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PRODUCT QUALITY (PQ) IDENTIFICATION IN MANUFACTURING COMPANIES: THE PERSPECTIVE OF MANAGERS AND EXECUTIVES

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Abstract
Pursuing quality as one of the main goals of a competitive manufacturing company is very important. The quantity of features and characteristics of a product reflects its quality. One of the most important aspects is that managers and executors (team members) must understand the importance of quality and know what factors affect it and what solutions take place with identified problems. Based on the identification of product quality from the point of view of managers and executives, problems are identified, and solutions are provided to change the situation. If they do not have a common understanding of product quality issues, the situation in production only worsens. Decision-making often requires access to real-time data, analytics, and resources that are typically managed by relevant departments or MANAGERS. Expected, that EXECUTORS follow established procedures and report issues to their MANAGERS. Organizations must empower their frontline employees with the authority and training to make decisions related to equipment operation and maintenance. The results of the Exploratory research revealed that the work of managers and executives with product quality has a lot of disadvantages. The general perspective of managers and executors in solving product quality problems and making decisions to eliminate them include a shared understanding of quality standards, effective communication, data-driven decision-making, empowerment, a commitment to continuous improvement, problem-solving skills, resource allocation, risk management, ongoing training, customer focus, and documentation. Organizations must empower their frontline employees with the authority and training to make decisions related to equipment operation and maintenance. In such cases, EXECUTORS are expected to exercise their judgment and expertise to keep operations running smoothly. The general perspective of managers and executors in solving product quality problems and making decisions to eliminate them include a shared understanding of quality standards, effective communication, data-driven decision-making, empowerment, a commitment to continuous improvement, problem-solving skills, resource allocation, risk management, ongoing training, customer focus, and documentation. By working collaboratively and emphasizing these factors, organizations can effectively address and prevent quality issues.
KEYWORDS: product quality, managers, executors, production company.

Introduction

Today and always, to survive in the market, it is important to be superior to your competitors, and this can be achieved through a quality product. It is necessary to ensure the quality of the processes and the product, which is one of the main characteristics of product quality, due to which consumers will always choose products of that company. It is understood as an initiative aimed at meeting consumer needs through product quality. To meet the needs of consumers, the organization must constantly improve its activities in terms of quality.

Every study in the organization is very useful for identifying the causes of product quality problems, which helps to generate useful ideas to solve these problems. Every motive or reason for a lack of product quality is a basis for change. It is most commonly used in analyzing causes and effect relationships, communicating this information to managers and executives, and facilitating the identification of product quality problems by associating them with the cause and solution of the problem. Research data indicate that the respondents believe that all employees must participate in the implementation of the standard, and the manager must interest and indicate specifically what changes await the employees (Krikščiūnienė, 2008). Different understanding of product quality assurance by MANAGERS and EXECUTORS is becoming one of the most common problems in manufacturing companies in Lithuania.

Different decisions of managers and executives to identify and solve product quality problems in production. Product quality in the manufacturing company. To present an exploratory study aimed at clarifying product quality identification problems and solutions in production from the perspective of managers and executives.

The research is exploratory. Methods used in the research: comparative analysis and synthesis of scientific literature; quantitative research - written survey. The research sample is non-probabilistic - a random way of selecting groups, since the researchers do not intend to extrapolate them to the entire population, that is, transform them outside the research group (Kardelis, 2016). The study involved 135 respondents divided into two groups - 32 MANAGERS and 103 EXECUTIVES involved in the production process.

The research instrument is a questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of three blocks (preparation for production, production, and production results) and statements prepared for decision-making according to categories: employees, methods, technique, technologies, tools, measurements, and environment. The respondents had to evaluate each statement according to the Likert scale - from 1 - completely disagree to 5 - completely agree. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the questionnaire range from 0.762 to 0.822, so the reliability is sufficient. The obtained research data were processed with SPSS and EXEL programs.

The research was conducted (in June 2023) in large furniture manufacturing companies in the Klaipeda region.

Theoretical background.

The competition is increasing day by day. It is becoming increasingly difficult for companies to convince consumers that the product they are selling is of high quality. A product is a good, service, or idea obtained through an exchange. It can be a tangible or intangible measure, including functional, social psychological measures or benefits (Ivanauskas, 2014). Product quality assurance is one of the goals of every manufacturing company. The right quality is not necessarily the best quality. It is determined based on the summary of necessary costs, technical characteristics of the product, taking into account the specific requirements of users, etc. (Giedraitis, 2015).

According to Martinkienė, J., Valackienė, A., Vaikšnoras, M. (2021), analysis of the concept of empowerment explicitly shows that human resources in the organization are empowered by the leader; empowerment depends on management style, character of impact on employees and style of behaviour. Employee empowerment in the organization should be a continuous process depending on the management traits and qualities of the leader and through various tools provided by the leader to employees: required information, various trainings, employee promotion and motivation would develop an empowered employee, who is able to address various encountered problems much more promptly in a self- directed way, to offer various problem solving methods and to strive for the aims and objectives set by the organization.

Quality can be understood "as compliance with the requirements of standards and specifications, suitability for use, degree of satisfaction of customer needs" (Mikulis, 2007). The emergence of quality as an important element allowed to change not only business and/or industrial processes but also the mindset of people. More and more attention is being paid to ensuring quality and requirements when creating products, but little attention has been paid to the efficiency of the entire production process without degrading the quality requirements of the product. In the hierarchical system of quality criteria, the role of management is very clearly revealed, where data managed by managers and information about product quality assurance conveyed to executives is one of the priorities in the organization.

There are two groups of requirements for product quality assurance. The first group includes conditions about the buyer's wishes - requirements for the product. The other group consists of the requirements that must be maintained in the production processes in order to ensure that the product meets the needs of the customers. The abundance of technology and the vast number of ways it can be used in production creates many problems.

At the moment, the list of problems is narrowing when manufacturing more and more complex products in Lithuania, and the basis of everything is product quality assurance in manufacturing. A process is carried out related to a person's desire to solve a certain product quality problem or opportunity that he has recognized and perceived (Table 1).

Table 1. Common product quality issues

Product quality issues	Description of the problem	Authors
1. Defects and variability	Defective products and differences in product quality can lead to customer dissatisfaction and increased costs.	(You, DalBianco, Lin & Amankwah-Amoah, 2019); (Drejeris & Drejjeriene, 2019)
2. Process inefficiency	Inefficient manufacturing processes can lead to waste, delays and reduced product quality.	(Heavin & Power, 2018)
3. Technological errors	Imperfection of technological equipment, failures, and human tuning errors.	(Wang et al., 2015); (Ramilo & Embi, 2014). (Deloitte, 2019)
4. Supply chain issues	Quality issues can arise from problems in the supply chain, such as substandard raw materials or components.	(Heavin & Power, 2018).
5. Insufficient communication	Poor communication between different departments or teams can lead to misunderstandings and quality problems.	(Leichteris et al., 2018)
6. Lack of training	Inadequate employee training can lead to errors and quality deficiencies.	(Bagdžiūnaitė et al., 2019); (Albukhitan, 2020); (Wang et al., 2016)

The causes of problems (Table 1) are grouped into general categories to identify the sources of these causes. Typically, these categories include people, methods, techniques, tools, measurements, and environment (Gifu et al., 2014). Before any transformations, it is necessary to see for yourself how the employees perform one or another process (Ranonytė, 2014). According to V. Howell (2015), it is the involvement of the entire organization. A. Ranonytės, (2014), it is useful to measure and describe the processes, because it allows to review of the entire value chain.

According to Martinkienė, J., Vaikšnoras, M. (2019), to successfully implement the aims and objectives of organization it shall be led by the leader, who possesses managerial competencies, i.e. – the leader, who predicts and clearly formulates the direction to be pursued by the organization.

According to V. Howell (2015), standardization of work increases efficiency, so it becomes possible to do the same work with fewer people. However, it is necessary to refrain from a hasty desire to abandon freed resources, because the first efficiency improvement project will also become the last. Employees would simply not get involved in them (Ranonytė, 2014). It is necessary to receive feedback in order to evaluate the benefits of the change (Ranonytė, 2014).

According to Martinkienė, J., Giedraitis, A., Vaikšnoras, M. (2016) in the business world, it's important for business companies to be able timely respond not only to ongoing external changes, but also to internal ones.

According Çuhadar, S., Rudnak, I. (2022) well-being and feelings of employee are the essential for managers. Organizational profit: it is essential to drive a business for success. Employee's engagement: it is associated with how strong commitment employee have for organization. Knowledge sharing culture: it implies organizational culture that supports free exchange knowledge, information between employees and it is essential to drive a business based on sustainable leadership criteria.

Improving overall administrative performance reduces the number of errors. Company management and employees understand how much work can be done in the same amount of time and with the same employee resources, while simultaneously improving work productivity, quality, costs, work morale, and customer satisfaction (Oppenheim, 2015). By correctly communicating with the organization's team on various issues, sharing information can create a strong internal culture of the organization and ensure continuous learning (Pociūtė and V. Janušauskienė, 2005). The ability to solve product quality problems is an integral part of improving the production process. A necessary prerequisite for decision-making is the ability to choose from several possible alternatives of future behavior or actions (Table 2).

Table2 . Possible solutions for product quality issues

Means	Description	Authors
Quality management systems	Implementing quality management systems such as ISO 9001 can help standardize processes and ensure that quality standards are met.	Sharma, D. S. (2005)
Statistical process management (SPV):	Using statistical methods to monitor and control processes can reduce variability and prevent defects.	Serafinas, D. Ruželė, D. (2014)
Data-driven decision making	Using data and analytics to monitor processes and make informed decisions can help ensure more effective quality management.	Schildkamp, K. ir Datnow, A. (2020)
Root cause analysis	Identifying and addressing the root causes of quality problems using tools such as Fishbone Diagrams or 5 Causes can prevent recurrence.	Drejeris, R., & Drejjerienė E. (2019)
Cross-functional cooperation	Encouraging cross-departmental collaboration can improve communication and better align quality goals.	Niederkorn, M., Ruffini, C. (2008).
Supplier quality management:	Ensuring that suppliers meet quality standards through audits and collaborative improvement efforts can prevent quality problems.	Schildkamp, K. ir Datnow, A. (2020)
Automation and technologies.	The introduction of automation and advanced technology can improve the consistency and accuracy of manufacturing processes.	Smith, T. M. (2015)
Inclusion of customer feedback.	Collecting customer feedback and incorporating it into product development can lead to better product design and quality.	Schildkamp, K. ir Datnow, A. (2020)
Continuous process improvement.	Encouraging a culture of continuous improvement using methods such as Lean or Six Sigma can help to systematically solve problems and reduce waste.	Howell, V. W. (2015)

Each solution to product quality problems (Figure 2) is the identification and selection of a course of action to solve a specific problem. In Tables 1 and 2, the specifics of the problems and solutions can vary greatly depending on the product type and organizational context. Therefore, it is recommended to adhere to the combination of low production costs and high quality of your product and service (Giedraitis, 2015).

In some organizations, responsibility for product quality falls under the specific responsibilities of MANAGERS. EXECUTORS "individually" cannot be held responsible for product quality issues and cannot be authorized to assume full responsibility without resolving all issues of concern to them. Therefore, it needs to be constantly checked. All employees of the organization (MANAGERS and EXECUTORS) are different, so their internal motives are also different. Researchers and practitioners in manufacturing companies continue to explore and apply these concepts to address evolving manufacturing and product quality issues.

Research results

The statements evaluated from the test, the first block, show that there is no significant difference between the ratings of MANAGERS and EXECUTORS (Figure 1).

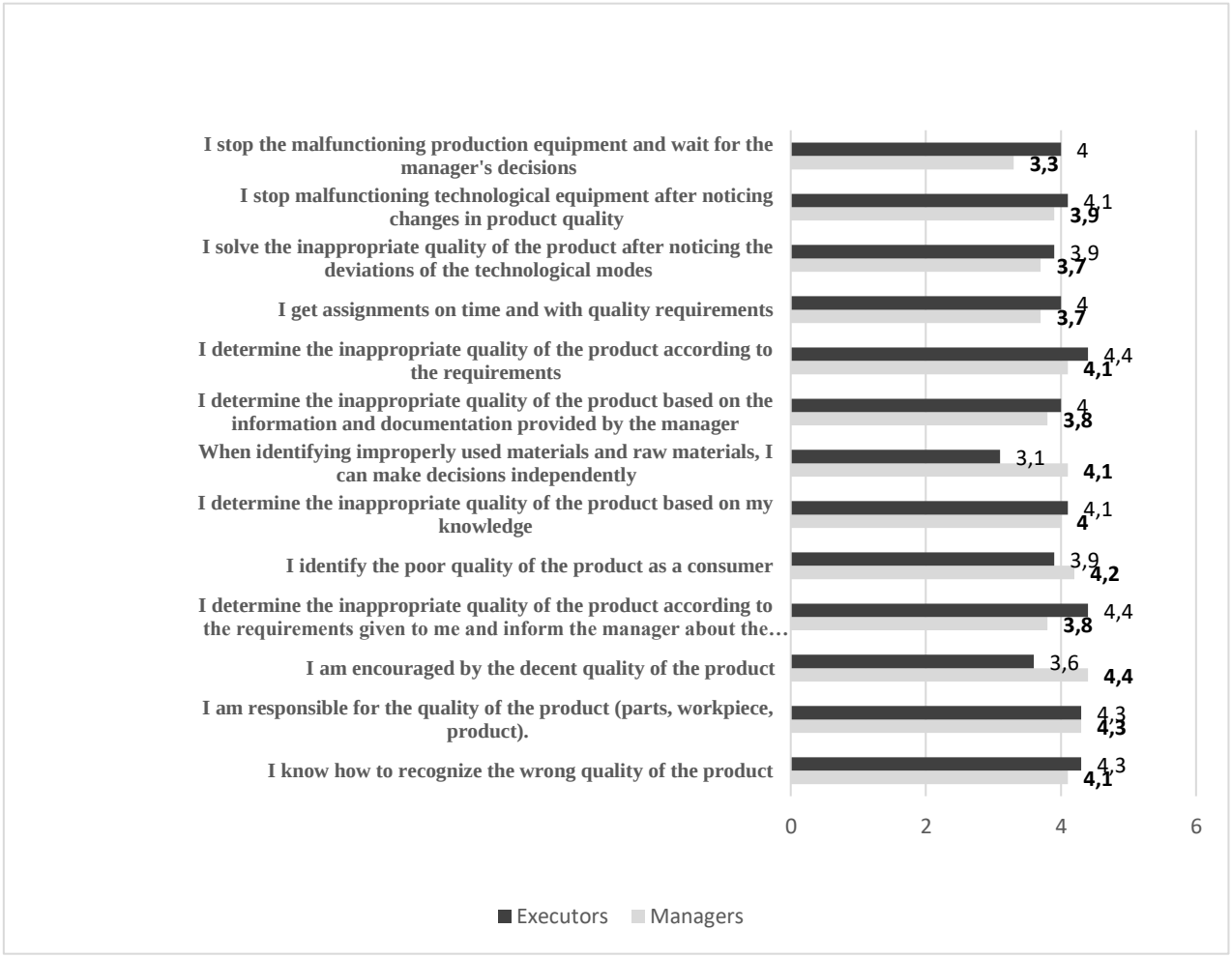

Fig. 1. The relevance of product quality in the stage of preparation for production

Research data (Fig 1) revealed that MANAGERS are reluctant to stop the malfunctioning production equipment and to wait for the direct manager's decisions (x-3.3). Waiting for above managerial approval in such situations can lead to unacceptable risks. Continuing to operate malfunctioning equipment can exacerbate the problem and lead to further damage or increased downtime. In some cases, immediate action is required to address emergencies, such as equipment overheating, electrical faults, or fires. Stopping the equipment promptly can lead to quicker resolutions and less production disruption. In order to change this situation, it is necessary to empower the responsible manager as well as monitor the operating equipment and, if necessary, make a decision to stop it.

Another important indicator is that EXECUTORS are not explicitly granted decision-making authority in quality matters (x-3.1), including materials management. This can occur when management does not trust their judgment and expertise. Decision-making authority regarding materials usage might rest with only higher-level managers or departments specializing in procurement, inventory management, or production. EXECUTORS often have defined roles and responsibilities within an organization, and their authority may be limited to specific tasks or processes. Also, EXECUTORS may not possess the necessary expertise and might rely on managers or experts in these areas. EXECUTORS might be risk-averse when it comes to making decisions that can have financial or operational implications. Incorrect decisions regarding materials usage can lead to waste, increased costs, or disruptions in production. EXECUTORS may feel ill-equipped to evaluate all the potential impacts and may hesitate to make decisions without a comprehensive understanding of the situation. EXECUTORS may not have access to the necessary resources, data, or tools needed to evaluate and address materials usage issues effectively.

In urgent situations where improper materials usage poses an immediate threat to production, quality, or safety, EXECUTORS may need to step in and make quick decisions to mitigate the risk, regardless of their managerial structure.

In the second block, the statements evaluated show the opinions of MANAGERS AND EXECUTORS about actions on product quality issues in the production process. The presented data (Figure 2) show that the opinions of MANAGERS AND EXECUTORS differ more.

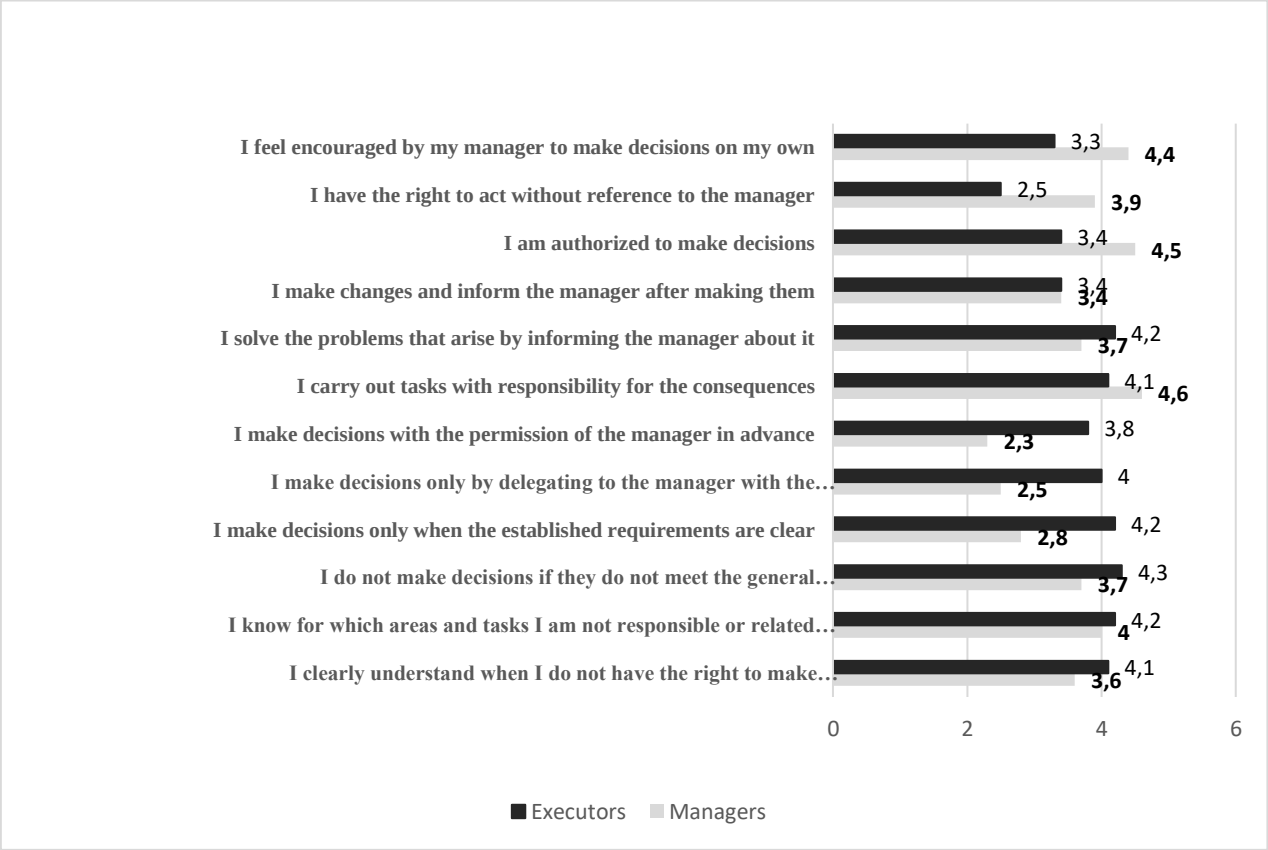

Fig. 2. The relevance of product quality in the production process

According to the research data presented in Table 2, it can be stated that MANAGERS do not receive permission for decision-making in advance (x=2.3), even if the necessary information is agreed in advance (x=2.5) and the requirements for decision-making are not clear (x=2.8). It implies that MANAGERS may not have clear guidelines or criteria to follow when making decisions. Even if they have the necessary information and have reached agreements on it, there is a lack of clarity in the decision-making requirements, and they are still unable to make decisions without prior permission or approval. In other words, they are not allowed to make decisions without seeking prior approval or permission. This could imply bureaucratic or hierarchical constraints within the organization that hinder efficient decision-making by MANAGERS.

Another statement "I have the right to act without reference to the manager" revealed that the EXECUTOR does not have the right to act independently (x=2.5) because he does not have the authority to do so. This one of the most common consequences is delayed decision-making. EXECUTORS must wait for managerial input, which can slow down operations and impact productivity, especially in fast-paced environments. MANAGERS may be concerned about the potential risks associated with allowing executors to make independent decisions. They may believe that centralized decision-making reduces the likelihood of errors or costly mistakes. In some cases, MANAGERS might want to maintain control to ensure accountability. They may want to be directly responsible for decisions to track and assess their outcomes. When employees are discouraged from making decisions independently, it can stifle innovation and creativity within the organization.

In the third block, the end of the production process, the opinions of MANAGERS and EXECUTORS differ in the evaluation of the statements as well (Figure 3).

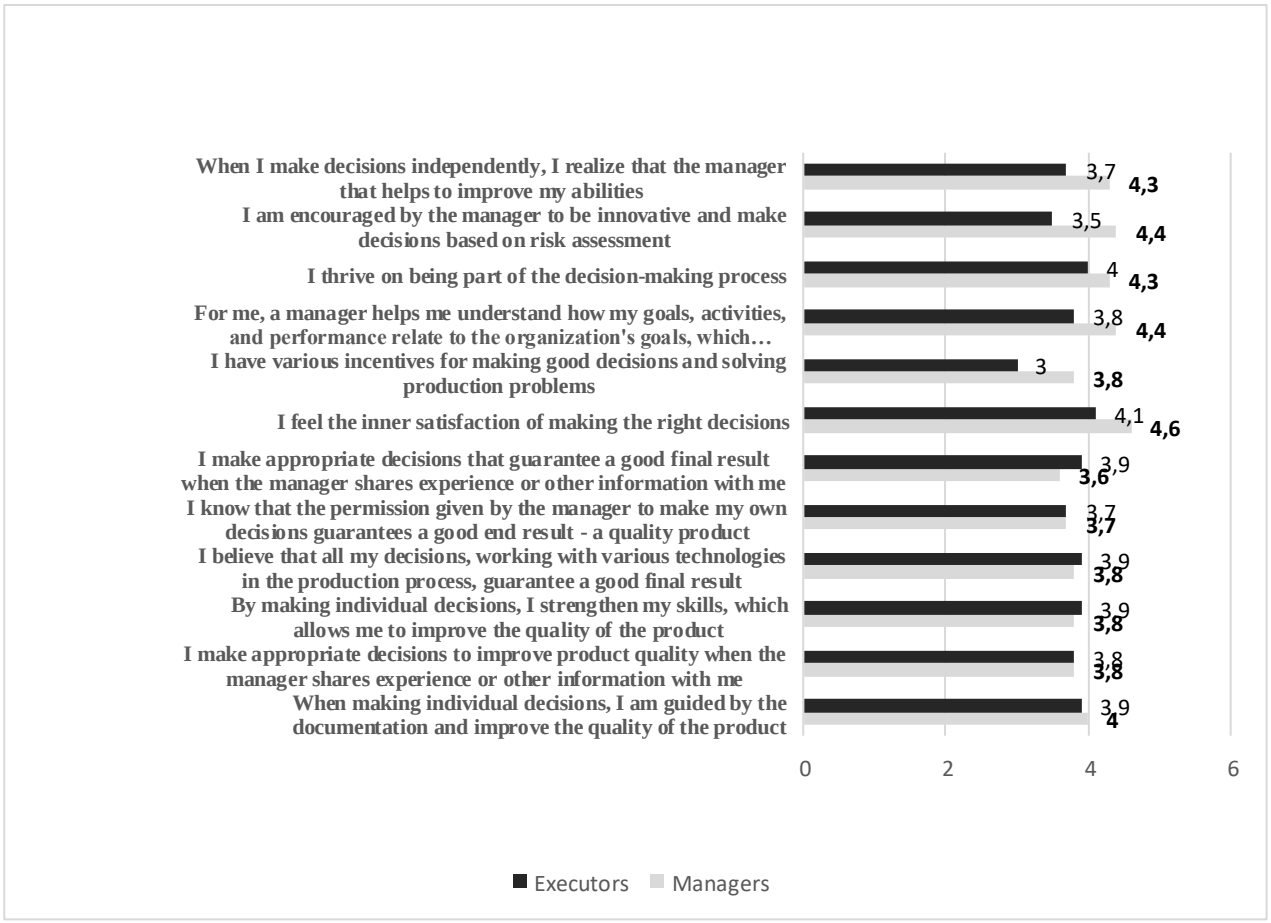

Fig. 3. The relevance of product quality at the end of the production process

To another statement "I have various incentives for making good decisions and solving production problems", MANAGERS and EXECUTERS answered differently - MANAGERS x=3.8 and EXECUTERS x=3.0.

This means MANAGERS and EXECUTORS do not have clear performance goals related to decision-making and problem-solving, and they may not feel motivated to improve in these areas. When the impact of good decisions and effective problem-solving is not measurable or timely feedback is not provided, employees may not see the value of these activities.

If performers fear punishment or negative consequences for mistakes, they may avoid taking risks, even if those risks are necessary for innovation and effective problem-solving. Lacking the necessary skills and knowledge can make it difficult for implementers to make good decisions and solve problems effectively. Poor communication and collaboration can hinder the sharing of ideas and the collective effort needed for effective decision-making and problem-solving. Solutions can be recommended to change the situation: Establish clear, measurable goals related to the quality of solutions, the effectiveness of problem-solving, and their impact on production results; Invest in training and development programs that improve decision-making and problem-solving skills at all levels of the organization; Provide opportunities for continuous learning, mentoring, and coaching; To promote open communication channels and collaborative platforms that encourage the exchange of insights and ideas; To implement a performance appraisal system that tracks the results of decisions and problem-solving efforts. To provide regular feedback and use performance data to improve.

In summary, motivating MANAGERS and EXECUTORS to make good decisions and solve production problems requires a combination of clear goals, an enabling culture, training, empowerment, effective communication, measurement, and alignment with organizational goals. By addressing these factors, organizations can motivate their employees to excel in these critical areas and drive continuous improvement.

Conclusions

The quality systems developed by the companies allow to ensure compliance of the product production processes with the requirements of the interested parties. The understanding of product quality and the application of the quality system in the processes are becoming more and more modern and all-encompassing. With a strategic

understanding of the importance of quality and its continuous supervision, it is necessary to involve people who know their field in the assessment, support, and improvement of this area - both MANAGERS and EXECUTORS.

Decision-making often requires access to real-time data, analytics, and resources that are typically managed by relevant departments or MANAGERS. Expected, that EXECUTORS follow established procedures and report issues to their MANAGERS.

Organizations must empower their frontline employees with the authority and training to make decisions related to equipment operation and maintenance. In such cases, EXECUTORS are expected to exercise their judgment and expertise to keep operations running smoothly. Organizations that embrace a culture of continuous improvement encourage employees at all levels to identify and address operational inefficiencies. EXECUTORS may view stopping malfunctioning equipment as a way to contribute to this culture and enhance overall productivity.

An organization values MANAGERS and EXECUTORS differently in terms of innovation and risk assessment and disproportionately rewards MANAGERS for these skills, it can lead to a variety of consequences. While it may encourage managerial innovation and calculated risk-taking, it can also create hierarchical divides, stifle creativity among EXECUTORS, and limit the organization's ability to adapt and innovate at all levels. Striking a balance and recognizing and nurturing innovation and risk assessment capabilities in all roles can be key to fostering a culture of innovation and ensuring the organization's long-term success.

To address these challenges, some organizations are moving toward more decentralized decision-making, empowering their employees to make informed choices within established guidelines. This approach can lead to increased agility, improved employee engagement, and more effective problem-solving. However, it also requires a culture shift and investment in training and development to ensure that employees are equipped to make responsible decisions independently.

The general perspective of managers and executors in solving product quality problems and making decisions to eliminate them include a shared understanding of quality standards, effective communication, data-driven decision-making, empowerment, a commitment to continuous improvement, problem-solving skills, resource allocation, risk management, ongoing training, customer focus, and documentation. By working collaboratively and emphasizing these factors, organizations can effectively address and prevent quality issues.

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