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Refslund, Bjarke ; Hasle, Peter; Seim, Rikke

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FROM EMPLOYEE REPRESENTATION TO PROBLEM-SOLVING - MAINSTREAMING OHS MANAGEMENT

**BJARKE REFSLUND, PETER HASLE AND RIKKE
SEIM**

**CENTER FOR INDUSTRIAL PRODUCTION, AALBORG UNIVERSITY,
DENMARK**



AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

A study of the changing role of OHS reps

Background

Worker representation in occupational health and safety came after a pressure from unions and were often regulated in collective agreements

In Denmark the Work Environment Act from 1975 secure the right

EU framework directive from 1989: OHS reps in all countries

A change in the Danish OHS legislation 2010

- More flexible ways to organise the OHS work and reps
- However still OHS reps and a basic organisation (less rather flexible)



Research design

The study included 60 Danish case companies

- On-site visits and interviews with key personnel related to the organisation's OHS management (2-6 persons/firm)
- Representative sample of the 60 companies
- The cases were stratified on five main labour market sectors – construction, manufacturing, private service, knowledge and healthcare

The Danish context

- Strong encompassing unions, legitimized, institutionalized
- Consensual and productivity enhancing approach



Empirical findings

Changing roles for the OHS-representatives

- Five idealtypes

Mainstreaming of OHS organisation

Professionalization

- But also some ad hoc OHS work/organisation and “side-car” OHS



Changing roles for the OHS-representatives

Greater emphasis on problem solving in the daily work

Less emphasis on voice and interest of the co-workers
(the more traditional role)

We identified five ideal types of OHS reps (there are also mixed cases)



Changing roles for the OHS-representatives

Five ideal types of OHS reps

- **Professional OHS reps**
 - More resources, fewer reps (two are full-time OHS-reps) and more responsibility
- **Systems maintenance OHS reps**
 - High levels of systematizing and standardisation
 - Most often full time OHS officers and the OHS reps main function is to support the OHS officer in the form of systems maintenance
- **Integration of OHS activities in core tasks**
 - OHS activities are an integrated part of the core tasks
 - The rationale behind improvements and initiatives are linked to the enterprises' operations and core task.
 - Often OHS reps work closely together with management and shop stewards about solving day-to-day operational problems as well the longer term
 - Often in health care



Changing roles for the OHS-representatives

- **Political OHS reps**
 - A few cases still have elements of the traditional political OSH rep approach
 - Emphasis both employee representation and OHS improvements
 - However the modern political OHS reps are politicizing actors within the organisation
- **Management driven OHS activities**
 - Management domination
 - Strategic OHS activities are centralised to the enterprise top level
 - Daily operation of the work environment is with professional OHS officers or first line managers
 - The OHS reps are more or less push to the side-line,



Mainstreaming of OHS organisation

OHS is increasingly integrated in the daily operations of the firms

- As opposed to the traditional organisational “side-car” metaphor (Cutler and James, 1997)

...from a separate and isolated issue to integration of OHS into the main management decisions...

Mainly the work organisation and management perspective

- Include OHS in operational management

Better employee-management cooperation

Risk of management domination

Not necessarily improving the outcome!



Mainstreaming of OHS organisation

Mainstreaming in the studied workplaces can be characterised by four key observations:

- Management does not consider work environment as an issue, which needs to be given priority because of employee demands, but as part of regular operations
- Systems are established which are expected to handle work environment issues on a day to day basis and securing that major problems in terms of accidents, diseases, employee complaints and improvement notices from inspectors are avoided
- The work environment is treated as other specific issues such as quality management, environmental management and HR management.
- Staff and resources are allocated to carry out the tasks in the OHS organisation, and OHS reps are considered part of this staff



Professionalization

OHS reps have in general become more professional

- Often they work as OHS professionals
- However some companies still have an ad hoc or side-car approach

The ad hoc approach:

- characterised by the absence of systematic approach to OHS
- Only acts if accidents occur or the labour inspectorate shows up

The side-car approach:

- Formal status required but without any genuine or efficient integration into the daily operations of the firm
- Typically small and medium sized firms



Interaction of approach and OHS reps

FIGURE 1 *OHS approaches and OHS reps typologies*

General OHS approach			
OHS rep role	Side-car	Ad hoc	Mainstreaming
Professionalization			++
Systems Maintenance	++	+	
Integration		+	++
Political	+		+
Management driven	+		++

Source: Own compilation

Conclusions

The role of the OHS reps are changing

- Towards problem solving from representing co-workers

There has been a tendency towards

- Professionalization of OHS work
- Mainstreaming – in many companies OHS regulation have become more integrated in the everyday work of the firms
 - Not conflict issue and OHS work needs to be proactive
 - This does not per se secure a higher level of the work environment

