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**RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES IN PEOPLE PROCESS MATURITY – ANALYSIS AND
INSIGHTS**

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ABSTRACT

There is a vast stream of literature around various aspects of corporate, people and quality systems and its impact on business outcomes. In particular the high performance people practices have been well studied in multiple industries around the themes of effectiveness and impact. However the impact of people process structures and their maturity is not seen to be frequently covered in the studies. Essentially the research studies can be classified as “inward looking” at HR practices without much focus on outcomes or “outward looking” with very little focus on process maturity that enables the outcomes. From an extensive analysis of the studies, we propose a framework that looks both at the internal process maturity dimension and its external impact on outcomes. This framework linking independent variables around people processes to the dependent variables of business, customer and employee outcomes as well as the role of possible mediating and moderating variables are explored in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of governance system is to assure outcomes and help de-risk any uncertainty with the same, providing clear visibility as well as possible leveraging points for the stakeholders to influence outcomes. In this paper, we propose to look at governance systems across the dimensions of Corporate, People and Quality aspects and look at how they provide a mechanism to influence intermediate outcomes such as levels of attainment of people process maturity or final outcome for stakeholders including employees, business and its customers.

Viewed individually, areas such as Corporate Governance, People Processes, Quality and Business Systems have received fairly extensive research attention across the world, particularly in the developed markets. But we are unable to see much research attention on areas of knowledge at the intersection of these elements or areas that correlate Governance to People Process Systems and to firm outcomes. Further, research seems to be fairly limited in aspects linking People Process Maturity to business outcome and results, particularly in emerging markets as well as in the context of technology intensive services sector. The studies under each of the dimensions are elaborated to bring out insights from the analysis.

The related research areas can be represented in terms of three dimensions of corporate governance, quality governance and people governance. The gaps appear to be more in the intersection areas across the three dimensions.

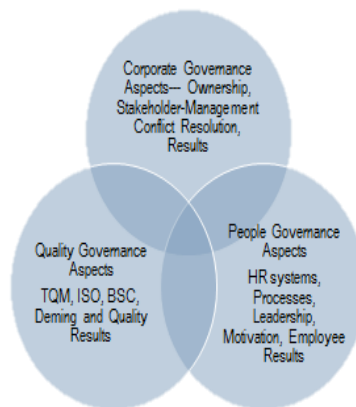


Fig 1: Three dimensions of the research area

Research on corporate governance related variables

Earlier studies in corporate governance have been more grounded in the ownership and financial aspects of the firm and on the resolution mechanisms for resolving investing stakeholder and management conflicts. However it does not appear to go much into the enabling mechanisms that will translate the board intent (as representative of investors) into operational actions, through a People / Process Governance system, that will also offer greater possibility of proactive control over the firm outcomes.

Irrespective of the presence of agency costs, publicly held corporation as a business firm has largely stood the test of time (Jensen MC and WH Meckling 1976). There have been continuous attempts to minimize agency costs and maximize returns to stakeholders. However there is a greater need to attain control over returns through any enabling mechanisms such as governance systems.

In an interesting study of corporate governance and firm performance, Brown LD and ML Caylor (2004) suggest that good governance is well correlated with financial performance. They have also used a very good mechanism of governance score that covers 51 factors. However the study is largely confined to financial outcomes and does not cover aspects of employee and customer outcomes. Further “governance score” does not appear to cover quality and people governance related factors. However there are various limitations of traditional shareholder approach to studies on corporate governance (Letza et al, 2004) and we need a wider perspective with the inclusion of all stakeholders. Consideration of people and process factors could be a useful supplement in this direction.

Wilkes J (2004) looks at the issue of governance measurement and how performance measures need to be supplemented by contextual information on the business and its situation. Becht et al (2005) argue that corporate governance is a mechanism for resolving inherent stakeholder conflicts. However protection for small investors may be at the expense of an unwarranted increase in managerial discretion which could be risky for investors. Here again Quality Governance systems could offer a mitigation. Hoetker G and T Mellewig (2009) in their study of various governance mechanisms and their effectiveness point out that while formal mechanisms are functional and largely adequate for physical assets, relational governance mechanisms are very important for knowledge assets.

RESEARCH ON QUALITY GOVERNANCE RELATED VARIABLES

The research on quality systems has broadly covered areas of Total Quality Management (TQM), International Standards Organization (ISO) and related systems, Deming awards and such mechanisms, but seems to be fairly limited in terms of “people process” coverage. The studies have largely focused on manufacturing sector. There is very little coverage of high tech services sector, people process maturity and enabling advanced quality systems that will be of greater relevance in this context such as People CMM (PCMM) among others. Further, the studies do not appear to focus much on firm outcomes beyond basic financial measures and are quite limited in terms of correlation with customer and employee outcomes

On a case study approach, Jensen MC and KH Kruck (1994) demonstrate that TQM is a way of application of scientific thought to organizational operations and helps decentralize decision making and knowledge dissemination in the firm. This offers a good connect between corporate governance and quality governance, however this study is based on a single case in Chemicals sector in the US. The study also does not appear to focus much on firm outcomes. Based on a New Zealand manufacturing sector study, Carr et al (1997) suggest that while there appears to be a difference in business strategy dimension between ISO and non ISO companies, there is very little difference in terms of quality or reporting systems. The study however is limited to manufacturing sector in that country and only based on ISO systems. There is also little focus on firm outcomes. The study found positive difference in ISO companies focus on process improvement and metrics however. Hendricks et al (1997) study the linkages between quality awards and market value of firms. The study points out that the stock market reacts positively to quality awards and the effect is even more pronounced for smaller firms. This may be due to the underlying expectations of better performance on the basis of quality improvements and risk reductions due to the same.

Zhang (2000) explores in a Netherland based manufacturing sector study the implementation of TQM and points out that TQM has an edge over simpler ISO models on business performance. It does not cover the mechanisms of translating TQM to business outcomes. A study by Krishnan et al (2005) observe that there is a positive correlation between IT investments and customer satisfaction through a focus on perceived quality and perceived value. This offers a good connect between quality governance and customer satisfaction but is largely restricted to viewing IT as a business enabling investment and customer outcomes thereof. The enabling mechanism of process systems does not seem to be covered in the study. In a study, Anand et al (2005) cover BSC

implementation in Indian companies. The study points out that there is an over emphasis on financial performance dimension in BSC implementation and there are issues around weight age of dimensions and the need to examine causality. Focus on enabling mechanisms around quality governance could help cover a missing link here as well.

Bedi K and JK Sharma (2006) trace the journey of quality movement and define “qualitopia” as a quest and a continuing journey. In a study linking quality enhancement thro structural synthesis, Lowder (2007) stresses the need to analyze strategic choices and cascading in evaluating TQM programs. Balanced Score Card (BSC) is one of the recognized mechanisms of strategic cascading. A study on strategic performance management in practice, Waal D and K Kourtik (2008), covers 17 Dutch organizations and points out that with the right focus, specific advantages have been achieved by the companies offering a link between strategic systems and outcomes . The study does not seem to cover process quality as a lead variable. In a theoretical study, A study on quality management and job quality by Levine D and MW Toffel (2010) brings focus on employee outcomes such as earnings, health, safety results . This is a study of 1000 organizations predominantly in manufacturing sector utilizing fairly basic ISO systems.

RESEARCH ON PEOPLE GOVERNANCE RELATED VARIABLES

A study by Chan et al (1997) points out the fact that better alignment across business, people as well as information systems strategy dimensions promotes more effectiveness. The mechanism of how it is translated into outcomes is not adequately covered. Hung (2006) in his study brings out the point clearly that process alignment coupled with people involvement brings out better organizational effectiveness.

The study on the role of business improvement models in providing a good linkage from strategy to people performance by Adam (2002) brings out the point that people measurement systems aligned to strategy are more effective in driving outcomes. Wongrassamee et al (2003) point out in their study the similarities, between Balanced score card and European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) models, though they argue that there may not be any “perfect” match between organization needs and measurement systems. Many of the above studies are more “inward” looking in terms of internal HR processes and not adequately linked to outcomes derived from the same.

There are a few studies that cover particular outcome dimensions. In relating organizational change initiatives to firm performance, Guha et al (1997) point out that successful initiatives had several people and culture related positive factors, underscoring the importance of people processes in successful change. In a largely theoretical study De Bruin et al (2000) point out the development of BPM maturity model which has people, culture and governance has key factors in enabling business outcomes. Lesser et al (2001) study the role of Communities of Practice in creating organizational value and how the underlying phenomenon of “social capital” enables better behavior and performance. Robust people processes and systems will definitely help enhance such value. Similar focus on critical success factors on BPM implementation was studied by Ariyachandra et al (2008)

Kennerley et al (2003) discuss in their study the dynamic business environment and the need for measurement systems to keep with the pace of changes to effectively support the evolution. Implementing such systems will need dynamic people practices that are kept in sync with the changing needs. McAdam et al (2003) in their study point out that the ethical basis of quality systems will help enhance the effectiveness of CSR initiatives and hence the overall firm performance. Mann et al (1994) bring out the point that quality activities, particularly TQM, have beneficial effects on business performance. But they also mention that it has to be sustained over many years to produce a significant positive effect on performance. Terziowski et al (2003) point out in a study in Australia on ISO 9000 implementation that there is a significant and positive relationship between the manager’s motives for adopting ISO 9000 certification and business performance. Those organizations that pursue certification willingly and positively across a broad spread of objectives are more likely to report improved organizational performance, underscoring the importance of people factors in implementation success.

In a UK study, Gratton et al (1999) point out the linkages between business strategies, HR strategies and performance underscoring the importance of people factors in successful results. Schuler (1992) in his study points out the links between business needs and HR practices and how they mutually reinforce the performance. Yeung et al (1997) in an interesting study explore HR processes and its impact on business results. In a case study approach, they identify paths through which HR practices contribute to business performance through organizational capabilities leading to employee satisfaction and then on to customer satisfaction. Bourne et al (2003) point out how the improvement in underlying processes contributes to better corporate performance. They also emphasize the need to broaden performance measures beyond the financial ones to give the correct long term picture

Ulrich (1998) in an interesting study emphasizes the changing role of HR and the need for line managers to enforce accountability of HR in the transformation journey. This brings back the focus on people processes for enabling transformational results. Schoeffler(1974) in their extensive study of 57 corporations point out the linkages between strategic planning and performance and how there is a need to take a holistic and industry wide view that will help develop win-win strategies. Factors around people and culture will help facilitate the same. Lopez et al (2005) discuss in their study in Spain of 195 companies the impact of learning on organizational performance and how people processes around learning help foster innovation and improve competitiveness and results. Rahman (2001) in a study of TQM in Western Australia take up the SME sector and point out that there is good linkage between various quality factors and business outcomes. However there is need for more focus on people and leadership factors for sustained improvements

Mc Adam et al (2001) studied the role of measurement systems in TQM implementation. The study emphasizes the need to link improvement plans more effectively with measurement trends Seth et al (2005) did an extensive study of TQM, TPM initiatives and business performance in the Indian manufacturing sector. They identify critical factors such as leadership and process planning in effectively achieving results in such cases. Wright et al (2003) explore the impact of HR practices on business unit performance within a corporation. With a sample of 50 autonomous business-units within the same corporation, the study revealed that both organizational commitment and HR practices were significantly related to operational measures of performance as well as operating margins and pre-tax profits.

Guthridge et al (2008) in his article summarized the findings from McKinsey research. The findings underscore the importance of maintaining deep commitment to talent throughout the organization. The HR team also needs to be able to improve their capabilities to translate business needs to talent strategies. Guthridge et al (2008b) point out a strong correlation between financial results measured by profit per employee and score on talent management practices. In a Korean study with 138 firms in Korea, Bae et al (2000) point out that firms with high scores on valuing HRM and people as a source of competitive advantage were more likely to have high-involvement HRM strategies. The study infers that these variables also had positive effects on firm performance. Arthur (1994) in his study in the steel manufacturing sector of commitment versus control type HR systems points out that commitment system produced better results in terms of productivity, scrap rates and staff turnover. Typically in terms of people process maturity, commitment type systems will relate to higher maturity versus control type which will be lower maturity. Hence it can be inferred that higher maturity has a beneficial effect on key outcomes

An empirical study by Agarwala (2003) points out that extent of introduction of innovative HR practices is perceived to be a significant predictor of organizational commitment. But this study covered largely firms that are already perceived to be innovative and also does not link the outcomes with financial results. Garvin (2013) in his recent study on Google analyses how engineers working there perceive the value of management and concludes that it is necessary to demonstrate actual value added, through data using people analytics. This also helps managers constantly improve their performance. This underscores the importance of quantitative people process management in adding business value.

PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAME WORK

It is interesting to study how the various input variables across the themes of Corporate, Quality and People Governance interact to produce Outcomes with regard to Employees, Business/Firm and Customers as key stakeholders. Given the analysis of the literature across the three dimensions, it will be good to investigate the presence and role of any mediating or moderating variables in enabling these outcomes.

There is a need to look at whether and how well the interaction of the leading variables around corporate governance, people and quality systems are linked to perceptions of firm outcomes such as business results (Eg: sales, revenue), firm value (Eg: profitability, market value) , employee outcomes (Eg: satisfaction, salary) and customer outcomes (Eg: satisfaction, repeat business, value) and investigate the role of any mediating variables as well in enabling the outcomes. We propose the following conceptual framework to map these variables.

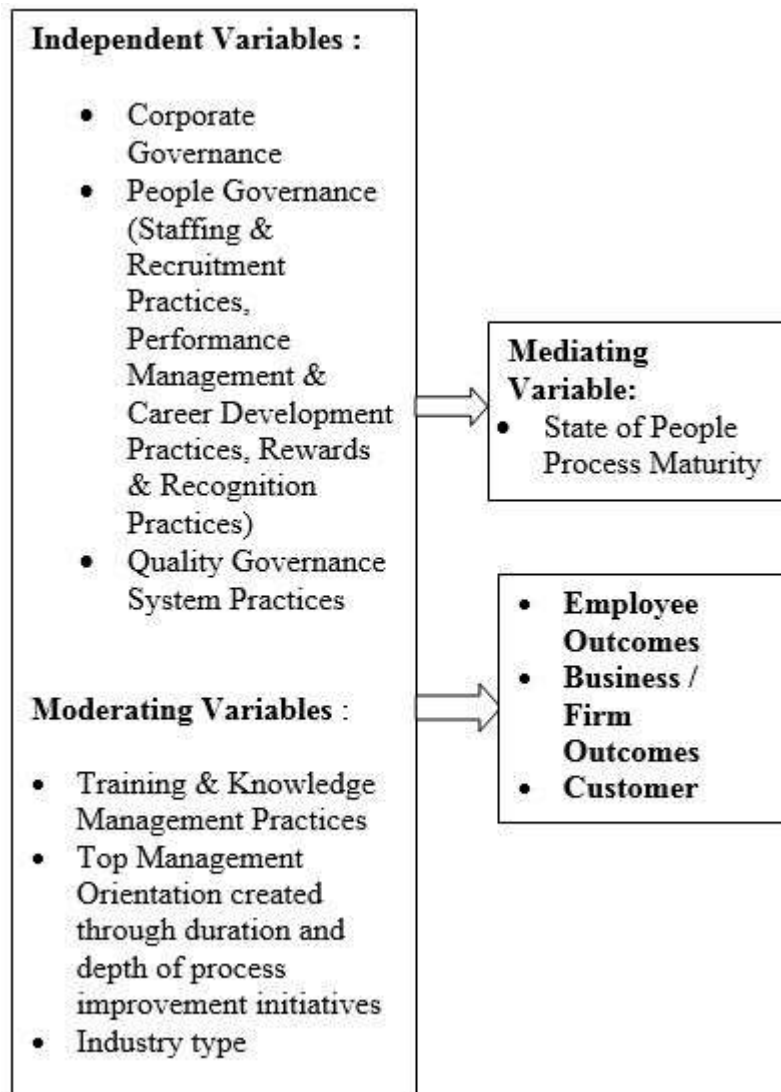


Fig-2: Conceptual framework linking People Process Maturity related variables to perception of outcomes

MODERATING INFLUENCE OF TRAINING AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM) PRACTICES

While other factors are maintained at the same level, it appears that the level of training and KM practices could positively influence the effectiveness of people, quality and corporate governance variables and hence affect the outcomes.

Huselid et al (1995) studied the impact of high impact HR systems on firm performance and conclude that it is both economically and statistically significant. This has significance for firms planning to enhance their HR systems for improved performance. Neal et al (1999) in their work attempt to study the process flow through which HR interventions influence individual performance. This has implications for HR processes around performance management, job enrichment, motivation and others while the overall impact on organizational performance is not covered in this study. Delaney et al (1996) in their study of 590 firms found positive relationships between HPWP in training and staffing and corresponding perceptual performance measures. Youndt et al (1996) bring forth a contingency approach, in a study covering 97 manufacturing plants, on the impact of HRM practices on firm performance. The study argues that the strategic positioning really determines the degree of impact. Vanderberg (1999) in a study of 49 firms conclude that high impact work practices impact organizational effectiveness and results positively. Neumark et al (1999) point out that high performance work practices could help increase productivity. However the study cautions that it can also increase labor costs. The overall balance needs to be considered as there is a beneficial effect due to greater staff motivation and ownership effects as well.

Batt et al (2002) examined the relationship between HR practices, attrition rates, and organizational performance in call centers. The study infers that quit rates were lower and sales growth was higher in establishments that emphasized high skills and employee participation in decision making consolidated through better training and management orientation. Paul et al (2003) has made a study on Indian software companies to develop and test a causal model linking HRM with organizational performance. The study has found that though there may not be a direct effect on financial performance due to any of the HR practices, there is an indirect influence of the practices on the operational and financial performance of the organization. The study notes that practices such as training, job design, and compensation directly affect the operational performance parameters such as retention, productivity, quality, cycle time and cost. Combs et al (2006) in a meta-analysis of various studies on High Performance Work Practices (HPWP) and firm performance infer that there is clearly a linkage, though observed more in the manufacturing sector.

Hypothesis 1: Level of Training /Knowledge Management Practices and Management Orientation significantly influences the attainment of outcomes.

Role of people process maturity as a mediating variable

While HR and governance practices exist to produce the desired outcomes, the degree of internalization and establishment of such practices in the organization itself creates a more mature people process system in the organization. There are formal frameworks to measure people process maturity such as the People Capability Maturity Model (PCMM), which measure maturity in a highly structured fashion.. However the level of maturity of people processes is a function of how well the practices are institutionalized and made as a “way of life” in the company and can be measured through the investigation of process establishment as perceived by practitioners. We postulate that level of people process maturity attained could be the intermediate state which enables the achievement of final outcomes from employee, firm or customer perspectives

PCMM (Curtis, 2002) is a 5 maturity level framework which is well utilized by many firms in the Technology and Services sector. PCMM has 22 Key Process Area (KPA) across 5 maturity levels. The model brings in 499 practices across these 22 KPAs which are essentially good practices distilled from practical implementation across industries that promote specific capabilities needed to demonstrate particular maturity levels. 50 % of these practices are oriented towards particular implementation and another 50% towards institutionalization which covers enablers for the practices and their ongoing evaluation mechanisms thereby stressing heavily on the institutionalization aspects to assure continuous sustenance .

PCMM draws heavily from the disciplines of HRM, TQM (Total Quality management) and OCD (Org Change and Development) across its KPAs. PCMM groups its focus across four “threads” which have KPAs cutting across maturity levels. These four threads cover aspects such as Developing Capability, Building Workgroups, Motivating & Managing Performance and Shaping the Workforce aligned to business objectives. There are very few studies specifically on PCMM implementation but several other studies quoted in this paper touch upon the threads or the topics covered in the KPAs of PCMM. In a study looking at the degree of support provided by Oracle HRM suite to PCMM practices, Turetken et al (2004) point out that only PCMM earlier maturity levels of 2 and 3 are covered with some variability. In a manufacturing setting study in 2011, Soltani I and BN Joneghani point out that it is possible to measure excellence across three dimensions of individual, process and organization using PCMM.

Oakland et al (1998) in an interesting study of past research work around key aspects of effective people management explore the downstream links with satisfied employees, who can make a difference in delivering services, which enables exceptional levels of customer satisfaction and corresponding business results. Highly mature people process systems will be a great enabler in this context. Prahlad et al (1986) explore the links between diversity and performance building on past research. Well aligned people processes will help attract varied talent that builds such diversity effectively in organizations. Snell et al (1995) point out that from a study of 102 firms that behavior and input controls are far better than output controls as an approach to HRM practices. The study of Ahmad et al (2003) explores impact of HRM practices on Operational Processes and looks at an ideal system for manufacturing plants

In a Russian study of 101 foreign firms, Fey et al (2000) attempt to map HRM practices to firm outcomes through a mediating variable of HRM outcomes. Becker et al (2006) in their study look at the black box between HRM practices and firm performance and investigate whether integrating strategy implementation could provide the missing link. They also point out the need for differentiated HR practices both across and within firms. People process maturity could be an enabling factor to explain the results in this context.

Hypothesis 2 : The level of People Process Maturity attained in an organization significantly mediates employee, firm and customer outcomes.

Hypothesis 3: The institutionalization of practices promoting greater people process maturity through frameworks such as PCMM significantly impacts the people process maturity

Outcome Variables

The ultimate test of effectiveness of people governance practices and maturity thereof lies in the extent to which important firm outcomes are achieved. These outcomes can be seen from the perspectives of staff, business as well as customer as its important stakeholders.

Hypothesis 4 : The strength of variables across Corporate, Quality and People Governance aspects significantly determines the level of People Process Maturity

Hypothesis 5: The level of people process maturity significantly influences the attainment of outcomes across Employee, Firm and Customer dimensions

CONCLUSIONS

The intent of governance systems in any organization is to ensure greater possibility of attaining outcomes and reduce risks that may impact the same. There is a vast stream of literature around various aspects of corporate, people and quality systems and its impact on business outcomes. In particular the high performance people practices have been well studied in multiple industries around the themes of effectiveness and impact. However the impact of people process structures and their maturity is not seen to be frequently covered in the studies. Essentially the research studies can be classified as “inward looking” at HR practices without much focus on outcomes or “outward looking” with very little focus on process maturity that enables the outcomes.

The research on corporate governance variables covers extensively ownership, financial, structure and stakeholder return aspects. But there seems to be less focus on enabling mechanisms which translate strategic intent to firm results and in particular from a people results perspective. Past studies in the area of quality governance systems have covered areas such as quality systems and its implementation in delivery across manufacturing and industrial sectors. However the focus is relatively less on the technology services sector and emerging markets such as India. In addition people process aspects do not appear to be well covered in quality governance studies. In the area of people governance and people process maturity, coverage is more extensive on strategic HR aspects as well as traditional areas of HR such as staffing, performance management, training, development, motivation and leadership among others but with more focus on internal aspects rather than linking to the business outcomes. A few studies are there on high performance work practices relating to firm outcomes but here with lesser analysis on people process variables enabling such outcomes. There are very few studies that cover both the inward process aspects and outward results aspects together or look at specialist people process maturity frameworks such as PCMM that offer a good linkage from internal to external aspects. It is also seen that very few studies focus on emerging markets such as India or the technology / knowledge based services sector. There are also fewer studies on intersection areas across the three dimensions of governance at corporate, quality and people levels which can potentially provide greater enabling mechanisms and leverage for outcomes.

We feel that greater the strength and maturity of systems across corporate, people and quality dimensions, better the likelihood of achieving targeted organizational outcomes. We also postulate that training, knowledge management levels and the right management orientation will positively influence the outcomes. We also see the level of people process maturity attained as a possible intervening variable that will mediate the attainment of outcomes. We have covered the interaction across these variables in terms of our conceptual framework. It will be interesting to see how well the theoretical framework is actually validated in practice. It is proposed to validate this through an empirical study, with data taken from practitioners in the technology and knowledge based services industry in India. Such a study will throw more light on how this framework and the composite variables can be actually leveraged in practice, to enable attainment of beneficial outcomes

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