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Working environment committees – stretched between strategy and participation

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Abstract. In Denmark, the Working Environment Act was revised in 2010. The intention was that increased flexibility in the structure and operations of the legally required safety and working environment committees would enable a more systematic approach and lead to integration of working environment issues in strategic decisions in companies. In this paper we discuss the development by presenting four case studies from a larger case sample drawn from two research projects. We discuss whether this change towards flexibility, systematization, and strategy is conducive or prohibitive in relation to ambitions of making the working environment organization better at dealing with psychosocial working environment problems, and maintaining a high level of employee participation, and proximity between committees and local workplaces.

Keywords. Working environment committees, psychosocial working environment, strategy, participation

1. Introduction

This paper reports the findings from four cases – taken from a larger sample – and discusses some of the dilemmas of mainstreaming occupational safety & health issues in relation to employee participation and the need to sustain proximity between working environment committees and local workplaces. The trigger of the changes we discuss is revised legislation in 2010.

We use the concept ‘working environment activities’ to denote a company’s attempts to manage and prevent WE problems. The term ‘approach’ is used to generalize a company’s way to handle their WE activities.

Statutory working environment committees (formerly known as safety committees) in all workplaces are central elements in the Danish working environment regulation. They secure the implementation of working environment regulations, while also ensuring participation from employees in decisions concerning their working conditions and working environment (WE). As such the formation of WE committees is a regulatory attempt to stimulate company self-regulation in the OHS area (Robens 1972) within a larger framework of responsive regulation (Ayres & Braithwaite 1992) or reflexive regulation (Teubner 1983). Based on democratic principles, these committees have played a central part in the Danish WE tradition (Hasle 2001; Knudsen 2000; Busck, Knudsen & Lind 2010). The understanding of workers participation as pivotal in relation to occupational safety and health is widespread in both the political system and in the research community; in Denmark and elsewhere (the 1989 ‘European Framework Directive’ (89/391/EEC); Walters & Nichols 2009).

For many years a particular concern has occupied the Danish labour market parties as well as researchers – the problem of mainstreaming WE issues. In Denmark the phrase "moving the working environment from the sidecar to the driver's seat" – formulated by Kaj Frick – has been generally accepted as a common challenge. The 2010 revision of the Working Environment Act was intended to deal with this challenge.

1.1 The Working Environment Act (2010)

The revised act permits companies to organize their WE activities in a more flexible way as they can now decide for themselves the suitable number WE groups and committees. The assumption is that a more flexibly adapted organization will promote better practices because the local adaptation makes the work of the committee more aligned with the company's needs.

Furthermore, the revised act stipulated that workplaces were to conduct an annual WE deliberation (Act no. 1072 of 7 September 2010). With the introduction of an annual deliberation where action plans and the previous year's activities are discussed, it is expected that the companies will take on a more systematic approach to WE. The annual reoccurrence of the deliberation is more in line with company processes like budgeting – compared with the hitherto mandatory four annual meetings – and the deliberation is expected to be less occupied with details and ad hoc issues and more focused on general trends and objectives. Thus, the annual deliberation is supposed to contribute to a more strategic approach to WE issues.

The changes in legislation are expected to contribute to the integration of WE concerns and objectives into wider strategic considerations and decisions within the company, which will enhance the company's ability to prevent WE problems (Trepartsudvalget 2009). Prevention has been described as a challenge for many companies – even those with well-functioning WE committee work – because they have failed to include discussions of WE in decisions about major changes in business strategy (Hasle 2001).

An import aspect of this idea of influencing the strategic agenda of the company is the question: "What is strategy?" Neither in theory (Mintzberg et al. 2005) nor in the national political process that transformed the political ambitions into legislative text; the act only have a very rudimentary formulation of how WE should become strategic; is the answer to that question very clear.

The concern in this paper is the experience of how this ambition of integrating WE in strategy unfolds in practice; and how it depends on what is understood by "strategy".

2. Methods

We have been involved in two projects that evaluate the effects of the revised act. The cases discussed in this paper are taken from a larger sample of cases (17) in which we have performed the data collection. These 17 case studies have been completed within two different projects which have encompassed a total of 72 case studies. The four cases presented in this paper have been chosen because of their ability to point out dilemmas related to companies' conduct of WE activities.

The case studies were primarily conducted through qualitative semi-structured interviews with both management and employee representatives. The interviews in both projects followed similar but not identical interview guides with questions regarding the WE committee's area of action and assessment of the company's working environment.

Three of the featured case companies (the 'Factory', the 'Chemical Company' and the 'Retailer') are extreme cases (Flyvbjerg 2006) since they have made recent changes in the

organization of their WE activities and are generally acknowledged for being compliers and first-movers in relation to WE. The case companies could be perceived as ‘cutting-edge’ companies in this field, setting a trend other companies would be likely to follow.

These case studies point to some difficulties as well. All three have very systematic, strategic, and integrated approaches but are struggling with other aspects of conducting applicable and successful WE activities. In this sense, the three companies form a group of critical cases (Flyvbjerg 2006) where dilemmas in and changes of WE activities in relation to proximity and democracy can be studied.

The fourth case in this paper (the ‘Nursing Home’) plays the role of a ‘contrast case’. This case presents a different take on strategic WE approaches. Although there are obvious differences in the size of workplaces, between public sector care work and private sector production and retail work that make direct comparison difficult, we still find the contrast fruitful, as it shows how a strategic WE approach can also be conceived of and carried out.

3. Results

The sections ‘results’ and ‘discussion and conclusion’ are constructed following the assumption presented in the introduction. The assumption is that 1) increased flexibility in the organization of companies’ WE activities will enable a 2) more systematic approach (both presented in this section) that leads to 3) integration in strategic decisions (discussed in the last section).

Psychosocial working environment (PWE) is given special attention in this paper as it poses a special challenge to companies’ WE activities. PWE is also emphasized by practitioners, organizations and researchers, and as a sign of this particular attention PWE has recently been formally equated with physical working environment in the Danish Working Environment Act (Act no. 356 of 9 April 2013).

3.1 Flexibility and strategy - between alignment and exclusion

The rationale behind the introduction of flexibility in WE activities is that the companies will be able to choose an organizational form that makes sense in the specific context. This means that while some companies would increase the number of WE groups and committees, others would decrease.

Many of the companies have chosen to decrease the number of WE groups and representatives. It is not surprising that companies seem to utilize the flexibility to create more centralized committees as there is an overall tendency to deregulate and a lot of contentions for flexibility in the field of WE activities within companies. These are likely to ‘drown’ opposing contentions for increased participation in WE activities (Frick 2011; Walters 2004; Knudsen 2000). For several case companies, flexibility appears as a means to prevent what is seen as unnecessary bureaucratic decision-making processes associated with formal workplace democracy (Knudsen 2000). At the same time the democratic model of workplace participation is seen to generate working environment quality (Knudsen, Busck & Lind 2011).

Both the Factory and the Retailer have seen the changes in legislation as an opportunity to create more centralized, ‘slim’ versions of their WE committees. This means that there are fewer WE groups and committees in both companies. Employee participation through these committees becomes more indirect – when committee members represent more than 100 employees.

The Factory finds it easier to take a more systematic and consistent approach in their new WE activities. It is however difficult for the Factory’s committee to handle important issues (explained in section 3.2) and challenging to maintain proximity to local workplaces. It is therefore an example of integration in business strategy that does not necessarily result

in more effective and suitable WE activities.

The Retailer's employee representatives have been given a new role to play. This company had trouble utilizing the old safety committee, and WE was not given great attention throughout the company. The legislation changes motivated a radical change in the company's WE practice – reduction in the number of local WE groups. The employee representatives are now seen as members of the management group as they use a considerable part of their working hours on WE. The change is seen as beneficent. But at the same time this constellation hinders the development of new ideas and practices that originate from employee participation through critique and opposition. This is an overall trend in modern management where confrontation is avoided and smooth cooperation with management is promoted (Knudsen 2000).

This is a point where our 'contrast-case', The Nursing Home, can provide some perspective. Here the WE committee structure has not been reformed – a structure with local employee and employer representatives at all worksites is maintained. The employee representative in the Nursing Home thus represents approximately 40 colleagues, and interacts with many of them on a daily basis. This structure was prioritized by the municipality to which the nursing home belongs, based on the point of view that the representatives must have local knowledge of problems and working conditions to be able to do their jobs. Also, the central WE coordinator sees the local representatives as important sources of knowledge on local WE issues, in an organization as large and fragmented as a modern municipality.

3.2 Systematic WE activities – struggling with the psychosocial working environment

Some of the 17 case studies show a link between the changed legislation and the ability to conduct systematic WE activities. At the same time, it becomes apparent that well-functioning and very systematic WE activities sometimes struggle to accommodate 'softer' issues.

The Chemical Company takes on a very systematic approach that enables integration of WE and other quality standards. This secures that WE is discussed whenever production plans are assessed for the purpose of quality assurance. However, PWE seems to be more absent in these discussions.

For the Factory, PWE is an increasingly important issue. Since the company sold off many of its production sites, the group of employees working in sales and administration is the biggest group within the company. This group is less exposed to risk of work-related injury but at the same time more exposed to psychosocial strains like stress etc. The WE committee tries to develop strategies for PWE, but finds it challenging for various reasons: First it is difficult to make appropriate objectives; and second when using surveys – as it is quite common in Danish workplaces – the issue of anonymity keeps popping up. The outcome is that prevention of work-related injuries remains the main focus of the WE activities even though the risks are absent in most of the local workplaces.

Handling PWE has been a challenge for companies prior to the legislation changes. PWE is difficult for the WE committee to assess and act upon as it concerns relational, organizational and managerial questions (Hasle et al. 2003; Busck, Knudsen & Lind 2010; Hohnen & Hasle 2011). The legislative changes do not make it increasingly difficult, but at the same time the regulations offer few applicable methods or tools. Tools such as surveys, Workplace Assessments, or certified OHS management systems are found insufficient because the ambition of charting, assessing and solving WE problems does not apply well to PWE. The same ambition can be found when viewing the annual deliberation as a tool. The demand for systematic work can lead to frustrations because it seems an immense challenge for the WE committee to handle PWE the same way as physical working

environment. Some have argued that strategic PWE activities follow fairly narrow standards and understandings (e.g. by using surveys) that can contribute to the exclusion of non-standardized areas and effects (Hohnen & Hasle 2011; Abildgaard & Nickelsen 2013). Ultimately both companies give up on PWE – even though they are included in our sample of cases here because they are ‘cutting-edge’ companies.

Again our contrast case shows a different approach. Our assessment is that their WE approach concerning the PWE can be perceived as strategic and to some degree systematic, although not in the sense of setting standard objectives and articulating the perfect measure of PWE. The nursing home was at the time of our visit experiencing problems regarding cooperation, trust and communication among the employees on day, evening and night shifts. Their approach to solving these PWE problems was a local participative process concerning their understanding of ‘holistic care’ and ‘a good life’ for the elderly residents. The mentioned PWE problems were discussed in the process, but the goal was not to develop measurable objectives for how to improve in these areas. Instead the discussions were integrated with discussions on a common goal and source of meaning in care work – how to secure the wellbeing of the residents across day, evening and night shifts. We find that this approach contains a very strategic element, as it relates closely to the daily work practices, and as such, it was found meaningful and helpful by the employees in addressing the PWE problems.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

It is apparent that the new act motivates some changes in WE activities that are seen as beneficial in three of the four included cases. At the same time there are some challenges emerging from the changes in these companies.

Flexibility and centralization prevent decision-making processes that are considered slow and inefficient. At the same time the gains stemming from direct employee participation, oppositions and critique slide into the background.

The legislative changes promote a more systematic approach by introducing the annual deliberation that qualifies the companies’ WE activities. But it seems difficult to handle PWE in a systematic manner which can lead to exclusion of these issues.

The key assumption that the complete set of activities would lead to better integration in business processes will be discussed in the remainder of the paper.

4.1 Integration or lost proximity?

Companies that are already working with quality standards find it easy to integrate WE in their overall business strategy. However, it is often a certain type of issues that are handled this way – issues that are naturally linked to production plans and procedures i.e. safety considerations etc. In some of these companies the link between the integrated WE issues and the problems employees experience in everyday life is weakened. Both the demand for systematic work (because PWE is difficult to handle), the centralization of the committee, and the notion that strategy is something that takes place only in the higher echelons of the organization contribute to this fact.

Representatives in the companies that have centralized the committee, point to challenges in terms of visibility and proximity towards the local workplaces and the daily challenges they face. The committee at the Factory has concerns because the appointment of fewer representatives means that the dissemination of the WE activities conducted by the committee is more difficult. This is a striking contrast to the Nursing Home, where WE activities are questions of participation rather than dissemination.

The companies that have centralized their WE activities, experience some new

challenges because of the distance between representatives and local workplaces. The employee representatives have been given a new role that links them closer to the management group, changing their contact and dialogue with employees. It becomes a challenging role that requires new competences such as teaching and dissemination of information on WE. It also becomes increasingly difficult to grasp and act upon subtle PWE issues. This holds true even when we acknowledge that representatives' awareness of PWE problems has also been a challenge prior to the introduction of the new role (Busck, Knudsen & Lind 2010). Consequently, lack of proximity to local workplaces appears as a hindrance to the handling of PWE. The Nursing Home case shows us that meaningfulness, proximity and participation can be key elements in what could be termed 'local strategic' WE practices. Here we play on a distinction between strategy as domain of managers and leader – elite strategy – and strategy as dispersed throughout the entire organisation – local strategy. Local strategy is not less strategy than elite strategy since it deals with the core elements of the operations – in case of the nursing home: relations between staff and the residents, the aim of the care work, etc. key elements in what you might call a 'local strategic' WE approach.

The examples given in this paper show that the combination of very systematic and centralized WE activities sometimes result in committee work that is less well connected to experienced problems, and as such is not very strategic - even if the companies' development of their WE activities seems in line with the rationales concerning effective and strategic WE approach, embedded in the revised working environment act.

This paper does not attempt to conclude that the working environment in these companies has deteriorated upon the legislation changes. But we have shown that systematization, flexibility, integration and elite strategy do not automatically lead to sufficient WE activities within these companies. We do not suggest that the model of PWE-sensitive WE activities used in the Nursing Home can just be copied by the other included companies. There are of course important differences in sector and organizational structure. We do however propose that proximity and participation are important elements of WE activities, as they lead to sensitivity and knowledge regarding the core WE problems. As such WE activities are not just a question of dissemination, but also of developing local meaningful WE strategies, closely related to daily work practices.

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