemporary dimensions include collective bargaining, industrial safety and health, grievance redressal procedure, quality circles, work-life balance, workers' participation in management, and so forth.

QWL encompasses the characteristics of the work and work environment that influence employee's work lives. To Huang et al. (2007), QWL is the favorable conditions and environments of the workplace that addresses the welfare and well-being of employees. But Knox and Irving (as cited in Lewis et al., 2001) have argued that the determination of QWL is not only the consideration of the strengths or favorableness of the total work environment but its weaknesses as well. This condition of the total work environment is given importance because it motivates effective job performance (Gnanayudam & Dharmasiri, 2007), as well as work attitude (Trau & Hartel, 2007).

Furthermore, Guest (as cited in Saklani, 2004) has referred to QWL as the measure of the quality of human experience in the organization. Similarly, Ivancevich (2001) has referred to QWL as worker's job experiences of the job content and job context and how these experiences meet as many employee needs

as possible. With a more focused elements to address, Gnanayudam and Dharmasiri (2007) have viewed QWL as the employee's overall satisfaction with work life leading to develop work-life balance.

Aside from viewing QWL as influenced by the environment, Hackman and Suttle (as cited in Saklani, 2004) have pointed out that QWL is determined not by personal or situational characteristics alone but by the interaction between these two sets of factors – by the closeness of the individual-organization fit. Moreover, for Kaushik and Tonk (2008), and Carayon, Hoonakker, Marchand, & Schwartz (2003) (as cited in Gnanayudam and Dharmasiri, 2007), it is not only the fit that matters but that QWL includes the quality of relationship between employees and their total working environment, with Carayon et al. putting emphasis on the human dimension.

The literatures cited would show that QWL is determined by the desired favorable interaction between and among: *the worker* – as an individual person, member of a group, and being part of the organization; *what the worker does* – job content; and *the condition or environment* within which the worker does this job – job context.

Furthermore, the foregoing literatures would indicate that given the multi-dimensional construct of QWL, there appears to be no common construct that would define QWL domains that will apply to all organizations. This would then indicate that the QWL dimensions that an organization will use have to be appropriate and useful taking into consideration the workers' needs and expectations, the nature of the work to be done, and the kind of work environment the organization has.

DETERMINATION OF QWL

Perceptions held by employees play an important role in their decisions to enter, stay with or leave an organization. Thus, it is important that staff perceptions be included when assessing QWL with perception of QWL often assessed

using job satisfaction surveys (Krueger, Brazil, Lohfeld, Edward, Lewis, & Tjam, 2002).

Furthermore, as Johnsrud (2002) points out, most studies of the quality of work life are perceptual; that is, it is assumed that whether or not by some absolute standard the quality of work life in a particular situation is good or bad, that fact is not as important as what the personnel perceive the situation to be. It is then assumed that perceptions matter. Of course, individual perceptions may vary sharply. By measuring perceptions across an entire unit, or nation, the idiosyncrasies of individual views are subsumed into a generalized perception. Thus, any discussion of QWL must acknowledge that quality is defined with regard to certain people in a particular place-time (Wyatt, 1988).

Parker et al. (2003), citing researchers' report, say that there exist relationships between employees' perceptions of their work environment and outcomes such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and job performance. Albion, Fogarty, Machin, & Patrick (2008) concur that organizational climate is regarded as exogenous construct that reflects employees' perceptions of the work environment.

Results of a study conducted by Parker, et al. (2003) have indicated that psychological climate perceptions have reliable relationships with employees' work attitudes, psychological well-being, motivation, and performance. Their study has shown that climate perceptions have stronger relationships with employees' work attitudes as manifested by satisfaction.

Job satisfaction has been viewed as an attitudinal disposition that is studied as an outcome of the quality of work life (Johnsrud, 2002). Thus, the quality of working life scale has to assess key issues in the workplace such as job satisfaction (Cardiff University's QWL survey, 2008). Corollary to these views, Kaushik and Tonk (2008) have argued that QWL is also determined by the interaction of personal and situational factors, that is, individual-organizational fit, where it involves both personal (subjective) and external (objective) aspects of

work-related rewards, work experiences and work environment.

With satisfaction viewed as a psychological state resulting from the difference between the situation in which a person finds himself or herself and the situation in which the person wishes to be (Quilty, Van Ameringen, Mancini, Oakman & Farvolden., 2003, as cited in Martel & Dupuis, 2006), it can then be determined by a psychological comparison process in which perceptions of objective experiences are compared against personal standards of comparison. Standards of comparison can take different forms, such as: what workers want, feel they should receive, believe their co-workers are receiving, and have received in the past. These are based on the recognized fact that the subjective perceptions of people about their work environment (i.e., working conditions and management policies and practices) cannot be ignored as these affect the quality of their work experiences (Saklani, 2004). Supporting this view, Guest (as cited in Saklani, 2004) has opined that QWL is a measure of the quality of human experience which is a matter of the individual-organization interface. Furthermore, Sashkin and Lengermann (as cited in Saklani, 2004) have contended that QWL can be assessed with the help of the scales containing items based on the QWL conditions (QWL-C) which comprises of a set of objectives indicators that reflect prevailing working conditions and management policies and practices at the workplace. This approach allows for the drafting of QWL statements in such manner that they are descriptive of empirical realities, evoking their cognition or recall, and leaving little scope for the influence of opinions and affective reactions.

Arguing on using a different set of measuring scale, Trist and Wesley (as cited in Martel & Dupuis, 2006) have stated that the most reliable indices for determining the impact of QWL programs are objective measurement criteria such as productivity, absenteeism rate or staff turnover. This view appears to be supported by empirical studies. For example, Blegen's (as cited in Krueger

et al., 2002) meta-analysis of 48 studies looking at work satisfaction among nurses revealed that job satisfaction was associated strongly with reduced work stress, organizational commitment, communication with supervisor, autonomy, recognition, fairness, *locus* of control, years of experience, education, and professionalism. Another meta-analysis study concerning nurses and QWL conducted by Knox and Irving (as cited in Lewis et al., 2001) indicated that autonomy is significantly associated with QWL.

Contradicting the paradigm of defining QWL based on the claim of satisfaction or dissatisfaction to determine the level of QWL, Seashore (as cited in Martel & Dupuis, 2006) asserts that close to half of the variance in job satisfaction measures could be explained by a relatively limited number of environmental conditions and the absence of any time perspective in measuring the concept of satisfaction and its consequent insensitivity to changes within the organization, the job or the individual.

Moreover, Sheppard (as cited in Martel & Dupuis, 2006) has denounced the use of batteries of tests which he considers useless for measuring a concept as subjective as QWL. He also notes the tendency to replace measurements of subjective areas closely related to job satisfaction (e.g. degree of autonomy) with objective and verifiable indicators such as salary or the possession of specific goods. Sheppard states that there cannot be any substitutes for the direct measurement of job satisfaction and that variation in income do not necessarily entail any change in satisfaction. He opines that the simplest way to assess job satisfaction is to measure its frequency with such questions as, "How much of the time are you satisfied with your job?"

Therefore, the way satisfaction is measured, generally on a continuum, makes it totally inappropriate for measuring dynamic constructs such as QWL (Martel & Dupuis, 2006). This is because as Golembiewski, Billingsley and Yeager (as cited in Martel & Dupuis, 2006) have argued that a dynamic construct like QWL is characterized by three kinds of possible changes:

(1) alpha changes, which correspond to a change in a condition over time; (2) beta changes, which correspond to changes in a condition over time, but with a possible change in reference point as well; and (3) gamma changes, which correspond to a change in condition over time, but with a possible change in reference point and a change in the person's perspective and priorities. The authors have concluded that a static construct like satisfaction, which can only measure alpha changes, is inappropriate for evaluating a dynamic construct such as QWL.

In order to facilitate empirical studies, Turcotte (as cited in Martel and Dupuis, 2006) has defined four major dimensions of a QWL program – nature of the job itself, physical context, psychosocial context, and organizational context – that gives clear indications as to the items that must be included when measuring QWL. In support of this view, Martel and Dupuis (2006) have pointed out that the use of these major dimensions in measuring QWL should provide the following benefits: (1) there is no need to rely on any constructs related to workers' well-being or mental health such as job satisfaction, job stress, and so forth; and (2) no need to administer a battery of unrelated tests the results of which must be assembled to constitute QWL.

The above literatures would indicate that the quality of work life that a worker expects and experiences could be a product of his perception about himself, his work, and his work environment. This perception could be manifested through the worker's attitude, behavior, and level of job satisfaction in the workplace. Moreover, the literatures cited here clearly indicate arguments for and against the use of job satisfaction as a measure of a dynamic construct such as QWL. Furthermore, it also shows that job satisfaction is still the most common variable used to determine the existence and level of QWL in a given organization but with clear indications as to the items that must be included when measuring QWL have to be given due important considerations.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the literatures reviewed have shown that QWL is indeed a multi-faceted concept, having multi-dimensional constructs brought about by the variation of interest of the researchers and/or its users. However, it seemed apparent that determining QWL always involves the interplay between and among the worker, job content, and job context.

Furthermore, the determination of the extent of QWL in an organization is a perceptual undertaking. As such, QWL is greatly influenced by the personal characteristics of those who determine it. Hence, to measure the extent of QWL in the organization is usually done through the level of satisfaction employees experience using a given set of variables that are appropriate and useful in their situation.

The literatures would also show a bias of studies towards the first-world countries and on industrial and commercial sectors. There are very few from the service sectors. Moreover, published studies and literatures on QWL in ASEAN countries, particularly the Philippines, is very difficult to find, if there is any.

RECOMMENDED RESEARCH

In view of the review of literature, the following research can be pursued:

1. Considering that the Philippines have limited literatures and studies on QWL, a study may be undertaken in developing a database on the business organizations operating in the Philippines that are using QWL programs, the extent of how these programs are applied, and how these programs are viewed by, and affecting the satisfaction of, the workers.

2. With the wide variation in the conceptualization of QWL which could be attributed to the influence of the interest of the stakeholder, an exploratory study

of the QWL domains that is prevalent among Filipino workers within an industry and across industries may be undertaken so as to produce Philippine-perspective dimensions of quality of work life.

3. An empirical study using the four major dimensions of a QWL program – nature of the job itself, physical context, psychosocial context, and organizational context – specifically in the service sectors that may provide clear indications as to the items that must be included when measuring QWL in these sectors.

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