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Determinants of Sustainable Continuous Improvement Practices in Mail Processing Service Operations

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Abstract

This study aims to identify determinants of sustainable Gemba Kaizen practices, a concept of continuous improvement, for reducing carry over and enhancing productivity at a mail processing centre owned by a leading postal services provider in Malaysia. In order to discover determinants of sustainable Gemba Kaizen practices, this study looks into eight variables; organizational culture, employee participation, employee behaviour, leadership, ergonomics, maintenance, work procedures and process redesign. Questionnaires were distributed to 220 employees that were directly involved in the 5S activities. Interestingly, employees' experiences show that factors related to employees' competency, maintenance of equipment and ergonomics are vital in sustaining the Gemba Kaizen practices. The organization may need to review company's policy in order to sustain the effectiveness of continuous improvement activities; the 5S.

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1. Introduction

In improving process, it is not necessary for an organization to incorporate sophisticated tools and advanced technologies to solve problems. Most of the problems can be solved with low cost and common sense approaches. The Gemba Kaizen implies continuous improvement that involved everyone; both managers and workers and require little costs for its implementation where the action or activity is taken place (Imai, 2007). To date, the application of

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Gemba Kaizen is not limited to manufacturing of goods. It is widely adopted in service operations. Studies on the implementation of Gemba Kaizen noted interesting trends and increasing cases of adoption across industries, in particular, the service industries such as retail and health (Teehan & Tucker, 2014; Wickramasinghe, 2014; Matsushita, 2015). While many studies have explored various facets of continuous improvement (Fryer, Ogden & Anthony, 2013), to understand waste reduction and quality improvement at large, very little studies view the needs to understand how to sustain the practices. In real situation, organizations found obstacles to quality maintenance (Roslina & Corner, 2009).

One of the important services industries in Malaysia, the postal and courier services play a significant role in supporting the socio-economic development. It contributes to technological advancement in various sectors in the supply chain of goods and services. Hence, the postal industry provides a considerable number of job opportunities for Malaysians with over 105 licensed courier operators and other related services such as the mailing houses; air, land and sea transport and logistics companies. In recent years, postal and courier service industry faces many challenges in competing with electronic communication and to improve mail process (Lee, 2011). In the postal and mail operations, delivering mails on time is a very critical issue. Daily, post offices needs to operate millions of mails to be delivered on time. Accordingly, a few terms are used to classify mails at different stage. The 'clear floor' refers to condition of mails that are received, processed and delivered successfully within the same day. If the mails do not get delivered right on time, the mails is considered as 'carry over'. The 'carry over' mails need to be kept as work in process within workstations. Mails which are not able to be delivered on time or within the same day will be arranged for delivery on the following day. It is then, categorized as 'late delivery'. 'Late delivery' is the product of inefficiency in sorting process at the mail distribution centre. Consequently, this problem can lead to increasing number of volume mail and increasing work pressure on staff for accumulated mails. For the same reason, the cost of overtime and running machineries will increase along with the additional hours of operations. The failure in processing mails within the allocated hours will result in 'late delivery' and frequently required manual arrangement by numbers of skilled staff at odd hours. In recent years, the service provider starts to reconsider the applicability of Gemba Kaizen as a part of the continuous improvement programs. . The company recorded a remarkable decline in volume of carry over during the introduction of Gemba Kaizen in 2012. However, inconsistency was detected in the percentage of carry over after 2 years of implementation, an alarming increase of carry over in 2014, showing ineffectiveness of the Gemba Kaizen practices.

Considering the concept of Gemba Kaizen and its benefit in providing continuous improvement towards effective work process, this paper aims to examine the improvements made in tandem with the implementation of Gemba Kaizen and determinants for successful implementation of Gemba Kaizen practices in the long run for sustainable performance, in particular, the postal and courier services. Thus, the paper is divided into five main sections. The review of the literature on continuous improvement practices extends the understanding on importance of Gemba Kaizen to operational performance. Subsequently, the following section looks into factors associated with successful implementation. Section 3 describes the research context, the development of the survey instrument and the data collection process. Subsequently, the survey results are presented and discussed in section four. The closing section discusses the theoretical and managerial implications of the analysis. It concludes with the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

2. Labour Productivity and Gemba Kaizen Practices

In the effort to improve operational performance, indicators such as reduce waste, costs and increase productivity, are some of the ways of measuring outcome (Thessaloniki, 2006). Labour productivity can be reflected in an objective way of measuring units produced per labour hour and/or labour cost per unit (Heizer and Render 2011). The concept of productivity is closely related to Gemba Kaizen, where the value-adding activities to satisfy customers' requirements and operations objectives are carried out for continuous improvements. In application, it means multitude of small or incremental changes as one seeks elusive perfection. Although improvements are small and incremental, the kaizen process brings about dramatic results over time (Singh & Singh, 2009).

With the aims of reducing waste and improve quality, one of the elements in Gemba Kaizen process is the 5S or the House-Keeping concept. 5S is deemed as a good basis to all improvement related activities. 5S is a system to

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