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## **Workers' participation in safety and health at work**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on the importance of getting workers involved in safety and health issues at work. Since modernisation and industrialisation have led to human loss and tragedy all around the world due to industrial accidents, safety practitioners and observers have widely agreed that the traditional belief that employers are solely responsible for the workers' safety at work should have a new paradigm. To create a safe working condition, workers should be allowed to participate actively in safety and health matters and cooperate with the employers. Since they are closer to their work, it is felt that the workers themselves are the most qualified to make decisions about safety and job improvements. Evidence showed that various benefits could be yielded if workers work together with employers including the reduction of death and injury rates at work. However, to make workers' participation in this field effective, several criteria are crucial. They are the legal support, management support, trade union support, training and the positive quality of the workers involved.*

**Keywords:** *workers' participation, occupational safety and health, legal support, management support, trade union support, training, and quality workers.*

### **Introduction**

Modernisation and industrialisation has been seen as an important factor for the growth of a country. However, the attempt to achieve industrial success often leaves a trail of human wreckage when huge numbers of people become victims of industrial accidents at the workplace suffering injury or even death. It seems very difficult to achieve economic development and social transformation without the expense of the human costs and this fact still holds true. Occupational accidents and disease remain the most appalling human tragedy of modern industry and one of its most serious forms of economic waste (Somavia, 2004). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported that work-related accidents and diseases cost the global economy some 4% a year in lost revenues or a staggering US\$1.25 thousand billion annually (ILO, 2003). The best estimates currently available on a world basis reckon that every year more than 2 million people die from accidents and disease directly caused by or related to work and 160 million workers fall ill each year due to workplace hazards. These figures which were published by the ILO in 2003 in conjunction with its 'Global Programme on Safety, Health and the Environment', provide evidence that occupational accidents are more disastrous causing more than twice as many deaths as war or malaria.

Traditionally, the responsibility to provide safety in an undertaking for the prevention of accidents lies in the hands of the employer (Blair and Geller, 2000). This responsibility covers a wide range of aspects including the layout of factory premises, the machinery and equipment, the planning and execution of a system of work. They make all the decisions,

establish the rules and are responsible for making changes. Although the employer is basically responsible for the safety of his workers in the undertaking, Walters (2000, 1998a, 1998b) and Versen (1983) asserted that the joint participation of employers and workers is said to be indispensable. It is now widely accepted that decisions with regards to safety and health should not be taken by the management unilaterally or by experts alone (Johnstone *et al.*, 2005). In one way or another, workers who put their lives and fate in the company must be allowed to influence decisions that affect them and safety is definitely one of the areas which require the active involvement of the workers. According to Cordova (1982), following the recognition of workers' involvement in safety and health matters at the international level by ILO in 1981, measures to strengthen the involvement of workers in the undertakings have been made by many countries globally as they have begun to realise the importance of encouraging workers to become actively involved in the internal safety matters of the individual establishments.

### **Justifications for workers' participation in OSH matters**

As mentioned earlier, the need to promote workers' involvement in OSH has been accepted at international level. With the promulgation of the International Labour Organisation Convention concerning OSH and the Working Environment, No. 155 in 1981, workers were given the right under Article 19, to have adequate information about safety at the work place as well as the right to enquire about any related matters to enable them to participate effectively in this area. According to Parmeggiani (1983), workers' involvement in the protection of safety and health at work has become increasingly important. More and more countries including Italy, Belgium, Sweden, America and the United Kingdom began to take a keen interest in this matter and have asserted the principle of active and priority role of workers in OSH (Parmeggiani, 1983). This is supported by Johnstone *et al.* (2005) who provided evidence showing positive benefits of inviting workers to manage OSH together with the employers such as fewer illnesses, injuries and deaths.

Gevers (1983) explained five arguments in favour of participation in this field. He noted that:

1. workers can contribute to the prevention of industrial accidents by keeping an eye on potential hazards and giving notice of imminent dangers,
2. workers' involvement was regarded as a valuable means of ensuring workers' cooperation in the promotion of safety,
3. the ideas, knowledge and experience of workers were regarded as a useful contribution to the definition and solution of health and safety problems,
4. arguments for an extension of participation in safety and health matters can be derived from the general idea underlying industrial democracy i.e. the right of employees to be associated with decisions affecting them, and
5. cooperation between employer and employees, essential to improve working conditions, can be effective only if based on equal partnership.

In Versen's (1983) view, workers' participation in safety practices means that workers should cooperate with the employers in creating and maintaining an acceptable safety culture at work. He added that cooperation between both parties enable daily practical problems within an undertaking to be solved in a flexible manner. Among the important basic principles for cooperation are:

1. the worker must be kept clearly and fully informed about the accident risks and health hazards liable to be encountered in the course of his work, including the necessary safety measures and first-aid and rescue procedures,
2. there should be regular consultation and exchange of information concerning safety and health measures through the safety committee/representatives and the factory medical officer,
3. the works council or corresponding body elected by the workers has an important role to play. Their rights may extend from merely being informed about decisions and measures to be adopted by the employer, through the right to be consulted and express opinions before the final decisions are taken, up to, in some cases, the right of veto.

Concurring with Versen, Sass (1986:129) argued for the '*extension of civil rights into industry*'. He contended that the concept of worker's rights in matters of safety is crucial in bringing about reforms. He identified those rights, based on the 'fundamental rights' identified by society, as the right to be informed, the right to refuse hazardous work and most importantly, the right to participate in decisions affecting workplace safety conditions.

According to Du Prey (2002), the range of employee involvement in safety decision-making can vary. Employees' safety participation can range from not participating in safety decision-making to full participation in safety decision-making. Employees who do not participate in safety force supervisors to make all safety decisions. In full participation, everyone is connected and employees are involved in safety and health decision-making.

In theory, employees who are closer to the work are recognized as often being the most qualified to make decision about safety and job improvement (Vredenburg, 1998). When workers are encouraged to participate in decision-making within an organization, safety performance is usually higher. Their firsthand knowledge of the workplace operations enables workers to identify hazards and to offer recommendations for improvements (Wharton, 2003). In addition, involving workers in safety and health matters will enhance both the employees' and employers' commitment to address workplace hazards.

Studies by Glyde (1981) and Rooney (1992) also suggested the positive effects of employee participation in decision-making in creating a safer workplace. They also revealed the importance of workers being more involved in the actual design and implementation of the organisation's safety practices including safety-enhancing programmes, safety training programmes and worker-management safety committee. The effects of such involvement may result in less hazardous workplaces. Park (1997:44) highlighted:

*"Because workers participated in the course of design and implementation of organisation's safety enhancing programmes, they will be more committed to the programme's successful implementation and by providing employees with participation rights in decision-making, the effect of the firm's safety investment will increase."*

Organisations that involve workers in making decisions and applying their knowledge to solve problems will be able to quickly respond to today's organizational demands. Smith (1996:43) states:

*“Many employees believe that when workers are involved, they feed into an infrastructure enabling firms to respond to shifting demands on the organization...organisations that recognize this are likely to involve employees in important organisational processes...many organisations, however, prevent employee involvement and allow only management personnel to participate in decision-making.”*

In the UK, the Health and Safety Commission (HSC) (2004) has recently come up with a Collective Declaration on Worker Involvement. The statement acknowledges that workers who are encouraged to have a voice and are given the ability to influence health and safety are safer and healthier than those who are not. Their vision is to become a world leader in safety and health by the year 2010 and it is agreed that an essential part of this vision is to have a workforce fully involved in health and safety management and a vibrant system of workplace health and safety representatives operating in partnership with management. By involvement, the HSC meant relationships between workers and employers based on collaboration and trust and nurtured as part of the management of safety and health.

#### **Determinants for effective workers’ participation in OSH matters**

There are several factors that influence the effectiveness of workers’ involvement in OSH matters. Walters (1996a) asserted that one of the factors that influence the effectiveness of workers’ participation is the presence of a statutory framework. The existence of health and safety related legislation is one of the main reasons for the success of the structure, because many employers are unwilling to establish meaningful representative machinery in the absence of a legislative requirement (Koch and Salters, 1999). Walters (1996a) added that even though there are some employers who would allow employees to be involved in this area voluntarily, most of them will only follow rules that are written down and enforced. Enforcement to ensure compliance is also crucial to make it effective. This means that mandating workers’ participation without proper regulatory strategies will not strengthen the operation of the programme. Thus, the role of regulation is twofold consisting of the legislation itself together with regulatory strategies, which are essential to make it a success. Other determining factors highlighted by Walters (2000, 1998a, 1998b, 1996a, 1990 and 1987) in his studies are the quality of the workers or their representatives, support from the management and trade union and also training. There are many other researchers on these issues of safety and health whose work supports each of these factors.

As regards the quality of the worker, Chew (1988) asserted that the mere existence of a safety committee does not guarantee fewer accidents. What is fundamental is to ensure that the committee know their role and function properly. Chew (1988) reached this conclusion as his study revealed that safety committees exist in both high injury rate firms and low injury rate firms. The only differing factor was the way the committees functioned. Safety committees in firms with low injury rate had systematic inspections methods while decisions were made by senior management on their recommendations. Similarly, Singleton (1983) is of opinion that workers’ participation in safety and health scheme could work provided that their know-how is recognised, their ability to investigate and express views is developed and their proposals for changes are taken seriously by the management. He adds that where a committee inspects regularly, discusses substantive issues and has its recommendations treated seriously by senior management, a lower injury rate will be achieved

In another research project conducted by Walters (1998c), he asserted that the most obvious reason for the achievement of worker participation (albeit limited) in safety and health is the

experience and commitment of the safety representatives. In his study, Walters analysed the performance of the employees' representation on safety and health matters in small enterprises in the agriculture industry in the United Kingdom. He found that all of them had many years of employment in the agriculture sector which enabled them easily to identify hazards and infringements of safety standards. They were confident of the task undertaken and performed the job with total commitment. He opined that if the representatives were to have an impact at the workplace level, they needed to be able to communicate and advise farmers and farm managers on safety and health matters.

It has also been asserted that the formation of safety committees should not be seen as solely for the purpose of complying with the law or as a place to exchange information. They must possess real power to decide or challenge the management decisions and operate as a mechanism to initiate serious reform to attain a balance between humanity and profitability in the undertaking (Walters, 1987). As pointed out by Clarke (1982:201), the main issues are, *"Do the committees work? Are they able to eliminate or reduce risks to the health and safety of workers? Or are they merely discussion groups, leaving the decision to be taken by the management, as in the past?"* Since safety and health is frequently marked as an area where there is a conflict of interest between employers and employees, there is always a tendency on the management part to minimise the committee's role in order to avoid challenges to managerial priorities and interest. This was evident in the study made by James and Kyprianou (2000) when it was found that the depth of Royal College of Nursing safety representatives' involvement in the National Health Service hospitals in the United Kingdom remained limited and often fell short of that envisaged under the law. It seems that legal requirements relating to this safety representatives and committees may not be complied with if they are seen to clash with managerial priorities and interest. This eventually suggests the other influential feature which contributes to the effectiveness of this scheme, that is, management support.

Workers' participation can make a significant impact on the prevention of industrial accidents if it receives total support from the management as well. However, when the authorities have acted to implement legislation providing for workers' participation, the employer's first reaction has been to oppose it on the ground that workers' safety is a managerial prerogative and that any participation by workers in decision-making is an infringement of the prerogative (Clarke, 1982). Furthermore, employers have been concerned that workers' involvement will lead to unreasonable demands, costly alterations to plant and processes, reduced productivity and unnecessary delays. Employers in undertakings where no union exists have feared that the formation of health and safety committees will lead to demands for unionisation. Generally, employers have been concerned that this right will be misused and that workers will down tools on mere whim.

This negative attitude of the employers can act to undermine any legislative measures introduced. One example can be seen in the findings of the study made by Walters (1998c) on workers' participation in small enterprises in the agriculture industry in United Kingdom. He contended that the attitude of the employers was undoubtedly the major factor in the failure of the programme. The employers were not supportive because they were of the opinion that the scheme was in reality a thinly-disguised means of trade union recruitment (and possibly a strategy to achieve trade union recognition), the chosen representatives were of insufficient calibre and experience and it would not be cost-effective. It has been emphasised that cooperation of employers is critical to the future development of the programme and without this support it faces considerable obstacles in sustaining its continued activities. That is why one of the reasons for the success of workers' participation in Sweden in safety and health

matters is the support it received from both the individual employer and the specific employer's organisation at the industry level (Frick, 1997).

In discussing this issue further, it is paramount to understand the kind of support required from the management in order to make it a success. The primary support essential for this purpose is for employers to comply fully with their legal obligations as far as the workers' rights are concerned. Generally, the law requires the employers to inform workers fully and clearly of accident risks and health hazards, to exchange information and consult them regularly, to allow them to carry out inspections and investigations and to grant them paid time off for health and safety activities and for training. The willingness of the employer to provide financial support in this area would be an added bonus in helping the workers to work seriously towards creating safe working conditions. If employers are not hesitant in fulfilling this obligation, this implies that they have given their cooperation to make this programme a success. It would also be a further advantage if the management were to empower the workers to do more than the minimum legal requirements. With this positive attitude the workers will be able to perform their task better and indirectly help the employer to realise numerous business advantages such as lower insurance and overtime costs, better productivity and improved morale, among others (Zaccardi and Macdonald, 1995).

Alongside management support, backing from the trade union is another determinant for an effective workers' participation programme. Trade unions are in a position to lend support to the activities of employees through the provision of training, information and advice. In a study conducted by Walters and James (1997) which looked at the European system of workers' participation in this aspect, it was said that workers' representatives in countries from which evidence is available, invariably identify trade unions as their most useful sources of information. A similar picture appears to exist with regard to training, as the extent of training organised and delivered by trade unions is very extensive. Trade unions normally provide training for all workers who are involved in monitoring safety matters at work, regardless whether they are union members or not. Nevertheless, in the same study conducted by Walters and James (1997), it appears that trade union safety representatives are more likely to undertake training than their non-union counterparts. Nonetheless, the important consideration is for the trade union to realise that with its continuous unfailing support, it would enable workers to perform better in their task in trying to reduce accident rates at work.

Apart from the above elements already mentioned, the importance of training is another fundamental criterion to consider if the scheme is to become workable. Even though the aspect of training has been mentioned earlier (albeit briefly), it is felt that this issue needs further attention. Requiring workers to be actively involved in monitoring safety matters will not attain total success if the workers do not have the skill to identify hazards and recommend the proper corrective measures. This task is undoubtedly not an easy one to perform but it can be executed if the workers are provided with proper training. With proper training, it is believed that they can make significant changes in the workplace as expected by the management. Support from the management and trade union in providing training will undoubtedly increase the workers' expertise and performance. While it can be seen from earlier discussion that trade unions are very supportive in this aspect, some employers seem to be more reluctant to cooperate. One example can be seen in the study made by James and Kyprianou (2000) on the Royal Nursing College safety representatives in the United Kingdom. In this study, only 26 percent of the respondents indicated that their employers had provided them with the relevant training.

Moreover, while it is recognised that training has a role to play in improving the effectiveness of the workers' participation scheme, it can only be achieved if they attend training which is of good quality. Comparative studies of trade union training in health and safety showed that Swedish safety representatives were generally among those who received the highest level of training and support in Europe (Walters and Raulier, 1995). However, the research says little about the quality of the training they received. Although the trade union confederations have revised the training syllabus, it is doubtful whether it will fully address the needs of all the participants (Walters and Raulier, 1995). Therefore, it is submitted that it will not be adequate for the workers to be sent for training which provides only introductory courses. Continuous training programmes, especially those which address the relevant safety problems normally encountered by the workers at the workplace, would be most helpful in upgrading their skills. In addition, the workers should also be sent for courses which would enable them to keep abreast of the latest technology, latest safety measures or latest research and development findings on matters which are relevant to their undertakings.

### **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly all countries in this world have a dream of becoming an industrialised country. However, in the quest to fulfil the dream, the safety of the workers who work hard to help the country achieve its dream should not be ignored. If workers are allowed to participate in safety and health matters at work, they could make a huge difference in creating a safe working condition for all. Workers can contribute to the prevention of industrial accidents by keeping an eye on the working conditions and giving notice of imminent danger. Rapid safety reforms can also be accomplished if organisations get their workers' involvement rather than by doing it themselves.

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