IJAAR PUBLISHING®
DOI: 10.46654

Research Journal of Management Practice | ISSN: **2782-7674**
Vol. 2, Issue 4 (April, 2022) | www.ijaar.org

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT AND COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE: THEORETICAL PAPER

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ABSTRACT

Continuous improvement, a quality philosophy that will always ensure continued improvements and ensures a workable process that should be constantly monitored for further improvements. The main objective of the study was to determine the relationship between continuous improvement practices and efficiency. Continuous improvement (CI) is a quality philosophy that assumes further improvements are always possible and that processes should be continuously re-evaluated and improvements implemented. CI's importance manifests itself in terms of the role it plays in quality improvement, customer satisfaction, employee engagement and productivity. Continuous improvement (CI) is a collection of activities that constitute a process intended to achieve performance improvement. In manufacturing, these activities primarily involve simplification of production processes, chiefly through the elimination of waste. Continuous improvement allows production of a wide variety of products or services, efficient and rapid changeover among them as needed, efficient response to fluctuating demand, and increased quality. It encourages the rapid response to customers' ever changing demands with focus on mass customizations rather than mass production. Eliminating waste along the entire value streams, instead of at isolated points, creates processes that need less human effort, space, capital, and time to make products and services at far less costs and with much fewer defects, compared with traditional business systems. Continuous improvement pave way to do more with less coaching of employees, and enable the organization to provide customers with exactly what they need at the right time and place that meets their value expectations. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between continuous improvement and competitive advantage.

Keywords: Continuous Improvement, Competitive Advantage, Resource Based View

Introduction

In a dynamic business environment, there is the added pressure to be more socially and environmentally responsible and there are risks which need to be mitigated and managed globally (Bititci et al., 2002). The complexity created by ever increasing customer requirements and expectations, globalization, the pressure on cost, and the availability and access to resources, management expectation to improve profitability, increase revenue growth, capture and protect larger market share are key drivers to competitive organizations (Antonelli & Parbonetti, 2002).

A firm can only achieve superior performance if it provides services or goods/ products which customers can pay for at a price that is higher than it costs the firm to produce/manufacture them. It is imperative that the firm must therefore create value to be able to achieve superior performance and have a competitive edge. Value creation is at the centre of any successful strategy. However, value creation in itself is not enough. In order to prosper, the firm must be able to capture the value it creates. In order to create and capture value, the firm must have a sustainable competitive advantage (Porter, 1980).

A competitive advantage can only be achieved and sustained after careful examination of strategy and the strategic management process. A strategy is the direction and scope of an organization over the long term, which achieves advantage in a changing environment through its configuration of resources and competencies with the aim of fulfilling stakeholder's expectations (Johnson, Scholes, &Whittington, 2008). By strategy, managers mean their large-scale, future-oriented plans for interacting with the competitive environment to achieve company objectives. A strategy is a company's game plan. Although that plan does not precisely detail all future deployments (of people, finances and material), it provides a framework for managerial decisions. It reflects a company's awareness of how, when and where it should compete; against whom it should compete; and for what purposes it should compete. A strategy is a compass, a guide, a plan, a course of action into the future, or generally a path to get from here to there (Patanakul & Shenhar, 2011). A focused organization therefore, requires a strategic action plan/ a response that will seek to review how business is being conducted vis-à-vis the content/existing business environment to ensure the adoption of appropriate strategies that will help to deliver sustainable competitive advantage. One of such strategies companies pursue is continuous improvement.

Due to intense competitiveness and multiple market sectors, there has been strict policies and measures to ascertain no re-invention of the wheel (Tangram, 2005). Continuous improvement does not assume the end of a process rather it engages on ongoing process that are real and viable, it has a viewpoint that procedures, methods developments need to be progressively, assessed, and improvements effected (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). Today, continuous improvement plays a vital role in day-to-day strict schedules as it emphasizes on the customer, flexibility and quality in order to survive competition. It also helps the organization to anticipate what will delight their customers in the future (Zangwell & Kantor, 1998). The skills provided by continuous improvement include waste elimination, identification of process problem areas and improvement through the focus on what and how attention to detail and customer focus (Ndlovu, 2008)

Continuous improvement being a quality philosophy system has been anchored with Resource based view (RBV) theory and system theory. The shared aims between continuous improvement and RBV has been surrounded in the belief that surviving organization will use resources and capability in a cost effective way, as they are limited (Attaran & Attaran, 2004). The relevance of the theory with continuous improvement is that for positive effects organizations have to constantly conform and align itself to the changing environment. According to Oakland (2003), organization system is influenced by variables in the environment, which in this case are factors like management commitment, people involvement training, resources and infrastructure and other moderating variables it is therefore important for organization to operate in an open system for visibility purposes.

Continuous improvement, a quality philosophy that will always ensure continued improvements and ensures a workable process that should be constantly monitored for further improvements (Juergensen, 2005). According to Laitinen (2002), all organizations need continuous improvement at times known as ('Rapid improvement') since it helps to simplify the flow of processes. Organization that have efficient workflows save time and money, in return less wasted time and effort, besides, it constantly improves operating overhead. Continuous improvement is indeed a motivating driving force behind most efficient and effective organizations (Bourne, 2001).

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation

According to Prahald, Hamel and Barney (1990), RBV is an approach to identify core competencies that are critical for a business to achieve competitive advantage. The proponents of this view argue that organizations should scrutinize their internal resources that yield competitive advantage instead of concentrating on competitive environment. According to RBV, organization should scrutinize their internal resources that yield competitive advantage instead of concentrating on competitive environment. Continuous improvement and RBV have commonality in this manner that organizations exist within resources and capabilities that are both limited, therefore those organizations surviving will tend to use these resources in a cost effective manner. This will be achieved by maintaining optimum levels, which will in turn create competitive advantage. Ultimately, for organization to have distinct competitive advantage, they need to have capabilities, which are rare can produce value, imitable and can be exploited by the organization (Attaran & Attaran, 2004).

Resource Based View argued that for firms to be termed superior their performance should be as a result of accumulation of resources and capabilities that are rare, valuable, and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). Continuous improvement therefore is a fundamental philosophy focusing on resources that are heterogeneous in nature and that employees can use resources more efficiently and effectively and provides tailored solutions in solving specific organizational problems that are perfectly mobile and can sustain a firm above average returns (Valiris, 2004).

The resource based view of the firm by Barney (1991) is a means that companies use to gain competitive advantage by utilizing and optimizing resources internal to the firm such as human resource, assets, customer data and technology to create more value for their customers. A firm owns resources that can assist to achieve distinctive advantage or superior long-term performance. A firm will achieve competitive advantage by engaging its activities which will in turn increase efficiency or the effectiveness and that are not being adopted by its rivals and in this case, we are referring to the data generated by customers in commercial banks. It is also worth noting that competitive advantage is called sustained if an organization's competitors are not able to duplicate the strategy.

The resource based view theory argues that not all resources are strategically relevant but also considers that resources can provide sustainable competitive advantage if they are rare, inimitable, valuable and non-substitutable for example each transport and logistics firm has data that is generated from its customers including systems as unique to it fitting within the valuable (Barney, 1991).

Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is a quality philosophy that assumes further improvements are always possible and that processes should be continuously re-evaluated and improvements implemented (Juergensen, 2005). It is also the seeking of small improvements in processes and products, with the objective of increasing quality and reducing waste. The belief that an organization must constantly measure the effectiveness of its processes and strive to meet more difficult objectives to satisfy its customers also constitutes continuous improvement. Continuous improvement (CI) can be considered an ongoing effort to improve products, services or processes. These efforts can seek "incremental" improvement over time or "breakthrough" improvement all at once (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005).

CI's importance manifests itself in terms of the role it plays in quality improvement, customer satisfaction, employee engagement and productivity. CI is essentially a quality journey that is "never ending" (Oakland,2007) and its main emphasis per Deming's teachings, lies in never accepting that the way business operates today is the best way, even in the face of profitability. Continuous Improvement (CI) in context of Kaizen means improving performance in many small, incremental steps. In Japan, continuous improvement is called kaizen. The word means continuous improvement, involving everyone in an organization. It implies a never-ending cycle of repeatedly evaluating and re-evaluating the basic processes of an operation (Russell &Taylor, 2003). CI is a philosophy that Deming described simply as consisting of improvement initiatives that increase successes and reduce failures (Juergensen, 2000). Or as a completely new approach of enhancing creativity and achieving competitive excellence in today's market (Oakland, 1999); (Caffyn, 1999); (Gallagher, Austin & Caffyn, 1997).

Continuous improvement Implementation

Traditionally, workers were not involved in quality control. It was seen as more effective and convenient to have staff functions assigned to quality: however the philosophy of CI suggests that workers should do and think. This is a difficult transition for managers used to having external control over workers. It requires some degree of trust that workers are capable of contributing to quality improvement, and that they will not exploit the lack of external control to "get off easy," and perform substandard work. In short, it requires faith in the process. Unless managers buy into the key role of workers, they are not likely to bother to invest the time and resources needed to keep workers involved in CI programs.

Focus on the customer and not only the results by management inspires changes more readily. Communicating widely the desire of the management to continuous improvement on the way things are done to exceed the customers' expectations. Handling customer feedback should be top priority of managers who should utilize at least a third of their time to improve systems and process that focus on the customer (Krishan, 2011). It is every organization's dream to deliver customer satisfying products or services that are better than its competitors. It is clear that CI is about looking for better ways of doing things. It means more than adapting to the times and is a never-ending quest to improve the way things are done. Ultimately this leads to improved efficiency and profitability (Ndlovu, 2008).CI can be applied to processes, products, technologies, skills and capabilities, every aspect of a business (Trollip, 2008). Companies need to continuously improve because they operate in dynamic environments.

Culture is one of the most important aspects in CI implementation. It is represented by the norms and unwritten rules that guide employee actions, so it's often somewhat amorphous and subject to perceptions. However, culture is critical to an organization's success. The key principle of CI is creating a culture of continuously looking for better ways of doing thing. Culture affects the perception of the individuals and how seriously they take up the responsibilities given to them. It revolves around the values of the company, the norms, recognition and reward systems and communication between the management and employees (Guidon performance solutions, 2011).

A culture where reward and recognition is both individualized and teams oriented creates an atmosphere of creativity and innovation. Involvement of the employees in the improvement of process and systems motivates them and brings a sense of satisfaction in their jobs. Creating a culture of continuous improvement must come from the senior management according to Deming's teachings he encouraged involvement of top level management in creating an environment that supports continuous improvement. Showing unrelenting support to continuous improvement initiatives is a call for all senior and top level management. Suzaki (1993) suggested that human resources are the last source of competitive advantage in the global market. How a firm harnesses the knowledge and creativeness of workers through informal networks will become a critical differentiating element.

Continuous Improvement Practices

According to Taylor and Wright (2003), a combination of factors will determine the success or failure in the establishment and failure of quality systems in an organization. Bessant (1994) observed that continuous improvement had huge benefits, as it does not require high capital, and employees' ideas and skills can be easily utilized. Woods (1997) stated that through continuous improvement employees enjoy benefits such as healthy working conditions, contented clientele and higher monetary yield. Martichenko (2004) indicated that firms that do not adopt continuous improvement are likely to face variable systems in terms of re-arranging the organization, the structure, streamlining including activities within the management and the methods that will elate the delegate to feel they are on the right track. The key continuous improvement variables are; customer focus, engagement of people, process approach, and quality improvement programs top leadership initiative and Evidence based on decision-making.

Focus on Customer

The main underlying principle under quality management is that the product is as per the agreed needs and have surpassed the clientele expectations. This sustainability can only be termed as progressive and successful when organization objectively acquire and sustain the assurance of its clientele and favorable prospective parties (ISO, 2000:9001). The process of service delivery in firms are as a result of connections which either its outcome either a product or a service could be offered to the end user must add value to them (Berman & Evans, 2013). The result is that one action (the process) on the other hand distresses the other entity (the end consumer). For example, all the clients' grievances are comparable to process disparity. However suppose the variation does not conform to standards it will finally distress the quality of the final product or service.

For that reason, it is paramount to track records of such so that customer complaints then adjust where necessary. Some of the key indicators in relation to products that drive customer satisfaction are reliability, aesthetics, adaptability, usability, functionality and appropriateness in relation to products. Some major driving signs and indicators for services are hospitable/kindliness of workers, security/threat of provision, presentation of billing process, time taken to respond to queries, availability at the site, how accommodative the provider is, level of empathy and listening skills, loyalty and clear language on communication. Thus, customer focus is where value is delivered to customers by asking them directly what satisfies them (Berman & Evans, 2013; Cravens & Piercy, 2013).

The more an organization interacts with the customer the more the opportunity to build relationship and create further value and with that particular customer. It is paramount for an organization to clearly understand what the customer requires in terms of current and future needs. There could be interested parties on the other hand who also contribute to sustainable realization of the firm the that accrue when organization concentrate on customer focus are rise in clientele value, upsurge on customer contention, better customer loyalty, enriched repeat business, developed corporate image of the firm and stretched customer base Increased income and market share (ISO,2001). More importantly, banks should adopt to market driven strategies so that they are able to articulate the market as well as the clientele as this ultimately grab a share of market segment for developing products and services that will in turn meet the needs of the final customer (Berman & Evans, 2013).

Engagement of People: Organizations should strive to engage its employees to be competent, and empower them at all cost at all levels, it is the responsibility of the organization to distribute its capability in order to create, to deliver items that will be of good value. For proper management organization needs to strive to engage its employees at various level not only effectively but efficiently. Besides this there should be mutual respect among individuals and the organization (ISO 2000). The kind of involvement should be well designed and planned for greater autonomy in creation of decision enhances company performance (Yildirim, 2012). Employee empowerment and engagement are components that can affect the performance of the organization and the results of an industry (Abdullah, Uli & Tari, 2009). According to them, the contribution summed up with involvement of employees has led to speeding up the progression of continuous improvement. In turn, this has elevated obligation, self-sufficiency and innovativeness that will ultimately lead to organization invention. The involvement of employee has an affirmative impact on innovation and operational efficiency (Bon & Mustafa, 2013).

When employees are recognized and empowered, they enhance a sense of competence, which facilitate the engagement of people in achieving the firm's quality in terms of objectives. Enhanced focus and understanding of the of the firms quality objectives, increased motivation to achieve them, enhanced involvement of people in improvement activities, enhanced personal development, initiatives and creativity, people contention, heightened unity as well as collaboration summed up with trust and teamwork throughout the organization, upsurge focus to shared values, and culture within organization (ISO 2000:9001).

Process Approach: Process approach is referred to the interactions between processes that are systematic, identifiable and its management employed in the organization (ISO, 2000:9001; Pokorni, 2004). When activities within the organization are comprehensible it is easier for management to be consistent in terms of achieving outcomes effectively and efficiently. The QMS is considered to include interrelated process, thus when the outcome of this system is understood organization will be able to boost the system and its performance (ISO, 2000). The requirements as per ISO 9001 follow a step by step approach with their actions. There are examples on how firms select shape and govern the procedures of QMS. Plan Do Check Act (PDCA) is a cycle that can be used to check on the performance and management of the system (ISO 9001:2015).

The benefits that accrue are improved focus on major processes and their opportunity, coupled with the consistency and predictable outcomes through an aligned process system, proper performance by being effective, management of processes, the use of resources efficiently, need for reduced barriers that are cross-functional, organization providing confidence, to interested parties as to bring about consistency, which in turn yield effectiveness and efficiency (ISO, 9001). QMS consists of vast procedures, all summed up through input-output relationships. In order to develop a management system based on quality that will target ISO 9001:2000 standard, one need to grow and develop, document, adopt, constant monitoring and better processes (Pokorni, 2004).

Quality Improvement Programs

Reed, Lemak, Montgomery (1996) describe quality as both producing products to specification and meeting customers' expectations. Meeting the needs and expectations of customers is a key input to continuous improvement (Reed et al., 1996). In line with this, Easton & Jarrel (1998) describe product and service quality as emphasis on customer requirements and customer satisfaction. Hendricks & Singhal (2001) state that for customers to be satisfied and loyal the end products produced have to be of very high standards. According to Mehra (2001), quality will depend on what is demanded by the customer and it is also dictated by the dynamic in the market. Chong and Rundus (2004) indicate that when organization focus on quality processes and product at all cost in their production, it will improve their performance and relationship with customers with the ultimate goal of satisfying customers. Therefore, the focus on quality throughout the organization should be the main principle on continuous improvement. Adopting quality improvement programs enhance performance and also improve organizational capabilities which results in productivity and survival of the organization (ISO 9000:2008).

Top Leadership Initiative

TPI are essential element that positively contributes to progressiveness of continuous improvement adoption. In general managers require skills that can help them to do proper leadership; the knowledge on executive-quality leadership, prioritization, diverse knowledge of systems, diverse knowledge with regards to quality, and high end knowledge of change management (Antonaros, 2010). Leaders require these skills in order for continuous improvement implementation practices to be deemed more successful (Antonaros, 2010; Bon & Mustafa, 2013). Through leadership, the focus on quality and innovation is driven, responsibility and roles for each team are defined, in order to make the ultimate decision with regards to resource .Expectations have to be set by the senior team and this has to be clear this will in turn result to balancing between innovation and processes, decentralization and. Without strong leadership, companies suffer as the frustration is clearly seen on hostile relationship between functional bars and teams that are striving to be innovative (Govindarajan et al., 2011).

Managers should constantly reinforce continuous improvement at all cost and demonstrate active commitment to, and leadership of, continuous improvement throughout the organization. Leaders shall take responsibility to initiate continuous improvement methodologies and not delegate to the quality assurance department (Caffyn, 1999). Top management is the pillar to continuous improvement and without their full support and commitment, its initiative is bound to fail. Top management should thus spearhead continuous improvement projects and activities, instil positive attitude towards continuous improvement practices, empowering employees with excellent performance and equality in problem solving (Stephens, Shah & Wang, 2014). Cohen and Bailey's (1997) enhance the indicators of teamwork as proper communication, group unity, responsiveness in terms of clarification based on feedback and focus on organization vision. Therefore, in conclusion, top management commitment is an important element to practice for an effective continuous improvement practices. Top management commitment will be at the backbone and major driver on continuous improvement. Besides, it is a key element when it comes to individual involvement, quality and customer satisfaction within and across the entire organization.

Competitive Advantage

According to De wit and Meyer (2010), a firm has a competitive advantage when it has the means to edge out and outsmart rivals when contesting for the favour and following of customers. Schermerhorn, Davidson, Poole, Woods, Simon and McBarron (2014) say a competitive advantage comes from operating in successful ways that are difficult to imitate.

A competitive advantage is the "how" of strategy. It actually defines in what ways the firm intends to achieve its long-term goals within the chosen scope. Since the firm faces actual and potential competitors, it must have a compelling reason to expect that it will be able to compete effectively against them (Porter, 1980). As the phrase "competitive advantage" suggests, a high performance firm must achieve advantage over its competitors. To be successful, a firm does not need to have an advantage over all of its competitors. This is because many markets have room for several firms that have parity to compete. However, a firm will genuinely do better if its source of competitive advantage is unique. A firm that does something in a better manner than most of its actual or potential competitors has an advantage in that activity. However, this can be a competitive advantage only if being better at that activity contributes to the firm's ability to meet its long-term goals. For example, a firm that is best in its industry at filing documents has an advantage in document filing. This will not provide it with a competitive advantage, however, unless document filing speed is somehow linked to the basis on which firms compete (Porter, 1980).

According to Porter (1980), there are different kinds of competitive advantages, and they can be divided into categories, that is, advantages based on the firm's position and advantages based on the firm's capabilities. A firm can have many specific kinds of positional advantage, but any positional advantage takes one of the three forms: positional advantage from an attractive industry structure e.g. a duopoly where both firms benefit from the attractive industry structure; positional advantage from heterogeneity within the industry e.g. a firm having a dominant position from a fragmented industry will do better than other industry incumbents; and positional advantage from a network of relationships e.g. with buyers, suppliers, or competitors. Examples of positional advantage include brand name (a strong brand commands premium), customer relationships, government protection and support (government intervention could favour a firm), status of the firm, distribution channels, geographic incumbency, and being a gate keeper in the flow of goods or information. A firm can also have a capabilities-based competitive advantage because firms possess many different kinds of capabilities. This could include a firm having specific knowledge or know-how that is related to a given process, special access to low-cost inputs hence produce at low cost, among others.

Continuous Improvement and Competitive Advantage

The concept of continuous improvement great significance has been felt in performance improvement and management of collective efficiency of firms. Manufacturing firms achieve operational effectiveness and efficiency by continuously improving their products and services through improved processes., on the job training , benchmarking, hiring of expertise and investing in modernized systems of operation. In addition, firms minimize waste and unnecessary costs within the system by empowering people with appropriate technology and skills to perform their duties (Antonelli & Parbonetti, 2002).

Quality can also be a very serious source of competitive advantage if implemented carefully. By applying quality management concepts to the operations of an organization well, an organisation can set itself apart from its competitors thereby attracting a very loyal and repeat customer pool. Constant improvement in the quality and reliability of an organisation's products or services may result in a competitive advantage that cannot be imitated or taken away. Product and service innovation can offer opportunity for competitive advantage; however, this could be short-lived because competitors could easily copy the same as soon as it hits the market. A firm's strategic resources can also be a source of competitive advantage. The empirical indicators of the capability of an organization's resources to generate sustained competitive advantage include value, rareness, limitability and substitutability (Barney, 1991).

Organizations need to strive at meeting difficult objectives; they should have a belief of constantly measuring effectiveness of its process in order to satisfy its customers 4 constitutes continuous improvement. Continuous improvement can be considered to strive to better products, services or processes. With that we tend to engage "incremental" improvement thereafter "breakthrough" improvement all at once (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). The drawback in this case indicate a wholesome coordinated process of change, whereas continuous improvement is should not initiate form the top coming down , instead it should be an all-round event on all employees suggesting opinions methods that can be finally be implemented for improvements As much as firms would want to remain competitive continuous improvement attracts cost elements such as training of employees, hiring of expertise and other hidden costs, which might not be easily realized (Hofstede, 1983).

Successful firms should strive to retain their internal processes and approaches once implemented (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000). Regular monitoring helps these firms to remain competitive amongst their rivals. The key principle of continuous improvement is the creation of a culture of continuously looking for better ways of doing thing. Culture affects the perception of the individuals and how seriously they take up the responsibilities given to them. It revolves around the values of the company, the norms, recognition and reward systems and communication between the management and employees (Guidon performance solutions, 2011).

Conclusion

Organizations operate in a dynamic and complex business environment which is constantly changing, and the level of competition is rising all the time. With the advent of global economy, it is necessary for them to identify what their true level of competition is; key priorities' areas that lead to superior performance and how to manage properly to improve their effectiveness, efficiency and ultimately their competitiveness. This dictates that such organizations then, must measure their performance as compared to other players in the industry. Continuous improvement which brings about change in management emphasizes the importance of developing organizational values, capabilities and methods for systematic development and review of progress, based on strategic orientation of improvement and change actions (Bititci, et al., 2000). Continuous improvement involves just-in-time production, where, through systematic techniques designed to minimize scrap and inventory, and essentially, all forms of waste, quality and productivity are increased, and costs are reduced. The aim of lean manufacturing is the elimination of waste in every area of production and includes customer relations, product design, supplier networks, and factory management (Bourne, et al., 2000). Lean thinking is seen as the “antidote” to muda, the Japanese term for waste. Its goal is to incorporate less human effort, less inventory, less time to develop products, and less space in order to become highly responsive to customer demand while producing top 25 quality products in the most efficient and economical manner possible (Bourne, 2001).

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