

ALIGNMENT BETWEEN STRATEGIC PLANNING AND HUMAN RESOURCE PROCESSES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Patricia A. Lapoint, McMurry University

ABSTRACT

The United States Congress in 1987 voted to enact the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award with the goal of encouraging U.S. businesses and other types of organizations to approach and deploy effective quality processes in the delivery of their products and services. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award provides a framework of internal assessment for companies to use in their planning and implementation of quality initiatives. Through this internal assessment process, company leadership gains a better understanding of the alignments/linkages within its operations in order to modify its processes for meeting or exceeding customer expectations and requirements. The purpose of the research is to examine the extent of the alignment between strategic planning processes and human resource processes. Eleven manufacturing companies were selected for a site visit. Each of these 11 companies represents a different industry sector, geographical location, and organizational size. Documents searches, personal interviews, and observations were used to collect the data. The initial observations of the alignment between the two categorical variables strategic planning and human resource processes suggest that a moderate to weak alignment is present.

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KEYWORDS: Strategic Planning, Human Resources, Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award, Quality Management

INTRODUCTION

The highly competitive global environment in the 1980's spurred a major quality revolution for companies in the United States. In response, the United States Congress in 1987 voted to enact the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) with the goal of encouraging U.S. businesses and other types of organizations to approach and deploy effective quality processes in the delivery of their products and services. The MBNQA provides a framework of internal assessment for companies to use in their planning and implementation of quality initiatives. Through this internal assessment process, company leadership gains a better understanding of the alignments/linkages within its operations in order to modify its processes for meeting or exceeding customer expectations and requirements. The underlying philosophy for these quality-driven companies is a strong passion to continuously improve. The MBNQA award is a nationally and internationally accepted standard currently available in several sector categories: business (large and small), education, government, non-profit, and health care. Under a set of predetermined criteria, organizations are examined in seven categories: leadership, strategy, customer, measurement/analysis/knowledge management, workforce, operations, and results.

The purpose of this research study is to examine the alignment of variables related to strategic planning and human resources planning. The recent state of the literature does not empirically address the alignment issue for Malcolm Baldrige winners; the recent research literature only addresses Baldrige winners in

general normative terms. As a result, this research study adds to the body of knowledge as an empirical analysis to assess if alignment is present in Malcolm Baldrige winning companies and to follow up on research studies of Malcolm Baldrige winning manufacturing companies from the 1990s and early 2000s. Follow up studies are important to periodically conduct in order to identify whether or not Malcolm Baldrige winning companies continue to adopt and implement the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality framework in their organizations. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: literature review, methodology, results, conclusions, concluding remarks, references, acknowledgements, and biography.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malcolm Baldrige Framework

The Malcolm Baldrige Framework consists of seven categories: Leadership, Strategy, Customers, Measurement/Analysis/and Knowledge Management, Workforce, Operations, and Results. (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2017). The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Program is based on 11 core values and concepts. These values and concepts are the foundation for integrating key organizational requirements within a results-oriented framework. The underlying core values and concepts for business are: “customer-driven quality, leadership, continuous improvement and learning, valuing employees, fast response, design quality and prevention, long-range view of the future, management by fact, partnership development, public responsibility and citizenship, and results focus” (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2017). For each sector, these core values and concepts are translated into the Criteria for Performance Excellence (CPE), and reflect validated leading-edge management/administrative practices against which an organization can measure itself. The Criteria for Performance Excellence represent a common language, making it easier for organizations to share knowledge and transfer best practices. They provide a systems perspective for understanding performance management.

Ford and Evans (2000) argue that by viewing the Criteria for Performance Excellence as an “... integrative model of organizational effectiveness that encompasses a number of cross-functional disciplines”, a large body of research related to the CPE framework actually does exist. An in- depth examination of the CPE’s strategic planning category was conducted. The authors demonstrate that the strategic planning framework represented by the CPE aligns considerably with the conceptual literature. The authors suggest that despite the lack of direct scholarly validity of the CPE, the Malcolm Baldrige framework embodied by the CPE is grounded in research-based principles. A number of research streams support the consideration of human resources in the strategic planning process. One such stream relates to management development and has been cited as important for both strategy formulation (Andrews, 1971; Wright and Snell, 1998; Delery, 1998; Hodgetts, 1999; Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Mintzberg, 1973; and for strategy implementation, (Kerr and Jackofsky, 1989). In an article by James F. Huggett, the author states “the key to meaningful change in your organization is to align every thought, action, and behavior (the manifestations of an organization’s culture) with the clearly defined and communicated vision you have established. ... managing context is a process of establishing clear frameworks for decision making (based on the organization’s vision and strategy and the work group’s specific objectives), and then empowering employees to make decisions within those frameworks. ... embedded in your organization are a number of systems that shape the behavior of your employees. Some are obvious and intentional; others are subtle and unintentional. ...Any soft system that is in conflict with the outcomes you desire will act as a barrier to change. The sooner these systems are identified and aligned, the better” (Huggett, 1999). The Huggett research suggests that without a framework, strategic planning and human resource practices may result in barriers to effective change outcomes.

In an article by Richard M. Hodgetts et.al., the authors examine perspectives from several small business Malcolm Baldrige award winners. These small businesses emphasize the importance of creating a culture conducive to and supportive of strategically aligned quality systems, part of which are a sense of

empowerment by the employees and employee recognition and rewards. The authors state “small businesses implementing high-performing quality efforts (Baldrige Award Winners) are able to achieve their objectives and outpace the competition because they have created the right conditions for their success. ...Baldrige winners have an overall philosophy and strategy that encompasses all areas of product and service delivery. They do not emphasize one area to the exclusion of others. Additionally, all employees are involved in the effort and understand what is expected of them. As a result, each Baldrige winner is a unified organization” (Hodgetts, 1999).

Several authors employed empirical research methods to test and validate the causality of the Criteria for Performance Excellence (CPE) in the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award framework (Wilson, (2000); Meyer, (2001); Curkovic, (2000); Badri, (2006). The general statistical findings show significance in causality for the leadership criteria as the driving force for all other CPEs. The study conducted by Wilson et.al. shows predictor variables in each CPE category. The leadership category is the most important driver of system performance results. The second most important driver of performance is the process management category (now changed to operations category in the 2017 Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence framework). However, the authors found no direct effects on financial results. Winn and Cameron (1998) studied the MBNQA CPE framework for the validity of the proposed relationships amongst the MBNQA dimension in higher education. This study found that in the literature there is no clear definition of quality; as a result, the MBNQA framework and the surrogate variables contained within the framework are difficult to ascribe to an unclear definition of quality. The empirical results of the study helped to create a modified model or a more simplified version of the model in order to manage quality improvement initiatives.

Griffith, (2013) applied the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria to a hospital environment for Malcolm Baldrige award winners from 2002-2008. The research limited the examination to the Knowledge Management criteria (now changed to Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management in the 2017 MBNQA CPEs). The findings of this research showed the MBNQA framework assists in the effectiveness for the variables accuracy, confidentiality, timeliness, and security. Lee (2003). examined the impact of the MBNQA criteria on organizational quality. The authors’ findings suggest that the MBNQA framework leads to positive effects on organizational quality. Hart and Schlesinger applied the MBNQA framework to human resource activities. Similar to the Lee study, Hart and Schlesinger (1991) found the MBNQA framework assists in achieving total quality management in human resources.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The specific sample identified for this research study are business sector manufacturing companies who have either won the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award or their respective state award based upon the Malcolm Baldrige criteria. From this list of award winners, letters were sent to each organization requesting a site visit. Only 11 companies responded affirmatively for a site visit; these 11 companies represent a convenience sample. The empirical data at the 11 company locations were collected over four years (2013-2016). Each of these 11 companies represents a different industry sector, geographical location, and organizational size. Table 1 identifies the specific breakdown across sector, geography, and size.

In the 11 manufacturing companies, three companies are in the automotive sector, six companies are located in the Midwest and five companies are small in size. Within each of the large and small manufacturing companies, 30 and 20 employees respectively were systematically randomly selected from each plant's employee list. Table 2 shows the gender and employee job type of the respondents.

Table 1: Distribution of Companies by Sector, Location, and Size

Sector	Location	Size
Foods	East	Large
Automotive	Midwest	Small
Electronics	West	
Chemicals	South	

*Table 1 identifies the distribution of companies by sector, location, and size. Column 1 shows the sectors; column 2 shows the number of companies for each sector; column 3 shows the geographical location; column 4 shows the number of companies for each geographical location; column 5 shows the size of the companies; and column 6 shows the number of companies for each size. Of the 11 sites visits, two are in the Foods sector, three in the Automotive sector, three in the Electronics sector, two in the Chemicals sector, and one in the Health Care sector. Two companies are located in the East, six in the Midwest, one in the West, and two in the South. Six of the companies are large and five companies are small.

Table 2: Demographic Data by Gender and Employment Category

	Male	Female	Management	Professional	Other
Gender	157 (56%)	123 (44%)			
Employee Job Type			51 (18%)	61 (22%)	168 (60%)

*Table 2 shows the percentages by gender and employment category for the 280 respondents; Fifty-six percent of the respondents are male and 44 percent are female. Eighteen percent of the respondent group hold management positions; 22 percent hold professional-type positions; and 60 percent represent all other types of positions.

Thirty-six percent of the respondents are male and 44% percent are female. Eighteen percent of the respondents hold management positions, 22% hold professional-type positions, and 60% hold other types of positions. Site visit information was collected from several sources: documents, personal interviews, and observations. These multiple sources of information were used primarily as a means of cross validation of data as well as mutually exclusive sources of data. Initially, 34 variables that represent strategic planning and human resource processes were examined at each of the companies. For this study, only 13 of those initial 34 variables will be reported. The 13 variables are: core values, vision, mission, goals, strategies, human resource policies, training, development, job design, selection practices, monetary compensation, termination practices, and performance appraisals. Measurement and scoring procedures vary according to the source of information. Data from personal interviews are measured using content analysis procedures; data from both document searches and observations are measured using frequencies. Frequencies are used as the method for collecting data from document searches and observations. The basis used for the percentage calculations of these frequencies was determined as a function of the total presence and absence of alignments for the specific variables examined.

RESULTS

For this research study, the qualitative analysis will be limited to the selected variables of strategic planning (core values, vision, mission, goals, and strategy) and human resource processes (human resource policies, training, development, job design, selection practices, termination practices, monetary compensation, and performance appraisals) for the companies in the study. The approach I have elected to take is to report the results in two ways: 1) in what ways each of the companies are similar in their strategic planning processes and their approaches to human resources management; and 2) to identify the frequencies of alignment between strategic planning and human resource processes.

Strategic Planning

As a point of comparison, the most significant and obvious similarity for all companies in the study is their strategic planning process itself. In all 11 companies, strategy development and policy deployment

processes serve as the foundation for all company activity and effort. More than simply foundation, however, the strategic planning processes actively drive resource allocation, performance measures, rewards and recognition, continuous improvement, information and analysis, fact-based decision making, and performance-oriented results.

Strategic Planning Process

Phase 1: Each organization collects information from its various markets, competitors, customers and other relevant sources in order to project a forecast of volume/revenue.

Phase 2: Each of these companies routinely compare themselves on critical indicators to their key competitors.

Phase 3: Internal capability and resource availability information is collected to determine allocation of resources and prioritization of organizational goals.

Phase 4: Information gathered from Phases 1-3 are then used to develop the unit strategies and combined into annual operating budgets.

Phase 5: Unit strategies along with their corresponding budgets are reviewed by institutional senior leadership for alignment amongst unit segments.

Phase 6: The implementation of the unit strategies is managed through the policy deployment methodology. Each subunit provides their key goals to support the strategies of the organization and the unit segments. This bottom-up strategic development process enables these companies to encourage ownership of their goals and to become accountable for their accomplishment. As part of the strategy development and deployment process, these companies also define key performance indicators which have been agreed upon by the unit and subunit personnel, which become the mechanism by which performance results will be measured.

Phase 7: The key performance indicators are reviewed periodically at the lowest level of responsibility to the highest level.

Phase 8: If a change is warranted in performance or plan, contingency plans are reviewed against goals, and if necessary, activated.

Phase 9: As the strategic plan is carried out, deviations from the original goals are expected. In recognition of this reality, the planning process of these companies is designed as a dynamic process capable of adapting rapidly to changing environmental conditions. These companies use horizontal and vertical communication to keep a continuous and vigilant eye on the plan and on the environment.

All 11 companies in the study developed a vision and mission statement, and established core values to which strategy development and deployment were derived. The vision, mission and core values were the philosophical guiding principles by which the companies operated. As was earlier mentioned, no company activity or effort was conducted unless those activities were aligned with the companies' guiding principles and strategic goals and objectives. Although different terminology is used to describe each company's core values, there are common themes amongst them. For example, customer focus, teamwork, integrity, quality-driven, respect, trust, empowerment, partnerships, and continuous improvement appear as stated core values. For effective operational results to occur, these companies recognize that the organizational strategies must be communicated and well understood by all organizational members. Table 3 identifies

the aggregate frequency percentages for the strategic planning variables, core values, vision, mission, goals, and strategies.

Table 3: Aggregate Frequency Percentages for Strategic Planning Variables Core Values, Vision, Mission, Goals, and Strategies

Strong	9%
Moderate	47%
Weak	44%

**Table 3 reports the results of the frequency analysis for the strategic planning variables core values, vision, mission, goals, and strategies. Column one categorizes the frequencies according to strong, moderate, and weak. Column two identifies the percentages within each category.*

The results from the aggregate frequency analysis for the strategic planning variables core values, vision, mission, goals, and strategies shows a 91% frequency in the moderate and weak categories. The key performance indicators or key measures as they are sometimes called become the mechanisms/tools for translating vision, mission, and strategy into more concrete concepts that can be measured and understood. For the most part, between four and ten clearly defined key measures, developed and selected by senior leadership in conjunction with unit leadership, representing a wide range of organizational interests, were identified by these companies as true indicators of success or failure within their respective organizations. These key measures then become the foundation for all subunits to define performance measures that are directly related to that specific subunit's responsibility. Through the processes involved in strategic planning goal setting, reviews of performance results relative to targets/goals, each subunit takes ownership and commitment for their performance. The core values of these companies reinforce the idea that personnel throughout the entire organization must have a clear understanding of what their department is working toward and how they as individuals can contribute to the effort.

Alignment occurs through the process of bottom-up strategy planning and deployment. At each level of bottom-up strategy planning, each unit and subunit are connected vertically, and at the organization level, each unit segment is connected horizontally. The process owners who establish targets for their respective unit objectives within these companies address the following questions: 1) what do the objectives measure—i.e., what surrogates are used to measure the objectives; 2) how are the objectives linked to key measures, mission, and strategy; 3) what is the source of data; and 4) who collects the data, and how often is the data collected and analyzed? It is generally recognized by each of these companies that valid and reliable information and critical analysis leads to fact-based decision making for effective management of their respective companies, and system integrity.

This latter point may seem obvious, but is often the source of many misunderstandings, confusion, and suspicion by personnel who, after all, are the implementational forces/energies of organizational performance and results. Through linkages and alignment within these companies' operations, there is a strong belief by leadership that each function, role, and process must be designed and implemented for internal consistency and integrity. Generally occurring through the improvement cycle process, teams of individuals discuss misalignments within their respective areas. It may sound ridiculous that an organization would have internal barriers or disincentives that discourage the achievement of the unit's goals, but this is often the case when an organization does not pay attention to the alignments within its system.

Human Resource Focus

The human resource focus for this particular study included the specific variables training, development, selection practices, job design, monetary compensation, termination practices, performance appraisals, and human resource policies. In addition to these specific human resource variables mentioned above, the

variables of teamwork, communication input/feedback and empowerment will be included in this discussion. In 10 out of 11 companies, teams/teamwork is a stated core value. Senior leadership recognizes the value of cross-functional work processes for enabling their employees to share knowledge and continuously improve. For employees to function effectively in teams, they are provided with extensive training and development programs for personal growth and organizational improvement. In 8 of the 11 companies, teams manage their own work systems including scheduling, work assignments, time off, peer review, and work flow. Compensation systems are aligned with team-based work activities by rewarding individuals for team-based performance. The performance appraisal process includes a significant percentage of peer assessment as input providing a documented record for rewarding merit increases for the achievement of goals and the demonstration of skills. Table 4 identifies the aggregate frequencies for the human resources variables human resource policies, training, development, selection practices, job design, monetary compensation, termination practices, and performance appraisals.

Table 4: Aggregate Frequency Percentages for Human Resource Variables—Human Resource Policies, Training, Development, Selection Practices, Job Design, Monetary Compensation, Termination Practices, and Performance Appraisals

Strong	1%
Moderate	37%
Weak	62%

**This table shows the aggregate frequency percentages for human resources practices. Column 1 categorizes the frequency percentages according to strong, moderate and weak. Column 2 identifies the frequency percentages.*

Although each company states a commitment to the alignment of human resources practices, the results of the aggregate frequency analysis in Table 4 suggest that 99% of the companies have only a moderate and weak alignment.

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of the paper is to examine the alignment between strategic planning and human resources processes. What companies state they are committed to and what they actually do may not be aligned. The methodology used to collect the data were interviews, documents searches, and observations. Based on the aggregate frequencies analysis of the strategic planning variables (core values, vision, mission, goals, and strategies) and the human resources processes (human resource policies, training, development, selection practices, job design, monetary compensation, termination practices, and performance appraisals) the results show moderate and weak alignments between strategic planning and human resources processes. On a more detailed examination of the alignment between strategic planning and human resource processes per data collection type, the results suggest that a moderate to weak alignment is present when the data sources are the interviews and personal observations. When the data source is the document searches, the results yield a strong/moderate alignment between these respective variables. The inconsistency from independent data sources on alignment presents confusing and conflicting findings; therefore, no clear conclusions can be made on the alignment issue at the present time.

Limitations

Limitations of the research are the convenience sample for the 11 companies studied, aggregate frequency counts only, and no statistical analysis on the individual variables.

Future Research

Directions for future research may include a detailed examination related to the conflicting results amongst the different data collection methods found in this study. Additional future research might include statistical analyses such as pairwise correlations, multiple regression, and ANOVA for the selected 13 variables in this study and a more inclusive analysis of the initial 34 variables. The statistical analyses could provide a more detailed examination of each variable's relationship to the issue of alignment between strategic planning and human resource processes.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Without exception, all of the 11 companies in the research study state they use their strategic planning process cycle as the primary alignment mechanism and driver toward the deployment of company activity. At this level of detail, each of these companies identify stakeholder requirements, key performance measures, and links to business drivers in order to align their strategic goals and strategies to operational action plans at all levels in the organization. The cascading effect of the strategic planning process links various business units through information networks for timely, accurate input and feedback. Any changes in the business environment may prompt a quicker response time from all business units. However, the results of this study show mixed results for alignment depending upon data collection method.

The most significant cross-cutting attribute shared by all of these companies is that they are winners of a state or national quality award based upon the Malcolm Baldrige criteria (the sample for the study was chosen for that parameter). These companies realize that their quality initiatives could not be implemented or sustained without a valid framework in place. The Malcolm Baldrige framework provides a validated assessment process driven by the organization's strategy and action plans, tailored to their specific customer/stakeholder focus and critical key success factors as identified by the organization. The self-assessment process allows the organization to identify organizational strengths and to target key opportunities for improvement. Organizational alignment, communication, and performance results function in an integrated, holistic systems approach supported by resources aligned to the achievement of organizational goals. All of these are consistent with the Malcolm Baldrige framework and core values

The 11 site visits of these quality award winners afforded this researcher the opportunity to collect a large quantity of data on leadership, strategic planning, communications, and human resource practices. In general, all of these companies are committed to performance excellence, and state this commitment through their approach and deployment practices. Each of these companies ascribed to a continuous improvement philosophy. In addition, each company supports and reinforces its commitment to quality by allocating financial and other resources to strategic objectives.

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BIOGRAPHY

Patricia A. Lapoint is a Professor of Management in the Walter F. and Virginia Johnson School of Business at McMurry University, Abilene, Texas. E-mail contact: lapointp@mcmurryadm.mcm.edu.