

## Employees' Perception of Human Aspects in TQM at GCC Standardization Organization

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### Abstract

*The Gulf Standardization Organization (GSO), serving as the standardization body for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, has operated as a multinational entity across six Arabian Gulf countries for five years. Its primary functions include supervising and issuing Gulf Standards while endeavoring to enhance the quality infrastructure within the GCC nations. Despite its significant international engagements with organizations such as ISO and BSI, the awareness of its employees regarding its relationship with Total Quality Management (TQM) remains uncertain. To address this gap, this project aims to assess employees' familiarity with and awareness of the "soft" side of TQM and its implementation within the GSO. In-depth interviews were conducted with managerial, supervisory, and operational level employees to gather insights. The study reveals that while some employees have a basic understanding of TQM and its practices, the majority exhibit a limited awareness of its "soft" aspects. In light of these findings, the study recommends the GSO undertake a specialized qualitative inquiry into TQM and its "soft" side. This investigation elucidates the factors contributing to employees' lack of awareness, empowerment deficiencies, and delays in TQM implementation. By identifying these weaknesses, the GSO can develop tailored training programs and promptly integrate TQM principles to enhance organizational effectiveness.*

**Keywords:** *Gulf standardization organization; total quality management; soft side; awareness; implementation; effectiveness; training.*

### Introduction

Contemporary administrative styles have garnered significant attention from both practitioners and academic researchers, being perceived as prevailing and desirable in the current era. This phenomenon is often likened to the third revolutionary wave, following the industrial revolution and the emergence of information technology. Scholars and professionals alike are drawn to explore its implications, applications, and potential for reshaping organizational structures and practices. This paper aims to delve into the intricacies of this administrative evolution, examining its historical roots, theoretical underpinnings, and practical implications for modern organizations (Porath, 2023). Organizations must keep pace with rapid development to ensure survival and continuity. Creative thinking is essential for organizations to grow and adapt. To foster creativity, organizations must form a culture of shared values and beliefs among employees, encouraging exploration and generating opportunities (Ahmed & Sajid, 2023).

Time is essential for integrating proper quality principles and techniques into an organization's culture (Akpa, Asikhia & Nnejii, 2021; Goetsch & Davis, 1994). that Total Quality Management (TQM) must swiftly permeate organizational practices to become entrenched. However, the immediate adoption of TQM as a way of life within organizations is impractical. While time is undeniably essential for TQM implementation, human resources play an equally vital role in its success. Hence, the awareness of quality among individuals within the organization emerges as central to TQM's purpose (Schein & Schein, 2017). Khando (2021) Asserts that quality awareness goes beyond simple promotion within the organization; it involves disseminating information and shaping managerial actions and discussions. Despite this, further research suggests that quality awareness is sometimes limited and subject to varying interpretations by managers across different national business contexts (Bertolini et al, 2021). Against this backdrop, this paper explores the extent of TQM awareness among employees of the Gulf Standardization Organization (GSO), particularly focusing on its "soft" side and implementation nuances. Through interviews conducted with GSO managers, section heads, supervisors, and other employees, this study delves into respondents' perceptions of TQM, shedding light on the depth of their understanding, particularly regarding its "soft" aspects. The findings suggest that while some familiarity with TQM exists among GSO employees, their

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understanding of its "soft" side is often superficial, highlighting the need for further exploration and intervention.

The study is organized into six sections. Section 2 offers the theoretical framework, exploring the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM) with a focus on both its "soft" and "hard" aspects. Section 3 reviews the literature, highlighting the importance of managers' awareness of the "soft" side of TQM, given their critical role in the General Services Organization (GSO). Section 4 details the methodology and research approach used. Section 5 presents and analyzes the study's findings. Section 6 includes the conclusions and recommendations based on these findings, followed by reflections on the research process in the final section.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of Total Quality Management (TQM) includes both "soft" concepts and "hard" practices, as highlighted in quality management literature. These elements constitute the foundation for implementing TQM within organizations, offering a comprehensive approach to quality management initiatives. Table 1 below details the theoretical framework used in this study.

Table 1.

Soft TQM Concepts Identified in Quality Management Literature	Hard TQM Practices Identified in Quality Management Literature	TQM Techniques, tools and systems
Total Employee Involvement	Statistical Process Control	
Continuous Improvement	ISO 9000 series	
Continuous Training	Pareto Analysis	
Teamwork	Matrix Diagram	
Empowerment	Histograms	
Top-management Commitment and Support	Tree Decision Diagram	
Democratic Management Style	Critical Path Analysis	
Customer/Citizen Satisfaction	Fishbone or Ishakawa Diagram	
Culture Change		

## Literature Review

The American Federal Office of Management provides a definition of Total Quality Management (TQM) that emphasizes its association with the organization itself, which operates as a social system (Snongtaweepon et al, 2023). Psychogios and Priporas (2007) contend that organizations encompass not only technical systems but also human systems. Furthermore, they characterize TQM as an endeavor aimed at enhancing the overall competitiveness, effectiveness, and structure of the entire organization. Two crucial dimensions of TQM emerge from the aforementioned definitions: management tools and techniques, and management concepts and principles (Hasham, 2018; Shahzad et al., 2023). These dimensions encompass what is commonly referred to as the "hard" aspects of TQM, comprising techniques, and the "soft" side, encompassing principles (Zwain et al., 2012).

Exploring the "soft" side of Total Quality Management (TQM) has led to the identification of nine principles commonly highlighted in quality management literature. The first principle underscores the inclusivity of TQM, involving every organizational member in the quality improvement process. This approach enhances information flow and problem resolution across all levels. The second principle emphasizes continuous improvement as key to enhancing organizational output. It views quality improvement as a dynamic process requiring proactive planning and anticipation. Scholars stress the need for a managerial culture dedicated to ongoing improvement, while others support establishing a quality council. Experts caution against complacency and advocate for a long-term perspective. It is recommended to integrate teams into organizational structures to promote flexibility and trust (Mosadeghrad, 2015). The third principle of TQM centers on teamwork, essential for continuous improvement. Teams, especially cross-functional ones, are considered more effective than individuals for addressing inter-departmental issues (Kumar & Sharma, 2018). Lawler emphasizes inclusive teams from all levels and departments. TQM also highlights employee empowerment, giving them more control over work processes and involving them

in problem-solving. Empowered employees use their skills better and take greater responsibility (Dimitmades, 2001; Al-Sabi et al, 2023).

The fourth principle, empowerment, involves creating an environment where employees have the capability, confidence, and dedication to improve processes within organizational goals (Vu, 2020). TQM not only enhances quality but also empowers employees broadly, placing process responsibility with those most familiar with them. The plan-do-study-act cycle is a key mechanism for employee empowerment in continuous improvement efforts. The fifth principle of TQM is continuous training, considered crucial for quality improvement (Rane, Achari & Choudhary, 2023). Customer satisfaction, the sixth cornerstone of TQM, underscores organizational performance improvement by prioritizing meeting the needs of both external and internal customers through ongoing quality enhancement endeavors. Top management commitment is paramount for TQM success, necessitating personal leadership, guidance, and obstacle management. Additionally, an open and participative management style is crucial for fostering collaboration and empowerment (Mannan, 2018).

Total Quality Management (TQM) necessitates a comprehensive grasp of both its "what" and "how" elements. While the "what" dimension may vary across contexts, it is the "how" aspect that truly sets TQM apart, encapsulating universally acknowledged principles and concepts that form its "soft" side (Dejanović & Lukić, 2023). Traditionally, TQM pioneers predominantly emphasized the "hard" side, centering on statistics and operations. However, TQM inherently encompasses both "hard" and "soft" facets. This prompts the inquiry: How vital is an understanding of TQM's "soft" side for managers? (Souza et al, 2021; Shabbir, & Gardezi, 2020). Quality management literature presents various tools, techniques, and systems, outlined in Table 2.

Managers' awareness of the "soft" side of Total Quality Management (TQM) has received significant attention, especially among middle managers (Bigliardi, & Galati, 2014). Middle managers play a crucial role in quality management, often challenging the status quo. However, there is limited qualitative research on managers' attitudes toward TQM (Maurer, Bach, & Oertel, 2023). Middle managers aspire to engage in TQM initiatives, but top management often lacks trust in their capabilities. TQM implementation significantly impacts middle managers, making their roles more demanding (Fatemi, Wei & Fatemi, n.d.). Subsequent studies have focused on assessing managers' awareness of specific TQM practices, potentially overlooking the holistic principles of TQM. Individual perspectives, influenced by factors like educational background and organizational context, complicate the measurement of awareness regarding both the "soft" and "hard" sides of TQM. Ignoring the "soft" side hinders successful TQM implementation. (Sweis et al. 2019)

The gap identified in the literature is the lack of comprehensive exploration into the understanding and implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM) principles among employees in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. While existing research acknowledges the importance of TQM and its potential impact on organizational performance, there is limited focus on the nuanced application of TQM, particularly its "soft" aspects like culture, leadership, and employee engagement, within the GCC context. While some studies have examined TQM awareness among managers, there remains a dearth of research on the broader employee population's perceptions of TQM. This study aims to address this gap by investigating TQM awareness among employees of the Gulf Standardization Organization (GSO), thereby offering insights to enhance TQM implementation strategies within GCC organizations

## Research Methodology

This study is based on interviews conducted with managers, section heads, supervisors, and other employees from various departments within the GSO. Through these interviews, insights into participants' perceptions of TQM, particularly its "soft" aspects, were obtained, contributing to a comprehensive understanding. Gilmore and Carson (1996) suggest that qualitative research methods are well-suited for the service industry, as they allow researchers to delve into topics or populations with limited existing literature, seeking understanding directly from participants' perspectives. This study aligns with such an approach. Specifically, it aims to investigate two key areas: the awareness and comprehension of the "soft" side of TQM among managerial, supervisory, and operational-level employees within the GSO. These aspects were explored through formal interviews.

In-depth interviews were conducted with managers and supervisors, as well as with randomly selected operational-level employees from various departments. A semi-structured questionnaire, developed based on existing literature, guided the interviews. Topics covered included personal information, roles within the organization, experiences, perceptions of TQM, and exploration of the "soft" side of TQM in employees' responses. To ensure a diverse range of responses, interviewees were selected based on two criteria: individual characteristics such as age, educational background, work experience, and departmental affiliation within the organization, reflecting different functions and levels of awareness regarding quality improvement efforts.

A total of eleven senior employees and thirteen operational-level employees from the GSO participated in the interviews, representing diverse demographic profiles. Interviews were conducted in the GSO building, following official permission obtained from the Secretary General. Handwritten notes were taken during the sessions, and subsequent transcriptions of discussions were reviewed and approved by the respondents. Data analysis followed a systematic procedure: re-reading and reviewing interview notes, identifying units of general meaning, and identifying units of meaning relevant to the "soft" TQM principles.

### Findings and Analysis

In order to present and analyze the findings that appeared from the collected data, a dual analytical framework was used. This framework consists of two main areas of analytical interest. The first area is related to the level of seniors' awareness of TQM and its "soft" side. I have divided them into two groups; Technical & Administrative seniors, and the second area of interest is at the level of junior level employees.

For managerial awareness in Total Quality Management (TQM), all our interviewees at these levels expressed a unanimous belief in the critical significance of TQM for the GSO. The insights gleaned from these discussions underscored the necessity for heightened focus on quality improvement endeavors. Consequently, this underscores the imperative for expedient and tangible outcomes in quality management to enhance GSO effectiveness.

These interviewees encouraged the view that this caused the adoption of practical methods, which mainly focus on improving outcomes. Most of our respondents took only a few seconds to explain TQM; it was like a surprise question. However, they do understand it, because the GSO conducted a special training course about ISO 9001 for such levels. Perhaps the implementation took time after they attended the course. They related quality improvement efforts primarily to the classical idea of organizational effectiveness mainly from inside. They also indicated that it was the accuracy of these quality improvement systems as well as their quick and, generally, effective implementation that led to the demand for an ISO 9001 award, which the GSO has been hoping to get for the last two years.

The IT manager emphasized the importance of delivering high-quality services, especially in the context of GSO's mission to enhance product and service standards in the GCC market. He demonstrated a strong understanding of TQM principles, recognizing their potential to benefit both his department and the organization. As he stated, "In IT, we adhere to various TQM principles such as planning, deploying, implementing, testing, documenting, training, and re-engineering."

This young manager, with four years of experience at GSO, also oversees the Information Centre, responsible for providing International & Gulf Standards. However, responses from the two section heads indicated a differing perspective. They did not perceive TQM as highly important, despite its potential to enhance IT operations and overall organizational performance. Additionally, they did not elaborate on the "soft" side of TQM. Both section heads mentioned a lack of awareness among employees, attributing it to the specialized nature of the concept and insufficient training. The Information Centre section head highlighted, "The concept is not popular, and there is a need to raise awareness." Similarly, the IT section head mentioned, "Less awareness and training courses were the reasons for that."

To analyze the findings derived from the collected data, a dual analytical framework was employed, focusing on two main areas of interest. The first area pertains to the awareness of TQM and its "soft" side among senior management, divided into Technical & Administrative seniors. The second area examines the awareness among junior-level employees. Managers' and supervisors' awareness of the "soft" side of TQM All interviewees at these levels expressed the significance of TQM for the GSO, emphasizing the need for

greater emphasis on quality improvement efforts to enhance organizational effectiveness. They indicated that practical methods focusing on improving outcomes were adopted, primarily driven by the desire for quick and direct results in quality management. While most respondents had a basic understanding of TQM, attributed partly to a special training course on ISO 9001 conducted by the GSO, they acknowledged that its full implementation may take time. Quality improvement efforts were associated with enhancing organizational effectiveness, leading to aspirations for ISO 9001 certification.

Response from Technical seniors: One IT manager highlighted the importance of high-quality services, particularly in a role dedicated to improving product and service standards in the GCC market. He demonstrated familiarity with both the "soft" and hard sides of TQM, recognizing its potential to enhance departmental and organizational performance. However, two section heads within the IT department expressed less enthusiasm about the importance of TQM, though they acknowledged its potential benefits for their work. They attributed the lack of awareness among employees to the specialized nature of the concept and insufficient training. Similarly, the Technical Standards section head, a PhD in electrical and electronics engineering, acknowledged the benefits of TQM in coordinating efforts, reducing waste, and fostering teamwork but noted a lack of awareness among employees, emphasizing the need for involvement in administrative activities to increase familiarity. Engineers provided valuable insights into TQM and its "soft" side, emphasizing the need for management commitment and training to enhance employee awareness. The Metrology section head highlighted the importance of customer satisfaction monitoring for organizational success, while the second head, a mechanical engineer and ISO auditor, stressed the significance of tools like auditing and corrective action for continual improvement. Another senior professional, a Sr. Conformity Assessment Specialist with extensive TQM experience, emphasized TQM's role in building quality infrastructure and improving internal processes.

These technical interviewees conveyed their insights using industry-standard terminology, showcasing their profound understanding of quality management. For instance, a Senior Conformity Assessment Specialist, a mechanical engineer by training, underscored the relevance of Quality Management System (QMS) principles for the organization, especially considering its emphasis on standards and conformity assessment procedures. He detailed how QM practices can prevent the production of substandard products, align products with customer requirements cost-effectively, and streamline processes for ongoing enhancement. Despite their diverse backgrounds in age, nationality, education, and work experience, these technical experts offered valuable perspectives on both the practical and conceptual aspects of TQM, highlighting its significance across various organizational roles.

### **Administrative Seniors' Responses**

The majority of administrative seniors noted the need for training courses for GSO employees due to their limited awareness, especially regarding the "soft" side of TQM, given that most GSO employees are non-technical. However, two administrative seniors demonstrated a poor understanding of TQM and negligible awareness of its "soft" aspects, providing brief and simplistic definitions such as "commitment to rules and regulations" and emphasizing its importance without elaboration. Conversely, two other seniors exhibited a better understanding, emphasizing TQM's significance in achieving organizational objectives and satisfying customers, as well as its potential to minimize costs, improve skills, and enhance efficiency.

In summarizing the responses from administrative seniors, two main points emerged: (a) The majority recommended TQM courses for GSO employees. b. technical seniors generally displayed greater awareness of TQM and its "soft" side compared to administrative seniors. However, many administrative seniors also lacked a clear understanding of the importance of the "soft" side, highlighting the need for training. Junior employees' awareness of the "soft" side of TQM: Several junior employees provided insightful definitions of TQM, emphasizing its role in integrating organizational functions to meet customer needs and enhance company outputs. However, some expressed uncertainty about the "soft" side of TQM or lacked awareness altogether. One notable concept mentioned by a conformity engineer was empowerment, highlighting its importance in improving management quality and creating job satisfaction among staff. However, others demonstrated limited understanding or awareness, suggesting a need for training and implementation improvements. Overall, while some junior employees exhibited a good grasp of TQM concepts, others showed a lack of awareness or understanding, indicating the importance of training and implementation efforts to ensure consistency and effectiveness across the organization.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, our study highlights that while senior managers at GSO exhibit a level of awareness regarding Total Quality Management (TQM) and its "soft" principles, their comprehension falls short of organizational expectations. Notably, technical seniors and junior employees demonstrate a superior understanding of TQM's "soft" side compared to administrative staff. However, a significant gap persists, even among technical seniors, indicating the need for enhanced awareness and training initiatives. Despite the provision of training courses and recommendations for ISO 9001 implementation, TQM has not received substantial attention on the managerial agenda. Urgent action is warranted to integrate TQM principles effectively. It's noteworthy that educational backgrounds vary among employees, yet qualifications do not necessarily correlate with a deeper grasp of "soft" TQM principles. The simplicity and universality of these principles facilitate widespread acceptance among GSO employees, irrespective of their educational background. However, there persists a perception that quality improvement efforts are primarily the responsibility of experts or individuals with prior TQM experience, both internally and externally. This underscores the necessity for comprehensive organizational engagement in fostering a culture of continuous improvement and TQM integration across all levels.

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## Interviewees

The interview participants at the Gulf Cooperation Council Standardization Organization come from diverse backgrounds, including various nationalities, genders, ages, educational levels, and job titles. They represent countries such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, Morocco, the UAE, Yemen, Egypt, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Bahrain, highlighting the organization's multicultural environment. Predominantly male and aged between 30 and 50, they hold a range of educational qualifications from diplomas to postgraduate degrees in fields like engineering, IT, finance, and humanities. Their job titles encompass portal developers, conformity engineers, IT specialists, administrative assistants, finance heads, HR directors, network engineers, and technical assistants, offering a comprehensive array of perspectives on Total Quality Management's human aspect within the organization.

List of interviewees names, position, has been excluded.

## Appendix

Table 2.

“Soft” TQM Concepts Identified in Quality Management Literature <b>TQM Concepts</b>	“Hard” TQM Practices Identified in Quality Management Literature <b>TQM Techniques, tools and systems</b>
Total Employee Involvement	Statistical Process Control
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