

WOA 2021 Special Event

The TQM Journal Special Issue

*“Balancing the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’ shades of TQM:
bridging conceptual advancements and managerial insights.”*

Genova, September 10/11th 2021

The main theme of the WOA 2021 incites us to look beyond the bricks and mortars of organizational design and to delve into the meaning and purpose of organizational action. Classic organization theories have been powerful in providing us with conceptual lenses and practical tools to control human behaviors in organizational contexts, aligning (and, somehow, constraining) the individual interest with the organizational purpose of achieving an unanimity of intent. Even though the heritage of classic theories continues to imbue are reflections about the sense of organizing, they need to be permeated with new insights and cognitive schemata that permit us to acknowledge the complexity of individual and collective actions in organizations.

As organization scholars, we are experiencing unprecedented challenges which solicit us to ask to ourselves what the purposes of our organizational endeavours are. Being confronted with an environment which is characterized by jarring challenges, such as the increasing pervasiveness of Information and Communication Technologies, the disruption of traditional management models, the employees' need for more empowering working arrangements, and the volatility of sources of organizational success, we assist to a revamp of research streams aimed at illuminating the meaningfulness of work. However, literature is not consistent in conceptualizing the factors that add to the meaningfulness of the working environment. This calls for further theoretical and empirical advancements intended to shed light into the purposes of organizing.

The burgeoning of meaning-seeking employees operating within and across organizations to establish brand new sense-making and meaning-making processes which are more consistent with the state of the art has provoked a radical reconfiguration of deep-seated management tools. Among others, Total Quality Management (TQM) has been argued to necessitate a balanced mix of “hard” and “soft” ingredients to succeed (Gadenne and Sharma, 2009). Issues related to soft TQM are primarily intended to shed light into the meaningfulness of work, triggering a concern for the organizational capability to create an empowering working environment that stimulates the engagement and commitment of people to organizational dynamics.

Even though scholars are achieving a growing awareness of “soft” TQM, this topic has been mostly investigated on its own. The “soft” domain includes a variety of strictly interrelated factors (Lau and Idris, 2001). Firstly, it involves macro-level dimensions – such as organizational politics, strategy making, organizational intelligence, organizational design, organizational culture and ethics, organizational identity, and organizational symbolism – that represent the ground where “hard” TQM initiatives take roots (Svensson and Wood, 2005; Edwards, 2007; Tenji and Foley, 2019). Secondly, it includes meso-level dynamics – *i.e.*, organizational learning, decision making,

organizational change, organizational sensemaking and sense giving, organizational communication, organizational development, and conflict management – that boost (or hamper) TQM initiatives (Chadwick, 2012; The *et al.*, 2014). Thirdly, micro-level factors – including cognition, intuition, awareness, leadership, motivation, employees’ empowerment and engagement, and interpersonal communications and collaboration – are crucial soft ingredients of the recipe for successful TQM (Pool, 2000; Mohammad Mosadeghrad, 2014). The macro, meso, and micro dimensions of TQM find synthesis in Human Resource Management Practices (HRMP), that are intended to make the “soft” side of TQM tangible (Graham *et al.*, 2014). More specifically, HRMP have been presented as practical tools to combine the “soft” issues and the “hard” components of TQM, enacting business excellence and sustaining it in the long-run. In spite of these considerations, the interdependencies between the “hard” and the “soft” sides of TQM are under-researched (Rahman and Bullock, 2005; Ershadi *et al.*, 2019; Khalili *et al.*, 2019).

The soft side of TQM has been usually considered to be a “contingent” variable in the analysis of “hard”-based interventions aimed at enhancing organizational performances and increasing customer satisfaction (Imeri *et al.* 2014). Lack of awareness of the interplay between the “soft” and “hard” facets of TQM generates ambiguity in the acknowledgment of their effects on the meaningfulness of the working environment. We contend that the three (macro, meso, and micro) layers of soft TQM depicted above are strictly interrelated, being concomitantly involved in organizational interventions that are intended to the achievement of an empowering and engaging organization (Cooney and Sohal, 2002). Beyond composing the “social” and the “human” sides of TQM, soft issues enact the organizational commitment to quality improvement and allow people to develop a coherent organizational sense-giving of plans, structures, operations and procedures designed for business excellence. The soft dimensions are moulded into managerial tools by Human Resource Management Practices (HRMP), such as employees’ recruiting and selection, training, evaluation, and development (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1991; Wilkinson, 1992), that are intended to: 1) introduce TQM interventions and integrate them with conventional HRM tools (Simmons *et al.*, 1995); and 2) sustain the engagement and the involvement of employees in continuous quality improvement (Keng Boon *et al.*, 2007).

In this scenario, we aim to nurture a scientific debate about “soft” issues in the TQM discourse, which may enable us to collect some additional insights to answer the key question that inspire WOA 2021: what is the purpose of organizing?

Participants to the WOA 2021 who are willing to tackle these conceptual and practical issues are warmly welcome to participate to a special event which is devoted to push forward what we currently know about the integration of soft TQM into conventional hard TQM initiatives and to understand what the implications of soft TQM on the meaningfulness of working environments are. The special event is linked to the Special Issue “Balancing the “hard” and the “soft” shades of TQM: bridging conceptual advancements and managerial insights”, co-edited by prof. Luca Gnan and dr. Rocco Palumbo. The special issue will be published in 2022 by the [TQM Journal](#) (Cite Score 2019 = 4.3; Cite Score Tracker 2020: 4.1; first SJR quartile in the sub-fields: “Business and International Management” and “Business, Management & Accounting”; ranked by ANVUR as an “A” journal for ASN). Papers to be considered for publication should be submitted through the TQM journal ScholarOne portal within October, 31st 2021.

The special event hosted by WOA 2021 will be conceived as an opportunity to discuss the challenges that we meet in designing empowering organizational structures and meaningful Human Resource Management Practices. It will also stimulate a debate with the Guest Editors to collect comments on the suitability of papers presented to WOA 2021 for prospective publication in the TQM Special Issue

All types of papers – including conceptual articles, literature reviews, case studies, longitudinal and cross-sectional empirical researches – are targeted by this special even.

We wish to meet you soon in Genova and to collaborate with you for the success of our editorial project!

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