

Discussion Forum

Review Article: Quality and Workplace Innovation

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To date the literatures on Quality and Workplace Innovation have been largely separate. David Hutchins is an International Quality Academician, and his trilogy of books since 2006 provides a valuable contribution to debates on Workplace Innovation. His focus is on empowering workers, who are seen as the leading experts in their jobs. He sees Quality Circles as central to empowerment. They have been less popular in the U.K. than in Japan but should be seen as self-managing workgroups.

Recently Workplace Innovation has become a fashionable paradigm in the field of enterprise development (see *European Journal of Workplace Innovation* from 2015). Research and publications have brought together shared accounts of concepts and practices (Oeij et al 2017, 2023). I suggest that several earlier related perspectives have achieved popularity over the decades, which could be seen as paving the way for Workplace Innovation but using alternative vocabulary and concepts (Johnsen et al 2015).

One of these perspectives has been Quality, and in particular Total Quality Management. It has provided a paradigm, with well developed literatures in the USA and Japan, dating from the American occupation of Japan following the Second World War. Quality has had a relatively reduced following in Europe, and in particular in the UK. In the UK, Quality has been seen in terms of compliance with standards. There have been ongoing problems regarding productivity, and a culture of external inspection rather than improvement, owned by the workforce.

David Hutchins is a young 87 year-old, who has been working in the field of Quality for many decades, including with the late Dr Juran (USA) and the late Prof Ishikawa (Japan). He has published many books, including the trilogy (Hutchins 2008, 2019, 2023) which we consider here. He writes with long experience of the workplace, where he had worked as a mechanical and electrical engineer, before moving into consultancy and founding David Hutchins International Quality College (DHIQC). Writing from within the culture of continuous improvement, he addresses practitioners. He is sceptical about academics in the field, who he sees as generally writing at a distance from practice. In "Self-Managing Workgroups" (Hutchins 2023) he provides an extensive bibliography covering the field until 1985. There is

a strong case for updating the bibliography! This could be a suitable assignment for a PhD student.

Hutchins has worked as an independent consultant for many years, introducing improvement processes, and empowering people to take them forward. He operates as an individual rather than selling predefined packaged solutions. He has a distinctive writing style, in which his personal voice is clear, as he draws lessons from workplace cases.

“Hoshin Kanri” (Hutchins 2008) presents a strategic approach to continuous improvement, providing a context for elements such as Six Sigma or Lean Manufacturing. It was taken as a practical guide by managers in transformative changes at Gatwick Airport.

“Quality Beyond Borders” (Hutchins 2019) draws on experience in Japan and presents Quality as a seamless companywide matrix of interactive concepts. He does not favour the development of large Quality departments. Quality is regarded as everybody’s responsibility, from the chief executive downwards. Workers are seen as the experts in their own jobs, and a key resource for the organisation. They deserve to be protected from top-down Taylorist management.

“Self-Managing Workgroups” (Hutchins 2023), completes the trilogy. Building on his previous books on Quality Circles since 1985, the focus is on the role of Quality Circles as a key to participative management. My own experience of Students’ Quality Circles, Staff Quality Circles and Senior Quality Circles at Kingston University taught me a great deal about pragmatic issues of facilitation and organisational change in Higher Education. Circles can take on a life of their own, and lead to the formation of successor Circles. Hutchins and I have worked with partners in South Asia, where there is a lively culture of Quality Circles in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal, with potentially transformative outcomes (Chapagain 2022).

I know from experience that the cultures of Quality and Workplace Innovation can be linked. Peter Totterdill of Workplace Innovation Europe has been a leading contributor to conferences organised by DHIQC. In Nepal, the national success of Students’ Quality Circles in education could lead to transformation in the workplace. This is a focus of current PhD research by Tina Saud at Kathmandu University, where she has worked with both Students’ Quality Circles and Quality initiatives in the coffee sector. Using Zoom technology, Tina participated in the “Quality Coffee Shop”, hosted by David Hutchins, which explored practical issues around Quality from spring 2020.

Hutchins’ work could be of considerable practical value to EUWIN projects such as Bridges 5.0, in which participants explore developments in innovation beyond the current norm of Industry 4.0. He reminds us that many of the current debates are not entirely new. His accounts of facilitation and process improvement are accessible to practitioners and could be a useful addition to resource banks.

References

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