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## Quality Competitions Based on Models of Organizational Excellence: An Italian Quality Award Case Study

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** The aim of the paper is to present assumptions of the Italian Quality Award competition (on the basis of the EFQM model) and show the role of this rivalry in quality management and in creating the competitive advantage of companies aspiring to obtain this award and that having been honored with the distinction awarded by Associazione Premio Qualità Italia.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The literature study method, the survey research method conducted on a sample group of Italian micro-enterprises as well as the monographic method, the essence of which was a detailed case study – a specific competition initiative: the quality award, were applied in order to develop the issue.

**Findings:** Organizations have the access to a wide range of quality management methods and techniques as well as to a diversified set of tools that allow them to generate and evaluate quality. One of the tools is the quality competition, which helps organizations both design and supervise processes aimed at ensuring the appropriate high level of products modernity, reliability, efficiency, effectiveness, durability or aesthetics as well as test and confirm the effectiveness of these processes through the self-assessment and then external and internal evaluation procedures. Solutions developed during the European Quality Award competition have become the starting point for the development of standards and assessment methodologies applied in national quality competitions around the world, including Italy. The Italian Quality Award, which is based on the EFQM model, allows its laureates and candidates to design, evaluate and improve managerial solutions that are related to all aspects of company management. It also helps take image advantage of the quality effective creation. The quality award granted by the APQI association is a kind of an instrument supporting the organization's brand. It strengthens company information, guarantee and promotional functions. In fact, the award is used to develop and maintain the Total Quality Management in an organization.

**Practical Implications:** Practical business implications focus primarily on indicating the functions of the Italian Quality Award as well as indicate opportunities resulting from this distinction in the field of quality management processes and marketing communications of companies.

**Originality/Value:** The multifaceted role of the Italian Quality Award, both as a quality management tool and as an image instrument has been presented in this paper. The text also contains a short discussion of the author's own research results (empirical study) on the role

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*of quality certificates for activities carried out by Italian microenterprises and on the recognition of the Italian Quality Award brand.*

**Keywords:** *Quality, quality management, TQM, Italy, economic competitions, quality awards.*

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## 1. Introduction

Quality is one of the most important conceptual categories of management. High quality of products and services offered by an organization leads to the increased productivity, decreased costs, increased customer satisfaction, positive image and trust in a market offer. In turn, these factors affect the organization's competitive position, sales level and profits as well as capacity development.

The concept of "quality" has its origins in ancient ontological thought. It was first used by Plato, who pointed out that "the quality of particular things is the degree of perfection they have achieved." For Aristotle, quality meant "difference in essence", which, together with nine other categories, enabled the division of all concepts into logical groups, time, place, quantity, substance, relation, position, disposition, action and quality (Bielawa, 2011, pp. 143-152; Thalassinos *et al.*, 2023).

On the other hand, Cicero understood the concept of quality as a property of a given object and its specificity that was valued positively. Nowadays, in the field of management science, quality can be defined as the expected degree of homogeneity and reliability of a given entity (e.g. product, process) at the lowest possible cost and in accordance with the requirements of the organization's stakeholders (Deming, 1982, p. 229).

In other words, quality means a property characterizing the suitability of a specific thing or an intangible object for the efficient fulfillment of functions expected by the user (Bielawa, 2011, pp. 143-152).

However, quality is not a static characteristic of a product. It is the result of many interrelated activities undertaken by an organization striving to ensure the quality of its products and processes. Intentional activities, conscious and purposeful actions aimed at creating and maintaining quality belong to these activities.

Considering quality from this dynamic perspective, it must be assumed that quality can and should be managed in order to ensure continuous improvement of products, services, processes or an entire organization. Quality is not something that is given once and for all. It requires constant development, monitoring and control, through formalized processes and managerial tools.

The quality of a product depends on many factors, especially those which an organization has a real influence on, e.g., raw materials, production processes, employee competences or funds. Quality management allows to coordinate these elements, increase their value, effectiveness and efficiency. The organization's actions based on the cyclic procedures of planning, implementing, controlling and improving processes allow to improve quality and to maintain it at the level expected by both the company and its customers.

Quality management means managerial activity focused on quality issues. It also involves setting quality objectives and ensuring their efficient achievement. However, quality planning, quality system, quality motivation and quality control belong to quality management functions (Bieńkowska and Zabłocka-Kluczka, 2005).

Organizations have a wide range of quality management methods and techniques as well as a diversified set of tools that allow them to generate and evaluate quality. One of the tools is the quality competition, which helps organizations both design and supervise processes aimed at ensuring the appropriate high level of products modernity, reliability, efficiency, effectiveness, durability and aesthetics (Horbaczewski, 2006) as well as test and confirm the effectiveness of these processes through the self-assessment and next external and internal evaluation procedures.

## **2. Quality Competitions in Global Management Practice**

In 1987, the publication of ISO 9000 standards by the International Standardization Organization initiated a new stage in the development of systemic pro-quality solutions. Countries around the world began to introduce the ISO 9000 standards into their national standardization systems.

In consequence, more and more organizations made their efforts to develop and implement quality management systems consistent with these international standards. Dissemination of ISO standards for services, products and management systems as well as the growing acceptance of TQM solutions by management practitioners have also contributed to the development of the idea of quality competitions for companies and public institutions.

This concept of competitions is based on the methodology of quality standards and on the assessment of these standards implementation by both a company – self-evaluation and an external entity - “third party” evaluation.

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The origins of quality competitions are dated back to 1950, when the first competition of this kind was organized in Japan. The Deming Prize established by the Union of Japanese Scientists and Engineers (JUSE) was awarded. William Edwards Deming, the American statistician, the pioneer of the statistical process management and statistical quality control was the patron of this award. After the end of World War II he went to Japan, where he was to assist the occupation authorities of General Douglas MacArthur in organizing a population census.

During his stay in Japan, Deming was involved in the popularization of knowledge on the role of statistics in management among Japanese engineers. In the 1950s and 1960s his knowledge contributed to the dynamic economic and industrial development of this country. The first prize in honor of William Edwards Deming was awarded in 1951 for the implementation of statistical methods in quality control.

Since then, the award has been handed annually in three categories: 1) collective award – for enterprises, 2) individual award – for natural persons and 3) for business units. A company applying for the Deming Prize is assessed in terms of implemented management methods. These methods allow for the effective control of both customers' needs like, quality, price or delivery time as well as employees and employers' needs like, safe and appropriate working environment, successful product development and conditions for the future development of the company (Vovk, 2013, pp. 347-368; Grima *et al.*, 2023).

Another quality competition with a long-standing tradition, international significance and a recognized brand is the Malcolm Baldrige Award, established by the United States Congress in 1987 in order to distinguish American companies and organizations for their achievements in quality management and to raise awareness of the role of quality in companies' competitive advantage in the market. The award can be granted annually in the following categories:

- manufacturing company
- service company
- small company
- education (since 1999)
- health care (since 1999),
- non-profit organizations (since 2007).

Criteria considered by the Malcolm Baldrige Award jury include 7 specific categories:

- *leadership* - assessment of the method, by means of which a company management implements quality values, which, together with the management system, direct all activities leading to the achievement of the excellent level of quality. The leadership role of the company management

- in the process of achieving quality as well as the method, which lets the company combine its social responsibility with quality values, are assessed;
- *information and analyses* – assessment of the scope, significance and methods of taking advantage of data; information management; adequacy of data and analyses conducted for the needs of a company and its customers;
  - *strategic planning* - assessment of the short and long-term planning processes, the aim of which is to obtain or maintain a leading role in the scope of quality. The evaluation also covers types of actions taken in order to improve quality;
  - *human resources management* - assessment of the effectiveness of company's efforts concerning the professional development of employees; benefiting from the employees' qualifications and creating conditions that are conducive to the full involvement of staff contributing to the company development and employees' personality (motivational tools are also assessed);
  - *management process* - assessment of the systemic approach to the quality of products and services. This assessment is based mainly on the technological process and its control, including the control of materials, spare parts and services. Attention is paid to the integration of process control with continuous quality improvement;
  - *economic results* – assessment of the quality level and products and services improvement. This assessment is based on the analysis of recipients' requirements and expectations and the company's activities as well. The level of products and services quality achieved by competitors is also compared. The following elements: customers' requirements and expectations; customer relationships with a company; customer service standards; company's commitment towards customers; complaints and their analysis for the quality improvement; level of customer satisfaction; customer satisfaction with products or services in comparison to customer satisfaction with products or services of market competitors, are researched;
  - *customer satisfaction* – assessment of the degree to which a company meets the requirements and expectations of customers and markets (Karpziel and Balon, 2001).

Applications for the Malcolm Baldrige Award competition are estimated by an independent Examination Board consisting of economy and quality management experts. Examiners evaluate achievement and progress in each of seven criteria categories.

Companies that pass the initial verification are visited by teams of examiners in order to confirm the information provided in the competition applications and to clarify any problems that may appear during the inspection. Candidates receive a written summary of the visit, including a description of strengths and weaknesses with respect to every category criteria (Karpziel and Balon, 2001).

Popularity of the American Malcolm Baldrige Award and its positive role in promoting quality management methods in business environments have contributed to the adaptation of this idea in Europe. In 1992, the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) established the European Quality Award. It is granted in the framework of the competition for organizations or organizational units that are perceived as models at national and European levels and that are proud of at least the five-year experience in the scope of continuous improvement.

The award is based on the EFQM Excellence Model, which is a complex and advanced tool for the organizational improvement. The Model covers the most important areas of an organization functioning and defines requirements that should be met within these areas. This model is also defined as a self-assessment tool and, at the same time, as a model of excellence that a company should be focused on in each of distinguished areas (Kacała and Kołaczyk, 2013, pp. 145-154). These areas are divided into two categories: "the potential" and "the results". They are defined as follows:

- *leadership* - creating a vision, values, ethical principles, involvement in the organization improvement and cooperation with society representatives;
- *employees* - planning and improving human resources, identifying and consolidating the level of knowledge and competence, providing the employees' involvement through motivation and communication;
- *policy and strategy* - methods of strategy building, considering future needs, making decisions based on facts;
- *partnership and resources* - supplier relationship management, financial management, infrastructure management, technology management, information and knowledge management;
- *processes, products and services* - designing and improving processes, designing and manufacturing products on the basis of customer needs and expectations, developing customer relationships;
- *results arising from relationships with employees* - measuring the effectiveness of motivation in relation to customer satisfaction, employees' achievements and involvement;
- *results arising from relationships with citizens, customers* - implementing measures concerning customer's opinions of the organization and activities outcomes indicators;
- *social results of activities* – company image, social responsibility, reducing the harmfulness of products to the environment, relations with authorities;
- *key performance results* – results of the company's activities in the area of Occupational Health and Safety at Work (Excellence Model, 2004, pp. 13-24; Obolewicz, 2011, pp. 611-618).

The European Quality Award candidate evaluation procedure that is carried out by a team of six auditors includes a company analysis according to the criteria of the EFQM Excellence Model.

### **3. Conditions and Main Assumptions of the Italian Quality Award Competition**

Solutions developed in the European Quality Award competition framework have become the starting point for the development of standards and assessment methodologies applied in national quality competitions around the world. In Poland, the role of such a contest is played by the Polish Quality Award Competition, organized since 1995 and initiated by the National Chamber of Commerce; the Polish Center for Research and Certification and the Teraz Polska Foundation (Zymonik, 2012, pp. 141-156). In Italy, the quality competition based on the EFQM organizational excellence model is the initiative called the Italian Quality Award (Italian: *Premio Qualità Italia*).

It is worth noting that in the Italian economic culture, certificates and quality awards have been acting an important role for many years. They constitute a popular and appreciated way of confirming the quality of products or an entire organization.

However, this applies not only to business but also to the public sector. Italy has a long term tradition of high quality products starting with food and ending with design and fashion. The Italians strongly identify themselves with the concept of “made in Italy”. For them it is a synonym of excellence, prestige and value for the customer. Confirmation of this value through formal certification or accreditation procedures is widespread in Italy and considered effective.

Research conducted by this paper author on a sample group of 143 Italian micro-entrepreneurs showed that over half of them (54%) have participated in at least one economic ranking, quality competition or certification procedure in the period of the last 5 years. As many as 67% of surveyed entrepreneurs recognize the Italian Quality Award brand and 91% of respondents from this group assess it as prestigious and significant. 85% of respondents, who know the Italian Quality Award brand, believe that it has an important and positive impact on marketing communication with customers. 61% of those respondents believe that participating in the competition provides a positive impact on company internal processes functioning and improvement.

These results refer to the research conclusions on the recognition of awards and quality certificates conducted at the European Union level. For example, the recognition of the logo of PDO – Protected Designation of Origin (*ChNP – Chroniona Nazwa Pochodzenia*) for food products and wine, was the highest In Italy (36%). At the same time the European average was at the level of 14% (Kot, 2021).

Popularity of certificates, awards and quality labels is justified by the specificity of the Italian economy and business culture, which is defined as "customer-oriented". It means that business culture of this country emphasis on meeting customer needs and ensuring their positive experiences.

Moreover, Italians are proud of their heritage, business activities and local identity. These elements are promoted in various ways, including quality awards. It is also worth noting that Italy has highly developed systems of industrial clusters and supply chains. Obtained quality awards and credibility certificates create trust within these business systems. Interestingly, Italian entrepreneurs are eager to participate not only in domestic rankings and quality competitions but also in foreign initiatives.

Every year Italian companies successfully obtain high results and gain the right to use the "European Quality Leader" emblem in their marketing communication. They participate in the international economic competition for the "European Quality Leader" certificate, organized in Poland since 2019 and carried out simultaneously in seven European markets, i.e. in Poland, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Great Britain and Italy by the auditing company Quality Institute from Katowice (<https://leader-qualita.eu/>).

The Italian Quality Award is granted by the Italian Quality Award Association APQI (*Associazione Premio Qualità Italia*), based in Rome. This Association has been operating since 1996 (Angeli, 2004, p. 23). In addition to APQI, other entities operating in the business environment: the General Confederation of Italian Industry Confindustria (Italian: *Confederazione Generale dell'Industria Italiana*), the University Consortium for Quality Engineering and Innovation (Italian: *Consorzio Universitario in Ingegneria per la Qualità e l'Innovazione*) and the Italian Association for the Culture of Quality AICQ (Italian: *Associazione Italiana Cultura Qualità*) also were the initiators of the award. APQI is the non-government organization that has been managing the Italian Quality Award competition from the very beginning and it has promoted the competition assumptions in business and in the public administration environment (<https://www.confindustria.it>).

The Association has built the competition territorial structures on the basis of its member organizations operating in different regions of Italy. In addition to its role as the competition promoter and manager of the participants' evaluation process, APQI also conducts trainings in the field of quality management. These training are addressed to potential and actual competition participants as well as to competition auditors, who represent the academic sector; consulting firms and public institutions.

Moreover, this organization crucial task is also connected with providing constant updates of excellence models (EFQM and CAF – in the case of awards for public administration). Apart from granting the Italian Quality Award, APQI also awards, individually or in partnership with other organizations, additional distinctions to companies and institutions. The prizes concern business innovations (since 2007) as well as rewards for implementations in the field of occupational health and safety at work in industry (since 2011).

The Italian Quality Award has been granted since 1998. Initially, it was addressed exclusively to small and medium-sized companies that could apply at the national,



regional or local levels. Since 2005, the scope of the competition has been expanded. Large enterprises, including capital groups as well as educational and public administration institutions can take part. Over 430 companies have been assessed in the competition editions that have been organized so far, (<https://www-apqi-it>).

The competition is dedicated to organizations that have already possessed well-established experience and achievements in the Excellence Model applications. Competition candidate companies, in cooperation with the APQI evaluator, commit to conduct a detailed analysis and self-assessment of key areas of their activities, including the identification of the strengths and weaknesses related to:

- management styles and methods applied by the board and managerial staff as well as the company's mission, vision, values and elements of corporate culture,
- development strategy, including basic principles of company activities and economic and social objectives,
- human resources management, including team management methods,
- organizational resources, including financial, material, technological and information,
- business relationships capital, including forms, principles and quality of cooperation with external stakeholders,
- processes referring to all tasks and activities
- customer satisfaction level, including customer opinion on products and services,
- employees' assessment of working environment,
- impact on the environment, including the local community and the natural environment,
- economic outcomes of activities (Piazzo, Heil, and Cecolin, 2000, pp. 10-23).

Results of this self-evaluation are presented to APQI in the form of a detailed report (competition application with self-evaluation). Then these results are assessed by the association experts. The role of experts is also to verify the data presented and conduct a competition audit in the organization. APQI data shows that 306 audits have been carried out so far in companies taking part in the competition for the Italian Quality Award.

These audits have been carried out by 370 experts employed by APQI. Evaluators' assessment is completed with a detailed report on the organization's compliance with the EFQM excellence model criteria. Next, the ranking points are awarded. The report identifies possible paths for further improvements. Additionally it defines the organization's scoring profile, which is created by comparing this profile with that of other companies, which previously received the Italian Quality Award. In turn, the number of awarded ranking points allows to select organizations with the highest ratings (from 300 points).

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These companies are awarded by APQI. Quality awards are granted at two levels: national and regional. A company that obtains the highest score nationally demonstrating its best overall performance wins the Italian Quality Award. Other companies that achieve a high level of excellence, as defined by the criteria discussed above, obtain regional distinctions.

#### **4. Functions and Role of the Italian Quality Award in the Development of Entrepreneurship**

Theoretical and regulatory assumptions discussed above as well as the practice of implementing the Italian Quality Award competition indicate that the participation in the project may bring various pro-quality and image benefits to organizations (Kaczmarczyk, Ruta, and Zrałek, 2021, pp. 120-128). One of the most important advantages is the knowledge influencing the way the companies manage quality, including the effectiveness and efficiency of actions taken in this area.

This knowledge is provided both by self-assessment carried out within the course of the competition and by external evaluation prepared by APQI auditors. Self-assessment carried out by organizations for the purposes of the competition can be defined as a systematic, comprehensive and complex review of quality management activities. The results of these activities in terms of the criteria of the evaluation model are also reviewed.

This model aims at identifying the company's strengths and areas requiring further improvement. It enables to provide the prioritization of planned improvement actions that can be regularly monitored (Haffer, 2011, pp. 194-196). The main objective of this self-assessment is to assess the level of the quality management system advancement and to identify needs and priorities of this system improvement.

According to the EFQM model, self-assessment focuses both on the excellence of achieved results and on methods of these results gaining in the framework of the entire organizational system (Haffer, 2011, pp. 194-196). This is facilitated by the broad objective scope of self-assessment as well as its extensive subjective range. It happens due to the fact that both the managers of the company participating in the competition and the employees or partners take part in the self-assessment. The organization key benefits of competitive self-assessment are the following:

- organizing distributed data on products, services, processes, business relationships and company results,
- creating a database (catalog) of company data for further use in management, marketing and image activities,
- challenging employees and partners to acquire, catalogue, verify and analyse company data,

- making all employees aware of the role of quality management and its impact on the organization's success in the market,
- measuring the success achieved in quality management and identifying future improvements,
- setting priorities concerning initiatives improving quality management,
- disseminating best quality management practices within the organization,
- providing employees with a company vision and a model of excellence to follow,
- providing the input data for periodic reviews of the management control level,
- improving communication between company management and employees (Haffer, 2011, pp. 194-196).

Therefore, the self-assessment carried out in order to participate in the competition is not only the element of the model or a kind of "the starting point" of external expert evaluation. It also has an autonomous function. Regardless of the role of self-assessment in the expert evaluation, (auditors work on collected, developed and submitted data as a result of self-assessment processes), this evaluation can significantly improve the organization quality management processes; support pro-quality activities; verify the effectiveness of managerial actions; challenge employees or improve communication (Kaczmarczyk, Ruta, and Zrałek, 2021, p. 128).

In addition to opportunities of gaining knowledge on organization internal aspects collected by the competition participants and details provided by auditors, who assess the company and prepare its final report, taking part in the competition for the Italian Quality Award allows organizations to participate in many educational events that accompany the competition. They aim at disseminating studies connected with the quality management.

In order to promote all editions of the Italian Quality Award, the APQI association organized numerous conferences, debates, seminars and workshops on quality and organizational innovations in the context of *Total Quality Management* (TQM) in Italy. Companies that participated in these initiatives had the opportunity to get to know and apply the Quality Award reference model. They also had the chance to understand its potential as a tool for a company functioning improvement and its competitiveness increase (Horodecka and Wolniak, 2014, pp. 99-109).

Finally, obtaining a quality award is an important promotional asset for an organization. It helps provide the company's environment with information about its potential, reliability, managerial professionalism as well as create specific expected attitudes and opinions about the company and services or products it provides. The role of the Italian Quality Award in the market communication process is multifarious:

- competition strengthens the organization's brand; helps distinguish a company from its competitors; indicates functional and emotional benefits resulting from the company offer. Cooperating with the awarded company emphasizes the values desired by a specific target market,
- competition provides justification and confirmation of a company activities quality in the field of quality management. This might become the company promotional "attribute", its strengths, resources and capital,
- competition result constitutes the expert "proof of validity" connected with organization's actions in the area of quality management. It is based on the opinions of independent auditors representing the academic, business and NGO environments. Their verdict has a significant meaning, which can be appropriately highlighted for the purpose of a company image.
- through various public relations activities undertaken by APQI, the competition provides the media attention in the activities of winners, their success and specific substantive achievements in the field of quality management (Kaczmarczyk, Ruta and Zrałek, 2021, pp. 136-137).

## **5. Conclusion**

The Italian Quality Award is one of the European economic awards acknowledged for comprehensive, modern, effective and efficient quality management in an organization. Based on the EFQM model, the award allows its winners and candidates to design, evaluate and improve managerial solutions that are related to all aspects of company management. This award also provides image advantages connected with effective quality creation.

The quality award granted by the APQI association is considered as an instrument supporting the organization's brand. It strengthens information, guarantee and promotional functions. It contributes to developing and maintaining the Total Quality Management orientations in an organization. It is a management model, in which decision-making is assigned to the continuous increase in the quality of work and product (Wawak, 2015, pp. 25-31).

The idea acknowledging the national and regional quality awards in Italy is consistent with values and specificity of the Italian economic culture, which attaches great importance to the appropriate level of customer service and strongly benefits from the relationship and value marketing achievements.

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