

Assessing organizations against excellence models: will subject matter experts add value to the assessment outcomes? An exploratory study

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Abstract

Assessing organizations against excellence models (EM) aims to help them make substantial improvements to their services, thereby satisfying and exceeding the expectations of their stakeholders. Assessments seem to be the main comprehensive tool available to date, by which the level of organizational excellence can be thoroughly monitored. Organizations promoting EMs select assessors to evaluate strategic issues and be able to reach conclusions about the excellence level of the assessed organizations. Assessor selection is based on their knowledge of the EM criteria and assessment methodologies, including the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM). A new government EM, the Fourth Generation Government Excellence Model (4GEM), focuses on the assessors' knowledge of core business and selects them as Subject Matter Experts (SME). The conclusion of the research in this area is, unfortunately, ambiguous. Although researchers have recognized the importance and the impact of the assessors on the effectiveness of the assessment, few studies have addressed the relation of the specialized experience and core business knowledge of assessors to the outcome of the assessment. This exploratory paper attempts to discuss the impact of having SMEs as part of the assessment team, as well as the advantages and challenges. Further quantitative research studies are suggested to validate this research conclusions.

Keywords: Subject Matter Experts, assessments, excellence models, EFQM, Fourth Generation Government Excellence Model, assessors.

Introduction

Assessing Excellence

Competition increases between organizations, from both the public and private sectors, require them to improve their performance and global competitiveness. Thus, organizations must improve their processes and services and reduce

their costs to meet the increasing demands of their customers and stakeholders. To achieve this, organizations search for tools, frameworks, initiatives, and other models to adopt, which they hope will help them improve the quality of their products and services as well as to optimize their resources. Therefore, those organizations tend to implement best practices and frameworks that strengthen their leading positions and achieve excellence, such as excellence models, international standards, and proven best practices.

Quality standards or excellence frameworks were designed to help organizations focus their efforts to obtain superior performance in a more systematic and structured way and get recognized accordingly (Toma & Naruo, 2017; Dodangeh et al., 2012). Assessments were recognized as the main tool to evaluate the extent of implementation of these different excellence and quality frameworks or standards. They are used either internally through self-assessments or externally by the recognition bodies, national excellence programs or conformity/accreditation bodies.

According to ISO 19011 (2012), assessments are the strategies, techniques, tools, and instruments for collecting information to determine the extent to which organizations demonstrate desired outcomes. Assessments are used to evaluate the extent of implementing excellence award criteria, achieving outstanding results, as well as fulfilling and exceeding the needs of the stakeholders of the assessed organizations. Assessment outcomes provide information about the past performance of the organization, reporting what and how well the organization has been doing and providing the information about how to adjust or improve performance according to the EM criteria requirements.

Assessors are needed to perform assessments, and they are selected to conduct assessments according to a pre-defined criterion of qualifications and skills. Internal assessors are selected by the organizations to internally evaluate their systems, referred to as self-assessment, and define how to enhance excellence at all levels of the organization (Hillman, 1994); whereas external assessors are selected by the national quality awards programs which are considered the custodians for the award excellence frameworks for evaluating the organizations and deciding upon the winners of awards.

ILAC (2007) states that a successful assessment relies largely on the qualification of the assessors. It is also argued that the effectiveness and credibility of the assessing body depends on the competence, professionalism, and integrity of its assessors and technical experts

Few papers have explored the need for Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) in the assessment teams and whether they improve and add value to the outcomes of the assessment. This explanatory research discusses the formulation of assessment teams and the qualifications of the assessors needed to achieve effective and efficient assessment outcomes. The main objective of this research is to explore whether SMEs are required within the assessment team to evaluate the core business of the organizations, in addition to the excellence requirements, and whether there are challenges associated with this approach. We will further explore the main EMs and whether they are using SMEs in their assessment and argue how their experience in certain specialized fields of the organization's business might affect verbal and written feedback of the assessment, taking into consideration the need for assessors to have a holistic approach to the EMs integrated requirements.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a review of previous studies on the engagement of SMEs in assessments conducted by EMs relevant to this study. Section 3 reports a comparison between EMS when engaging SMEs. Section 4 presents the strengths and limitations of the study, and Sections 5 and 6 report conclusions and future research, respectively.

Literature review

Assessment Conducted by Excellence Models

Excellence models (EMs) have been adopted since 1951 by the private sector when Deming succeeded in introducing the principles of continuous improvements to Japan (Dahlgaard J., Chenb, Jangb, Banegasb, & Dahlgaard-Park, 2013). These principles have been further refined and verified to draw the major elements of a roadmap towards excellence, which were introduced as EMs.

Telwar (2011) discussed the three EM models that are now globally recognized to be the main three EMs; the American Malcom Baldrige (MB) model, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model, and the Japanese Deming model. MB is administered by the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program, EFQM runs the

European Excellence model, and the Deming Model is run by the Japanese Union of Scientists and Engineers (JUSE). The objectives of these awards are to help organizations achieve best-in-class levels of performance, identify and recognize role-model organizations, and identify and share best management practices, principles, and strategies (Al Shemali, 2009). Davies investigated the effective implementation of EFQM Excellence Model as part of the regular management practices of the organization and concluded that the model was integrated into the management of the organization, and in the ways that they had intended; therefore, it had been effectively implemented (Davies, 2008). Excellence programs have provided a roadmap for excellence and assisted thousands of organizations across the world to measure their level of excellence, identify opportunities for improvement, and identify a roadmap of actions to be taken by those organizations to make improvements (Talwar, 2011a).

Following the steps of these famous three models, several national excellence models have been developed and implemented. Recently, and based on 20 years of experiences of implementing one of the famous EMs, the EFQM, it was realized by the government of United Arab Emirates that such a model, which forms a framework for the requirements of excellence for both the private and public sectors, is no longer fulfilling the needs of their government organizations. Therefore, in 2015, the federal excellence program in the United Arab Emirates, namely Sheikh Khalifa Government Excellence Program (SKGEP), introduced an excellence framework that targets government organizations, which is named the Fourth Generation Government Excellence Model (4GEM). According to the website of SKGEP, the difference between this model and the other previous models is that it is made by the government and for the government. Also, it relies purely on the Subject Matter Experts in the assessment, which is the main theme of this paper.

Organizations implementing EMs and that want to verify the extent of successful implementation (to be nationally and internationally recognized as role models) must apply to the excellence programs responsible for the recognition/awards and engage in the process. Most excellence programs have a similar process that starts with an application and a submission document, followed by the desk and onsite assessment procedures, which seem to be the only comprehensive means available to date by which the level of organizational excellence can be thoroughly monitored and assessed. Assessments focus mainly on core concepts, processes, and results, and the linkages between them (MBEP, 2015; EFQM, 2013). Each excellence program has its assessment tool that unifies and harmonizes the assessment results between the applicants and drives systematic improvement in all areas of the organization. Excellence programs try to make sure that the recognition/awards process is transparent, and assessments are objective and value adding (Mann, 2016), which will be achieved once the assessment is value adding.

On the other hand, organizations use the model as an internal tool for improvement initiatives using self-assessment (Hillman, 1994). The objective of self-assessment is to identify and act on the areas of the improvement process that require additional effort (Wan Khairuzzaman, Darestani, & Irani, 2011). Hillman (1994) investigated the success of self-assessment and stated that assessments form a process of evaluating an organization and defining its improvement, achievements, and processes against a model for continuous improvement. He concluded that self-assessments are not audits that need very specific, detailed, and operational inspection to assure compliance. Rather, they had a wider scope of compliance through all levels of the organization. Self-assessment tools depend on the maturity level of excellence of the organizations and the award simulation, which includes a full assessment with team of assessors that are acquainted with and trained on the EM. All in all, EMs have considered assessments a successful tool to evaluate the extent of implementation of the excellence model and its maturity (Davies 2008).

No matter what the objective of assessments is, they need to be carried out by a team of assessors who are competent and qualified to carry out assessments, evaluate strategic issues, and be able to reach conclusions about the excellence level of the assessed organizations. The desk assessment helps assessors understand the organizations and its key business factors, followed by an on-site assessment to evaluate with clear evidences how organizations are effectively and efficiently implementing the requirements to fulfill their customers' needs and achieve outstanding results.

On-site assessment through the engagement of SMEs

EMs have their on-site assessments, and a scoring tool that unifies and harmonize the assessments results between the applicants and drive systematic improvements in all areas of the organization. Organizations utilize self-assessment as an internal tool for evaluating their performance against EMs. Assessors understand and assess how well organizations are accomplishing, how mature and how well processes are deployed, how good results are, and whether organizations are learning and improving. Scores are appointed accordingly, as per the set guidelines (MBEP, 2015). Based on the assessment results, feedback reports are developed and issued to the assessed organizations. The

assessment outcomes are qualitative, with a clear statement of strengths and areas for improvements and are accompanied by the quantitative scoring of each criteria representing the level of excellence maturity. The outcomes are documented in feedback reports that should be informative to the assessed organization and of high quality (Govaerts, Van de Wiel, & Van der Vleuten, 2013) with clear statements of strengths and opportunities for improvements developed to help organizations lead their cycles of improvements in their way to leading positions.

Most EMs form assessment teams that consist of a team leader and assessors. The conventional and common method for selecting assessors by excellence programs is based on their experience in the knowledge of the excellence models' criteria and applications, the assessment tool, and the general knowledge of the industry of the organization being assessed; whether it is public or private, services or manufacturing and others. The selected assessors would also have to go through specialized certified training conducted by these programs. Each organization that applies is evaluated by a team composed of three or four assessors that have expertise in the QM area. To become an assessor, trainees are given a short introduction to the model and the assessment process, and then all the assessor work individually on a case study (Raharjo, et al., 2015). Experience in the core business of the organization is not strictly required.

Therefore, experts and specialists in the assessed organizations are calling for more technical expertise to be involved in the assessment teams to help the assessed organizations understand new trends in the core business, to identify priorities, and determine how to improve their core business. The Sheikh Khalifa Government Excellence Program (SKGEP) is one of the few programs in the world that depend on international Subject Matter Expert (SME) assessors who have the breadth and depth of knowledge in the certain area of expertise in the core business of the assessed organization, or in certain assessed criteria. SMEs are required to have a lot of capacity and unique characteristics and qualifications, as well as wide and broad experience and knowledge of the latest development of the context of the different organizational culture. SMEs have to have proven expertise in the international best practices of the core business of the assessed organization or in some of the assessed criteria, such as Human Capital, Innovation or Smart Government (SKGEP, 2018).

Due to the limitations of previous studies on this topic, we review both the academic and practical validity of using SMEs in assessments based on the published literature and the authors' own personal experience with assessing organizations when applying for excellence awards, as external assessors, and jury members of the different Middle East Quality Awards including Dubai Government Excellence Program DGEP, King Abdullah Center of Excellence and Sheikh Khalifa Government Excellence Program SKGEP. The research in this area is, unfortunately, ambiguous, as it reports several advantages but also challenges.

Will SMEs add value to the assessment outcomes?

The assessors' main task is to evaluate the extent of implementation of the EM requirements and identify gaps and opportunity for improvements through written and verbal feedback provided to the assessed organization. Feedback, however, can only be as good as the assessment that informs it: high-quality assessment is conditional for high-quality feedback. The quality of the comments depends on the extent of the assessors' qualifications, competency, and specialization (Govaerts, Van de Wiel, & Van der Vleuten, 2013). Feedback provided by assessors includes scores and narrative comments about the organization performance based on which organizations build their plans of improvements to achieve leading positions internationally (MBEP, 2015; Ericson 2009).

SMEs are pioneers in their area of expertise and have developed their own rich accumulated experience. They are well equipped with a richer experience of the context of different organizational dynamic work and can customize their experiences to suit the context of the assessed organization's core business. They can understand the business and add value to the organization through benchmarking with international best practices. Moreover, the organizations' technical staff will feel more engaged with the assessment team of SMEs as the team will talk the same language of the organization and not only use excellence terminology that the technical staff tends not to understand. The discussion will be of a mutual benefit for both parties who will exchange best practices and would add value to the improvement plans of the organization. Jørgensen, Boer, and Gertsen (2004) have studied the development of a team-based framework for conducting self-assessment of continuous improvement and the need for engaging experts, which is also applicable for external assessment. One of the study conclusions is that expert facilitation is important during the continuous improvement self-assessment process. A comparison between excellence assessors and SMEs can be seen in (Table 1).

Table 1. A comparison between excellence assessors and SMEs

Area	Assessors	SMEs
Experience	Individuals who understand the EM and the logic behind it, its linkages and criteria, and able to interpret it while conducting the assessment	Individuals who are pioneers in their area of expertise and who have developed their own rich accumulated experience
Main task	To evaluate the extent of implementation of the EM requirements and identify gaps and opportunity for improvements through written and verbal feedback provided against the EM	They are well equipped with a richer experience of the context of different organizational dynamic work and can add value to the organization through benchmarking with international best practices
Main criteria of assessment	Uses mainly EM requirements	EM requirements and benchmarking with international best practices
Reporting	Concentrate on the feedback affecting scoring that might not touch its core business; because it is based on a holistic assessment of organization overall performance	SMEs discussions about the details of the business might satisfy the organization with technically valid and practical improvements needed to achieve excellence on the detailed operational level

Also, despite having a holistic perspective at its conceptual level, the existing EMs lack guidance for integration at the operational/process level. Therefore, SMEs discussions about the details of the business might satisfy the organization with technically valid and practical improvements needed to achieve excellence on the detailed operational level. On the other hand, the assessment feedback from excellence assessors would concentrate on the feedback affecting scoring, which would not have a big benefit to the organization and might not touch its core business (because it is based on a holistic assessment of the organization's overall performance).

However, arguments about the use of SMEs in assessments might be challenged by the fact that EMs are formed using different criteria and sub-criteria. The model integrates between the different elements, thereby explaining how enablers achieve successful results (Raharjo, et al., 2015). Assessors are requested to assess organizations by evaluating how the integration between the criteria of the EMs are being put into practice. Assessors are requested to gain insights and supporting evidence on site and to share and evaluate these insights within the team, thus building up the "big picture" (EFQM, 2015). For this reason, excellence assessors are trained to be able to see the whole picture rather than the individual breakdown of the requirements. Involving SMEs in assessments might direct the focus of the assessment of certain elements of concern or related to his/her area of expertise, rather than the full integration of the model. Therefore, the assessment and the feedback outcomes will not be comprehensive. In addition to that, if there is more than one SME in the assessment team, the integration between the various scopes of the organization will not be achieved, as each SME will focus on his/her area of expertise regardless of the connection with the other areas, which might affect the efficiency of the assessment.

Moreover, SMEs are experienced in certain technical areas, and therefore, they will not have full knowledge of the different criteria requirements, such as financial management and strategic planning. Accordingly, the assessment will be limited to the technical services or processes and will not be linked to the different requirements or the rest of the criteria and their impact on the excellence maturity of the organization will not be proven.

Additionally, the result of the assessment is to identify the main strengths and areas for improvement that would help the organization to develop an action plan for improving the excellence level to a best practice level in certain areas. SMEs might focus on their area of specialty, thus losing the insight of the big picture and following the concept of conformity audit rather than the excellence concept of achieving a leading position. It is also important to note that if the organizations are responsible for several main tasks and technical fields, to reach a comprehensive conclusion (which is difficult and make the assessment complicated for both parties, the assessors, and the assessed

organizations), the assessment team must include SMEs covering the whole scope. Having several SMEs coming from different backgrounds might lead to a lack of understanding and cooperation from the assessed organizations, not to mention the difficulty in integrating the different technical findings and strategic results to give on comprehensive picture.

Strengths and limitations

The strength of our study is the fact that there are limited studies on the impact of the assessors' qualifications on assessments feedback and outcomes or the impact of the improvement of SMEs on assessment outcomes. Our work will add to the literature and open new research opportunities that will benefit the excellence programs, organizations, and assessors. Excellence programs might reconsider the mechanism and rules of the formulation of assessors for the sake of the organizations and study the possibility of SMEs involvement. However, our research and experience indicate that SMEs might suggest improvements to the core business of the organizations, which will lead organizations to achieve excellence, but at the same time might also limit the scope of assessment to processes and services criteria.

Conclusions

The traditional technique of formulation of assessor teams by excellence programs always involves excellence assessors who are trained in excellence models. Assessors are mainly selected based on their knowledge of the business system they are assessing, which includes the framework structure and the criteria requirements, in addition to their knowledge of the assessment tool related to the framework they are assessing against. Knowledge of the business of the assessed organization is considered an advantage but is not a precondition. The quality of the assessments relies on the quality of assessors and their feedback.

Few excellence programs have extended their assessment teams to include SMEs, who are individuals with the breadth and depth of knowledge of the specific technical field. Therefore, few types of research have discussed the issue of involving SMEs in assessment teams. The involvement of SMEs can contribute to the effectiveness of the assessment process since they can communicate with the assessed organization in its business language, can focus on the organization's business priorities, and can easily reflect and link the EM criteria requirements to the organization business requirements. SME can also add value to the organizations by providing feedback recommendations for improvements that are related more to the core business of the organizations under assessment, which conform to the best practices of the organization's business. However, SMEs might give more focus and time to the assessment of their areas of expertise, and thus might lose the holistic focus and the "big picture" on the performance of the organization, which is fundamental to the assessment. Moreover, if SMEs are not adequately trained on the EM framework they are assessing against, they might have less focus on the comprehensiveness of the framework of the models. We propose further research that can improve the assessment, assessors' selection and formulation criteria and requirements, as well as the assessment methodology.

Future Research

This exploratory research creates an opportunity for wider quantitative and qualitative research addressing the effect of the qualifications, expertise, and training of the assessors on the outcomes of the assessment. Further research might also examine the validity of the findings, comparing the outcomes of assessments by teams with different qualifications or by measuring the effect of qualification and skills of excellence and SMEs assessors on the outcome.

Assessment quality and value outcomes of the different teams can be compared and evaluated by the organizations and experts. Our findings also call for research on the relationship between the assessment tools, assessors training, and feedback quality, in addition to the impact of assessors, training on assessment outcomes. Research questions could also address the design of assessors' selection requirements and how EMs can develop assessors training to provide comments that are meaningful and useful, to support learning as well as credible improvement initiatives. Another research question is to investigate the accepted tolerance level in the scoring that can be acceptable and might affect the award position or benefit to the organization.

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Biographies

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