



Process Improvement Contribution to Career Advancement: Evidence from Managerial Perspectives in Fintech

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The concept of a career has shifted significantly over recent decades, with traditional, linear paths based on tenure and hierarchy increasingly replaced by more flexible and dynamic trajectories. Although holistic management philosophies have emphasized employees' role in contributing to process improvement, the extent to which such contributions influence career advancement remains a question. Prior research has not clearly established how participation in process improvement is evaluated, recognized, and rewarded in promotion decisions, particularly from a managerial perspective.

Aim(s) – The aim of this paper is to explore how managers interpret and evaluate employee involvement in process improvement and how these interpretations shape career advancement decisions. It examines how organizations perceive and assess such involvement when making advancement decisions and identifies additional factors that shape this relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with 15 managers in the Lithuanian fintech sector. Data was collected using pre-prepared interview guides and analyzed through thematic analysis, including coding, categorization, and interpretation, moving to a structured conceptual framework.

Limitations of the paper – Although internal motivation is a key factor influencing employee participation in process improvement, it is not examined in depth in this paper. The focus on managerial perspectives was intentional, as career advancement decisions are largely shaped by managerial evaluation and interpretation.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that organizations should pay closer attention to how employee involvement in process improvement is identified, assessed, and rewarded. Managerial awareness and organizational culture play a significant role in determining whether improvement efforts translate into career advancement. This paper highlights the need for greater alignment between managerial practices, recognition mechanisms, and career systems. Building on theoretical foundation, the qualitative findings were grouped and conceptual framework developed.

Originality/value – The novelty of this paper lies in examining the relationship between process improvement and career advancement, which has been addressed only fragmentarily in prior research. By adopting an organizational and managerial perspective, the paper provides empirical insight into how managers interpret employee involvement in process improvement and how these interpretations shape career advancement decisions.

KEY WORDS

Employee Contribution, Process Improvement, Career Advancement, Managerial Perspective, Qualitative Research, Fintech Sector

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1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, several management philosophies emphasized the importance of process improvement and the involvement of employees across organizational levels (Semrau, 2024). Nevertheless, the degree to which employees' contribution to process improvement impacts their career advancement remains an open question. Some studies highlight the growing importance of employee involvement in process improvement and going beyond job description, particularly in organizational

contexts that value employee-initiated improvements (de Medeiros et al., 2025). Halligan (2021) argues that performance outcomes are frequently influenced by external factors that cannot be controlled, making it difficult to credibly measure and account for achievements. At the same time, employee outcomes such as career growth are influenced by factors that cannot always be controlled, meaning that even when achievements are evaluated, external circumstances can still play a role in career advancement.

Whitchurch et al. (2021) examines career trajectories using the “concertina” model, which identifies bounded, boundaryless, and niche career types. Although their work does not directly address process improvement, the boundaryless career type, characterized by proactive behaviour, cross-functional involvement, and broader responsibility, resembles the behaviours often displayed by employees who engage in process improvement. However, their study does not consider whether such behaviours translate into managerial recognition or promotion decisions.

De Medeiros et al. (2025) propose that employees involved in process improvement may receive greater career development opportunities due to their engagement, learning, and problem-solving. At the same time, their research does not examine how managerial perceptions and organizational acknowledgment transform these contributions into actual career advancement. These gaps suggest that previous research has not determined how participation in process improvement is evaluated, recognized and rewarded in promotion decisions.

The study adopts an organizational and managerial orientation, emphasizing how managers assess employee involvement in process improvement and how these assessments influence career advancement decisions.

The aim of this paper is to explore how managers interpret and evaluate employee involvement in process improvement and how these interpretations shape career advancement decisions in the fintech sector.

The research problem is to what extent does employees' involvement in process improvement contribute to their career advancement in organizations?

The Lithuanian and Baltic fintech sector is uniquely positioned as a leading global hub, operating largely under international management standards and competitive pressures (Nikiforova & Bicevska, 2020).

To achieve the aim of this paper, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How is employee engagement in process improvement identified, supported, and rewarded within organizations?

RQ2: How do process improvement contributions shape employee's leadership opportunities, and career advancement?

RQ3: How do the identified career advancement dimensions interact with process improvement to contribute to career advancement?

RQ4: To what extent do organizations utilize formal systems and specific metrics to evaluate employee's contributions to process improvement?

1.1 THE CONCEPT OF PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

Process improvement is widely discussed in management and organizational literature as a continuous effort aimed at enhancing the effectiveness, efficiency, and adaptability of organizational processes (Dumas et al. 2018). It is commonly defined as a systematic process of measuring, analysing, and optimizing processes within a business process management system (Semrau, 2024). Rather than being treated as a one-time initiative, process improvement is increasingly understood as an ongoing organizational practice embedded in everyday work activities (Harmon, 2019). The successful implementation of process improvement depends on organizational strategy, structure, and culture, as well as on the involvement of employees across hierarchical levels. Process improvement often requires changes to tasks, responsibilities and established routines, which makes employee participation essential (Semrau, 2024). Members of an organization are expected to continuously identify inefficiencies, reduce errors, and contribute to improved workflows, with the objective of achieving operational excellence and sustained performance (Fryer et al., 2007). Process improvement extends beyond technical optimization

and is shaped by how employees engage with, adapt, and modify processes in their everyday work (Malinova et al., 2022). The effectiveness of improvement initiatives is influenced not only by formal systems and tools but also by how employees perceive their role in shaping and developing organizational processes. The relevance of systematic process improvement is particularly evident in the Baltic fintech sector. As noted by Nikiforova and Bicevska (2020), integration of process improvement is a meaningful strategy for IT organizations to address performance issues and achieve higher project success rates compared to traditional methodologies. As an example, process improvement can be applied in customer onboarding, where mapping the current steps, finding bottlenecks, redesigning the process with automation, and tracking the new flow can be used to achieve the goal of making the process more efficient (Aamer and Milani 2023). Building on the approach of Malinova, et al. (2022) and the definitions consolidated, this research adopts a broad definition of process improvement, encompassing all contribution aimed at enhancing work processes.

1.2 EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT IN PROCESS IMPROVEMENT

Employee involvement in process improvement refers to the extent to which employees actively participate in identifying problems, proposing solutions, and contributing to changes in work processes. It is often described as a philosophy of managing and leading people's activities in processes associated with organizational success (Brajer-Marczak, 2014). Effective process improvement requires engagement at all levels of the organization, beginning with top management and extending to operational employees (Semrau, 2024). Employee involvement is closely associated with internal motivation and autonomy (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). When employees perceive their work as meaningful and experience autonomy in decision-making, they are more likely to engage in proactive behaviours that go beyond daily task execution (Brown & Cregan, 2008). In many cases, however, improvement-related tasks are not formally included in job descriptions, making involvement dependent on informal expectations and managerial support.

Organizational culture plays a critical role in shaping employee involvement. Cultures that encourage ownership, initiative, and learning from mistakes tend to foster higher levels of employee participation in improvement activities (Alsughayir, 2016). On the other hand, in environments where stability and strict adherence to existing procedures are prioritized, employees may be less inclined to propose or implement changes. The literature indicates that employee involvement, visibility through contribution and managerial support are becoming increasingly more important in career advancement than tenure or formal promotion systems. In this paper, employee involvement is assessed not only through contribution to process improvement, but also through observable behaviours such as identifying problems and taking initiative to propose or implement solutions. These findings suggest that career advancement is a multidimensional process, which provides a foundation for understanding the dimensions explored in this research.

1.3 OPPORTUNITIES OF CAREER ADVANCEMENT FOR EMPLOYEES

Conventionally, careers were perceived as linear and hierarchical advancements within one organization, which were mostly based on tenure, official promotion systems, and organizational control (Lips-Wiersma and Hall, 2007). Nevertheless, modern career literature focuses on more dynamic, flexible and individualized career paths, where employees are taking more ownership in their own career advancement (Whitchurch et al., 2021). Career advancement is increasingly associated with employee competencies, skill development and individual career commitment rather than tenure alone (Risal et al., 2023). Consequently, career advancement is no longer restricted to formal promotions but can also be in terms of increased responsibilities, visibility, reputational and leadership opportunities in organizations. Abbas and Bakri (2015) suggest that employees' career aspirations and perceptions of career success are strongly shaped by internal motivation rather than solely by organizational support structures.

According to Jiang et al. (2012), human resource management practices focused on motivation, are critical in linking individual contributions to rewards. This aligns with the perspective that career system

support acts as a bridge between an employee's proactive behaviour and their professional growth. Furthermore, Aziedjo (2024) emphasizes that while organizations provide the framework, the responsibility for career progression has shifted toward the employee, who must navigate these systems through continuous involvement in activities that create value. This suggests that while career advancement support systems exist, it is ultimately up to employees to identify and pursue them (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007). Employees may engage in contributions beyond job description such as process improvement in order to create a favourable impression and enhance their visibility to management (Schedlinsky et al., 2025). Such involvement is also associated with increased learning, engagement and problem-solving capabilities (de Medeiros et al., 2025).

The process of change is driven by flexibility and results in flat decentralized structures and less focus on the tenure requirements (Lips-Wiersma & Hall, 2007). As per Whitchurch et al. (2021), the advancement of employees might involve detours. Traditional career management practices, which were defined by organizational management, hierarchical promotion, and extended tenure, are gradually eroding. Employees with high tenure and a high commitment in their work are likely to achieve effective career management (Risal et al. 2023). Loss and Renucci (2020) identifies that employees who are ahead of the promotion threshold through job tenure and demonstrated performance are often more likely to advance. Also, employees hired from outside the organization tend to lack organization-specific skills, and although they might get bigger compensations, they quit at higher rates (Bidwell 2011). Therefore, internal promotion is often more effective than external hiring in terms of long-term success and performance, reinforcing the value of process improvement in career advancement.

Hoque et al. (2024) studying public and private sector, note that a strong organizational culture enhances working conditions and plays a major role in career accomplishment. This indicates that in such settings culture drives motivation and innovation, which indirectly adds to career advancement. The literature suggests that the relationship between career advancement and process improvement may depend on whether an organization considers culture as a driving force behind recognition and promotion.

Taken together, literature suggests a shift toward more multidimensional and individualized career patterns, which may play an increasingly important role alongside traditional criteria such as tenure. These findings suggest that career advancement is a multidimensional process, which provides a foundation for understanding the dimensions explored in this research.

1.4 LINKING PROCESS IMPROVEMENT AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT

Prior research suggests that employee involvement in process improvement may contribute to career advancement by enhancing skills, visibility, and perceived value to the organization. Process improvement often requires employees to engage with problem identification and solution development, which can broaden their understanding of organizational processes (Semrau, 2024). These attributes are commonly associated with leadership potential and readiness for increased responsibility. However, existing literature does not clearly explain how process improvement contributions are evaluated and translated into career advancement decisions. While involvement in improvement activities may expand responsibilities and increase visibility to management, it does not automatically lead to promotion or career progression (Whitchurch et al. 2021). The relationship between process improvement and career advancement appears to be influenced by context rather than formalized rules (Lips-Wiersma & Hall 2007). Huesmann et al. (2020) argue that informal networks and the reputation enhance employee's chances of promotion. Despite growing attention to employee involvement and continuous improvement, there is limited empirical evidence examining how managers assess these contributions when making career advancement decisions.

1.5 ANALYTICAL DIMENSIONS GUIDING THE STUDY

The literature indicates that employee involvement, visibility through contribution and managerial support are becoming increasingly more important in career advancement than tenure or formal

promotion systems. Process improvement can also enhance recognition and promotion opportunities especially in companies that appreciate initiative and skill building. These findings suggest that career advancement is a multidimensional process, which provides a foundation for understanding the dimensions explored in this research. Based on the research summarizing the possible dimensions for career advancement, six main dimensions can be identified (Table 1).

Table 1. Career advancement dimensions

Authors	Dimension	Explanation
Jiang et al. (2012), Abbas & Bakri (2015)	Internal Motivation	Employees must actively seek growth through projects and skill-building.
Loss & Renucci (2020), Huesmann et al. (2020)	Reputation & Informal Networks	Reputation drives career advancement, with promotions influenced by informal networks.
Risal et al. (2023)	Tenure	Long-tenure employees navigate careers better.
Lips-Wiersma & Hall (2007), Aziedjo (2024)	Career System Support	Motivation-enhancing HR strategies impact advancement.
Hoque et al. (2024)	Cultural Support	Organizational culture supports advancement and satisfaction.
Whitchurch et al. (2021)	Improvement vs. Operations	Distinction between improvement-oriented and operationally focused roles.

Source: Compiled by the author based on the results of analysis of scientific sources, 2025

Based on the reviewed literature, study adopted a multidimensional perspective to examine the relationship between employee involvement in process improvement and career advancement. Employee involvement in process improvement is treated as the independent variable, while career advancement represents the dependent variable. The relationship between these variables is influenced by several analytical dimensions. These dimensions include internal motivation, reputation and informal networks, tenure, the distinction between improvement-oriented and operational roles, cultural support, and career system support. This framework was based on the analysed literature and observed gaps related to employee engagement in the process improvement and its possible impact on career advancement. Each step flowed out of key dimensions identified in the literature, which were shown alongside the respective framework layers (Figure 1).

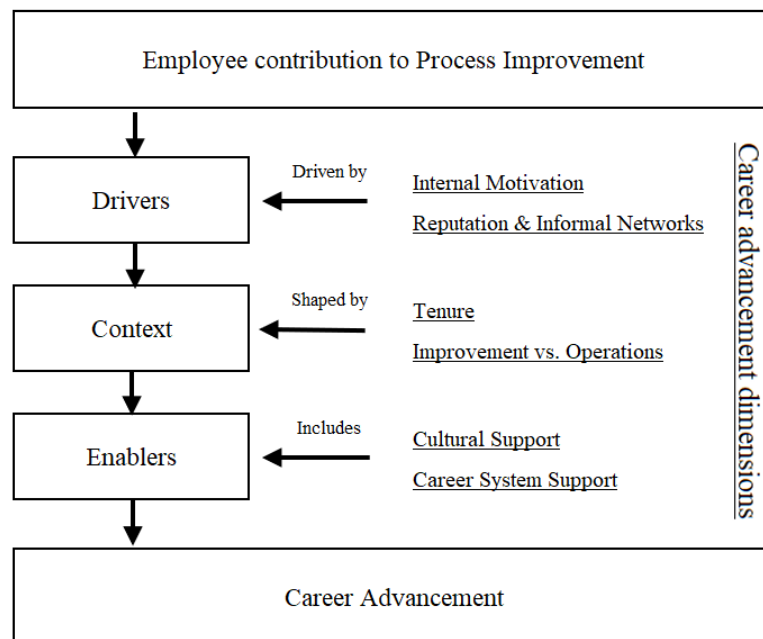


Fig 1. Framework based on literature findings

Source: Compiled by the author based on the results of analysis of scientific sources, 2025

Framework aimed to guide empirical investigation and form the foundation upon which interview questions were developed. As well to help to evaluate how organizations measure contribution of process improvement and how such contributions link to career advancement.

2 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, as the research aim is to explore how employee involvement in process improvement contributes to career advancement from a managerial perspective. Qualitative research is suitable for examining perceptions, interpretations, and experiences that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measures. The study is grounded in an interpretive perspective, emphasizing how managers understand and assess employee contributions within organizational contexts. Data for this study was collected using semi-structured interviews with managers. The interview method was selected to allow respondents to express their views freely while ensuring that all relevant research dimensions were addressed. Interview questions were developed based on the theoretical framework and focused on employee involvement in process improvement, career advancement, and factors influencing managerial evaluation. The prepared questions were also grouped into career advancement dimensions that provided a structure for the qualitative interviews. The dimensions reflect both the concepts found in the literature and the gaps identified in existing research and were designed to help and group gathered information on how process improvement involvement is perceived in organizational practice. These questions were interpreted thematically to determine trends regarding how managers view process improvement involvement when it comes to promotions and career advancement. The empirical study was conducted between June and September of 2025.

During the qualitative interviews, managers were selected on the condition that they have the authority to influence promotion decisions, aligning with the organizational perspective of this research. Special attention was paid to understanding how organizations measure employee contributions to process improvement, through formal evaluations, recognition systems or informally. Fintech industry was chosen because Lithuania is hub of fintech in Europe, especially big cities Vilnius and Kaunas. The availability of industry professionals helped in the collection of data and the sector being fast-paced and innovation-driven provided good environment to examine how process improvement can lead to career growth in office-based work environments.

Respondents were recruited through systematic professional outreach via the LinkedIn network, utilizing purposive sampling to identify individuals holding leadership roles within the Lithuanian fintech sector. While the outreach was broad to ensure a diverse representation of the industry, participation was strictly limited to those meeting the predefined inclusion criteria: a minimum of three years of managerial experience and the authority to influence or participate in career advancement decisions, which was captured in the questionnaire. Managers gave their views, personal experiences, and actual case scenarios about the process of improvement and career advancement on a voluntary basis. Data access was obtained through direct engagement with managers. The data was gathered through semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face, telephone, or online interviews. In the case of participants who could not arrange the sessions because of workload, the written questionnaire was offered, which the participants completed and sent back at their own convenience. Online and Questionnaire response formats demonstrate flexibility in meeting participants' schedules. The length of each interview was about 40-60 minutes, which was enough time to discuss the topic in detail without losing the attention of the participants. To ensure that the findings were valid, confirmatory interviews were conducted to validate the interpretations and maintain the validity of results. In total, fifteen managers participated in the study. Interviews were transcribed. Transcriptions were coded and recurring themes and sub-themes examined.

The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic coding was conducted manually in Excel to ensure consistency across participant responses and was grouped by analytical categories. The analytical procedure followed a systematic thematic approach, moving from initial open coding of interview transcripts to the grouping of related codes into first-order categories. These categories were then further synthesized into overarching second-order themes, which formed the structural basis for the final conceptual framework. To ensure transparency in how the results unfolded, the identified codes, categories, and themes are summarized in Table 2. This process ensured that the findings remained

directly grounded in the empirical data. Thematic analysis enabled systematic comparison across respondents and supported the identification of key factors influencing how employee involvement in process improvement is assessed and translated into career advancement opportunities, while remaining open to the emergence of additional insights. Respondent anonymity was ensured throughout the research process. No identifying information was disclosed, and interview data were used solely for academic purposes.

While this qualitative approach allows for insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Manager perspective-based study can be subjective because of the interpretation of promotion requirements and contributions to process improvement. Even though the managers can comment on the promotional decisions, their opinions may not be comprehensive enough to reflect the experiences of the employees and their internal motivation dimension to this subject. The sample is also limited to Lithuania, with a focus on biggest cities like Vilnius and Kaunas, which may restrict the applicability of the findings to broader cultural or organizational contexts. The use of an iterative interview process, while useful for refining questions, could introduce slight differences across participant answers. Additionally, responses may be shaped by social desirability, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as recognition and advancement. Despite these limitations, the study aimed to maintain methodology and transparency throughout the research process.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The empirical findings were generalized to describe empirical data and to confirm the framework developed in the earlier chapters. To summarize the key findings, the results of all the six dimensions are shown in the table below. When analysing the experts' answers for each question, many codes were identified. Their summary is shown in the table. Table summarizes codes, categories and themes that were found in the analysis, demonstrating the connection between career advancement opportunities and the employee's involvement in the process improvement (Table 2).

Table 2. Empirical research analysis results

Codes	First-Order Categories	Second-Order Categories	Themes Identified
Rewards, Metrics, Support, Ownership	Initiative beyond job description	Internal motivation	Internal motivation to improve the process is reinforced by leadership support and trust.
	Creativity & innovation		
	Managerial support & trust	Leadership support & Trust	
	Empowerment to take ownership		
Improvement, Ownership, Expertise, Visibility	Deep process knowledge	Process expertise	Process improvement comes from process expertise and fresh perspectives.
	Newcomers' fresh ideas	Newcomer insights	
	Challenging old approach		
Culture, Metrics, Ownership, Collaboration	Verbal and public recognition	Cultural support	Improvement efforts are connected to cultural support, learning and collaboration.
	Suggestion systems	Learning & Collaboration	
	Learning from failure		
	Cross-team collaboration		
Visibility, Improvement, Culture, Reputation, Leadership	Cross-team impact and visibility	Visibility & leadership awareness	Visibility and leadership awareness strengthen reputation and informal networks.
	Managerial awareness	Reputation & Informal networks	
	Informal networks		
	Improvement success history		
Ownership, Expertise, Improvement	Ownership mindset	Ownership & Transparency	Tenure builds credibility through ownership and transparency.
	Transparency & openness		
Metrics, Feedback, Reward	KPIs and score tables	Career System Support	Career system support helps link improvement to rewards and recognition.
	Performance reviews		
	Bonus & reward structures	Rewards & Recognition	
	Promotion decisions		

Source: Author, 2025

The findings indicate that process improvement is generally encouraged across organizations through both formal and informal mechanisms. Managers reported that employees are invited to share ideas via suggestion platforms, performance reviews, and cross-functional initiatives. Support typically takes the form of allocated time, resources, and training. Recognition practices vary, ranging from financial rewards such as bonuses or vouchers to public acknowledgment through internal communication. In some cases,

employees were entrusted with leading improvement initiatives, which positioned them for further career advancement. The results demonstrate that employee visibility and reputation play a central role in shaping career outcomes.

Contributions that were visible to senior management or discussed in organization-wide meetings were more likely to influence promotion decisions. Employees actively involved in improvement initiatives were often perceived as more motivated, responsible, and capable of leadership, which strengthened their reputation and increased their chances of being entrusted with leadership roles. Process improvement does not only make an employee more visible, but also makes them part of the informal networks, which earns them trust and recognition that managers can count on when they consider a candidate to promote. While experienced employees were often trusted to lead improvement initiatives due to their organizational knowledge, new employees were also valued for their fresh perspectives and initiative. Promotion decisions were therefore not based on tenure alone but rather on visibility, contribution, and demonstrated initiative. Operational excellence remained important, particularly for analytical and execution-focused roles, but advancement was more strongly associated with involvement in improvement activities.

Organizational culture and leadership support were found to be decisive in determining whether improvement efforts translated into career advancement. In cultures that emphasized ownership, openness, and continuous improvement, employee contributions were more likely to be recognized. Managers played a key role in reinforcing these values by allocating resources, encouraging involvement, and providing feedback. Practices such as suggestion systems, performance reviews, and collaborative work structures increased the visibility of improvement efforts and influenced advancement decisions, even when formal systems were not in place.

Overall, the findings suggest that participation in process improvement enhances career prospects primarily when contributions are visibly valuable and aligned with organizational objectives. In smaller organizations, informal managerial evaluation often substitutes for formal systems, while larger organizations rely more on structured assessment mechanisms. Individuals known for innovation, ownership, and initiative were more likely to be considered for leadership roles, strategic projects, or promotion. These results illustrate how fintech organizations in Lithuania integrate improvement contributions into career decision-making through both formal and informal pathways.

3.1 INTERNAL MOTIVATION DIMENSION

The findings indicate that internal motivation to engage in process improvement is actively cultivated by organizations through a combination of formal structures, managerial practices, and cultural reinforcement. Managers reported that employees are encouraged to contribute ideas via structured channels such as suggestion systems, regular check-ins, and designated communication platforms. Process improvement was often integrated into performance evaluations, feedback sessions, and OKRs (objectives and key results), making improvement-related contributions visible and relevant in career-related discussions. Recognition works through verbal appreciation, public acknowledgement, and inclusion in performance reviews. Financial rewards, particularly bonuses, were the most mentioned form of recognition, ranging from annual performance-based bonuses to smaller one-time rewards. However, motivation was not sustained through monetary incentives alone. Managers emphasized the importance of allocating time, resources, and autonomy to employees, enabling them to take ownership of improvement initiatives. Overall, internal motivation was not treated as an individual trait but as something actively shaped by organizational practices. Cultural values such as ownership and initiative played a central role in sustaining engagement, while managerial encouragement and structured recognition mechanisms helped translate motivation into actual improvement contributions. These results support Shepherd and McLeod (2020) argument that managerial encouragement helps align employee motivation with organizational needs, which suggests that organized recognition and empowerment practices can turn motivation into contributions to process improvement.

3.2 IMPROVEMENT VERSUS OPERATIONAL FOCUS DIMENSION

Process improvers generally were seen as more innovative and better positioned for advancement. Career growth was linked with doing more than what is in the job description and generating measurable and visible impact on process improvement. Operationally oriented employees were described as reliable, consistent, and effective in performing assigned tasks. In contrast, improvement-oriented employees were perceived as going beyond routine performance by questioning existing practices, proposing changes, and contributing broader organizational insights. Managers associated such behavior with leadership potential and were more likely to consider these employees for expanded responsibilities and career advancement. Nevertheless, strong operational performance was seen as a necessary foundation, as improvement efforts were valued primarily when built upon solid execution. Outstanding process performers were appreciated, particularly in analytical or execution-focused roles. Newcomers were often valued for their fresh perspectives and initiative. The difference between operational and process improvement is similar to that Whitchurch et al. (2021) noted that proactive, role-expanding engagement beyond formal role description can support career mobility. This is also consistent with de Medeiros et al. (2025) who suggest that engagement in improvement programs improves organizational performance and employee visibility, which can improve career growth opportunities. Therefore, key challenge is ensuring employees maintain perspective so that improvements align with broader organizational governance and deliver measurable value.

3.3 CULTURAL SUPPORT DIMENSION

Organizational culture was identified as a critical factor shaping whether employee involvement in process improvement translates into career advancement. Managers described cultures that encourage ownership, openness, and transparency as more supportive of process improvement. In such environments, proposing improvements are perceived as behavior aligned with organizational values and more likely to be recognized. On the other hand, in organizational contexts where cultural and managerial support for process improvement is weaker, employee contributions are less likely to be systematically evaluated and rewarded, which reduces process improvement influence on career advancement. Most respondents emphasized that process improvement is a fundamental cultural value linked to innovation, efficiency, and organizational development. However, the intensity of this cultural support varies across organizations and even among managers. While some organizations rely on formal performance systems to evaluate improvement efforts, others, particularly smaller firms, use more informal, manager-led assessments. Process improvement activity results are not only individual, but also culture wide.

3.4 REPUTATION AND INFORMAL NETWORKS DIMENSION

Reputation and informal networks played a significant role in linking process improvement involvement to career advancement. Managers frequently referred to visibility and reputation as one of the determinant factors in the contributions to process improvement resulting in career advancement. Employees whose contributions were visible to senior management or had cross-functional impact were more likely to be considered for advancement. Informal networks were described as channels through which information about employee contributions circulates. Managers acknowledged that career decisions are often shaped by accumulated impressions and reputational signals rather than by formal documentation alone. Respondents noted that improvements generating tangible value, engaging multiple teams, or attracting senior-level attention were more likely to lead to leadership opportunities. Advancement also showed to be dependent on the availability of career opportunities within the organization. Earning a reputation for reliability and competence in executing improvements increased the likelihood of being entrusted with additional responsibilities and leadership roles. Process improvement not only increases visibility but also embeds employees into informal networks of trust and recognition that managers rely on when considering promotion candidates. Moreover, the results confirm the hypothesis by Loss and Renucci (2020) that reputation plays a central role in shaping promotion

possibilities and career-related incentives. It is worth noting that the reliance on informal networks introduces a risk of subjective evaluation. Since the assessment of process improvement contributions is often not a formalized procedure but depends on manager assessment, it can create a positive bias toward visible employees. This can also outweigh the quality of improvement. Therefore, employees who do not participate in informal networks may face a disadvantage in career advancement compared to those who are more skilled at navigating organizational visibility.

3.5 TENURE DIMENSION

Employees with longer tenure had higher chances of leading process improvements because of their knowledge of the process and organizational expectations. Managers indicated that experienced employees are often trusted to propose and implement changes. At the same time, tenure alone was not seen as determining career advancement. Respondents emphasized that capability, initiative and motivation were more important than tenure in deciding who should be involved in process improvement. Newer employees were often described as bringing fresh perspectives, higher energy, and strong motivation. In general, tenure was regarded as a contributing, but not a determining factor. The findings support the work of Risal et al. (2023) that career systems are no longer based on tenure-based promotion but rather on competence-based promotion. This helped to confirm the opinion that flexible, competency-based career structures are especially applicable in dynamic sectors like fintech.

3.6 CAREER SYSTEM SUPPORT DIMENSION

Formal career systems were found to only partially capture employee involvement in process improvement. Some managers reported that improvement-related contributions are incorporated into performance evaluations, development discussions, OKRs, or KPIs (key performance indicators), while others indicated that such contributions are assessed more informally and depend largely on managerial judgment. These inconsistencies in career system support influence whether process improvement involvement leads to career advancement. Where formal systems align with managerial expectations, employee contributions are more likely to be recognized. In the absence of such alignment, advancement decisions rely heavily on informal assessments. Taken together, the findings suggest that career advancement is shaped less by isolated contributions and more by how such contributions are interpreted within organizational contexts. Employee involvement in process improvement gains career relevance primarily when it aligns with managerial expectations, cultural norms, and available recognition mechanisms. The assessment of improvement contributions remains informal and dependent on manager interpretation, creating subjectivity in how such contributions translate into career advancement. While many organizations formally recognize process improvement efforts, respondents noted that the consistency and structure of these programs vary. Managers highlighted challenges related to crediting team-based improvements and avoiding overemphasis on quantity rather than quality. In cases where contributions are not recognized or appreciated, employee motivation may decline, weakening the link between process improvement and career development.

3.7 UPDATED FRAMEWORK

The empirical study has shown how managers perceive employee contribution to process improvement and its relevance to career advancement in organizations, particularly in the fintech sector. The findings of the study were structured according to the analytical dimensions derived from the theoretical framework and build upon the empirical findings presented in above sections. These dimensions reflect how managers assess employee involvement in process improvement and how such involvement translates into career advancement opportunities. It was confirmed that process improvement is widely embedded into organizational practices and cultures. The existing framework was updated to represent the results. The framework summarized the empirical evidence in all career advancement dimensions, validated the existing dimensions and clarified their roles. The updated framework differentiates the dimensions by colour coding: empirically confirmed elements are marked in

green, while newly added or redefined elements are marked in red. Overall, the empirical results showed that participation in process improvement is associated with positive career advancement outcomes when the evaluated dimensions are present in organizations (Figure 2).

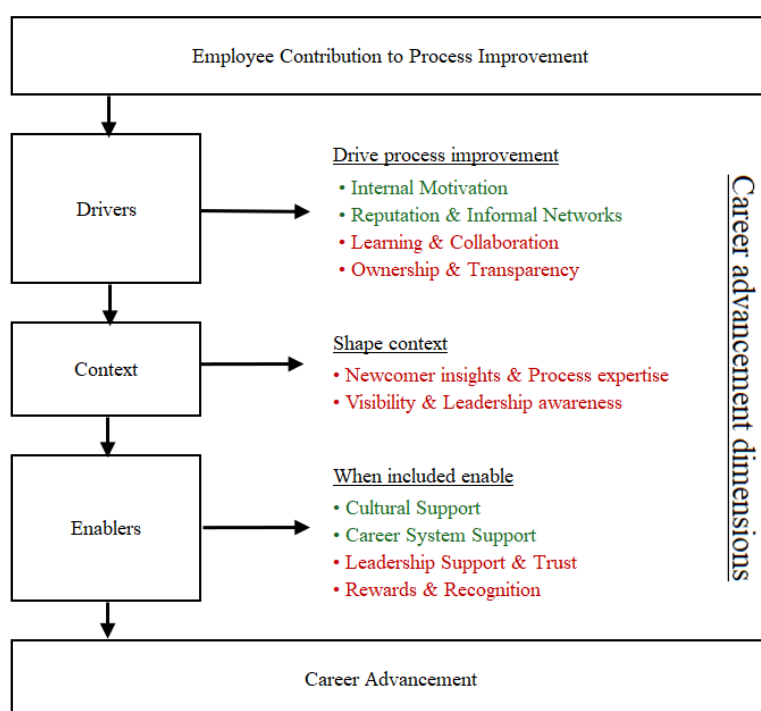


Fig. 2. Updated framework based on empirical research
Source: Author 2025

In Figure 2, the Drivers layer describes the factors that influence and drive employee engagement in process improvement. Internal motivation as well as reputation and informal networks were confirmed by the empirical findings as important drivers. In addition, learning and collaboration, along with ownership and transparency, were expanded based on the research results.

The Context layer represents the managerial perspective that shapes how process improvement contributions are interpreted and recognized. Visibility and leadership awareness were added as contextual factors that affect the perceptions of managers towards improvement behaviours. The Improvement vs. Operations dimension was redefined as newcomer insights and process expertise, with the focus on the fact that process improvement is not a result of tenure but a combination of new views and process knowledge.

The Enablers layer reflects organizational conditions that, when present, support the translation of process improvement contributions into career advancement outcomes. Cultural support and career system support were confirmed as important enablers, while leadership support and trust, as well as rewards and recognition, were expanded as distinct dimensions due to their significance in the empirical findings.

Together, the three layers illustrate how employee contributions to process improvement are influenced, shaped and enabled to result in potential career advancement. The expanded framework clarifies different dimensions and could be used or expanded in future research.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how employee involvement in process improvement contributes to career advancement opportunities. A review of the literature showed that process improvement is commonly conceptualized as a strategic and continuous practice aimed at enhancing organizational efficiency, flexibility, and competitiveness, while also requiring active employee participation that often extends beyond formal job description.

Career advancement has been examined through multiple lenses, such as tenure-based promotion, reputation, informal networks and organizational culture. While prior literature highlights the importance of visibility and leadership opportunities in shaping career outcomes, it does not analyze how process improvement contributes to these dynamics. There were also gaps in the knowledge of whether such contributions were systematically evaluated and rewarded in promotion decisions in organizations.

The empirical findings demonstrated that employee involvement in process improvement contributes to career advancement primarily through increased visibility, enhanced ownership, and perceived readiness for greater responsibility. However, this relationship is not automatic. Contributions were more likely to lead to advancement in contexts where evaluation and reward mechanisms were clearly defined and aligned with managerial expectations. In contrast, where assessment systems were informal, inconsistent, or weakly connected to promotion criteria, the career relevance of improvement efforts was less certain.

The findings demonstrate that employee contributions to process improvement are often not systematically or uniformly evaluated and rewarded in promotion decisions. While some organizations apply formal mechanisms, in many cases the assessment of improvement contributions remains informal and dependent on manager interpretation.

While the study primarily discusses how process improvement can facilitate career advancement, the findings also highlight several challenges. Specifically, the informal nature of evaluations and the difficulty in measuring intangible or team-based contributions can lead to situations where an employee's efforts are overlooked. Furthermore, in cases where the contributions are not realized or appreciated, employee motivation may drop, weakening the link between process improvement and career development.

The study contributes to the literature by empirically linking employee involvement in process improvement with career advancement outcomes and by demonstrating that this relationship is shaped by social and interpretive processes. Specifically, it reframes the distinction between improvement-oriented and operational roles not as a performance comparison but as a managerial interpretation mechanism. The findings may also be applicable to other process-intensive and highly regulated sectors, including banking, insurance, telecommunications, and information technologies.

The study limitation is that the analysis is based on managerial perspectives and does not include the employee perceptions which may reveal different experiences of process improvement and career advancement. Manager responses may be shaped by social desirability, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as recognition and career advancement.

Internal motivation is a significant factor that drives employees to participate in process improvement, which is not discussed in detail in this master thesis. The choice of restricting the research to managerial perspectives was intentional considering that the promotion decisions and career advancement processes are subject to managerial evaluation and interpretation by organization. Future studies could consider the employee-based views, such as internal motivation and perceived employee impact on career advancement to receive additional insights on this topic.

The sample is limited to Lithuania, focusing on major hubs like Vilnius and Kaunas. While the fintech sector is globalized and operates under international standards, the identified mechanisms may reflect specific managerial cultures prevalent in the Baltic region. Therefore, the findings should be generalized with caution when applied to other geographical regions or more traditional industries.

Future studies may be enhanced by increasing the number of respondents to include employee's internal motivation area or a mixed-method design to determine the effect of improvement participation on promotion patterns in the long term. Quantitative confirmation of the conceptual framework could also be performed to evaluate whether the dimensions of internal motivation, reputation and informal networks, learning and collaboration, ownership and transparency, newcomer insights and process expertise, visibility and leadership awareness, cultural support, career system support, leadership support and trust, rewards and recognition are applicable in other organizational contexts.

Overall, this study demonstrates that in innovation-driven settings, employees who contribute to process improvement can build reputation, trust, and expand responsibility, positioning themselves more favorably for career advancement. When supported by consistent leadership practices and transparent

career systems, process improvement can function as a meaningful internal mobility mechanism. This is increasingly important for organizations facing competitive pressures and seeking to develop resilient, merit-based career structures.

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