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Quality Culture as a Strategic Link between Hospital Accreditation and Workforce Performance

S. Alexander[1*], Dr. A. Shameem[2]
[1]Research Scholar, AMET Business School, AMET University, Chennai, India
Email: shareblood.athmabb@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6667-0342
[2]Professor, AMET Business School, AMET University, Chennai, India
Email: drshameem@ametuiv.ac.in
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2869-2702
***Corresponding Author:** S. Alexander, Research Scholar, AMET Business School, AMET University, Chennai, India
Email: shareblood.athmabb@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

While hospital accreditation is often thought of as an external tool of quality assurance, it is effective only if the compliance with the requirements becomes routine behaviour of professionals. This conceptual paper examines quality culture as the essential link contributing to the transfer of the positive effects of accreditation into healthcare workforce performance. The theoretical perspectives of Normalization Process Theory, organizational readiness for change, structure-process-outcome model of healthcare quality, the concept of safety culture and working performance have been integrated within the article.

Qualifying factors of accreditation are addressed through the lens of leadership commitment, standards application, workforce training and competencies, and practices related to patient safety and quality improvement. Quality culture is treated as the continuous changes taking place within the organization, patient-centered approach, communication, teamwork, learning and collective accountability. Employee performance consists of the following components: task performance, contextual performance and quality-related behaviours.

The analysis of the paper leads to the conclusion that accreditation serves as a source of formal expectations and means of creating enabling mechanisms and quality culture provides all the necessary meaning and legitimacy. Consequently, accreditation may influence performance through clearer roles and standardised processes, while its deeper and more sustainable influence depends on cultural internalisation. The article contributes by moving accreditation research beyond the accredited-versus-non-accredited comparison and toward a theoretically grounded explanation of how accreditation is translated into employee-level outcomes.

Keywords: Hospital accreditation, Quality culture, Workforce performance, Patient safety and Healthcare management

Introduction

Hospital accreditation has become a prominent instrument for demonstrating that a healthcare organisation has established systems consistent with defined standards of quality, safety and governance. Accreditation programmes typically require documented procedures, competent personnel, systematic monitoring, incident learning and evidence of continuous improvement. Their formal logic is persuasive: clearer standards should reduce variation, strengthen accountability and improve the reliability of care. Nonetheless, the body of research provides a more nuanced picture. Reviews indicate positive connections with various facets of healthcare quality but demonstrate also that there is no consistency in results, methods and uncertainty about the mechanisms of accreditation (Alhawajreh et al., 2023; Araujo et al., 2020; Brubakk et al., 2015; Hussein et al., 2021). It seems that accreditation cannot be regarded as a self-regulating tool, as a hospital may meet the required documentation, however, it may not really incorporate it into the daily routine. One hospital may benefit from the accreditation process, making it a platform for fostering collective understanding, joint actions and professional responsibility, while another may only have documents attesting that it is accredited as required. Therefore, it seems more important to investigate how the requirement is implemented rather than whether the hospital is accredited or not in the outcome perspective.

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Quality culture provides a theoretically valuable explanation of this translation process. In this paper, quality culture is understood as a concept covering shared values, assumptions and behavior, which develops the notion of quality, safety, learning, teamwork and continuous improvement deemed important in everyday activities of the employees. Accreditation contributes to the establishment of formal regulations and their external scrutiny; whereas, culture is what decides if employees consider them significant, fulfill them and improve for the next survey afterward. Therefore, culture can help interpret the reasons why in technically similar accreditation systems, different behavioral and performance results appear in different healthcare organizations. The aim of the conceptual paper is to elaborate an integrated concept of the influence of hospital accreditation practices on workforce performance through quality culture. The discussion differentiates accreditation as an organizational practice from accreditation as a status, describes the cultural processes, through which this impact occurs, as well as conceptualizes the workforce performance through the lens of task performance, contextual performance, and quality-oriented work behavior. By merging these elements, the paper proposes theoretically valuable insights pertaining to hospitals and other healthcare institutions.

2. Scope and Method of Conceptual Development

This paper attempts to expand the theory of service delivery in hospitals based on the combination of the established concepts such as the quality of health care, implementation science, organizational culture and work performance theories. The authors do not claim to conduct systematic review or meta-analysis. Instead, they selected important reviews, theoretical papers and empirical studies which allow answering at least one of four questions: what is accreditation in organizations; how the formal interventions are incorporated into daily practices; how do shared cultural values affect behavior; what should be understood as workforce performance in complicated services.

The conceptual scope of the paper is accreditation of hospitals and healthcare centers applying for accreditation at the organization level but meaning the accreditation processes in general rather than certification of a particular medical department. The accreditation is treated as a multidimensional organizational intervention comprising leadership assistance, standard implementation, workforce training and competence development, and patient safety and quality improvement routines. Quality culture is perceived as an organizational and unit phenomenon experienced by employees. Workforce performance is perceived as an output with formal, discretionary and quality component.

The integration operates according to a mechanism-based logic. To start with, the process of accreditation leads to the emergence of certain structural and procedural requirements. After that, employees interpret these requirements, assessing their appropriateness and feasibility. After that, a number of practices enter the stage of implementation, leadership reinforcement, peer encouragement, and feedback to become generally accepted in the organization. Finally, these shared requirements define the way how employees perform their key functions, help colleagues, react to mistakes, and engage into improvements. Thus, the provided rationale indicates that accreditation has both a direct impact on performance and an indirect impact via quality culture.

3. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical discourse is rooted in Donabedian's division of the structure, process, and outcome. The accreditation process primarily influences the structures and the processes through determining the governance arrangements, expertise and proficiency of the staff, the systems of documentation and monitoring as well as the clinical or administrative processes. While these arrangements can result in better outcomes, their impact is not guaranteed as there is a need to put formal structures into practice through the behaviour of people (Donabedian, 1988). Quality culture is the aforementioned behavioural aspect. This means that it affects the use of the organizational structures in practice as well as the implementation of processes according to the requirements.

Normalization Process Theory enriches this idea as it pays attention to how the new intervention begins being the part of the routine. Namely, its mechanisms include coherence, cognitive participation, collective action and reflexive monitoring (May & Finch, 2009). When it comes to accreditation, coherence is related to the employees' understanding of its objective; cognitive participation - to their willingness to accept it; collective action - to the employees' availability of the appropriate resources, expertise, and coordination as well as reflexive monitoring - to their ability to evaluate the impact of the accreditation process. Every time an external requirement is transformed into a shared internal routine, it marks a process of establishing quality culture.

Organisational readiness concept brings in another perspective. There is a link between preparedness and shared willingness to accept the changes and also firm belief in the ability of an organization to ensure that changes are executed (Weiner, 2009). Communication from the leader, resource availability, training, and feedback can actually define whether the accreditation process is perceived as a sincere improvement of the quality of services or just another burden to comply with. Once the readiness is high, one will be more likely to put efforts in the changes, cooperate and persist in overcoming problems connected to implementation.

Organisational culture theory deepens an understanding of accreditation impacts' duration. Culture is"the values, beliefs and behaviours exhibited by a group of people" where certain norms of behaviour determine both how attention is paid to certain events and which actions require justification. The results of studies in the area of health care suggest that there is some correlation between positive culture and positive results of the treatment, although the existing evidence is still weak (Braithwaite et al., 2017; Mannion & Davies, 2018).

4. Hospital Accreditation as Strategic Practice

Accreditation is commonly presented as a binary feature, although the status does not provide much information about actual implementation quality. A more fruitful approach would be to understand accreditation as a set of managerial and clinical practices. The commitment of leaders provides guidance, legitimacy, and resources. Implementation of standards reinforces general requirements by converting them into role expectations, standard operating procedures, and mechanisms of monitoring in place and prepares employees for working within such structures. Patient safety and quality improvement practices serve as channels for the reporting of events, learning information, applying corrective measures, and preventing negative events.

Many empirical studies back the idea of moving from status to practice. Accreditation performance is tied to organizational culture and leadership; however, the relationship with clinical performance is not so clear (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Earlier and present reviews arrive at the same conclusion that accreditation may enhance certain processes and aspects of quality; however, there are certain methodological limitations of research that make it almost impossible to draw clear causal conclusions (Alkhenizan & Shaw, 2011; Greenfield & Braithwaite, 2008; Hinchcliff et al., 2012).

Moreover, standards vary according to their empirical justifications and local implementation, which necessitates the need to study how they are interpreted and employed (Greenfield et al., 2012).

The strength of accreditation is its ability to focus attention on an otherwise fragmented professional field. Hospitals bring together many occupational groups, departments and interrelated processes. Accreditation can provide the common language of quality, set the minimum standards which should be achieved and connect activities on the ground to the goals of the organisation. At the same time, the excessive focus on documents, the survey-oriented preparation or the fear of monitoring could lead to the appearance of ceremonial compliance. Consequently, employees would fill in the forms instead of changing the practices or would hide their errors instead of discussing them.

In fact, it has to be stated that accreditation should be viewed as a planned organisation's intervention that will work only if there were no shortcomings in the process of its implementation. The integrity of the process takes place when the appropriate managerial behaviours are demonstrated, standards are adapted but not modified, employees are trained specifically in this area, data concerning performance is sent to working groups and gained experience leads to the improvements in terms of operations. With the help of these practices, the effectiveness will increase due to a lower level of uncertainty and more stable procedures. At the same time, these practices can lead to social learning resulting in sustainable quality culture development.

5. Quality Culture as an Organisational Capability

The quality culture goes beyond being just favourable employee perception or an environment during the period of external auditing. Quality culture refers to organizational competence as it brings people's attention and actions towards quality regardless of time, professional sphere or organizational unit. Observable components of quality culture include processes of improvement, open communications, interdisciplinary cooperation, patient-centric decision-making, learning from mistakes, and shared responsibility. Underlying components include beliefs, such as that any harm should be prevented, decisions should be made based on data, and quality belongs to everybody, not to only experts.

Three components of quality culture are especially important. The culture of continuous improvement encourages employees to search for problems, test their solutions, learn from results, and implement successful changes. Patient-centred quality orientation implies that decisions concerned operations and clinical issues must be taken based on the needs of patients, their safety, dignity, and results. Quality communication and teamwork allow transmitting information across professionalism and departments, thus providing possibilities for decreasing failures in coordination and solving the problems collaboratively.

Quality culture acts as a medium because it interprets the messages of the organizational systems in terms of employee actions. The messages of leadership show the priorities but not whether they will be believed. Procedures tell what needs to be done, but culture defines whether employees will obey procedures only when somebody is watching or will consider it to be their task. Reporting systems provide the information regarding incidents, but culture decides whether people will raise their concerns or whether the management assistance will be productive. Training provides the knowledge, but culture decides whether teammates will support it or sabotage. This is the place where psychological safety plays its role, as learning is possible only if employees are willing to ask questions and report problems even when they know they might be punished (Edmondson, 1999).

While external assessments are episodic pressures, culture provides consistent forms of social control and collective memory. After quality principles are internalized, peers sustain demands and teams are more

likely to understand variances, making improvements occur less frequently in supervision contexts. However, culture should not be perceived as an absolute positive force that is easy to change. Hospitals have professional subcultures and the role of accreditation may be interpreted differently by different occupational groups. What matters is that the degree to which quality-related norms are coherent and accepted determines the extent to which accreditation influences behavior of employees.

6. Workforce Performance in Accredited Healthcare Settings

In assessing how effectively healthcare workers are performing, merely counting how much work has been completed does not suffice. One can speak of any performance relating to tasks, as opposed to contextual performance and counterproductive behaviour; therefore, the research in this article is reformulated according to such multidimensional concepts as described by Koopmans et al. (2014). Task performance means doing one's job correctly, on time, and in full. Contextual performance stands for voluntary behaviour maintaining the social and organisational environment, including helping colleagues, knowledge sharing, participating in improvement efforts and reacting in appropriate ways to problems occurring in the work process.

Moreover, one more dimension that is of particular significance for health care is the so-called quality-oriented behaviour. Such behaviour involves compliance with safety protocols, proper recordkeeping, reporting potential dangers, participating in corrective actions, aligning with the revised procedures, and protecting the quality of service. The quality-oriented performance makes it possible to link workers' performance with accreditation processes. It is possible for an employee to perform one's tasks in a timely manner and achieve poor quality due to skipping checks, failing to send messages and ignoring recurring issues.

Accreditation affects these dimensions in a straightforward way. Having clear procedures helps to reduce ambiguity in performance and allows for the fulfillment of duties. Having established roles improves coordination. Also, audits and feedback create awareness of quality-related performance. However, this approach has its limitations. Regulations do not cover all clinical situations, and in times of heavy workloads or decline of supervision, quality performance may suffer. Quality culture is based on judgement and corporate commitment to understanding the standards rather than simply following the rules.

Evidence shows that there is also an indirect link between culture and performance since there exist the studies on the relationship between good organisational cultures and patient outcomes and safe care (Braithwaite et al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2024). The same ideas are presented in the concept of global patient safety. It states that strong leadership, learning system, workforce engagement, and safety culture are vital to eliminating preventable injuries (World Health Organization, 2021). Thus, workforce performance serves as the intersection point where the influence of accreditation and culture on services can be seen.

7. Integrative Theoretical Synthesis

The body of research lends credence to a paradigm wherein accreditations, quality culture and workforce efficiency are viewed as interrelated but conceptually separate phenomena. When it comes to accreditation, it refers to giving the formal structure to quality or putting it into practice through standards, roles and responsibilities, training requirements, monitoring procedures and other processes aimed at quality improvement. Quality culture, on the other hand, means the way employees of the organizations comprehend and implement this structure in their work. It should be noted that this connection starts from organizational practice of accreditation, but not from its state. Leadership attention, sufficient training, participation of employees, as well as meaningful feedback and credible information about quality help to inform the members of organization about the organization's true values. Continuous exposure to such signals can motivate employees of the organization to develop the same beliefs regarding the issues of patient safety, accountability and improvements.

Thus, quality culture is responsible for the interpretative and social link between requirements set by accreditation formalities and workforce behaviour. In so doing, quality culture affects performance by promoting the idea that employees must view quality as their professional duty, work collaboratively with various occupational groups, express their concerns, learn from mistakes, and contribute to improvement. This influence is very important in healthcare since employees are commonly faced with complicated tasks that cannot be solved by applying rules only. Common quality beliefs serve as guidance when it comes to making judgements and deciding how procedures have to be changed, how to deal with conflicts of interests, and how to react to new threats. Moreover, accreditation contributes to performance through certain operational solutions: identified roles, procedure standardization, competency requirements, and regular feedback. However, such advantages do not necessarily imply cultural changes. In this case, sustainability would largely depend on whether individuals continue demonstrating their commitment to quality after the external audit or accreditation process has been completed.

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8. Discussion and Implications

The major theoretical contribution is the distinction made between accreditation infrastructure and cultural internalization. Accreditation gives a formal structure for quality, while culture helps with determining whether this structure can actually be implemented in an organisation. This distinction can help explain contradictory findings in accreditation studies. Those studies that compare hospitals with and without accreditation may compare organisations that differ in terms of depth of implementation, leadership involvement, and learning capacity. It is also important to study particular practices related to accreditation and quality culture to explain performance differences.

The theoretical synthesis also connects organisational interventions and employee performance. Accreditation studies do not pay attention to the employee performance as much, focusing mainly on patient or institutional results, and thus neglect that implementation happens through decisions and actions of healthcare workers. The combination of task performance, contextual performance, and quality-oriented behaviour is used as a performance results system. This allows avoiding the assumption that it is enough to perform tasks well to provide an efficient performance in healthcare and that it is essential to consider collaborative behaviour, being proactive, being adaptive, and being willing to implement improvements as performance indicators.

According to the analysis, managers need to understand that the goal of preparing for a survey should not be the main aim of accreditation. The leaders should explain the significance of standards, show the links between the criteria and patient benefit, provide training for different roles, and return the audit results to the teams. Staff should take part in the process of creating the procedures, analyzing the issues, and improving the processes. The non-using orientation is crucial because being afraid leads to compliance while not revealing the risk. Accreditation service should become a facilitator of learning rather than a provider of documentation.

The issue for policy-makers and accreditation bodies is that the assessments should cover both cultural actions and document conforming. The surveying process should focus more on staff understanding, inter-professional communication, evidence of learning, and sustainability throughout evaluation cycles. The standards have to be clear enough in the terms of accountability but still flexible enough to ensure contextual implementation.

Because inadequate resources might relocate care activities and erode staff engagement, the expenses and burden related to certification also need to be taken into consideration.

There are limits to the current synthesis. Because mature quality cultures and high-performing workforces may also facilitate the implementation of certification, the ties may be mutual. Professional subcultures may create conflicting perceptions since culture is neither uniform nor immediately controlled. Additionally, evidence that solely relies on self-reported performance is susceptible to common-method bias. Because of these constraints, causal claims must be interpreted carefully while maintaining the explanatory validity of quality culture as the connection between official certification and employee behavior.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, when accreditation's formal standards are transformed into a common, quality-oriented meaning and behavior, it becomes strategically important. By promoting ongoing development, patient-centeredness, communication, teamwork, learning, and responsibility, quality culture fulfils this connecting role. Although accreditation can improve performance by providing more precise standards and skills, its largest long-lasting impact is probably going to happen when staff members integrate quality into their regular job. According to this conceptual understanding, accreditation is no longer an episodic external judgment but rather an organizational process that allows for the combined development of workforce performance and culture.

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