

Role and Position of the Modern Quality Assurance Manager

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Abstract

Quality assurance management in the food industry is complex, as it is the total of activities and decisions performed in an organisation to produce and maintain a safe product with the desired quality level against minimal costs (Luning, 2006). It includes: i) quality design, ii) quality control, iii) quality improvement, iv) quality assurance, and v) quality policy and strategy (Luning, 2007, 2009). Hence, it deals not only with all physical aspects of food products and their technological processes, but also with food handlers' decisions in daily production as well as management's decisions that impact food safety and quality (Luning, 2007). A proper quality management (i.e. total quality management) have shown to result in a better performance of the food business (Psomas, 2010; Fotopoulos, 2009, 2010).

Keywords: *Quality assurance, quality management, quality manager, Business management, Food business*

1 Introduction

The modern quality manager should be able to focus on different levels of quality, from product and process level to overall business level. Moreover, the manager should be familiar with business functions and/or business processes to embed quality management structurally in the organisation in order to assure food quality and safety in the longer term. The business functions and/or business processes include value and strategy development, human resource management, finance and communication. The focus at business level is important because tasks and responsibilities increase in complexity. This is due to the fact that many different stakeholders are involved in food safety and quality, due to the increased sensitivity around food in general public, due to the increased media attention, and due to the speed in which new technologies are available for food production and test methods.. This development is rather an appeal to the ability of quality managers to think in interdisciplinary ways (Luning, 2009). However, is the current quality manager able to fulfil all these tasks?

To answer this main question the following sub questions have been formulated:

- Who is the current quality manager?
- Is the business structure appropriate to let him/her be the modern quality manager?
- Does he/she already fulfil QM tasks?
- Does he/she have the relevant competencies (knowledge, skills, and attitude)?
- What are the problems that he/she is facing?

This research aims to attain insight in the role and position of the current quality manager in relation to the required tasks and responsibilities of the modern quality manager.

2 Materials and Methods

An internet questionnaire was set out for quality managers in the Dutch and Belgium (Flanders) food business. The questionnaire included 46 closed and open questions regarding demographics, the role, position and competencies of the quality managers. Hundred respondents filled in the enquiry of which 87 were quality managers working in a food producing business; food importers and animal feed producers were excluded.

3 Results

3.1 Who is the quality manager?

The typical quality manager is often in charge of a quality department with a size from 1 to 5 full time workers. He is more often a man than a woman and his/her age is between 40 and 50 years or to a less extent between 30 and 40 years. He/she usually works full time during normal business hours and the salary varies between 40 and 60 thousand euro per year. The quality manager usually completed a BSc level education and has followed no additional quality management courses.

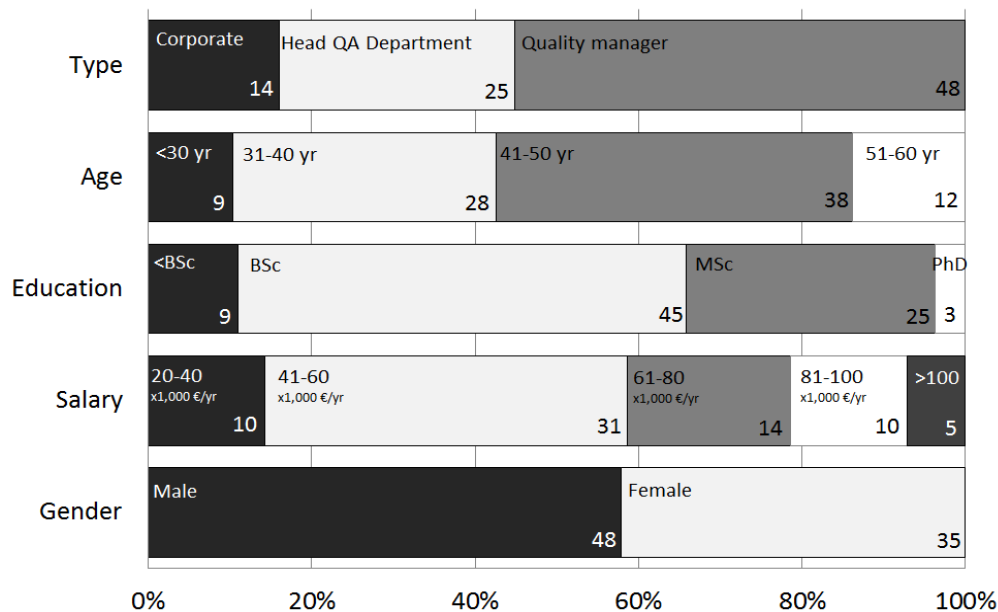


Figure 1. General aspects of the food quality managers (relatively and the number of respondent within the bars)

3.2 Is the business structure appropriate to let him/her be the modern quality manager?

The business structure is in most cases appropriate to allow a quality department to provide independent advices. To illustrate, 44% indicated that the quality department is an independent department next to the production; 44% specified that the quality department is an independent staff department advising the general management; only 13% indicated that the quality department is within the production department. So, the quality manager is generally a manager of a department with a relatively independent position in the organization.

Furthermore, the quality manager reports often to a general manager / CEO, corporate QA or plant / site manager (83%). In addition, three out of four quality managers are also a member in the management team (MT); i.e. 55% in the local MT and 20% in the overarching or corporate MT. Half of the quality managers who do not take part in the MT think that they should take part.

The quality manager meets with the MT usually monthly (31%) or weekly (24%), where the quality manager in the business unit joins the meeting more regularly than those at the corporate level. During these meetings commonly typical QC and QA issues are discussed, whereas QM issues are discussed less frequently (the QC, QA and QM activities are given in figure 3). In general, quality managers appreciate the commitment and strategic thinking of the management team, although it is often reactive and less proactive.

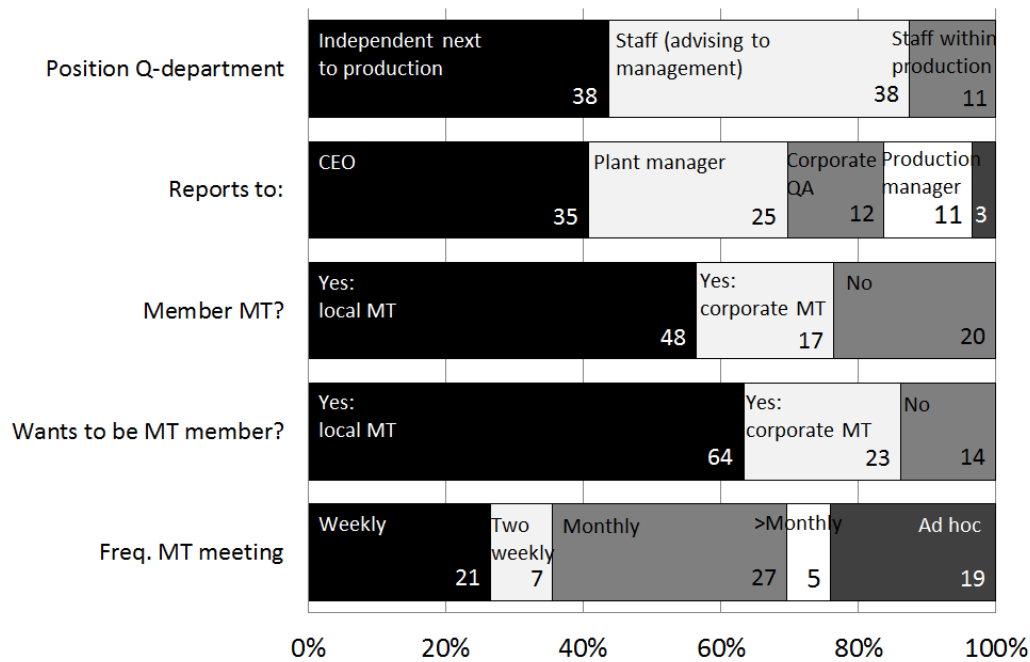


Figure 2. Position of the QA department and quality management within the organisation (relatively and the number of respondent within the bars)

3.3 Does he/she already fulfil QM tasks?

The quality manager is primarily concerned with QC/QA activities (figure 3). However, he/she is also involved in QM activities: 70% at 'organizational improvement/change' and 50% at 'strategy/policy'. The quality managers that were not involved in certain QM activities indicated that they would like to be involved. Also in the applied improvement programs (e.g. Lean or WCM). The reason that the quality manager is not involved in QM activities is mainly because management does not see this as a task of the quality manager, but also due to other reasons like a lack of time and insufficient knowledge.

3.4 Does he/she has the relevant competences?

The quality managers indicate that many roles and competences are needed to fulfil their tasks nowadays. The quality manager indicates that he/she is decisive, honest, conscientious, strong in problem analysis, independent and proactive and that he/she shows initiative. Seven competencies are indicated as insufficient: statistics, organization/business management, conflict management, negotiation skills and change management. A reason for this is that the quality managers lack the appropriate knowledge to deal with managerial issues, i.e. >40% of the respondents did not follow additional quality management, business management or change management courses next to their technical education.

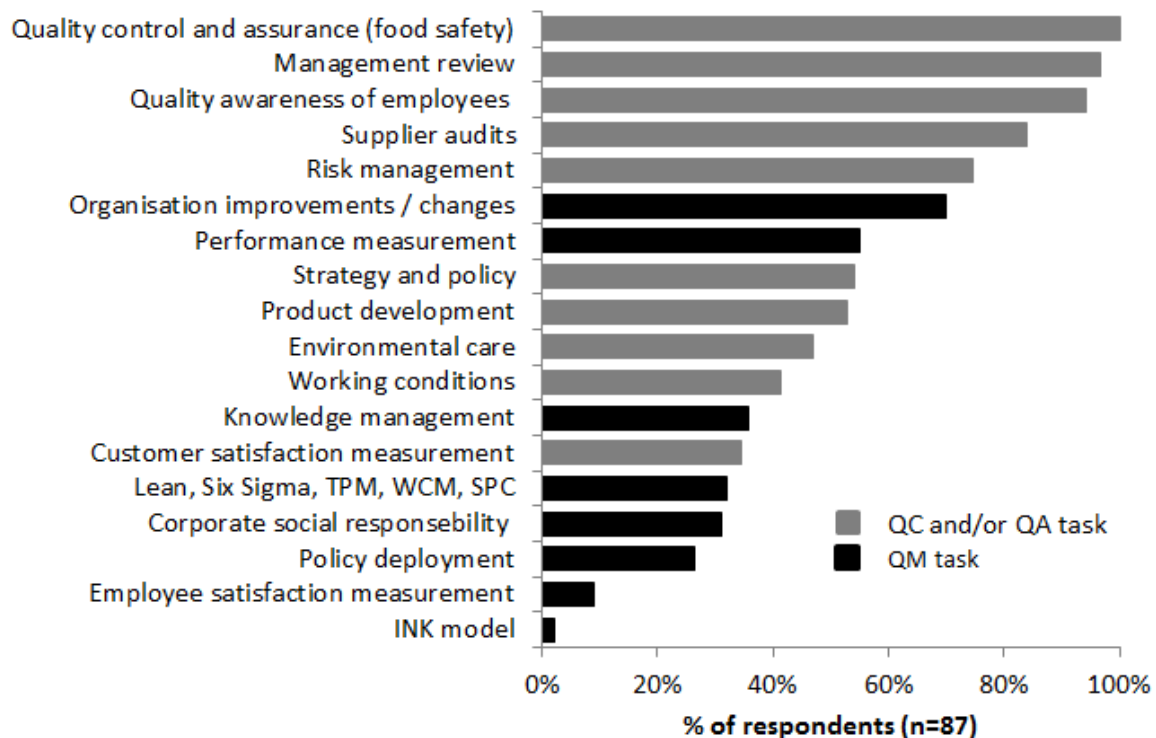


Figure 3. Activities at which the quality manager is involved

3.5 What are the problems the quality manager is facing?

The problems that quality managers face are many. First, the defined tasks, responsibilities, and authorities seem unclear. Second, they indicate that the general management has limited strategic focus on quality management and that priority is given to finance and commerce above quality. Third, the number of QA workers is limited, but also their competences. Fourth, 30% of the quality managers is not involved in strategic quality management, covering a plan to improve and assure quality in the future, whereas most quality managers would like to be involved in these strategic decisions.

4 Discussion

The hypothesis is that the quality manager in the food industry is more a QC/QA manager than a QM manager. Meaning that he/she is mainly concerned with product and process quality and safety-assurance systems. This research confirms this, although not to the full extent. The position of the quality manager and department offers the quality manager to

be or become the modern QM manager. Some skills and competences (statistics, conflict management, negotiation skills and change management) are lacking next to the relevant knowledge on management.

Overall can be concluded that most quality managers want to fulfil the role of the modern quality manager, but that changes are needed to fulfil this role appropriately. The question remains whether the general managers allow the quality manager to be involved in strategic management.

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