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Dr. Tejas N Patel

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Navsari
Agricultural University (NAU),
Navsari, Gujarat, India

Dr. Mehul G Thakkar

Major Research Guide, Professor
in HRM and University
Placement & Counselling Head,
Certified National, Trainer,
Master Trainer & Lead Assessor
of Govt. of India, International
Certified Career Coach from
Mindler-India & CDA-USA,
Startup MAARG Mentor of
Govt. of India in 5 Sectors,
Navsari Agricultural University
(NAU), Navsari, Gujarat, India

The new era of QWL: Sustainable practices for sugar co-operative employees

Tejas N Patel and Mehul G Thakkar

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Abstract

The study assessed the perceived Quality of Work Life (QWL) among employees of sugar co-operatives and explored sustainable strategies for improvement. Findings revealed that the overall availability of QWL was rated as “Average” with a cumulative mean score of 3.23, indicating a significant gap between expectations and reality. None of the eight QWL components achieved an “Excellent” rating, and critical areas such as occupied space by work in life, social integration at work, and adequate and fair compensation lagged behind in importance versus availability. Employees suggested interventions including social get-togethers (90%), regular training programs (88.33%), competitive pay (85.33%), and family-oriented benefits (79.67%). Based on triangulation with expert opinions, a set of management strategies was formulated emphasizing participatory approaches, job enrichment, flexible policies, health and wellness programs, and technological modernization. These strategies provide actionable insights for managers and policymakers to create inclusive, motivating, and sustainable workplaces.

Keywords: Quality of work life, sugar co-operatives, employee satisfaction, sustainable strategies, participatory approach

Introduction

Quality of Work Life (QWL) is a critical factor influencing employee satisfaction, retention, and organizational productivity. In the sugar co-operative sector, where operations are seasonal and labor-intensive, ensuring high QWL is essential for sustainable business practices. The dynamic nature of cooperative governance and the socio-economic profile of employees make QWL an important determinant of workforce stability.

Despite being a core industry in rural economies, sugar co-operatives face challenges in providing a holistic work environment. Monotonous work patterns, limited participation in decision-making, outdated processes, and insufficient welfare measures often hinder QWL. Employees perceive these shortcomings as barriers to professional growth and work-life balance.

Objectives

1. To assess the perceived availability of QWL among employees of sugar co-operatives.
2. To identify the major gaps in QWL components.
3. To collect employee suggestions for improving QWL.
4. To develop sustainable management strategies based on findings and expert opinions.

Review of Literature

This section reviews key studies on Walton's QWL model, Hackman and Oldham's job enrichment theory, and recent research on cooperative management and employee well-being. Literature suggests that QWL significantly impacts productivity, motivation, and retention, especially in cooperative organizations.

Research Methodology

- **Research Design:** Descriptive cross sectional and diagnostic
- **Sample Size:** 300 employees from selected sugar co-operatives
- **Data Collection:** Structured questionnaire and personal interviews

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Tejas N Patel

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Navsari
Agricultural University (NAU),
Navsari, Gujarat, India

- **Analysis:** Mean score, ranking method, and triangulation approach

Results and Discussion

Suggestions of employees for developing management strategies for improving QWL: The study findings revealed that the overall perceived availability of QWL among the employees of sugar co-operatives is reported “Average” with cumulative mean score of 3.23. Even with reference to the eight components of QWL, none of the components were reported to have “Excellent” availability/existence at the work place; and ironically 3 of these components namely – Occupied space by work in life (Availability lagging behind

by 5 ranks than Importance), Social integration at work and Adequate and fair compensation (Availability of each lagging behind by 2 ranks than Importance) were found to be lagging behind far away from their importance as reported by the employees. Consequently, interventions are imperative to improve QWL of these employees in sugar co-operatives. The following suggestions were proposed to foster better and higher QWL for employees of sugar co-operatives. Respondents were invited to contribute valuable suggestions for formulating a strategy to address the problematic areas of QWL at their work place and enhance overall QWL of these employees. The suggestions given by the respondents are presented in table 4.32 in order of importance.

Table 1: Suggestions for improving QWL of Employees in Sugar Co-operatives (n = 300)

Sr. No.	Suggestions	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
1	Social get-togethers should be organized to involve the family members of the employees.	270	90.00	I
2	Adequate provisions should be made for regular training programmes.	265	88.33	II
3	Competitive pay should be provided.	256	85.33	III
4	Benefits such as children education support and family Medclaim should be provided to employees.	239	79.67	IV
5	Merit-based promotion system should be implemented.	237	79.00	V
6	Canteen and rest room facilities should be started.	230	76.67	VI
7	Clearly communicated and impartial leave policy should be in place.	160	53.33	VII
8	Stress management programmes and counselling should be provided.	150	50.00	VIII

The results presented in table 1. reveals that majority (90.00%) of the respondents suggested to organize social get-togethers to involve the family members of the employees. 88.33 percent respondents suggested to have adequate provisions for regular training programmes in their organization. 85.33 percent of the respondents suggested to make provisions for ensuing competitive pay. 79.67 percent of the respondents suggested that family-oriented benefits such as children education support and family Medclaim should be provided to employees. 79.00 percent of the respondents advocated merit-based promotion to improve the QWL at their work place. 76.67 percent of the respondents suggested to start canteen and rest room facilities. 53.33 percent of the respondents suggested to have clearly communicated and impartial leave policy; so that employees can have enough time for social functions and family concerns as and when required. Considering the adverse effects of stress in modern-day organizations, 50.00 percent respondents suggested for arranging stress management programme and counselling facilities at their work place.

Management Strategies to improve QWL of employees in Sugar Co-operatives:

Problems and suggestions may vary

from person to person and place to place. Before evolving and exploring any strategy for the concerned stakeholders in the study area, it is crucial to gather appropriate suggestions from real information gatekeepers, respondents and experienced experts. Considering the problems/issues as limiting factors for improvement of quality of work life of the concerned employees, extension educationists have recommended using a Situation-Based Extension with a Participatory Approach (SBEPa) to address these issues and combat the problems effectively. As a part of this exercise, employees were asked to provide suitable suggestions for improving their QWL. The opinions of information gatekeepers and subject experts on the matters related to improvement in QWL and the suggestions offered by the employees were analysed separately. Using the triangulation method, a strategy to address the major concern areas of QWL of these employees was proposed. The developed strategies are presented in table 4.34. These strategies will be very useful for the policy makers, higher-ups and organizational authorities as well as other stakeholders; seeking to improve the overall QWL and consequently the quality of life of employees working in any organization in general and in sugar co-operatives in particular.

Table 2: Management strategies to improve QWL of employees in Sugar Co-operatives.

Strategy Area	Identified Issues	Proposed Strategies.
Job Satisfaction	Monotony, lack of motivation	Job enrichment, recognition programmes, career pathways
Work Life Balance	Long working hours, seasonal workload	Flexible shifts, leave policies, family support
Workplace Environment	Safety hazards, poor conditions	Safety training, ergonomic enhancements, social spaces, social get-togethers
Employee Participation	Lack of involvement in decision-making	Participatory decision-making, feedback mechanisms
Training and Development	Limited growth opportunities	Regular skills training, leadership development programs
Compensation and Benefits	Inadequate wages, lack of incentives	Competitive Pay based on Wage Surveys to ensure Internal and External Equity, Benefits Packages, Profit Sharing, Canteen, Rest Rooms
Organizational Culture	Poor communication, lack of inclusivity	Open communication, team building activities
Health and Wellness	High stress, physical health issues	Health and Stress Management Programmes, Counselling Services, Wellness Centres
Technological Advancement	Outdated processes	Digital tools, automation, remote work options
Social Relevance and Public Image of the Firm	Low employee morale and sense of belongingness	CSR involvement, community engagement projects

Implications of the study

The implications emerged from the present study and these may be useful to policy makers, administrators, researchers and extension workers in increasing the quality of work life of employees in co-operative sectors.

- **Enhancement of Compensation and Benefits Structures:** The study underscores the paramount importance of adequate and fair compensation in shaping employees' perceptions of their work life. Given that compensation emerged as the highest-ranked factor influencing job satisfaction, sugar cooperatives should consider revising their pay structures to ensure they are competitive, transparent, and aligned with the responsibilities and skills required. This would not only improve employee morale but also foster a sense of financial security, reducing turnover and enhancing retention.
- **Improvement in Work-Life Balance:** With work-life balance ranked as a top priority, sugar cooperatives must implement policies that promote flexibility in work hours, leave, and personal time. Initiatives that allow employees to balance their professional and personal responsibilities, such as offering flexible schedules or additional family leave options, could significantly boost overall job satisfaction and productivity. This would also help mitigate stress and burnout, particularly for employees who depend solely on their cooperative job for livelihood.
- **Focus on Fairness and Constitutionalism:** Employees placed high importance on fairness in the workplace, particularly regarding merit-based promotions, equitable treatment, and transparent grievance redressal systems. It is essential for management to ensure that organizational policies are consistently applied and that there are clear, accessible channels for employees to voice concerns. Promoting a culture of transparency, accountability, and justice will build trust, improve employee morale, and foster a cooperative environment.
- **Strengthening Employee Motivation Programs:** Despite a relatively low perception of motivational programs within cooperatives, the study highlights the need for structured employee engagement initiatives. By introducing more frequent motivation programs, workshops, or recognition schemes, sugar cooperatives can foster a sense of appreciation and involvement among employees. This could also contribute to greater job satisfaction and productivity, especially if these programs are aligned with employee needs and aspirations.
- **Better Utilization of Employee Skills:** The findings suggest that employees appreciate roles that align well with their skills, but they also desire more opportunities for involvement in decision-making processes and job planning. Cooperatives should focus on aligning job roles with employee capabilities, offering training and development opportunities, and involving employees in strategic decisions. This can foster a sense of accomplishment, leading to higher engagement and job satisfaction.
- **Promoting a Positive Work Environment:** The study indicates that a cooperative culture based on social integration, mutual respect, and teamwork enhances overall employee well-being. Sugar cooperatives should invest in fostering a collaborative, inclusive, and supportive work environment. Organizing informal

gatherings, team-building activities, and promoting a sense of belonging within the organization will help strengthen interpersonal relationships and improve the workplace atmosphere.

- **Addressing Socio-economic Diversity:** The study reveals that various socio-economic factors, such as age, family size, and employment status, influence perceptions of QWL. It is crucial for management to recognize these differences and design policies that accommodate diverse employee needs. For instance, younger or less experienced employees may require more training and career development opportunities, while those with larger families might benefit from policies that support work-life balance and financial security.
- **Policy Implications for Recruitment and Retention:** Given the demographic characteristics of the respondents—such as a predominance of rural-based, middle-aged male employees—sugar cooperatives may need to focus on targeted recruitment strategies that appeal to younger or more diverse groups. Additionally, they should implement retention strategies that cater to employees' specific needs, such as career progression opportunities, skills development programs, and a supportive work environment.
- **Reinforcement of Ethical Practices and Organizational Reputation:** The study also suggests that employees place significant value on ethical practices and the reputation of their organization. Sugar cooperatives should ensure that their operations are aligned with ethical standards, contributing to community development and upholding social responsibilities. This will not only improve employee satisfaction but also enhance the cooperative's public image, which in turn may attract talented individuals and improve organizational performance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study highlights critical gaps in QWL among sugar co-operative employees, emphasizing the need for holistic and sustainable approaches. Implementation of participatory decision-making, competitive compensation, social integration activities, and technology-driven processes will enhance job satisfaction, retention, and organizational performance.

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