From employee representation to problem-solving - Mainstreaming OHS management

Refslund, Bjarke ; Hasle, Peter; Seim, Rikke

Publication date:
2015

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation (APA):
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General OHS approach</th>
<th>OHS rep role</th>
<th>Side-car</th>
<th>Ad hoc</th>
<th>Mainstreaming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professionalization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems Maintenance</td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
<td></td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management driven</td>
<td>++</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Own compilation
Conclusions

The role of the OHS reps are changing
- Towards problem solving from representing co-workers

The 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