

Methodological Approaches to Assessing the Quality of an Organisation's Performance

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Abstract

Ensuring the quality of the various processes is essential to the effective functioning of an organisation. One way to achieve this is to assess the quality of the organisation's performance. This process involves both self-assessment and external evaluation, which are carried out using different methodological approaches to evaluation. It should be stressed that the outcome of the quality assessment also depends on the choice of a methodological approach and its correct use from a methodological perspective. The aim of this paper is to present methodological approaches to assessing the quality of organisational performance. The paper focuses on action research as a methodological approach to evaluation and case studies as a methodological approach to external evaluation, showing how the two are closely interrelated and how they can be used more frequently and successfully in quality management research.

KEY WORDS: *quality assessment, self-assessment, external evaluation, action research, case study*

1. Introduction

In line with the principles of modern management [2, 9, 10], it is essential to assess the quality of an organization's performance. Performance evaluation is a dualistic process [11] which involves self-assessment and external evaluation. Depending on the culture, traditions, internal structure, and size, etc. of each organisation, quality assessment is carried out using different methodologies [12], with conclusions based on quantitative and/or qualitative data. Often the collection and analysis of data becomes a routine and inert activity, turning the evaluation process into an end in itself. The lack of reflexivity in the evaluation process steadily reduces the perception of the meaningfulness of individual management cycles by focusing only on the implementation of individual management functions, thus undermining the internal sustainability of the organisation.

One of the problems is the lack of reflection on the meaningfulness of an organisation's performance evaluation processes, leading to inertia in performance evaluation. A discussion of the methodological approaches to assessing the quality of an organisation's performance can help to address this problem by answering some of the meaningful questions that help to understand the importance of quality management in an organisation, both at the individual and at the organisational level.

Therefore, the focus of this paper is on methodological approaches to assessing the quality of an organisation's performance. The aim is to present methodological approaches to assessing the quality of organisational performance. The paper focuses on action research as a methodological approach to evaluation and case studies as a methodological approach to external evaluation, showing how the two are closely interrelated and how they can be used more frequently and successfully in quality management research.

2. Theoretical models of the generations of evaluation

From a scientific perspective, evaluation can be defined as a systematic process of data collection, analysis, interpretation and synthesis, the purpose of which is to provide timely and valid information for making the necessary managerial decisions [19, 21, 22]. As early as the 20th century, researchers identified several generations of evaluation paradigms, the most prominent of which was the fourth-generation evaluation paradigm introduced at the end of the century [8].

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In contrast to the goal-oriented model [9] expressed in previous generations of evaluation, where, although the process itself has a clear direction and order, the evaluation design was based on predefined objectives and some of the important results of the evaluated object were not always related to the intended objectives. Little consideration was given to the experience of how the objectives were achieved, when assessing the level of achievement of the objectives. In later generations of evaluation paradigms, the complex relationship between evaluators and assesses [1] has emerged in relation to context, input, process, and product evaluation models. As Stufflebeam and Coryn [21] point out, a model based on the judgments of policymakers and administrators in a given organisation has the versatility to be applied to the evaluation of programmes, staff, quality assurance systems, etc. [16].

The fourth-generation evaluation paradigm has attracted a great deal of scientific interest [11], and attempts have been made to test ideas of researchers from different angles in different social science studies. The new generation evaluation paradigm has eliminated the tension between all participants in the process. The constructive interaction of all participants that facilitates learning processes makes the fourth-generation assessment a purely local process. Its results depend on the context and on the participants' experience of interaction, which is not transferable to other settings. As an organisational learning process, constructive evaluation can raise more questions than it gives answers. Its 'discoveries' create social constructions that become objects of reconstruction under the guidance of the evaluator. In the long term, this has become a key point of departure for changing the way evaluation and its dualism are viewed. As Stufflebeam [21] points out, the fourth generation of evaluation means that the new approach to evaluation encompasses and, at the same time, transcends the three evaluation models of the previous generation, which focused on goals, descriptions of aspirations, and classical formal measurements. The fourth-generation evaluation paradigm has been complemented by the active participation of stakeholders in all stages of evaluation as a prerequisite for the realisation of quality assurance: planning, conducting, reporting and presenting, etc. Constructivist evaluation, according to Stufflebeam [21], rejects the existence of any definitive reality and uses a subjectivist epistemology; the evaluation process must be holistic and analytical. In the evaluation process itself, 'human instruments' are essential. The fact that this process is highly complex and requires a great deal of expertise and insight is demonstrated by studies carried out in different countries (e.g., Fletcher and Dyson [6]; Grissom, Blissett and Mitani [7], etc.). Thus, in line with the fourth-generation evaluation paradigm, the purpose of the evaluation process is not only to collect data, but also to engage the organisational community, to foster accountability, and to bring about a positive change in organisational culture.

3. Action research as a methodological approach to evaluation

A didactical analysis of the assessment process shows that, in a dualistic, complementary process, the evaluation processes are more closely linked to the formative assessment objectives, and the external evaluation - to the diagnostic assessment objectives. This conditional differentiation of the evaluation process makes it possible, with some distance from the variety of evaluation models and historically conditioned evaluation approaches known in management science [21], to approach evaluation from the perspective of research methodology and to draw the conclusion that the processes of evaluating organisations' performance should be organised in accordance with the methodological approaches of action research, and those of external evaluation, with the methodological approaches of case studies.

Action research is research in which the researcher (i.e., a member of the community/ organisation) is directly involved and determines the situation, and the methods used are mainly qualitative (interviews, observation, document analysis, etc.). According to Fernie and Smith [5], a distinctive feature of this research is that it focuses on examining and improving professional performance. In this process, it is important to investigate different aspects of performance and propose solutions to improve performance. The methodological literature [3, 14] emphasizes that the value of research constructed using this methodological approach is that it is a social process in which the research is carried out in the presence and involvement of the researcher in the activity being researched, with all members of the organisation interacting with each other, sharing their knowledge and experience, learning together, and seeking social change. This methodological approach is closely related to and directly reflects the PDSA cycle in quality management.

In action research, it is important to collect data and information to help identify those aspects of the facility that need improvement [1]. In such evaluation, it is important to understand whether the processes are working as planned and whether progress is being made as planned [22]. As Alkin [1] argues, the information generated by the evaluation feeds back into the object being evaluated and helps improve it. According to Stufflebeam and Coryn [21], evaluation is proactive and forward-looking, not only helping to achieve the set objectives, but also enabling the achievement of higher objectives, and enabling continuous quality improvement decisions to be made with the participation of all stakeholders related to the object of evaluation.

According to Kemmis et al. [14], this research is collaborative and aims to spread good practice by looking

at specific practical activities rather than at abstract ones. It is about real, tangible, concrete activities carried out by concrete people in concrete places. The research itself is inherently emancipatory/liberating as action research helps individuals to break free from irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying social structures. It is a process by which individuals reflect on how specific situations or broader social (cultural, economic, political) structures constrain their practical activities; and think about possible ways to avoid, disengage from, reduce the negative influence of structures or situations, and increase the positive influence.

Action research is critical as it seeks to critically assess the ideologies, societal stereotypes and inert patterns of action that shape and constrain specific practical activities. The action researcher or practitioner is not only critical but also self-critical. The aim is to assess the extent to which the practice is consistent with the principles of equality, tolerance, non-discrimination, and social cohesion.

Action research is reflexive (dialectical, recursive). This is one of the key features of action research. Action research encourages reflection, evaluation, change of practices, and search for better, improved, more effective models of action. Reflection encourages change and deepens knowledge; it leads to the conceptualisation and theorisation of concrete practices.

Action research aims to change both practice and theory. Action research treats both practice and theory as equal; neither theory nor practice is given priority. Theory provides additional knowledge, suggests ideal models, and indicates aims for practice. Practice gives meaning to theory or promotes change in theory, enriches theory with examples, etc. The dialectical relationship between practice and theory is important in action research.

Weiss [22] points out that evaluation includes activities such as:

- writing the story (the evaluator can contribute to the understanding and functioning of the object being evaluated);
- feedback to practitioners (data can be meaningful not only to managers but also to those directly involved, as the evaluator is a perceptive observer who sees what is happening and shows what internal and external conditions are affecting the subject);
- clarification of the objectives of the evaluation (the evaluation is an opportunity for the actors involved to clarify the objectives of the exercise, taking them as a criterion for assessing the results, thus making the evaluation a disciplinary mechanism, a means of agreeing on what is to be done in the future for quality);
- accountability (making evaluation results publicly available promotes their understanding and use);
- understanding of social intervention (evaluation is initiated with the explicit aim of finding out what changes people's behaviour).

It is important to note that proper and meaningful self-assessment in an organisation provides an excellent opportunity for learning by accumulating knowledge of the lessons learned, allowing staff and the community to use it to plan future activities. It should also be noted that self-assessment is directly related to the idea of a learning organisation [20]. Assessment becomes a prerequisite for organisational learning, identifying gaps, challenges, and bottlenecks in the organisation's performance to improve quality. Since action research is based on the values and practices of the organisation's communities, action researchers focus on understanding their own subjectivities and how they affect the research process itself, rather than trying to eliminate them. Reflection, in which researchers continuously analyse the various assumptions they have made and how they relate to real activities, their interpretations and knowledge generation, is essential.

In addition to the advantages mentioned above, the methodological approach to action research in the context of self-assessment should also take into account the threats and disadvantages identified in the methodological literature that can disrupt the assessment process itself or affect the results: time costs for the participants, low technical quality of the assessment, and unfavourable political configurations.

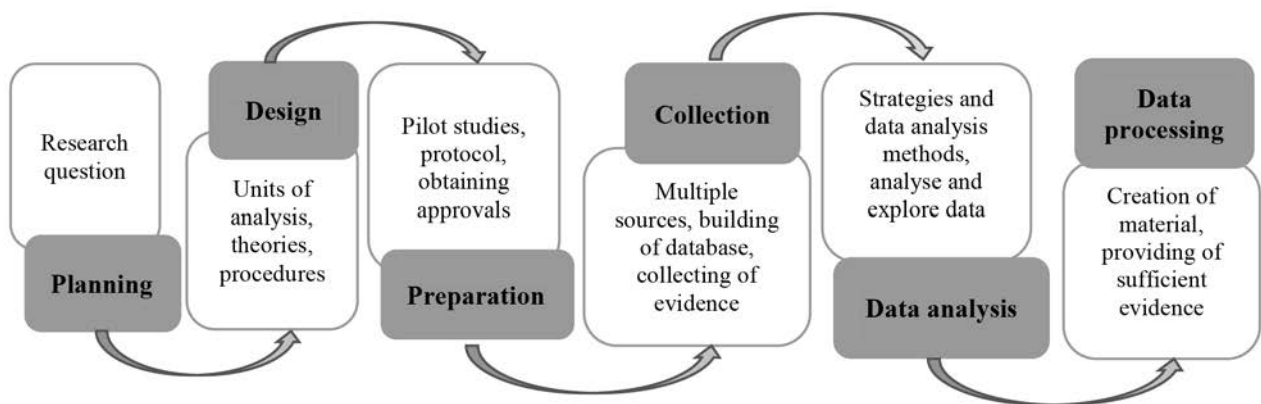
4. Case study as a methodological approach to external evaluation

A case study provides an opportunity to analyse and describe a single event or fact in depth in a real context and to describe/explain the phenomenon being researched [4, 13]. This type of research combines both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and processing. The methodological literature [9, 13] indicates that case studies are widely used in organizational performance research. These studies focus on a specific case, which they try to describe and explain in as much detail as possible.

Objective data - at the societal, institutional, personal or even interpersonal level - are important for both self-assessment and external evaluation. It must be available for objective self-assessment and external evaluation. Given the variety of existent data, appropriate and scientifically sound methods of collecting and processing data must be assessed. In addition to the classical dominant data collection methods used in formal procedures, it is appropriate to encourage communities to choose other data collection and processing methods such as focus groups, systematisation, meta-analysis, content analysis, thematic analysis, etc.

Case studies are very close, in essence, to responsive constructivist evaluation, which integrates the three previous generations of evaluation: (1) measurement, (2) description, and (3) judgment. As Lincoln and Guba [8] point out, responsive constructivist evaluation is concerned with stakeholder agency and context. Responsive/client-centred evaluation identifies the strengths and areas for improvement of the subject being evaluated and teaches how to understand and predict prospects for performance improvement. According to Stufflebeam and Coryn [21], this evaluation approach focuses on continuous communication between the evaluator and the evaluated by discovering and discussing the quality problems of the evaluated entity. Responsive evaluation, through two-way communication, becomes an open process which engages in a discussion that constructs a desirable understanding of quality and a commitment to achieve it.

According to Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier [9], a good case study is characterised by a clear and justified purpose and carefully formulated research questions. An external evaluation based on the methodological approach of a case study should first establish the direction and purpose of the study and refine the research questions. This would be followed by a focus on data collection tools and practical issues, the implementation of data collection and data management. These authors referring to quality case studies place additional emphasis on rich data collection, where data can be collected in an intensive but short time frame. It should be noted that the use of different tools and methods adds depth to the data, helps to break down the data, and strengthens the validity of the conclusions drawn.



According to Yin [12, 13], it is important to realise that a case study is not only a linear but also an iterative process (Fig. 1).

Fig.1. Case study phases by Yin [12,13].

In the planning phase (1), it is important to identify the research questions, decide whether to use a case study, and understand its advantages and disadvantages. In the design phase (2), it is important to define the units of analysis, develop the theory and propositions, determine the design of the case study, and define the procedures to maintain the quality of the case study. The preparation phase (3) involves developing the skills of the case study researcher, drafting the case study protocol, conducting pilot studies (if necessary), and obtaining approvals for the protection of subjects' rights. In the data collection phase (4), the case study protocol is followed, multiple sources of evidence are used, a case study database is built, and the consistency of evidence is maintained. In data analysis (5), it is important to draw on theoretical and other strategies, apply selected data analysis methods, use quantitative and qualitative data, and analyse and explore new data in isolation from interpretations. In the data processing phase (6), it is important to define the audience, create textual and visual material, and provide sufficient evidence to allow the study reader to draw their own conclusions.

Classical publications on research methodology refer to the four-step structure of a case study as: identification of the selected case (or cases) and delineation of the case boundaries; collection of data; analysis of the data; and interpretation of the findings. A case study provides an in-depth analysis and description of a single event or fact in a real-life context, and a description/explanation of the phenomenon under investigation, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clear. However, the members of the organisation are indirectly involved in this process. The essential steps of the research are determined by the researcher and the aim of the research. Therefore, in addition to the advantages mentioned above, it is important to consider the potential threats and obstacles [4]: the difficulty of selecting the most appropriate case and defining the boundaries of the selected case; the need to make a reasoned decision on how many cases it is sensible to analyse; the risk of lack of depth of the analysis if one chooses to study several cases instead of a single one; the need to gather a large amount of empirical material for a deep understanding of the case; the need to use a variety of methods for collecting the data; and others.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the methodological paradigms allows to argue that action research as a methodological approach to evaluation and case studies as a methodological approach to external evaluation are closely linked to organisational quality management. It is argued that action research is a critical, reflexive social process, in which the researcher and all members of the organisation are directly involved and determine the situation. Action research is important in quality management because it gathers data and information to help clarify those aspects of the object evaluated that need improvement. The self-assessment becomes a precondition for organisational learning, identifying gaps in performance, challenges, and obstacles to improving the quality of the organisation's performance.

Case studies provide an opportunity to look closely at a single case and analyse it in the context of one specific case. However, case studies based on empirical data and analytical methods allow for an in-depth analysis and description of a single event or fact in a real context. This study, unlike an action research study, does not directly involve the members of the organization, making it more suitable for an external evaluation of the organisation.

However, these methodological approaches should not be considered perfectly suitable in all cases, as they have limitations. The following risks or drawbacks can be observed when using the action research approach: the time commitment of the participants of the self-assessment, the low technical quality of the evaluation, the unfavourable political configuration, the excessive reliance on theory, and the neglect of practice. The fundamental weaknesses of the methodological approach of case studies are related to the selection of appropriate cases, the lack of supporting evidence, the need to use appropriate research methods, the incompetence of the researcher, etc.

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