
A Study on Quality of Work Life: Employee Perceptions

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Abstract

Organizations with high quality of work life can enjoy exceptional growth and profitability. The purpose of the study was to look into attitudes of employees towards their quality of work life (QOWL). The perceptions of male and female employees showed no significant difference while the overall average percentage of employees seemed satisfied with their quality of work life. Furthermore, employees on managerial positions seemed more satisfied with their quality of work life than the others. The study concludes with directions for deeper probing to enable organizations benefit more extensively from their human capital.

Keywords: *Quality of Work Life, Employee perceptions*

Introduction

Organizations in which employees enjoy a superior quality of work life often benefit from exceptional growth and profitability¹. While the positive contribution of QOWL may be difficult to quantify, Worrall and Cooper² recently reported that in the USA, a low level of well-being at work is estimated to cost about 5-10% of Gross National Product per annum. Retaining an adequate and qualified workforce is a prerequisite for a well-functioning organization³. No doubt then, that these organizations must broadly ensure at least a threshold level of the quality of work life as part of the quest for growth and success.

Managers who help employees improve their quality of their work life at home as well as at work often reap measurable rewards that include loyalty, productivity

and retention⁴. At the same time, it is observed that work today has become intense, thereby, raising its stress component. Therefore, organizations that are dependent heavily on their human capital rather than technology for their success, now seek to incorporate numerous programs aimed at proving a higher quality work life. Such actions are often included in company strategies and operating practices. The goal is to ensure increased level of satisfaction on the job—by improvement of work conditions and work contents⁵, or by other means. But to what extent are the underlying expectations justified?

QOWL has been coined as a philosophy, a set of principles, which holds that people are the most important resource in the organization as they are trustworthy, responsible and capable of making valuable contributions and hence they should be treated with dignity and respect⁶. People also conjure up QOWL as a set of methods, such as autonomous work groups, job enrichment and high involvement aimed at boosting the satisfaction and productivity of workers⁷. According to Shamir and Soloman, QOWL relates to the individual's job related well-being and the extent to which one's experience is rewarding, fulfilling and devoid of stress and other negative personal consequences⁸.

In addition to productivity, quality of work life is also noted to have an impact on human resource outcomes such as absenteeism, accident-proneness, grievance and quitting⁹.

Evidence gathered by recent studies suggests that worker participation leads to lesser grievances; lack of participation can

be major cause for workers' dissatisfaction leading to high levels of absence and high turnover.

However, organizations too are under stress. In order to remain competitive, organizations need to respond quickly and effectively to the challenges and special opportunities facilitated by new technologies and ways of working¹⁰ and of interfacing with employees, peers, and customers. Therefore, when businesses strive to occupy a prime position in the marketplace, the existing evidence already suggests that quality of work life must not be ignored or the related issues sidestepped. Sadly, management being under stress, this is often their predicament.

Indeed, in many organizations, QOWL of employees emerges as an elucidation for one's performance in the job¹¹. Researchers have also noted that it is important to develop and maintain an up-to-date understanding of what is happening in the rapidly changing areas of work organization, working conditions, and employee attitudes and the perception of well-being. The reason, we note again, is that working conditions and feelings of employees can significantly affect corporate performance¹² and hence can't be ignored.

Therefore, it would be vital to learn directly from *employees* how *they* perceive their quality of work life and how it affects their performance and their sense of meaningfully contributing to the mission of their employer. This research, conceived as a pilot study involving men and women employed in the UAE, aimed at developing insights into the positive and negative personal perceptions of employees' own quality of work life. Exploring perceptions

of individuals' quality of work life, it is widely held by Organizational Development specialists, can help one realize what employers need to know and understand in terms of improvement of work conditions and work contents—if they are seeking growth and excellence. HRM practices of the organization can thus be better built. The learning of employee perceptions may also turn out to be the key to raise the effectiveness of prevailing HRM processes. Not only that, one may venture to suggest that by improving quality of work life for its employees, the organization may materialize superior performance of the investment made in it by its stakeholders¹³

These factors and related readings prompted the execution of the present pilot study. The results are perhaps not unexpected. Yet, they indeed suggest an opportunity that is perhaps only partially exploited by many organizations in the present moment when stress and tension on the job are high. Also, an extensive QOWL survey in the UAE would be particularly significant because of the cultural diversity of UAE's workforce. In the quest to improve an organization's effectiveness under present global conditions, perhaps no effort—especially one focused to deliver OD (Organizational Development)—would deserve to be sidestepped. We begin this presentation with what has been learned about QOWL from earlier research. Next, we describe our own results.

Literature Survey

Walton¹⁴ proposed eight major conceptual categories relating to QOWL as: (1) adequate and fair compensation, (2) safe and healthy working conditions, (3) immediate opportunity—to use and develop

human capacities, (4) opportunity for continued growth and security, (5) social integration in the work organization, (6) constitutionalism in the work organization, (7) work and total life space and (8) social relevance of work life.

There have been several recent studies that critically evaluated the measurement of job satisfaction/QOWL. One recent review by Van Saane, Sluiter, Verbeek, and Frings-Dresen³ concluded that any measure of job satisfaction should include assessments of the following dimensions of job satisfaction in order to have content validity: (a) job content (i.e. variety in skills, challenge), (b) autonomy, (c) financial rewards, (d) promotion/advancement opportunities, (e) quality of supervision (support, fairness), (f) communication (feedback, counseling

opportunities), (g) coworkers (adequacy of coworkers, relationships with them), (h) workload (time pressure, stress), (i) work demands (insecurity of work situation, involuntarily doing extra work), (j) task meaningfulness, and (k) growth and development opportunities.

Literature also evidences findings of various QOWL studies revealing the necessary actions. For example, a Finnish quality of work life survey revealed that despite various improvements, an action for better working life and well-being had become more urgent¹⁵.

Table 1 summarizes Quality of work life factors listed in the literature.

Sr #	QOWL Factors	Researchers
1	Identified several needs for Quality of work life as such as Skill variety, Task identity, Task significance, Autonomy and Feedback.	Hackman and Oldham (1976)
2	Basic extrinsic job factors including wages, hours and working conditions, and the intrinsic job notions of the nature of the work itself.	Taylor J C in Cooper, CL and Mumford, E (1979)
3	Work involvement, intrinsic job motivation, higher order need strength, perceived intrinsic job characteristics, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, happiness, and self-rated anxiety.	Warr, P, Cook, J and Wall, T (1979)
4	Satisfaction with wages, hours and working conditions, describing the “basic elements of a good quality of work life” as; safe work environment, equitable wages, equal employment opportunities and opportunities for advancement.	Mirvis, P.H. and Lawler, E.E. (1984)
5	Job satisfaction, job involvement, work role ambiguity, work role conflict, work role overload, job stress, organizational commitment and turn-over intentions and reutilization of job content.	Baba, VV and Jamal, M (1991)

Table 1: QOWL Factors Addressed in the Literature

The research on African Americans' work life in recent years has provided us with valuable knowledge about the impact of work life on the social structural conditions (e.g., family structure and poverty) of African Americans¹⁶.

A study conducted in Taiwan further suggested that the concept of QOWL for Taiwanese workforce was related to the job; financial awards and job characteristics to be most important dimensions for all type of workers while perceptions on other aspects of QOWL differed and there was a significant difference when compared to Western measures of QOWL.

Ample literature exists on Quality of work life and Quality of work life programs that focus mostly on Western and other countries. By contrast, even if there is much relevance of QOWL in UAE, the few studies completed to date explore significant relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment¹⁷. One study has addressed factors that relate to work climate influences on QOWL¹⁸.

The purpose of the present study is to explore the perception of employees in context of UAE organizations. As widely noted, the UAE has a culturally diverse workforce and diverse work-environments. How then does a typical UAE worker perceive his/her QOWL? What bearing would that have on his/her performance, and consequently on the performance of UAE organizations?

Research Design

The investigator of the present study feels that QOWL should be addressed by formulating the hypotheses anchored on the

ability of the workplace to meet human needs, as theorized, for instance, by Maslow²¹. Leaving that broader objective for an important follow up research, this study employed a survey method to capture the positive and negative attitudes towards the quality of work life. A questionnaire was developed broadly drawing on evaluation of QOWL by Van Saane, Sluiter, Verbeek, & Frings-Dresen³ and the existing literature to stay close to the relevant (workplace) context.

The survey was administered to measure employees' attitude about a range of following 11 key factors affecting their quality of work life:

1. Amount of autonomy
2. Workload
3. Work life balance
4. Trust to senior mgt.
5. Training opportunity
6. Relationship with co-worker
7. Quality of supervision
8. Opportunity for promotion and advancement
9. Job security
10. Financial rewards
11. Care for health and safety

A seven-point scale with 1 being "Strongly Disagree" and 7 being "Strongly Agree" was used to measure the responses. The questions asked participants to select one response within a seven point scale (Very Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Somewhat Dissatisfied, Neutral, Somewhat Satisfied, Satisfied, and Very Satisfied). The responses were then grouped into three

categories, namely, those who indicated they were very satisfied were recorded as “Very Satisfied”, satisfied were recorded as “Satisfied” while all others were recorded “Not Satisfied”.

The target population for the study included samples of employees from several independent organizations in UAE. In addition to answering the formal questions, respondents were asked to identify and note in writing any other important factor that they perceived affected their overall quality of work life.

The data was analyzed by using SPSS Version 17. A reliability test was conducted to check the validity of questionnaire instrument. The reliability coefficient for this measure was good (Cronbach alpha = 0.84).

Empirical Evidence

This section presents empirical evidence gathered through the administration of the survey instrument, again we note, in a pilot mode, to guide future studies. 150 questionnaires were personally given by this researcher to respondents. 83 valid questionnaires were returned to the author. Of the respondents, 35% per cent were female while the rest were males. The respondents’ age ranged from 20-45 years.

The study indicates that only 49% of employees are satisfied with their quality of work life. The elements of quality of work life that are perceived as unsatisfactory are the workload, work life balance, financial rewards and the opportunity for promotion and advancement. This observation is much consistent with the other studies conducted on quality of work life.

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the perceptions of quality of work life for males and females. There was no significant difference noted in scores for males ($\underline{M} = 4.9$, $\underline{SD} = 0.88$), and females [$\underline{M} = 4.7$, $\underline{SD} = 0.99$] since a t-test yielded $t(83) = 1.81$ with $p = 0.24$. The magnitude of the differences in the mean QOWL between the sexes, thus was very small (eta squared = 0.039)

However, QOWL perceptions on financial reward differed. There was a significant difference in scores of Financial Rewards for males ($\underline{M} = 4.91$, $\underline{SD} = 1.6$), and females [$\underline{M} = 3.97$, $\underline{SD} = 1.8$; $t(83) = 2.4$, $p = .01$].

Table 2 summarizes the results.

Employees satisfaction factors of QOWL	Very Satisfied		Satisfied		Unsatisfied		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<i>Amount of autonomy</i>	16	19.3	18	22	49	59	83	100
<i>Workload</i>	5	6.02	26	31	52	62.7	83	100
<i>Work life balance</i>	3	3.61	23	28	57	68.7	83	100
<i>Trust to senior mgt.</i>	13	15.7	29	35	41	49.4	83	100
<i>Training opportunity</i>	18	21.7	25	30	40	59	83	100
<i>Relationship with co- worker</i>	12	14.5	34	41	37	44.6	83	100
<i>Quality of supervision</i>	11	13.3	32	39	40	48.2	83	100
<i>Opportunity for promotion and advancement</i>	7	8.43	17	20	59	71.1	83	100
<i>Job security</i>	20	24.1	25	30	38	45.8	83	100
<i>Financial rewards</i>	9	10.8	22	27	52	62.7	83	100
<i>Care for health and safety</i>	20	24.1	27	33	36	43.4	83	100

Table 2: Attitude of employees about their quality of work life

Furthermore, female employees responded in writing that adoption of a ‘flexi time’ system would considerably improve their quality of working life. It has been generally noted in past studies that flexi-timings benefit employee as well the employer—the employer gains from better labor input while employees benefit as it would help better fit their domestic needs with workplace commitments.²⁰

The opportunity for promotion and advancement being one significant factor causing dissatisfaction, literature suggests that one key HRM practice of a firm to affect employee motivation is closely linked to the employee promotion system in place²⁰. If this is indeed so, the quality of

work life can be improved considerably. Employees’ dissatisfaction feedback on the elements of autonomy suggests that many employees lack the freedom to make own decisions. The other important factor is the necessity of training as employees are found dissatisfied with the training opportunity provided to them.

Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of attitude of Employees’ QOWL by their “Job Title” seen as a formal indicator of whether they are empowered to make decisions. It seems the employees with managerial position are more satisfied with their QOWL. The overall percentage of dissatisfaction for managerial ranks is lower than the non-managers.

Managerial Position	V. Satisfied		Satisfied		Unsatisfied		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Yes	5	33	7	47	3	20	15	100
No	12	18	24	35	32	47	68	100

Table 3: Attitude of Employees' QOWL by their designations

Concluding Observations, Limitations and Future Research Suggestions

This pilot study intends to assist in short listing the significant workplace issues perceived by employees in UAE, building upon the suggestions made by researchers who probed QOWL in Western work environments and cultures. Even if this researcher believes that meaningful insights may be developed by anchoring the perception of QOWL on, for instance, Maslow's version²¹ of the hierarchical needs that humans seek to satisfy, this present research represents the first step of an ongoing inquiry process. For example, it is well known that creative people—artists, writers, engineering designers, etc.—do not particularly worry about the physical features of the environment. As long as certain basic conveniences are provided, they only seek the challenge and the opportunity to freely engage in their pursuit. Given these conditions, they would rate the quality of their work life high.

Our goal is to eventually link inferences about *the level of QOWL to employee performance* in order to facilitate decision makers in UAE on strategies to improve organizational performance. Such an approach, we admit, accepts that the

premise that a “content” employee would be a better contributor to organizational excellence.

The findings presented here only do the first step—they indicate the elements of QOWL that UAE employees are generally unsatisfied with and also a few elements that they found to be satisfactory. Overall, however, only 49% of employees were found to be satisfied. This suggests that a more expanded and insightful study should be undertaken, for, at least *prima facie*, the UAE workforce is perhaps only partially contributing at its full potential.

The study also compared the QOWL of managerial and non-managerial positions and it appears that the managers and positions of power experience better QOWL than those of the non-managerial positions. Also, there was no significant difference found between the male and female employees' perceptions towards their quality of work life. This study is exploratory. It has produced incomplete evidence.

However, such initial knowledge of employee attitudes about their quality of work life in UAE would surely assist in the second phase of this research study. The

second phase of this research aims to study employees of specific organizations—in order to find any organizational contextual issues that are affecting overall quality of work life in UAE and their possible linkage to organizational performance. Managerial implications of such a study would be to redesign the work, workplace, responsibilities, supervisory methods, and other aspects to improve QOWL since a satisfied worker generally has been found to be more productive, hence of more value to the organization.

Thus, this pilot survey of QOWL in UAE has tossed up several interesting questions. These will be probed in a larger survey to help UAE managers and administrators better design the work environment in order for UAE to gain productivity, a satisfied and motivated workforce, raising the sense of involvement and contributions, for example. This is expected to cut losses in productive time wasted on the job or due to low motivation. It will also make it possible for us to compare the UAE results with other similar studies to reveal any unique aspects of managing the multicultural white-collar workforce that is here to help build a globally competitive UAE.

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