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Analyzing and Integrating Environmental Excellence Frameworks in Business: An Overview

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Abstract
Companies employ a variety of managerial frameworks to achieve their desired development objectives. While many of these frameworks are focused on quality or financial performance, only a few are specifically oriented towards environmental excellence. The aim of this paper is to delineate and compare selected environmental excellence models, providing a comprehensive analysis of their key characteristics and effectiveness. The motivation for this study stems from existing research conducted by various authors who have explored environmental excellence models and the self-assessment practices based on these models. To achieve the paper's objective, a secondary research approach is employed, utilizing methods of analysis, comparison, and selection to identify the most commonly recurring criteria across the environmental excellence models under review. The analysis reveals that three out of four environmental excellence models include a range of criteria, with many of these criteria being similar across the models. However, the study also finds that certain criteria, which are based on other significant principles, are included in only one of the models. This suggests a gap in the current environmental excellence frameworks, where important aspects of environmental performance may not be consistently addressed. The paper concludes that while there is a degree of commonality among existing environmental excellence models, there is also a need for further research to develop an integrated model that encompasses the most critical criteria from each framework. Such an integrated model would provide a more holistic approach to environmental excellence, enabling companies to better align their management practices with sustainability goals. This paper highlights the strengths and limitations of current environmental excellence models and underscores the importance of creating a comprehensive model that integrates the most relevant and effective criteria. This would enhance the ability of companies to achieve environmental excellence while contributing to broader sustainability objectives.
Keywords: Environmental Excellence, Sustainability, Management Frameworks, Environmental Performance
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1. INTRODUCTION

Quality is a fundamental issue for every company, as it directly influences customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and overall business success. To ensure high standards and continuous improvement, companies employ a variety of models, frameworks, and standards tailored to optimize their quality management systems. These approaches may include internationally recognized standards like ISO 9001, Total Quality Management (TQM), Six Sigma, or frameworks designed to foster continuous improvement and process optimization. The ultimate goal is to create processes that consistently deliver products or services that meet or exceed customer expectations, while also maintaining cost-effectiveness and efficiency. Research in the field of quality management consistently highlights the effectiveness of structured quality frameworks. Studies by scholars such as Houston and Dockstader (1997), Jankal (2009), Jankalová (2009), Strenitzerová (2012), Bartošová and Bieliková (2012), Mittelman, Rentková and Rievajová (2013), Bartošová and Hrašková (2015), and Nicolaides (2015) confirm the significant role that robust quality management practices play in driving organizational performance. These studies demonstrate that companies adopting rigorous quality standards not only improve their operational processes but also build stronger customer loyalty, enhance brand reputation, and gain competitive advantages in their markets. In addition to improving product or service quality, effective quality management systems contribute to risk mitigation, helping organizations identify and address potential issues before they escalate into larger problems. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, companies can proactively manage changes in customer preferences, regulatory requirements, and market conditions, ensuring long-term sustainability and success.

Moreover, quality management practices also enhance employee engagement and internal collaboration. When employees are involved in continuous improvement initiatives and quality-focused activities, they tend to be more motivated and aligned with the company's goals, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. This creates a more productive and innovative workplace environment, further contributing to the company's overall performance. In summary, companies that prioritize quality management not only reap the benefits of delivering superior products or services but also strengthen their operational capabilities, enhance their market position, and ensure long-term success. This is supported by extensive research across various industries, which underscores the importance of adopting comprehensive quality management frameworks to achieve and maintain excellence in a competitive business

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environment. As companies evolve and adapt to increasingly complex market demands, many move beyond traditional quality management systems like ISO and Total Quality Management (TQM) towards more advanced models, such as Business Excellence frameworks. Business excellence represents a holistic approach that integrates multiple facets of an organization, focusing not only on quality but also on long-term sustainability, leadership, innovation, and overall organizational performance. Despite this shift, existing research highlights significant overlaps between ISO, TQM, and business excellence frameworks, showing that they share common principles and goals (Ashton, 1997; Adebanjo, 2001; Paulová and MÍkva, 2005; Ionica and Baleanu, 2010; Jankalová, 2016). At their core, all three approaches emphasize customer satisfaction, continuous improvement, and process optimization. For instance, ISO 9001 provides a structured set of requirements for implementing a quality management system (QMS), ensuring consistency and quality across operations. TQM, on the other hand, promotes an organizational culture focused on quality in all processes, encouraging involvement from every employee to enhance performance at all levels. Meanwhile, business excellence frameworks, such as the EFQM Excellence Model or the Baldrige Excellence Framework, take a broader, more integrated view by incorporating aspects of leadership, strategy, people management, and customer and market focus into the evaluation of organizational performance. Despite their evolution, all these approaches aim to create a sustainable competitive advantage by ensuring that quality becomes an inherent part of the organizational culture. ISO and TQM provide foundational quality management principles, while business excellence builds on those principles, extending the scope to include strategic decision-making, innovation, and leadership as key drivers of organizational success.

Research confirms that companies using any of these frameworks can achieve significant improvements in operational performance, customer satisfaction, and market competitiveness. Studies by Ashton (1997), Adebanjo (2001), Paulová and MÍkva (2005), Ionica and Baleanu (2010), and Jankalová (2016) highlight that the transition from traditional quality management systems to business excellence frameworks is not necessarily a departure from earlier methods but rather an enhancement. The foundational elements of ISO and TQM serve as stepping stones toward a more comprehensive approach embodied by business excellence, which integrates these quality systems with broader organizational objectives. While business excellence represents an advanced, holistic framework, it retains core elements from ISO and TQM, emphasizing continuous improvement, customer focus, and operational excellence. As companies strive for long-term success, these interconnected approaches provide a roadmap for achieving superior organizational performance and sustaining competitive advantage in a dynamic business environment. In addition to the focus on quality within companies, there is growing recognition of the importance of quality of life and its close connection to the environment. As companies continue to evolve, the next phase in their development is represented by a shift toward environmental excellence. According to Kondev (2014: 39), "the development of economic and social systems and their sustainability is linked increasingly to the achievement of environmental excellence." This reflects the growing understanding that sustainable development—both economic and social—cannot be achieved without addressing environmental concerns.

Achieving environmental excellence should be a top priority for both countries and companies, as it is integral to fostering long-term sustainability. For companies, this means adopting environmentally friendly policies and strategies that minimize environmental impact while promoting sustainable business practices. The integration of environmental considerations into core business strategies is increasingly seen as a key element in maintaining a competitive edge and securing the future of businesses worldwide. Environmental excellence goes beyond mere compliance with regulations; it requires companies to proactively reduce their carbon footprint, manage waste responsibly, conserve natural resources, and adopt practices that safeguard ecosystems. This transition not only benefits the environment but also enhances the company's reputation, attracts environmentally conscious consumers, and can result in cost savings through more efficient resource use and waste reduction. As companies strive for environmental excellence, they contribute to broader societal goals such as combating climate change, preserving biodiversity, and ensuring a healthier planet for future generations. The successful implementation of environmentally friendly strategies—such as sustainable supply chains, green innovations, and clean energy adoption—positions companies as leaders in their industries and reinforces their commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR).

The shift toward environmental excellence represents the next stage in organizational development, where businesses not only focus on quality and operational excellence but also actively contribute to environmental sustainability. As highlighted by Kondev (2014), the alignment of economic, social, and environmental objectives is critical for ensuring the long-term sustainability of both companies and the broader global economy. Environmental excellence, therefore, is not just an option but a necessity for companies that seek to thrive in an increasingly eco-conscious world. Corbett and Klassen (2006: 8) argue that effective internal operations within a company can serve as a pathway to achieving environmental excellence. They highlight a fundamental connection between Total Quality Management (TQM) and environmental management, which is underscored by the principles of ISO 14001 certification. ISO 14001, as defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), provides a framework for improving an organization's environmental performance. According to the ISO (2015: 2), "It helps organizations improve their environmental performance through more efficient use of resources and reduction of waste, gaining a competitive advantage and the trust of stakeholders.

This linkage between TQM and environmental management illustrates how organizations can leverage their quality management systems to enhance their environmental sustainability. By integrating environmental objectives into their operational strategies, companies can achieve a synergy between process optimization and environmental stewardship,

ultimately driving both performance improvements and sustainability outcomes. The principles of TQM, such as continuous improvement and stakeholder engagement, complement the goals of ISO 14001 by fostering a culture that prioritizes efficient resource use, waste minimization, and proactive environmental management. Environmental excellence is characterized by outstanding environmental achievements by companies, organizations, communities, and individuals who have gone beyond mere compliance with environmental regulations. These entities not only meet legal requirements but exceed them by adopting innovative and unique approaches to minimize their environmental impact. This commitment to environmental leadership is recognized and encouraged by government bodies and environmental agencies, such as the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change (2016), which highlights the significance of adopting forward-thinking strategies to enhance and protect the environment. Achieving environmental excellence requires more than just adherence to regulations—it demands a proactive and innovative approach to environmental management. Companies that excel in this area implement cutting-edge technologies, adopt sustainable business practices, and continuously seek ways to reduce their ecological footprint. These efforts not only benefit the environment but also provide businesses with competitive advantages, as consumers, investors, and stakeholders increasingly value sustainability and corporate responsibility. Environmental excellence is grounded in the outstanding environmental performance of organizations that take deliberate, innovative steps to reduce their environmental impact. As Corbett and Klassen (2006) and the ISO 14001 standard emphasize, integrating environmental management into a company's operational strategy can lead to significant gains in both environmental and business outcomes, helping organizations build competitive advantage while earning the trust of stakeholders. This combination of quality management and environmental responsibility underscores the importance of sustainable practices in achieving long-term success.

Environmental excellence is defined as "a cohesive organizational policy and culture that embeds sustainable thinking into all of the activities of the company." This concept encompasses not only operational improvements but also a fundamental shift toward sustainability in every aspect of a company's strategy and operations. Environmental excellence is characterized by practices such as recycling, reuse, waste reduction, and lower costs, all of which deliver tangible benefits such as cost savings and efficiency improvements. At the same time, it also brings intangible benefits, including increased brand equity, enhanced corporate reputation, and the creation of new intellectual property (Atos Origin, 2009). An important aspect of environmental excellence is the role of stakeholders, who have become increasingly empowered to drive companies toward maximizing the tangible and intangible benefits of sustainability initiatives. Stakeholders, including customers, employees, and investors, now prioritize sustainability and expect organizations to integrate these values into their business practices. Furthermore, environmental excellence has a direct connection to operational excellence. According to Corbett and Klassen (2006), companies that prioritize environmental sustainability often see improvements in their operational performance, leading to enhanced financial outcomes. By focusing on sustainability, companies not only reduce waste and improve resource efficiency but also create opportunities for financial success through innovation, improved processes, and new revenue streams. These efforts contribute to the overall complexity and robustness of the business, making environmental excellence a driver of both operational and financial success.

However, achieving environmental excellence represents a significant organizational shift that requires commitment at all levels, particularly from company leadership. Implementing this change is essential for aligning business practices with sustainable development and environmental management principles, but it is impossible without the moral commitment of company management (Kondev, 2014). Leaders must genuinely embrace sustainability as a core value, ensuring that it is embedded into the corporate culture and decision-making processes. This moral commitment is crucial for fostering long-term sustainable practices that benefit both the company and the broader environment. Environmental excellence is more than just an operational strategy—it is a cultural and ethical transformation that integrates sustainability into the core of a company's operations. By doing so, companies not only gain tangible and intangible benefits but also contribute to sustainable development. This transformation requires strong leadership and a moral commitment to sustainability, ensuring that businesses contribute positively to the environment while maintaining financial and operational success.

2. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to delineate and compare selected environmental excellence models. The motivation for choosing this topic stems from various research studies conducted by authors who have explored the concept of environmental excellence (Corbett and Klassen, 2006; Askerov, Abbasova, and Gahramanova, 2012; Mohammadfam, Saraji, Kianfar, and Mahmoudi, 2013), as well as studies that have focused on self-assessment based on existing environmental excellence models (Jensen, Johansen, Waehrens, and Shewan-Ul-Alam, 2013; Kondev, 2014). At the outset, it was essential to gain a thorough understanding of the interpretations of quality, business excellence, and environmental excellence. These foundational concepts provide context for how companies measure and strive for excellence in different domains, with environmental excellence being a more recent but increasingly important focus. The next step involves conducting secondary research, utilizing analysis, comparison, and selection methods to evaluate the various environmental excellence models. Through this process, the paper aims to identify the most frequently occurring criteria within the analyzed models, providing insight into the common elements that define environmental excellence across different frameworks. Furthermore, the paper seeks to identify connections and differences between the various models. By comparing these models, the paper will uncover similarities in the principles and practices they promote, as well as highlight any key distinctions in their approaches to achieving environmental excellence. This analysis will provide a

clearer picture of the criteria that underpin successful environmental strategies and how companies can assess and implement these models to achieve sustainability and operational success.

3. DISCUSSION

The first environmental excellence model to be discussed is the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence (BCPE). As noted by Pojasek (2000: 91), BCPE serves as an effective tool for measuring progress and promoting continuous improvement within companies. It also provides a strong framework for advancing environmental excellence. Progress toward excellence is evaluated using a 1,000-point scoring system, with feedback reports playing a crucial role in helping companies refine their environmental programs. Developed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), BCPE is designed to help companies of all sizes and industries assess how well they are achieving their most important objectives. NIST (2015: 2) defines it as a framework that encourages companies to explore their key tasks and determine how effectively they are being accomplished. BCPE consists of several critical aspects that are essential for managing and improving organizational performance. Leadership within the company is emphasized, focusing on how senior leaders guide the organization, set values, and ensure accountability. In terms of strategy, the model highlights how organizations develop their strategic objectives, implement action plans, and monitor progress over time. The framework also stresses the importance of engaging with customers, building strong relationships, and understanding customer satisfaction to drive organizational success.

In addition to leadership and strategy, the BCPE framework places a significant focus on measurement, analysis, and knowledge management. It encourages companies to use data and performance analysis to drive improvement and make informed decisions. Managing the workforce is another key component, as BCPE emphasizes the need for employee engagement, development, and creating a high-performing work environment. The model also considers how operational processes are designed and managed to ensure efficiency and sustainability, linking environmental excellence with the organization's operational goals. Lastly, BCPE evaluates results, looking at a company's performance across critical areas such as financial performance, customer satisfaction, and environmental outcomes. By integrating these aspects into a comprehensive framework, BCPE enables companies to track their progress and continually improve their practices. The scoring system and feedback reports are invaluable tools for identifying areas where further refinement is needed, helping businesses to evolve and achieve not only operational excellence but also environmental sustainability. Through this holistic approach, BCPE supports long-term success by ensuring that environmental goals are aligned with broader organizational objectives.

A key reason for the significant revision of the EFQM Excellence Model in 2010 was the growing recognition of critical trends in innovation, risk management, and sustainability (Samardžija and Kralj, 2010). These emerging trends highlighted the need for organizations to adapt to changing global dynamics by integrating more forward-thinking approaches into their performance frameworks. The 2010 revision reflected a shift toward addressing these broader concerns, ensuring that the model remained relevant and effective in guiding companies toward long-term excellence.

Further revisions to the EFQM Excellence Model in 2012 underscored the growing importance of social responsibility and environmental management. While the model had traditionally emphasized quality and the importance of stakeholder engagement, the 2012 update solidified the role of corporate social responsibility and environmental stewardship within the framework. This revision marked a shift from focusing solely on internal operational efficiency and stakeholder satisfaction to encompassing broader societal and environmental concerns. By including these elements, the model acknowledged that a company's success is increasingly tied to its ability to manage its social and environmental impact, reflecting the evolving expectations of stakeholders and the global emphasis on sustainability.

As noted by Atos Origin (2009), "evidence of positive business results is affirming, but the path to achieving environmental excellence is transformative and incremental." This underscores the fact that the journey towards environmental excellence requires companies to undergo significant, long-term changes in their operations and strategies. Companies must take a step-by-step approach, recognizing that the process is gradual and builds over time. A crucial aspect of this journey is the ability to self-assess—understanding where they currently stand in terms of sustainability practices and environmental impact. Through self-assessment, companies can better gauge their progress and identify areas where further improvement is needed.

Moreover, understanding the effort and rewards involved in advancing a company’s maturity towards environmental excellence is critical. Companies need to recognize that the investment in improving environmental practices—whether through resources, time, or organizational change—ultimately leads to long-term rewards, not only in terms of environmental benefits but also in financial performance and stakeholder trust. What differentiates the various environmental excellence models are their criteria, which are based on fundamental principles such as customer focus, partnerships, motivation, optimization, and implementation. Each of these principles plays a vital role in shaping how companies manage their environmental initiatives. Customer focus ensures that environmental strategies align with the needs and expectations of consumers, while partnerships emphasize collaboration with suppliers, communities, and other stakeholders. Motivation refers to the internal drive within the organization to pursue environmental goals, and optimization involves the efficient use of resources and minimizing waste. Lastly, implementation is the practical application of these strategies, ensuring that environmental goals are integrated into everyday operations. These differentiating criteria highlight the holistic nature of environmental excellence models, where not only operational efficiency but also relationships, leadership, and continuous improvement play central roles in achieving sustainable business practices.

4. CONCLUSION

The continuous improvement of both quality management and environmental management reflects the evolving nature of business practices. Companies are increasingly recognizing that simply being good is no longer sufficient; instead, excellence has become the new standard to strive for. Just as achieving business excellence can elevate a company's performance and competitiveness, the pursuit of environmental excellence offers even broader benefits. Environmental excellence not only enhances a company's operational efficiency and reputation but also generates positive impacts for the general public. Companies that adopt environmentally sustainable practices contribute to cleaner air, water conservation, reduced waste, and better resource management, all of which have far-reaching effects on society and the environment. This alignment of corporate goals with public and environmental interests fosters a win-win scenario—where the company improves its market position and operational performance while simultaneously benefiting the community and promoting the sustainability of natural resources. Moreover, the shift toward environmental excellence also positions companies as leaders in sustainability, setting a benchmark for others to follow. It helps build trust with consumers, regulators, and stakeholders who increasingly prioritize sustainability in their purchasing and investment decisions. Therefore, environmental excellence becomes not only a strategic business advantage but also a means to support the greater good, reinforcing the interconnectedness between corporate success and societal well-being. Environmental excellence is indeed a crucial issue for companies today.

The aim of this paper was to delineate and compare selected environmental excellence models to understand their structure and key components. A significant finding from this analysis is that three out of the four models studied include various criteria that guide companies toward achieving environmental excellence. Interestingly, while these models may differ in specific details, the majority of the criteria share common themes, such as sustainability practices, stakeholder engagement, and continuous improvement. This similarity across models suggests that there is a core set of principles that underpin environmental excellence, regardless of the specific framework being used. These shared principles highlight the importance of embedding sustainability into company operations, engaging with stakeholders, and fostering innovation to reduce environmental impact. By understanding these commonalities, companies can better tailor their environmental strategies to align with broader industry standards and best practices, ensuring that they are on the right path toward achieving environmental excellence. To summarize, environmental excellence models are primarily composed of criteria based on key principles such as leadership, strategy, processes, results, monitoring, and people. These elements form the foundation of each model and provide a structured approach for companies aiming to improve their environmental performance. When a company decides to enhance its environmental policy by adopting one of these models, the specific criteria of the chosen model will directly influence how the company's environmental strategy is shaped and improved. For instance, leadership ensures that environmental goals are integrated at the highest levels of decision-making, while strategy involves developing clear, actionable plans to achieve sustainability targets. Processes focus on operational efficiency and minimizing environmental impact, and results track the outcomes of these efforts. Monitoring enables continuous assessment and improvement, and people are critical, as employee engagement and organizational culture are key to implementing sustainable practices effectively.

Ultimately, the criteria within the selected environmental excellence model will determine the extent to which the company's environmental policy is enhanced, guiding the organization towards sustainable development and long-term environmental success. For instance, certain models emphasize ensuring that a company's environmental principles are fully integrated into its strategy and management processes. These models help ensure that sustainability is not just an afterthought but is embedded throughout the organization's operational framework. Other models, however, place a stronger emphasis on the monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of environmental policies. This is critical because monitoring is the only reliable way to assess the effectiveness of policies and identify areas for improvement. Moreover, some models focus specifically on embedding environmental values within the workforce, recognizing that employee engagement is crucial for the successful execution of any environmental strategy. In addition to these aspects, it is essential that models also incorporate criteria based on principles such as customers, partnerships, motivation, optimization, and implementation. A company committed to environmental responsibility must extend that philosophy to its partnerships, selecting environmentally responsible collaborators and promoting sustainable practices to its customers. However, the results of the paper indicate that only a few environmental excellence models fully encompass all these critical criteria. This finding underscores the need for further research aimed at developing an integrated environmental excellence model that includes the most important criteria, ensuring a comprehensive approach to environmental sustainability. Such a model would offer a balanced framework that addresses leadership, operational efficiency, stakeholder engagement, and continuous improvement, while also fostering environmental responsibility across all areas of a company's operations and relationships.

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