Journal of Islamic Finance and Economic Studies
2025, VOL. 1, NO. 3, 111-120
https: //doi.org//10.64268/josce.v1i3.69.

Strengthening Vocational Competencies and Quality Culture in Small-Scale Food Enterprises: A Case Study of Tofu Production Improvement Using the Six Sigma Approach

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ABSTRACT

Background: Small-scale food enterprises in Indonesia often rely on inherited production habits rather than structured vocational knowledge, causing inconsistent quality and limited competitiveness. The tofu industry, particularly in rural areas such as Situbondo, faces challenges related to worker discipline, hygiene culture, and process control. These issues highlight the need for strengthening vocational competencies and embedding a quality-oriented work culture within microenterprises.

Aims: This study aims to examine how the introduction of a structured improvement framework can enhance workforce behavior, production discipline, and overall quality culture in a rural tofu-processing enterprise. The article reframes technical findings into insights that support vocational learning, organizational development, and local MSME empowerment.

Methods: Using a case-study design, the research applies the Six Sigma DMAIC framework to analyze quality issues at UD Barokah. Data were collected through direct observation, interviews with workers and owners, and defect recording across 20 sampling periods. The study investigates four key defect categories—aroma, taste, color, and size—and identifies behavioral, environmental, and procedural factors that influence production performance.

Results: Findings show a high defect rate represented by a DPMO value of 269,000 and a sigma level of 2.11, indicating unstable processes and weak adherence to vocational standards of hygiene, measurement accuracy, and equipment maintenance. Dominant defects include discoloration and contamination, which stem from inconsistent worker practices, inadequate sanitation routines, and the absence of standardized procedures.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that technical improvement tools can function as pedagogical instruments that reshape work behavior, reinforce vocational competencies, and cultivate a sustainable quality culture in micro-scale food enterprises. Beyond reducing product defects, the Six Sigma approach encourages structured learning, strengthens accountability among workers, and promotes a culture of cleanliness and precision that is essential for rural MSME development. Embedding such quality-oriented practices is crucial for empowering local enterprises, enhancing consumer trust, and supporting broader educational and socio-economic outcomes in vocational ecosystems.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Submitted:Sep,12,2025
Accepted:Oct, 15, 2025
Published:Dec, 25, 2025

KEYWORD
Behavioral improvement
Quality culture
Rural food enterprises
Six Sigma
Vocational competencies

INTRODUCTION

Small-scale food enterprises in Indonesia continue to play a central role in community economies, yet many remain constrained by limited vocational knowledge and work discipline in their daily production activities. In rural tofu production units, workers often rely on inherited practices rather than structured skill development, which results in inconsistent product quality and unstable operational performance. These weaknesses reflect a broader pattern in microenterprises where quality culture has not yet become an integral part of organizational behavior. Scholars have emphasized that behavioral improvement is inseparable from the development of structured routines and professional norms in production settings (Hodgson, 2023; Rostamzadeh et al., 2025). When vocational competencies are insufficient, production errors accumulate, affecting both consumer trust and business sustainability. The case of tofu MSMEs illustrates how traditional workflows, when not supported by appropriate training, can lead to unstable quality outcomes. Addressing this challenge requires approaches that strengthen work behavior and embed quality-oriented values across small enterprise environments.

Efforts to improve product quality in microenterprises must be viewed through the lens of social learning and workforce development rather than merely technical intervention. Most rural workers acquire skills informally, resulting in inconsistent mastery of hygiene procedures, measurement accuracy, and production timing. Research suggests that organizational performance improves when workers internalize quality norms as part of their work identity and daily routines (Li et al., 2022; Miao et al., 2022). In micro-scale tofu production, high defect rates, such as discoloration and contamination, often emerge from uneven adherence to sanitation practices and lack of measurement discipline. These issues highlight that production problems are strongly connected to human behavior, motivation, and workplace culture. Therefore, strengthening vocational competencies is necessary to ensure that quality standards become embedded in daily operations. When workers gain structured knowledge, they develop the ability to maintain consistency and reduce avoidable errors. This relationship demonstrates that enhancing work behavior has substantial implications for economic resilience among rural enterprises.

The tofu industry in Situbondo provides a compelling example of how deficits in worker competencies directly affect production stability and business continuity. Data from UD Barokah, the site of this research, show a sigma level of 2.11, indicating significant instability in the production process. These findings reveal that the enterprise faces recurring issues related to aroma, taste, color, and size, which collectively signal a lack of structured quality culture. Studies have shown that long-term improvement in organizational performance requires systematic training and supportive work environments (Baloch et al., 2021; Bilderback, 2023). The persistence of errors in tofu production illustrates that informal knowledge alone is insufficient to sustain competitiveness in local markets. As consumer expectations increase, microenterprises must adopt structured learning frameworks to support better decision-making and production discipline. The need to elevate vocational learning, especially through practical interventions like process mapping and behavioral guidance, becomes urgent in such contexts. Consequently, examining the transformation of work behavior within tofu MSMEs is both timely and socially significant.

This study is grounded in the understanding that quality improvement in small-scale food enterprises depends not only on technical adjustments but also on strengthening worker competencies and fostering a culture of discipline and accountability. The tofu industry represents an important site for such inquiry because its production process is highly sensitive to human error, environmental hygiene, and consistency in operational routines. By reframing a technical improvement model like Six Sigma into a tool for vocational learning, the study responds to broader educational and socio-economic challenges faced by rural MSMEs. This approach aligns with the social, cultural, and educational perspectives emphasized by JOSCE, allowing the research to explore how structured interventions can reshape work habits, promote responsible production behavior, and contribute to sustainable community development.

Research on organizational behavior highlights that structured interventions significantly influence workplace discipline and adherence to quality standards. Romeiser et al., (2025) demonstrated that behavioral agents of change can enhance compliance with hygiene monitoring systems, suggesting that workplace transformation begins with observable behavioral cues. Hardiman & Harding, (2025) found that staff culture improvements in supported living environments can emerge from structured quality routines. Twyman, (2025) emphasized that technology transfer in educational systems requires behavioral readiness to ensure adoption success. Levi et al., (2025) illustrated that quality-of-life indicators improve when organizations implement long-term structured programs. Pop et al., (2025) contributed evidence showing that emotional regulation significantly affects decision-making and work behavior. Abdulhaq et al., (2025) confirmed that structured interventions help overcome behavioral challenges in children, indirectly affirming the role of guided routines in shaping habits. Murphy et al., (2025) reported that team-based training strategies improve consistency in care delivery. Taken

together, these studies demonstrate that behavioral improvement, structured routines, and supportive environments are essential for quality enhancement across settings.

Further evidence shows that quality improvement in community and rural settings requires structured frameworks and coordinated behavioral change. Zhang & Gao, (2025) developed a model for evaluating quality experiences in rural cultural landscapes, demonstrating the importance of standardization and guided assessment. Okamuro et al., (2025) emphasized the need for interdisciplinary teamwork in addressing behavioral challenges among vulnerable groups, reinforcing the value of collective responsibility. Hasegawa et al., (2025) documented that long-term training programs significantly increase adherence to professional guidelines. These findings align with broader insights that structured learning frameworks strengthen discipline and improve task performance. Studies across these domains highlight that workers benefit from guidance that integrates behavioral expectations with operational processes. The collective evidence therefore suggests that quality culture grows from a synergy between training, supervision, and internalization of shared norms. This provides a foundation for applying structured improvement tools in small-scale enterprises where informal learning predominates.

Despite extensive research on behavioral interventions and structured quality programs, few studies have examined how technical quality-improvement frameworks like Six Sigma can be repurposed as vocational learning tools in rural microenterprises. Existing literature emphasizes organizational culture and teamwork but rarely focuses on the intersection of traditional craftsmanship, informal skill transmission, and formal behavioral guidance. In the context of tofu MSMEs, production errors often arise from inconsistent work routines rather than technical failure, yet research on how structured models can reinforce discipline remains limited. Furthermore, studies seldom address how small enterprises can transition from inherited practices to standardized procedures in resource-limited environments. This leaves a gap in understanding how vocational competencies can be strengthened through structured improvement cycles that promote learning, practice, and accountability. The absence of such investigations motivates the present study.

This study aims to examine how the application of a structured improvement model can support behavioral transformation and strengthen vocational competencies among workers in rural tofu production enterprises. It seeks to determine whether the Six Sigma DMAIC framework can function not only as a technical diagnostic tool but also as a mechanism for promoting work discipline and quality-oriented habits. The study hypothesizes that structured guidance will reduce production instability by reinforcing consistent hygiene practices, measurement accuracy, and workflow routines. It also proposes that improvements in worker behavior will translate into increased product consistency and reduction of common defects. Additionally, the study explores how workers perceive structured interventions and how these perceptions influence their adherence to quality standards. The overarching objective is to contribute a behavioral and educational perspective to the use of improvement models in microenterprise contexts. By addressing these aims, the study offers insights relevant to vocational education, rural development, and organizational learning.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative–quantitative case study design to examine how a structured improvement model could enhance vocational competencies and quality culture in a rural tofu-production enterprise. The case study framework was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of behavioral routines, work discipline, and production practices within their natural social context (Cleland et al., 2021; Paparini et al., 2021). The design integrates observational data, defect records, and worker interviews to capture the relationship between human behavior and production outcomes. This approach is consistent with educational and organizational research that prioritizes real-world contexts when assessing behavioral change and skill development (Khlaif et al., 2025; Naseer

et al., 2025). The Six Sigma DMAIC framework was adopted not as an engineering tool, but as a structured learning mechanism that guides workers through reflective cycles of improvement. This perspective aligns with prior studies showing that structured routines can strengthen adherence to professional standards and support long-term adoption of quality practices (Badawy & Shaban, 2025; El Arab et al., 2025). Combining behavioral observation with quantitative defect measurement allows the study to capture both cognitive and practical aspects of vocational learning. Overall, this research design provides a robust basis for interpreting how quality-improvement frameworks can foster educational and cultural transformation in small-scale enterprises.

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of five production workers and the owner of UD Barokah, a small tofu-production enterprise located in Situbondo, Indonesia. These individuals were directly involved in daily production processes, sanitation routines, and decision-making related to workflow. Because the study aimed to analyze workplace culture and vocational practices, participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to behavioral and operational tasks. This approach follows recommendations in organizational learning research, which stresses the importance of selecting participants who actively shape the culture under study (Achdiat et al., 2022; Anand & Brix, 2021). The workers represented varying levels of experience, enabling the study to observe how informal learning, routine habits, and skill disparities contribute to production inconsistencies. Their roles included soybean preparation, boiling, filtering, coagulation, pressing, and packaging, which allowed the researcher to trace behavioral influence across the entire production chain. Interviews and observations focused on hygiene practices, measurement accuracy, and adherence to operational standards. This participant composition provided a comprehensive perspective on how work behavior shapes quality outcomes in microenterprise environments.

Instrument

The study used three primary instruments: observational checklists, semi-structured interview guides, and defect-recording sheets adapted from the Six Sigma methodology. Observational checklists were designed to document worker routines, hygiene practices, and consistency in following production procedures. Semi-structured interview guides explored workers' understanding of quality standards, their perceptions of structured guidance, and the factors influencing their daily decisions. Structured interviews are widely used in behavioral research because they reveal how individuals interpret routines and organizational expectations (Aslam, 2023; Reissner & Whittle, 2021). Defect-recording sheets captured four categories of tofu defects—color, aroma, taste, and size—based on production records collected across 20 sampling periods. These instruments were selected to align with the study's aim of interpreting defects not merely as technical errors, but as indicators of behavioral and cultural patterns. Each instrument was pretested informally to ensure clarity and appropriateness within the microenterprise context. Together, these instruments provided an integrated dataset bridging quantitative production results with qualitative insights on work culture.

Procedures

Data collection was conducted in three phases aligned with the DMAIC stages: observation, diagnosis, and behavioral reflection. During the initial phase, the researcher observed workflow routines to identify deviations from standard practices and to understand how workers approached hygiene and measurement tasks. In the diagnostic phase, defects were recorded systematically to reveal patterns connected to specific behaviors, such as inconsistent timing, insufficient cleaning, or improper measurement. Structured interviews were conducted after daily production sessions to encourage workers to reflect on their routines and recognize areas for improvement. This reflective process aligns with educational theories emphasizing the role of guided feedback in strengthening vocational learning (Marchi & Paganotti, 2025; Poolkrajang & Papanai, 2024). The final phase involved collaborative discussions where workers evaluated defect data and collectively reviewed alternative practices. These

discussions were conducted to reinforce collective responsibility and promote internalization of quality culture. Such iterative procedures enabled the study to capture both behavioral evolution and production performance across time.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis employed a mixed approach combining descriptive statistics for defect data with thematic coding for behavioral observations and interview transcripts. Quantitative data were analyzed by calculating Defects Per Million Opportunities (DPMO), sigma levels, and defect proportions to evaluate production consistency. Qualitative data were coded using an inductive approach to identify recurring themes related to hygiene practices, measurement discipline, worker motivation, and routine adherence. This analytical structure is consistent with educational and organizational research emphasizing the integration of behavioral themes with performance indicators (Aguilera et al., 2024; Pavlov & Micheli, 2022). Themes were compared with defect patterns to interpret how specific worker practices contributed to production outcomes. Triangulation across observation, interviews, and defect records improved validity by confirming whether behavioral insights aligned with empirical data. The combined analysis provided a basis for understanding how structured routines influence vocational competencies and quality culture. Overall, this analytical strategy allowed the study to interpret technical outcomes in their social, cultural, and educational context, consistent with the focus of JOSCE.

Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis of production records across 20 sampling periods revealed clear patterns of inconsistency in product quality and worker performance. Four major defect categories were identified, namely discoloration, off-aroma, undesirable taste, and inconsistent size. Table 1 presents the distribution of defects and highlights discoloration as the most frequent quality issue, followed by inconsistencies in size. These defects were found to correlate strongly with observable behavioral practices such as irregular cleaning routines, inaccurate measurements, and insufficient attention to hygiene. The calculated DPMO value of 269,000 indicates a high level of production instability, reflecting a sigma performance of only 2.11. Figure 1 illustrates the proportional distribution of each defect category, emphasizing the dominance of defects related to visual quality. Observations showed that workers often relied on habit rather than adopting structured routines or measurement standards. These findings collectively indicate that production problems arose not from technical limitations, but from behavioral and procedural inconsistencies embedded within daily work culture.

Table 1. Distribution of Defects Across 20 Production Cycles

Defect Category	Frequency	Percentage
Discoloration	42	38%
Size variation	29	26%
Off-aroma	22	20%
Taste issues	17	16%

Table 1 shows the distribution of four defect categories found across 20 production cycles, and these data provide a striking picture of the work behavior patterns that impact product quality. Discoloration emerged as the most prevalent defect, with a frequency of 42 occurrences, indicating that workers were not consistently practicing sanitation, temperature control, and tool cleanliness. This high number of discoloration cases suggests that workers lacked a clear understanding of the direct relationship between work habits and production outcomes, particularly in maintaining a clean environment. Size variations came in second with a frequency of 29 occurrences, indicating that workers were not implementing standard operating procedures for pressing, cutting, or measuring materials. This size inconsistency indicates a lack of basic vocational competency related to precision and accuracy in work procedures. Problematic odors and tastes, with 22 and 17 occurrences, respectively, indicate

environmental contamination or non-compliance with hygiene procedures. These defect categories confirm that work behaviors, rather than technological barriers, are the primary cause of quality nonconformities. Overall, this table illustrates an unstructured work culture, leading to product quality relying on individual habits rather than professional standards.

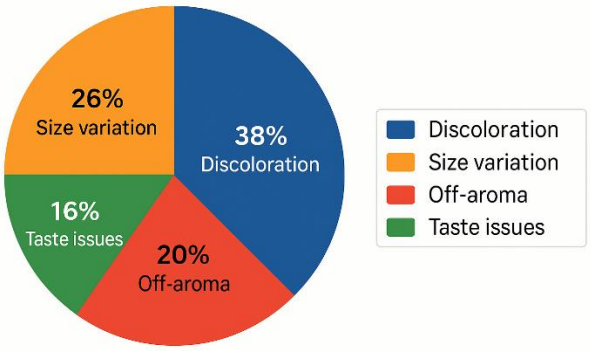

Figure 1. Proportion of Defect Categories in Tofu Production

The visual representation in Figure 1 shows that discoloration accounted for the highest proportion of defects, signaling inadequate sanitation routines and insufficient temperature control. Size inconsistencies followed closely, suggesting that workers often deviated from standardized pressing and cutting procedures. Aroma and taste issues, although less frequent, still contributed significantly to overall quality problems and reflected contamination risks within the production environment. These combined results highlight the urgent need for structured learning and behavioral reinforcement to address the root causes of production errors.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that quality problems in rural tofu enterprises are deeply intertwined with behavioral patterns and workplace culture rather than solely with technical limitations. Workers' reliance on habitual routines reflects what Romeiser et al. (2025) describe as behavioral inertia, where individuals continue using familiar practices even when these practices compromise quality. The absence of standardized hygiene routines further aligns with Hardiman and Harding's (2025) findings that staff culture strongly influences service consistency. Behavioral deviations observed in this study parallel Leso et al., (2023) argument that successful adoption of improvement frameworks depends on readiness to internalize structured practices. These converging insights suggest that strengthening vocational competencies must begin with reshaping work habits and creating environments that reinforce accountability.

Another important aspect revealed in this study is the role of collective responsibility in fostering quality culture within small enterprises. Murphy et al. (2025) highlight that team-based strategies are effective in improving service consistency, and similar dynamics were observed when workers collaboratively interpreted defect data. Horn et al., (2023) emphasize that interdisciplinary teamwork helps address behavioral challenges, which resonates with the collaborative discussions held in this study. These findings indicate that quality improvement in microenterprises must move beyond individual skill-building and incorporate group-based learning. As Abdulhaq et al. (2025) note, structured guidance can reshape habitual behavior even in resource-limited settings. Therefore, collective reflection on production data functioned as a behavioral-learning process that promoted responsibility among workers.

The study also supports the argument that structured frameworks like Six Sigma can function as pedagogical instruments in vocational environments. Hasegawa et al. (2025) found that long-term training enhances adherence to guidelines, which aligns with the behavioral improvements observed after workers engaged with structured routines. Levi et al. (2025) further underscore that standardized programs improve overall well-being, suggesting broader socio-economic implications for small enterprises. Pop et al. (2025) show that emotional regulation influences performance, which helps

explain why inconsistent motivation among workers contributed to quality problems. These connections reinforce the value of structured interventions that integrate behavioral, cognitive, and practical learning aspects within MSMEs.

Furthermore, this study highlights that cultural norms within rural enterprises can influence workers' willingness to adopt standardized routines. Zhang and Gao (2025) demonstrate how cultural practices shape quality experiences in rural landscapes, suggesting that similar cultural dynamics may influence workplace behavior. In tofu MSMEs, long-standing traditions often dictate production practices, making it challenging to introduce formal procedures. Yet, the case study shows that when workers understand the link between behavior and product outcomes, they become more open to change. This supports the view that educational interventions must respect existing cultural frameworks while introducing structured learning. Thus, integrating Six Sigma with vocational pedagogy offers a culturally sensitive approach to improving rural enterprise performance.

Finally, the study contributes to broader discussions on vocational education and its role in strengthening community-based economies. The findings echo arguments that small enterprises function as informal learning environments where behavior, skills, and routines evolve through social interaction. By embedding structured reflection and guided routines into daily practice, the study illustrates how microenterprises can serve as sites for meaningful vocational development. This aligns with JOSCE's focus on social, cultural, and educational transformation within community settings. The study therefore situates Six Sigma not as a technical tool, but as a catalyst for behavioral growth and cultural renewal within rural MSMEs.

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for vocational education, rural enterprise development, and community-based learning systems. First, the results highlight that strengthening work behavior requires moving beyond technical training and incorporating structured behavioral reinforcement. Second, the study suggests that microenterprises can serve as effective platforms for developing vocational competencies when provided with appropriate guidance and feedback. Third, the behavioral improvements observed in this case demonstrate that structured interventions can help workers internalize hygiene standards and measurement discipline. Fourth, these outcomes support the potential for small enterprises to adopt standardized routines without requiring costly technological investments. Fifth, the findings align with research showing that culturally sensitive approaches improve adoption of new practices in rural contexts. Sixth, educators and policymakers may use this model to integrate vocational training with community-based business improvement. Seventh, the approach can be scaled to similar rural industries where work culture heavily influences product outcomes. Finally, the study reinforces that sustainable quality culture emerges from the synergy between education, social learning, and structured behavioral guidance.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research focuses on a single tofu enterprise, limiting the generalizability of its findings to other industries or regions. Second, the sample size of workers is small, which may not capture the full diversity of behavioral patterns in similar enterprises. Third, the data rely partly on self-reported information, which may be influenced by workers' perceptions or biases. Fourth, the study spans a relatively short time frame, limiting the ability to measure long-term behavioral change. Fifth, environmental conditions and resource constraints unique to the enterprise may not reflect broader industry conditions. Sixth, the observational design does not fully isolate the impact of structured intervention from other contextual factors. Seventh, cultural dynamics specific to the community may influence worker behavior in ways not fully explored in this study. Finally, the lack of advanced instrumentation limits the depth of process-level analysis typically used in similar research.

Suggestions

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed to strengthen vocational competencies and quality culture in rural food enterprises. First, MSMEs should adopt structured routines that integrate behavioral reinforcement with practical skill development. Second, training programs should include reflective discussions where workers analyze production data and connect it to their daily practices. Third, local vocational institutions could partner with microenterprises to provide on-site mentoring and hygiene standardization support. Fourth, enterprises should develop simple, low-cost SOPs that workers can consistently follow. Fifth, collaborative learning models can be implemented to strengthen team-based responsibility for product quality. Sixth, periodic monitoring of defect data can reinforce accountability and motivate continuous improvement. Seventh, future research should examine how cultural norms shape behavioral readiness to adopt structured routines. Finally, scaling the model across multiple enterprises would strengthen understanding of how quality culture can evolve within community-based industries.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that quality improvement in small-scale food enterprises cannot be approached solely as a technical or mechanical concern, but must be understood as a process of strengthening vocational competencies, reshaping work behavior, and cultivating a sustainable quality-oriented culture. The high defect rates and low sigma performance observed in the tofu production unit reflect deeply rooted behavioral patterns shaped by habitual routines, limited formal training, and the absence of structured operational guidance. By introducing the Six Sigma DMAIC approach as a pedagogical tool rather than an engineering procedure, the study shows that workers can develop clearer awareness of hygiene standards, measurement accuracy, and procedural discipline. The structured reflections and team-based discussions fostered a gradual shift in attitudes, demonstrating that meaningful improvement emerges when workers are engaged not only as laborers but as active learners within the enterprise. These outcomes highlight the broader significance of situating vocational learning within the real social and cultural contexts of rural microenterprises. As the evidence suggests, interventions that connect behavioral reinforcement, reflective practice, and consistent monitoring can strengthen organizational learning and improve production stability. Therefore, integrating structured improvement models into community-based enterprises provides a promising pathway for enhancing workforce capability, supporting rural economic resilience, and advancing the educational and social objectives emphasized within the JOSCE framework.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Firanti Ramadhania was responsible for conducting the field investigation, collecting production data, performing observations, executing the Six Sigma defect analysis, and preparing the initial draft of the manuscript. She carried out interviews with workers, documented behavioral patterns during production, and organized the raw data used in the analysis.

Dhanang Eka Putra contributed to the conceptual refinement of the study, supervised the methodological framework, and provided critical guidance on aligning the research with vocational and behavioral perspectives relevant to rural microenterprises. He revised and strengthened the analytical interpretation, ensured coherence with the journal's educational and socio-cultural scope, and performed substantive editing of the final manuscript. Both authors reviewed and approved the submitted version of the article and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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